if you do not expect the unexpected you will not find it

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by afra_schatz, noalinnea

Summary

This takes place in afra_schatz’s boarding school AU- a series with one ficlet a day posted about daily life and its ups and downs at Jackson College, a boarding school in Yorkshire, where most of the LotR-cast happen to be teachers. Orlando is one of them. One night, he makes out with a tall, dark-haired stranger at the pub. And guess who the stranger turns out to be?
“Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.”

“Orlando- hi, it's Richard. From the ‘Riddemark’. Or, well, the Gents.” [Pause] “I was hoping you’d be there to pick up, actually, I’m shite at leaving mailbox messages.” [Pause] “So, I’m calling to tell you that I had a good time, on Friday.” [Chuckles] “Okay, now that sounded a bit weird. Getting fucked by a stranger in a toilet stall at the pub is not what you usually mean when you say you had a good time, I guess. But well, that’s how it is. I mean, the sex was pretty spectacular, given the circumstances, wasn’t it?” [Pause. Laughs quietly] "So, listen, Orlando, I think what I’m trying to do here is asking you if you’d want to meet up again? Maybe some time this week? I’d like that.” [Pause] “Just give me a call if you do, or text me, or find me on WhatsApp, or whatever. Cheers.”

[12/6/17 - Whatsapp]
Orlando [10.49 p.m.]: Hi
Orlando [10.49 p.m.]: Got your message
Orlando [10.49 p.m.]: Cheers
Orlando [10.50 p.m.]: I don't recall giving you my number
Orlando [10.50 p.m.]: I was rather pissed on Friday
Orlando [10.53 p.m.]: Meeting up sounds good
Orlando [10.53 p.m.]: I can't tomorrow, but I could do Wednesday or Thursday after 6
Orlando [10.54 p.m.]: Let me know

[13/6/17 - Whatsapp]
Richard [6.38 a.m.]: Good morning!
Richard [6.38 a.m.]: You don’t?
Richard [6.38 a.m.]: You wrote it onto my arm!
Richard [6.40 a.m.]: You do remember the rest, though?
Richard [6.41 a.m.]: Because it would indeed be a shame if you didn't...
Richard [6.52 a.m.]: Wednesday sounds good, my shift ends around 4.
Richard [6.53 a.m.]: Where do you want to meet up?
Orlando [10.04 a.m.]: Who writes messages before seven in the morning?

Orlando [10.04 a.m.]: And of course I remember, I wasn't that drunk

Orlando [11.23 a.m.]: Sorry, got interrupted. Work

Orlando [11.23 a.m.]: Wednesday suits me, too.

Orlando [11.23 a.m.]: I can be in York around seven, name a place

Orlando [11.25 a.m.]: If you want to grab dinner, I fucking hate seafood

Richard [6:15 p.m.]: Those who did not choose their profession wisely and have to get up at dawn.

Richard [6:16 p.m.]: Dinner sounds good.

Richard [6:18 p.m.]: If pub grub is okay with you we could meet at The Fox?

Richard [6:20 p.m.]: The food's quite good and they have a nice beer garden out back.

Richard [6:21 p.m.]: It's on Poppleton Road.

Richard [6:21 p.m.]: Meet you there at 7 tomorrow?

Richard [6:28 p.m.]: PS: I'm glad you remember!

Orlando [7.08 p.m.]: The Fox. You're on.

Orlando [7.10 p.m.]: And don't talk to me about not choosing one's profession wisely. I had an argument with my resident nudists and a tampon crisis to take care of before breakfast.

Richard [7.12 p.m.]: Wait, wait, wait.

Richard [7.12 p.m.]: What?!

Richard [7.12 p.m.]: Nudists?

Richard [7.12 p.m.]: Tampons?

Orlando [7.16 p.m.]: Yes. I am an OB/GYN based in a nudist colony.

Orlando [7.17 p.m.]: I'm a teacher.

Orlando [7.17 p.m.]: Which is pretty much the same thing.
Richard [7:21 p.m.]: Man, that sounds pretty disgusting.

Richard [7:23 p.m.]: I hope you don't have to engage in childbirth?

Orlando [7:30 p.m.]: Fuck no

Orlando [7:32 p.m.]: But cheers for giving me some perspective here

Orlando [7:32 p.m.]: What is it you do then? Aside from putting horror scenarios into my head that is

Richard [7:48 p.m.]: When I'm not picking up teachers involved in bizarre nudist colonies at the Gents, you mean?

Richard [7:49 p.m.]: What have I gotten myself into here?

Richard [7:50 p.m.]: I work at the hospital.

Orlando [7:57 p.m.]: Your first mistake was to call a number a bloke wrote on your arm after he fucked you in the Gents

Orlando [7:58 p.m.]: I have two boys in my house who don't believe in clothes. It's not that bizarre, it's just annoying

Orlando [7:58 p.m.]: Satisfying work?

Richard [8:17 p.m.]: Very.

Richard [8:18 p.m.]: And people there believe in clothes, which I think is an advantage in the professional context.

Richard [8:19 p.m.]: And yours?

Orlando [8.25 p.m.]: Yes, now that you mention it I was pleasantly surprised by the general dressed-ness of people when I was in hospital last month. Glad to hear that wasn't just a happy coincidence

Orlando [8.31 p.m.]: Work's work

Orlando [8.32 p.m.]: Am forced to watch second formers perform what I believe is supposed to be a musical about dogs right now.

Orlando [8.32 p.m.]: Subpar

Orlando [8.33 p.m.]: You?

Richard [8:47 p.m.]: My heartfelt condolences.
Richard [8:48 p.m.]: I can’t complain. I’m on the couch with a beer. And a book.

Orlando [8.52 p.m.]: Sounds preferable. Tbh I’d even take Kierkegaard over this

Orlando [8.53 p.m.]: There now are cats on stage

Orlando [8.53 p.m.]: Caterwauling gains a whole new

Richard [9:01 p.m.]: ?

Richard [9:02 p.m.]: You still there?

Orlando [9.24 p.m.]: Sorry about that

Orlando [9.24 p.m.]: One of the cats had a nervous breakdown / hissy fit on stage

Orlando [9.24 p.m.]: How’s your book?

Richard [9:45 p.m.]: No worries.

Richard [9:45 p.m.]: I feel your pain.

Richard [9:46 p.m.]: The book is both brilliant and terrible.

Richard [9:47 p.m.]: 'A Little Life” by Yanagihara. Read it by any chance?

Richard [9:49 p.m.]: Are your little singing trolls in bed by now?

Orlando [9.57 p.m.]: Most of them are, or at least are quiet enough that I can pretend they are while having a brew

Orlando [9.58 p.m.]: Haven’t read it, no. Not into fiction. Come to think about it, I had one of my last A-levels read People In Trees. Little Life anything like it?

Richard [10:02 p.m.]: Haven’t read it. But if it’s like "A Little Life” keep it away from children.

Richard [10:04 p.m.]: Do you live at that school?

Orlando [10.06 p.m.]: I don’t believe in wet-nursing. My kids can deal

Orlando [10.08 p.m.]: What gave it away? The nudist altercation before breakfast?

Orlando [10.08 p.m.]: Yeah, I live on school grounds
Orlando [10:09 p.m.]: So, if we're going for a repetition of Friday, which I'd like, it won't happen here

Richard [10:13 p.m.]: Well, The Fox does have a men's room...

Richard [10:15 p.m.]: And I make a point of keeping my flat free of children, so that might be an option as well.

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: I approve of your life choices

Richard [10:18 p.m.]: So do I, all things considered.

Richard [10:22 p.m.]: I really want to see you naked this time.

Orlando [10.23 p.m.]: Suave

Orlando [10.24 p.m.]: That can be arranged

Orlando [10.24 p.m.]: Means we're going back to yours, then

Richard [10:32 p.m.]: Well, why not.

Richard [10:33 p.m.]: Unless we find each other appalling in daylight.

Richard [10:34 p.m.]: Would you prefer me to be a little more subtle?

Orlando [10.38 p.m.]: Mate, be as unsubtle as you want

Orlando [10.39 p.m.]: Saves so much time

Orlando [10.39 p.m.]: And I like it

Orlando [10.40 p.m.]: So go ahead

Richard [10:41 p.m.]: No pressure, huh?

Orlando [10.41 p.m.]: No pressure? And there I thought you enjoyed that

Richard [10:42 p.m.]: I really liked what you were doing with your tongue.
Orlando [10.45 p.m.]: What thing? It's called kissing.
Orlando [10.45 p.m.]: Oh you mean that other thing?

Richard [10:46 p.m.]: Yes, that's what I mean!
Richard [10:46 p.m.]: You can't really expect to have figured me all out during that short time now.

Orlando [10.47 p.m.]: I can go with what I know
Orlando [10.47 p.m.]: So that'll end up with me having a sore throat again
Orlando [10.47 p.m.]: Fair enough
Orlando [10.48 p.m.]: What do I get in return?

Richard [10:48 p.m.]: Maybe better a sore throat than a sore arse?
Richard [10:48 p.m.]: Happy to change positions.

Orlando [10.49 p.m.]: I must've been more sloshed than I thought. I'm not usually that inconsiderate

Richard [10:50 p.m.]: Don't worry about it. We were both drunk.
Richard [10:51 p.m.]: And my coordination is a little better when I'm sober, too.
Richard [10:51 p.m.]: Might be a little easier on your poor throat.

Orlando [10.51 p.m.]: My throat doesn't need mollycoddling either. Quite the opposite, you were hot

Richard [10:53 p.m.]: You were a sight for sore eyes down there.

Orlando [10.54 p.m.]: Yeah, cheers. I got the impression you enjoyed that
Orlando [10.54 p.m.]: Feeling's mutual

Orlando [10.55 p.m.]: So, the plan for tomorrow night is to meet you for dinner and have a chat and pretend I don't want to skip all of it in favour of fucking you again straight away, yeah?
Orlando [10:56 p.m.]: How dull

Richard [10:59 p.m.]: Now who's being subtle?

Richard [10:59 p.m.]: I didn't want to be a cheap date.

Richard [11:02 p.m.]: But tell you what: Meet me at the tower, we can get a beer and walk along the river to my place.

Orlando [11:03 p.m.]: Man of my own heart, you are

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: And I never said I was subtle. It pays to be obvious

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: Case in point

Richard [11:05 p.m.]: Couldn't agree with you more.

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: Now I'm really looking forward to tomorrow.

Orlando [11.08 p.m.]: Same

Orlando [11.10 p.m.]: You still reading your book?

Richard [11:10 p.m.]: Haha.

Richard [11:10 p.m.]: No.

Orlando [11.11 p.m.]: Interesting

Richard [11:12 p.m.]: You reckon?

Richard [11:12 p.m]: [media content in this message]

Orlando [11.13 p.m.]: Fuck

Orlando [11.13 p.m.]: That's hot

Orlando [11.13 p.m.]: And wildly inappropriate, considering I'm sitting in the common kitchen of my house and a third former just came in to get a glass of water
Richard [11:14 p.m.]: Seriously?
Richard [11:14 p.m.]: Don't spoil the mood, man.
Richard [11:15 p.m.]: You are looking at pictures of my dick in a common area?
Richard [11:15 p.m.]: Get out of there!

Orlando [11.16 p.m.]: Give me ten minutes. Carry on, though
Orlando [11.24 p.m.]: In my defense, I was asking about your fucking BOOK
Orlando [11.24 p.m.]: Fucking curfew rules of my school, sorry
Orlando [11.24 p.m.]: Back in my flat now
Orlando [11.24 p.m.]: Definitely not a common area

Richard [11:26 p.m.]: [media content in this message]

Orlando [11.27 p.m.]: Yeah, good to know we're done with subtle for good
Orlando [11.27 p.m.]: Go on then
Orlando [11.27 p.m.]: And to make this fun
Orlando [11.28 p.m.]: As long as you consider typing with one hand fun
Orlando [11.28 p.m.]: Use your words

Richard [11:30 p.m.]: We were done with subtle when you asked if you could skip dinner and fuck me without further ado.
Richard [11:30 p.m.]: Not that I mind.
Richard [11:31 p.m.]: Don't be too loud, though. Your walls appear to have ears.
Richard [11:32 p.m.]: Touch yourself.

Orlando [11:33 p.m.]: Yeah, way ahead of you there, mate
Orlando [11:33 p.m.]: You'll have to trust me and the fucking typos I'll make cuz typing with my left is a bitch
Orlando [11:34 p.m.]: Old building, thick walls. Still want quiet? Cuz I remember you weren't on Friday
Richard [11:35 p.m.]: Quiet sex is no fun.

Richard [11:36 p.m.]: Tell me what you like

Richard [11:36 p.m.]: while I'm imagining it's your hand around my cock

Orlando [11.37 p.m.]: I like you hard

Orlando [11.37 p.m.]: I like you trying to keep quiet

Orlando [11.37 p.m.]: And failing

Orlando [11.38 p.m.]: Like you did, backed up against that stall in the Gents

Orlando [11.38 p.m.]: Good thing I had a hand free for your mouth

Orlando [11.39 p.m.]: Same one I have on my dick right now

Richard [11:40 p.m.]: I am

Richard [11:40 p.m.]: Hard

Richard [11:41 p.m.]: Have been every time I've been thinking about last Friday

Richard [11:41 p.m.]: I actually b

Richard [11:41 p.m.]: it through my lip trying to be quiet

Richard [11:42 p.m.]: Am failing now, too

Orlando [11.42 p.m.]: Fuck, that's criminal

Orlando [11.44 p.m.]: So tell me

Orlando [11.44 p.m.]: My dick inside you

Orlando [11.44 p.m.]: Or my throat around your dick?

Richard [11:45 p.m.]: Your throat around my dick.

Orlando [11.45 p.m.]: How did you come when you thought about last Friday?

Richard [11:46 p.m.]: That was so hot, you looking up at me from that tile floor
Richard [11:47 p.m.]: That image made me come all over my sheets Saturday morning

Orlando [11:49 p.m.]: Yeah, that was hot

Orlando [11:50 p.m.]: We'll start with that tomorrow

Orlando [11:50 p.m.]: Take the edge off in your hallway

Orlando [11:51 p.m.]: Before I fuck you

Orlando [11:51 p.m.]: For an hour or so

Richard [11:53 p.m.]: There is a convenient window sill in my hallway

Richard [11:54 p.m.]: but a nice little old lady living next door

Richard [11:55 p.m.]: she's half deaf but not blind. I might want to keep my trousers on.

Richard [11:56 p.m.]: but hey, hands

Richard [11:57 p.m.]: Can't see us strolling all the way to my place without touching either

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: An old lady?

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: Well, you sure know how to set the mood, mate

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: So I'm on my couch, texting, wanking, and laughing my arse off

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: Not my regular Wednesday evening

[14/6/17 - Whatsapp]

Richard [12.02 a.m.]: So am I

Richard [12.04 a.m.]: I don't mind laughing during sex though

Richard [12.05 a.m.]: Not my regular Wednesday evening either. I'm pleasantly surprised

Richard [12.06 a.m.]: Also still hard

Orlando [12.07 a.m.]: Same

Orlando [12.08 a.m.]: So, if your hallway is out

Orlando [12.08 a.m.]: Your couch then?
Orlando [12.09 a.m.]: Tell me what you want

Richard [12.10 a.m.]: I'm wondering what you'd look like spread out on my bed.
Richard [12.11 a.m.]: And what you'd sound like if I fuck you

Orlando [12.12 a.m.]: Is that so, yeah?

Richard [12.13 a.m.]: That's how it is.
Richard [12.13 a.m.]: It's a very pretty picture.

Orlando [12.14 a.m.]: Confident
Orlando [12.14 a.m.]: Nice

Richard [12:15 a.m.]: Intriguing
Richard [12:15 a.m.]: And you're one to fight back, aren't you?
Richard [12:16 a.m.]: Intriguing
Richard [12:17 a.m.]: Maybe I'd better hold you down then, while I fuck you and watch you come.
Richard [12:18 a.m.]: Which I'd very much like to assist you with now.
Richard [12:19 a.m.]: Tell me what you need.

Orlando [12.19 a.m.]: Fuck
Orlando [12.21 a.m.]: What I need?
Orlando [12.21 a.m.]: A fucking tissue, that's what
Orlando [12.21 a.m.]: Fucking hell
Orlando [12.21 a.m.]: Warn a guy next time
Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: Or don't, I reckon
Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: I know I left bruises on Friday
Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: It's only fair you do, too
Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: I'm good with that
Richard [12.24 a.m.]: damn

Richard [12.24 a.m.]: that's hot

Richard [12:28 a.m.]: I need one, too. Or two.

Richard [12:29 a.m.]: Wish I could've been there and watched you.

Richard [12:30 a.m.]: Tomorrow, though.

Richard [12:30 a.m.]: Or later, rather.

Orlando [12.35 a.m.]: Sorry for the delay. Needed to get cleaned up

Orlando [12.35 a.m.]: That was fun, cheers

Orlando [12.35 a.m.]: 7 at the tower tomorrow?

Richard [12:38 a.m.]: Yes and yes!

Richard [12:39 a.m.]: At the tower's entrance.

Richard [12:39 a.m.]: You can't miss me. I'm sure I'll be the only one carrying around at sweater in front of their body in this weather in order to conceal an anticipatory erection...

Richard [12:40 a.m.]: You don't mind if we don't cuddle now, do you?

Richard [12:41 a.m.]: Have to get up in 5 hours.

Orlando [12.45 a.m.]: Sorry for the delay

Orlando [12.45 a.m.]: Again

Orlando [12.45 a.m.]: Nodded off

Orlando [12.45 a.m.]: See you tomorrow

Orlando [12.46 a.m.]: Don't kill any patients in the meantime

Richard [12:49 a.m.]: Ugh, don't say that. Hits too close to home.

Richard [12:50 a.m.]: Yes, tomorrow!

Richard [12:50 a.m.]: Sleep tight!
Orlando [12.55 a.m.]: My apologies

Orlando [12.55 a.m.]: Likewise
Chapter Summary

On Friday night, Orlando has made out with Richard at the pub. They have been texting back and forth since and are now meeting up for a second 'date'...

He might only just have met the guy, but one thing that Richard appreciates about Orlando is his no-nonsense attitude towards sex. He apparently does not see any need to be coy about what he wants in bed, and just tells him. Or shows him, like on that first night at the pub.

What he wants tonight is to get Richard out of his clothes in the first thirty seconds after he has arrived and to then proceed to shagging him through the mattress, which is absolutely fine with Richard, because Orlando knows damned well what he is doing. He wraps a hand around Richard’s neck and backs him into the wall as soon as Richard has opened the door, the kiss demanding and almost a little impatient as well. He is hard already, unmistakably so, as is Richard within seconds when he presses against him. Orlando’s touches are firm and sure when he gets him out of his clothes, and that, too, is something that Richard appreciates very much. Almost as much as the fact that there is no trace of hesitation in Orlando’s movements when he slowly undresses and makes Richard watch, never once taking his eyes off his. When he is naked he takes the lead again and Richard doesn’t object, because it gets them into his bedroom. And Orlando being in control is pleasurable: He observes every change in Richard’s expression closely, every stutter of his breath, every quiet moan, and adapts his movements accordingly, appearing to be content only if he gets it right. He thrusts fast and deeply, just the way Richard likes it; if he lets someone fuck him he might as well feel it. He can hear Orlando taking pleasure in fucking him, too, can hear his breath hitching when Richard clenches his muscles around his cock, and that actually makes up for not being on top this time. As does the string of filthy words that Orlando uses to encourage him to further push off the bed and rock back into his thrusts. When Richard does, he is rewarded with a moan that almost does it for him, and he begs Orlando to slow down for a moment. He does, but only to push in deeper. Richard sinks his teeth into his lip in an attempt to remain in control when Orlando chooses to still his hips. Reaching around his body, he takes a firm grip around the base of Richard’s cock and bends forward to lick a broad wet stripe up Richard’s neck towards the shell of his ear. His breath is hot against Richard's wet skin when he says quietly: “Turn around. I want to see you face when I make you come.”

Richard is pleasantly sore and exhausted and quite content with the world in general when Orlando stirs next to him.

“I'll be on my way”, he says, turning towards Richard.

Richard hums. “Sure. I'll be right up, just give me another moment.”

Orlando yawns and just shakes his head. “By all means”, he says, getting up, "stay put."

With his eyes half closed Richard hears him turn on the faucet in the bathroom and give himself a quick rinse and then rummage around the hall for his clothes.

“Oi, Orlando?” he calls out, following a sudden impulse.
“Yeah?” Orlando calls back, and when he reappears in the doorway, he is dressed in his boxers and one sock; his t-shirt is dangling from his hand. He steadies himself against the doorframe and pulls on the second sock.

Richard vaguely gestures to the half of the bed Orlando just has vacated. “Or you could just stay the night.”

He watches Orlando’s eyes narrow a little and chuckles.

“Relax. It’s pouring with rain outside. You’re going to be cold and miserable if you ride your bike home now.”

Orlando shrugs and pulls his t-shirt over his head, running a hand through his hair when he reappears. “I won’t melt.”

Richard pulls up the sheet a little higher and smiles at him. “Hardly. But you are welcome to stay the night anyway.” He searches Orlando’s eyes. “And fuck me in the shower tomorrow morning, if you insist on getting wet.”

Orlando rolls his eyes at the pun but reaches for the hem of his t-shirt and pulls it back over his head again. The bed dips a little under his weight when he sits down.

"At what time do you have to leave for work?” he asks, and reaches down to take off his socks before he gets under the covers.

"Half past seven at the latest”, Richard says.

Orlando nods. "Set the alarm to six. I like to have coffee first."
Chapter Summary

After spending the night with Orlando, Richard meets his friend Cate for dinner.

Monday morning starts with shower sex, and damn, Richard could get used to that.

Monday morning continues with a traffic jam on the A64 and coming in a solid 30 minutes too late for work. By actually blaming his tardiness on the traffic chaos, Richard makes himself gossip item number one in the department 4 minutes after he has arrived, because nobody buys it. One minute after that, the emergency pager in his breast pocket goes off and he has to rush to an emergency c-section. The day quickly deteriorates from there. The baby is tiny, just a little over 450 grams, and won’t breathe properly, and after ten minutes next to the heating unit Richard could use a fresh set of scrubs. The morning vanishes in the blink of an eye. Lunch consists of a stale sandwich from the vending machine and two biscuits, and he is about to get himself a cup of coffee when another patient threatens to go into septic shock and the surgeon has to come in for an emergency laparotomy and bowel resection on the ward.

When he gets to his car at 5:15 p.m. Richard is famished and feels a little light headed. When he switches his phone back on, there are three messages from Orlando waiting for him, all of which make him smile. Most of all the third one which consists of a picture of a brightly colored clay object that very much looks like a penis-shaped vase.

He makes himself a cup of coffee when he gets home an hour later and eats three bananas before he takes a shower, grabs a clean shirt and heads out again for dinner with Cate.

She is already waiting for him at their favorite Italian restaurant and smiles at him when he leans over and kisses her cheek.

“You’re late”, she observes and winks at him.

“I’m sorry”, he says with a sigh and sinks into the chair opposite her, “I had a bit of a day.”

“You look good, though”, she says, and cocks her head to the side. “Those holidays seem to have done you some good.”

That, too, yes, Richard thinks and just hums, while he suppresses the smile that comes with the thought of Orlando having a cup of coffee in his kitchen this morning.

The food is good, as always, and the conversation effortless, and Richard feels his spirits return after the first half of his pizza and some of the day’s tension vanish.

When Cate excuses herself to go to the Ladies’, he checks his phone for messages. There are two, both from Orlando:

Orlando [8.15 p.m.]: This is fucking torture, for fuck's sake. Who let that fucker pick the movie? And if you don't stop fucking snickering, I swear I will fucking punch you, Sean.

Orlando [8.16 p.m.]: Sorry about the last text, that wasn't intented for you. Missed by one
Richard grins and quickly types a reply:

Richard [8:21 p.m.]: Was a bit confused for a moment. Also, you know how to swear, obviously. That Sean is one lucky guy.

He is about to switch off the phone and slide it back into his pocket when suddenly Cate is right next to him and squeezes his shoulder. Beautiful and light-footed. Life’s so unfair.

“I knew it”, she says, and her grin is so wide it shouldn’t even be possible. She bends down and lowers her voice so that the others patrons don’t hear her:

“You got laid.”

Richard feels himself blush and Cate laughs.

She slides back into her chair and reaches for her glass.

“Tell me about him”, she demands and reaches for the bottle standing between them to pour herself another glass of red wine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about”, Richard tries to deflect, but Cate just laughs.

“Richard”, she chides. “Nobody returns from a week in London looking this relaxed. And you were just blushing like a school boy.”

She winks at him. “Which certainly is a becoming expression on you. So. Tell me about him.”

Richard sighs but feels a smile tugging at his lips.

“I knew it!” Cate says triumphantly. “Where did you meet?”

“At ‘The Riddermark’, actually, last Friday, after I got back.”

She shakes her head in amusement. “You’re the only person I know who manages to pick up people at the bar.”

Err, Richard thinks, and blushes furiously, causing Cate to raise an eyebrow, even more intrigued.

Richard sighs again. Well. Better get this over with and be done with it.

“Not at the bar, to be precise”, he says, and for a moment considers to just bolt. Instead he takes a sip of his wine.

Cate just looks at him expectantly.

“We- um- sort of got talking at the Gents.” He can’t look at her and stares at the checkered table cloth instead.

“Talking?” Cate can’t suppress her glee.

“Well-” Richard shrugs and risks a glance at her from between his lashes, while his fingers are playing with the brim of his glass.

“Richard!” she exclaims and chuckles. “How do you do that?”

“You make it sound as if I’m doing this on a regular basis”, he complains half-heartedly and Cate
just shakes her head. "Was it any good?" she asks.

"Very", Richard says, and can’t prevent a huge grin spreading on his face. "Or else I wouldn’t have seen him again."

"What? When?"

"Wednesday", he says.

"And..?" she probes.

"Yesterday", he admits, and she slaps her palm onto the table, almost upsetting her glass.

"I knew it!"

He just grins at her.

Cate shakes her head, amused.

"So, who is he, what is he doing, when are you seeing him again?"

Richard laughs. "You’re not going to let this go before I tell you, or are you?"

"Absolutely not." She shakes her head.

"Well", Richard says. "He actually is a teacher. I don’t even know what subject he teaches, though, we haven’t gotten to that, sort of. Don’t look at me like that! We did actually talk a little. I know for example that he lives at that school, he had to be back there in time for breakfast this morning."

Cate is silent for a moment and suddenly looks as if Christmas has come early.

"What?" Richard asks, suspicious.

"He lives at that school?"

Richard shrugs. "Yeah, it’s a little weird, I know. Why?"

"Oh, nothing", she says lightly.

"Cate!" he says sternly, and she laughs.

"You know that I work at the only boarding school within a fifty mile radius, right?" she asks.

"Why?" Then it dawns on him. "Oh." He makes a face. "No. No, no, no. I’m sleeping with one of your colleagues?"

She grins. "It certainly appears this way."

"No way I’m telling you who it is, then."

"Come on, Richard, you know you want to", Cate teases.

He shakes his head. "I know I don’t want to. You’re probably going to use it as leverage of some sort if I tell you."
“I would never do that!” Cate protests.

“You certainly would!”

“You’re right”, she says with a smile. “But I guess I’m going to find out soon enough, if he’s wearing the same grin and smelling of your cologne.”

Richard hides his face in his palms.

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Richard flops down onto the couch when he gets back home. Orlando has replied to the message he sent earlier:

Orlando [8.23 p.m.]: He’s an arsehole who deserves a slap

Orlando [8.24 p.m.]: And you already knew how I swear. Don’t recall you complaining

Orlando [8.24 p.m.]: Don’t answer that, that was reflex. I’m sitting in a kids movie

For a moment his fingers hover over the keys but then he replies anyway:

Richard [9:52 p.m.]: I do. It’s the hottest thing ever, to hear you swearing while I’m fucking you.

Richard [9:52 p.m.]: Are you free an evening this week?
Chapter Summary

This is what happened with Orlando on June, 22nd 2017.

[22/6/2017]

Richard [12:34 p.m.]: How's life at Jackson College today? Somebody take off their clothes before breakfast again?

Orlando [1:54 p.m.]: Don't get me started. It's like they're filming an episode of Hollyoaks here and no one bothered to tell me

Orlando is a second too late to stop it from happening. He comes down the stairs in front of the arts building when he hears the collective 'ooh' of excitement. That, coming from a bunch of third formers is enough for him to quicken his step.

When they see him approach, the cluster of kids on the small patch of lawn instantly dissolves and everyone is trying their best to look a. somewhere else and b. innocent. That includes Roger Norton and Pia Wichewski, though the latter still has her fist raised and the former's face clearly shows where said fist landed five seconds ago.

'What's going on here?' Orlando asks. The question is twice redundant. He already knows the answer and also he doesn't want to know.

Pia opens her mouth and shuts it again when Orlando's eyes meet hers.

'If you were going to say that he started it,' Orlando warns, 'or that he deserved it, I won't even listen to the second half of your sentence and give you detention tomorrow night right away.'

The beauty of that would also be that Sean would have to deal with these idiots since he practically begged Orlando to switch Friday night duty with him. But Roger shakes his head.

'No, Mr Bloom', he says. He is clutching his hand over his nose. 'I told her to.'

Orlando closes his eyes, counts to three (he doesn't have time for ten), opens them again.

'Excuse me?'

'He asked me to', Pia says.

'Well, kinda', Roger adds. 'Ow.'

Orlando looks back and forth between both of them, waiting.

'Explain.'

'Roger was, like, telling us about Mohamed Ali', Pia says. 'And he was saying he was, like, super rad at weaving and whatever. Mohamed Ali, I mean. And then he said that he was just as good. Roger.'
Orlando makes a mental note to talk to Pia's English teacher about her sub-par skills as a narrator and when Pia doesn't instantly continue, he makes an impatient hand gesture to urge her on.

'Ow', Roger says.

'And so I was like, no way you are, and he was like, I totally am, and I was like, shut up,' Pia continues and offers a shrug. 'And I was like, okay, if you can weave like Ali, then let me try and slap ya.'

Orlando pinches the bridge of his nose.

'An undertaking which you then proceeded to put into action, I take it?'

'You what?' Pia asks automatically, but then instantly raises both her hands like she expects a slap from Orlando now. 'Soz, Mr Bloom.'

'Yeah,' replies Roger and he sounds like his nose is already swollen under his hand.

'And you totes weren't as fast as Ali', Pia says, actually sounding smug about it. 'Hit you right in the gob.'

'Ow,' Roger says for a third time and removes his hand from his nose.

Proof of just how well Pia hit him immediately starts dripping onto the grass. Roger's nose is bleeding copiously, now that the hand that sort of held it all in has been pulled away.

'Wow, sick,' someone from the crowd of innocent bystanders says. It earns him a glare from Orlando.

Roger, for his part, doesn't say anything. Orlando watches how he looks down at his own hand, red with blood, then looks up again at Orlando and further up at the sky, until his eyes go white. Orlando, too, rolls his eyes, but because he knows what is to come now.

Roger faints, falling forward and right against Pia.

Orlando pinches the bridge of his nose again.

Richard [3:06 p.m.]: Sorry about your shitty day. It's sunshine and unicorns here for a change.
Orlando [3:55 p.m.]: Glad your existence today is a little less nauseating
Orlando [3:59 p.m.]: Speaking of little flashes of sun on the surface of a cold, dark sea
Orlando [4:00 p.m.]: Any chance you're free tomorrow? By happy accident my evening opened up

Agitated voices come from the inside of the downstairs common room, 'the library', and they are too loud to be ignored entirely. Orlando can tell the difference between a heated argument and pupils trying to kill each other, so he makes himself the cup of tea he's been longing for two hours first. With his steaming mug, he makes his way downstairs, pushing the door to the common room open with his shoulder.

'Everything all right?' he asks, tea raised to his mouth.

Mara O'Riley, Emma Redding, and Victoria Shaw stop yelling at one another in order to look at him. They are sprawled across the leather couches, books and papers all over the place.
'Hi Mr Bloom', Victoria greets, chipper as always.

'We're fine', Emma says, grumpy as always.

'We're not fine,' Mara contradicts her and, with exaggerated drama, lets herself fall back onto the couch, 'our existence is meaningless.'

Victoria chuckles, Emma rolls her eyes.

'Well, sucks to be you', Orlando says.

Victoria laughs.

'We're discussing Sartre, Mr Bloom.'

Orlando quirks an eyebrow, and Emma nods while Mara grumbles,

'No, you two nitwits are, I already accepted I'm gonna get a D.'

It's utter bullshit, of course. All three are in Orlando's philosophy AS-level and while Mara always complains, the worst mark she's ever gotten was a B+. In class, Orlando doesn't have much patience for pupils being overly dramatic in their public pessimism, but this is recess.

'Hell is other people, hm, Mara,' he says anyway.

'Sorry?' Mara replies, too busy with her self-pity to follow.

'He's saying we're being utter -' Emma starts, then stumbles over self-censorship, and Orlando takes another sip from his tea while she goes through varying teacher-friendly curse words in her head.

'Hellhounds?' Victoria provides helpfully.

'Yeah, okay,' Emma agrees. 'We're being hellhounds because we're refusing to enable your idiotic denial of your own potential, and our discussion forever reminds you that you need to actualize your self-image.'

'I hate you', Mara replies, very unconvincingly.

'Yeah, you could,' Victoria says and makes a dismissive gesture. 'Or you could just stop fucking bitching. - Soz, Mr Bloom.'

Orlando refrains from saying that he couldn't have phrased it better, but he also doesn't tell her to mind her tongue.

Victoria, who obviously expected just that, smiles broadly at Mara and after a quick look at Emma, who now started to paint her fingernails with a black Sharpie for some reason, she shrugs.

'We're terribly sorry that we're condemning you to be free.'

Mara had just stopped wearing her pout – the one that causes half of the boys in Orlando's AS-level to lose track of the conversation and the other half to roll their eyes – but now gasps in mock outrage.

'Free? Hello, who is forcing me to do course work with them right now?'

'We wouldn't,' Emma says without looking up from her Sharpie task, 'if you weren't the best in class.'
With a grin that is matching Mara's outrage for grandness, Victoria looks up at Orlando.

'Wouldn't you agree, Mr Bloom?'

Orlando sips from his cup and nods.

'With great power comes great responsibility.'

Emma snorts and Mara exchanges her mock fury for a shake of her head.

'We're talking existentialism here and you're quoting Spiderman at us? You're into comic books, Mr Bloom?'

'Wow, talk about pointlessness of existence', Emma says before Orlando confirms or denies. 'So nihilistic, Mr Bloom. So Sartre.'

Now Victoria sorts, but Mara now drops her act and looks at Orlando with narrowed eyes.

'That's wrong, though, isn't it?'

'What is?' Orlando asks back.

'That Sartre was a nihilist. That's not true, is it. You said so in class.'

'Yeah,' Victoria agrees and shuffles through the notes she just now pulled from under a cushion. 'I wrote it down somewhere, too.'

'I know he did', Emma says, now drawing on her thumbnail. 'I just don't get it.'

'Well,' says Mara, but then nothing follows.

Victoria continues to shuffle through her papers. Orlando sips from his tea. Mara pulls Victoria's assortment of loose sheets from her hands and tosses them next to Emma onto the coffee table between them. She looks back up at Orlando.

'How is saying that there is no purpose to existence not nihilistic, Mr Bloom?'

Mara scoots over on the three seater she is occupying on her own, taking her books and markers with her and creating a free seat, the invitation not spoken aloud but still clear.

Orlando has a shitload of stuff to do – lesson prep and annoying follow up conversations regarding yesterday's consultation evening and talking to Marsters about the leaking faucets in the second floor showers. And he has a bunch of stuff he'd like to do before dinner – have a shower, catch up on the rumours about Morata transferring to United, message Richard maybe.

But Mara is still waiting, Victoria turns her head as well, and even Emma glances up from her fingers.

Orlando puts his mug down on the coffee table as he sits down on the three seater, his elbows resting on his knees.

'First of all, there's a difference between nihilism, or in fact believing that life has no meaning derived from outside humanity, and what Sartre says, all right? What he means by saying 'life has no purpose' is that there is no fixed purpose but only the meaning we ourselves give it.'

Richard [5:17 p.m.]: Sartre?
Richard [5:17 p.m.]: Nice!

Richard [5:19 p.m.]: Damn, you're making this really hard! I'm on background duty tomorrow and in Leeds. I do have a hotel room there and you'd be very welcome to join me, but I might have to jump out of bed at any point during the night and rush to an emergency delivery.

Richard [6:17 p.m.]: Tuesday or Wednesday maybe?

The day's heat is stuck in the conference room, and so is the five-headed planning committee. Despite the quick shower he had earlier, Orlando feels his deodorant failing. It doesn't improve his mood. Neither do Viggo or Craig and their arguing with Gina about the presentation schedule for project-oriented-learning week. They've been at it for ten minutes. The only reason why Orlando hasn't tried stabbing them with his pen is that he's actually quite fond of this pen. If this is how it is going to be for the next two weeks, he is going to nick a punchbag from Karl's gym. Normally for sports, he prefers a good fuck over mindless exercise. Who doesn't. Not when he needs to get rid off some of his pent up frustration, though. And he's not gonna let that pair of muppets ruin his orgasms, is he.

Sean elbows him in the side, and Orlando blinks as his brain closes ten tabs of porn it has opened up, most featuring Richard.

'What?'

'You're not gonna say anything to that?' Sean murmurs.

Orlando sets his face to his default annoyance. His gaze flicks to Viggo, Craig, and Gina who are hunched over a map of JC. Looking back at Sean, Orlando indicates with a short shake of his head, that he has no idea what this is about. Sean, in turn, arches his brows.

'Why are you so chilled out about this?' he asks. 'Did the school nurse shoot you up with tranquilizers?'

'I'm not “chilled out” about anything', Orlando hisses back, pretty much going on autopilot.

Some of the irritation on Sean's face vanishes and he helps himself to another sticky hobnob that Craig brought with him.

'You weren't listening, were you?'

Orlando looks over just as Gina, Craig, and Viggo start complimenting each other. That is never a good sign. Orlando still has no idea what is going on. But he isn't gonna let Sean in on that, now, is he?

'Fuck off.'

Sean crumbles most of his hobnob over his shirt.

'What were you thinking about?' He asks because he is an arsehole. 'If it wasn't this?'

Orlando glares. Sean munches on his hobnob. Orlando intensifies his glare. Sean smirks.

'Getting fucked up the ass,' Orlando says.

Sean pulls a face. He's so fucking straight, it's just too easy.

'Orlando,' he chides, like Orlando is 16 again.
Orlando shrugs.

'Don't ask, if you don't want to know the answer, mate.' He gestures at Craig, Viggo, and Gina who now got their notebooks out (well, in Viggo's case, his phone), comparing dates or something. 'And furthermore, does the outcome of the voting make me doubt democracy? Yes. But that doesn't mean I don't respect the result. If the majority of our school thinks that “love through the centuries” is the motto to go with for project oriented learning, then that's how it is.'

Sean looks at him skeptically, and for a second Orlando expects him to call him on still not knowing what the trio is on about. But then Sean helps himself to another hobnob.

'Yeah. You absolutely are on tranquilizers. Can I have some?'

'Why would you want tranquilizers?' Orlando asks back.

'For some of my ADD ridden first formers maybe.' Sean tilts his head contemplatively as he looks at Gina, Craig, and Viggo, but then says, 'Or for myself maybe. I could use a good night's sleep.'

He leans forward to reach for the plate of hobnobs again but Orlando pushes it out of his reach onto the middle of the table, smiling at Sean when Sean huffs.

'Mate, if you want to get knocked out,' Orlando says, 'All you gotta do is ask.'

And louder, to the trio, he adds, 'You think we're gonna finish this fucking schedule any time this century?'

*Orlando [10:47 p.m.]: Cheers for the invitation, but I'm not too keen on potentially time-sharing with newborns*

*Orlando [10:49 p.m.]: Can't on Monday or Tuesday*

*Orlando [10:49 p.m.]: Which sucks*

*Orlando [10:52 a.m.]: Wednesday? Yours?*

*Richard [12:35 a.m.]: Or you have to smuggle me into your place and we have quiet sex at night.*

*Richard [12:38 a.m.]: I see the flaw of that plan, though.*

*Richard [12:39 a.m.]: Wednesday!*
Chapter Summary

This is what Orlando and Richard were up to on July, 5th.

It's around six when Orlando's phone buzzes where he has placed it on the toilet lid. He has just gotten out of the shower, but has his hands under the running water of the washing basin again anyway; motor oil and grease and dirt taking another round of scrubbing before he gets them off. His skin feels slightly raw when he rubs it dry on the towel around his waist before he picks up his phone and leaves his bathroom. He finds three messages from Richard waiting for him.

Richard [5:47 p.m.]: Can we meet at the pub instead of at my place? My day didn't go as planned and I'm still in Leeds.

Richard [5:47 p.m.]: I'll be back by seven, but I'm really hungry and would like to grab a bite first.

Richard [5:48 p.m.]: That alright with you?

A horde of elephants tramples down the main staircase as he reads, kids yelling and laughing and shoving each other, as if their afternoon off only heightened their excitability or someone secretly fed them sugar. Not Orlando's problem tonight, though.

'Sure,' he texts back and suggests 'The Black Swan' before he gets dressed.

He drops by Wellesley Manor on his way to the garage to remind Sean to drop in at his house once or twice as backup for his house mother. Sean calls him a control freak and tells him to stop fussing, something which Orlando chooses to ignore. Sean has two sobbing teenagers on his couch as they speak, so Orlando is certainly not taking any advice from him.

The rain has stopped, the roads to York are surprisingly empty and Orlando breaks the speed limit once or twice just for the sake of it. It's due to that that he arrives early at the Swan, and he gets himself a bag of crisps and a bottle of Nix Zero before he settles at one of the tables. Might as well use the time to reply to some emails from parents while he waits for Richard.

When Richard arrives, it's with that kind of rushed air to it that people coming late bring with them. It's only when Orlando glances at his watch in automatic response to that that he notices that Richard is actually a quarter of an hour late.

Richard is a little breathless and sighs when he sits down opposite Orlando, but smiles at him.

'Hiya,' Orlando says. He switches his phone off and raises his beer in greeting.

Richard wipes his hand across his forehead and pulls at his shirt collar that is a little askew.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he says. 'I stopped by my place to park the car and get my bike. And a clean shirt,
actually.' He gestures at the bartender to bring him a pint.

'Yeah, no worries,' Orlando replies.

Richard sighs and for a moment he just holds Orlando's gaze, smiling, before he asks:

'Looks as if you found a way to pass the time, though?'

He points towards Orlando's phone.

Automatically, Orlando glances down at the black screen.

'Yeah, no time like the present to send hate mail to parents, is it?' he replies to Richard's enquiring look with a shrug. 'No, I'm all politeness and fucking professionalism.'

Richard grins at that reply, clearly amused.

'I bet that you get your point across in subtext, though, even if you're remaining polite. I'd probably be terrified of parents' day if I had a kid in your class.'

'How I like 'em best.'

Richard winks at him and reaches for the menu.

'Have you ordered anything? I think I need something like an infant-sized steak, I'm starving.'

He quickly flicks through the salad dishes and starters to get to the main courses section.

'Nah, I waited for you.'

Orlando takes a swig from his beer as he watches Richard read. The obvious impatience with which he scans the pages makes him bite back a smirk.

'But I had an obscene amount of pasta for lunch, so I'm hardly undernourished. You though?' He tilts his head to the side, regarding Richard. 'Day didn't leave time for food? For a moment Richard takes his eyes off the menu and shakes his head.

'Not really, no. I spent most of the time crammed into the back of an ambulance, feeling a little nauseous.' He pauses to recall his day in detail. 'I think I actually just had a sandwich and a Wunderbar, and that's hardly food.'

He shrugs and smiles at Orlando.

'But I'm going to do something about that right now. Do you know what you want?'

Orlando pulls the menu over from Richard's side of the table but merely to throw a quick glance at it again.

'Pie, I reckon, they do a mean one here.'

He gets up from his chair, its legs creaking on the wooden floorboards.

'Tell me what you want and I'll order for us.' He picks up his empty bottle and indicates the bar with it. 'I need a fresh one anyway.'

'Cheers. I'll have the cheese burger with fries.'
When Orlando turns to go place their order, Richard is left with a view of his backside. And he really appreciates that view, Orlando certainly looks good from behind in his well-fitting jeans, and aren't those the very ones he wore at the 'Riddermark'? That thought alone makes Richard grin.

There is another patron at the bar and Orlando has to wait for a moment. He turns back towards Richard and rolls his eyes. Richard is smirking at him and beckoning for him to just elbow the other guy out of the way.

Orlando considers this briefly. It's not that he would mind waiting, well, not really anyway. But the bloke occupying the bar man's attention obviously hasn't made up his mind about his choice of beverage and is spewing nonsense about the premiere league. And as much as Orlando normally wouldn't have anything against a spontaneous argument with a stranger, he'd much rather get back to Richard and that fucking smirk of his which seriously makes Orlando question this whole grub and chat preamble for a moment.

So, when the idiot in front of him finally has made up his mind, he places their order, gets a fresh Nix, Richard's pint and two bags of crisps and heads back to their table.

'Can't have you starve in the meantime,' he says and drops one of the bags on the table in front of Richard before he sits back down.

'It'll be fifteen minutes.'

Richard stares at the crisps for a moment while a wave of gratitude washes over him that is completely disproportional to the fact that Orlando merely has gotten him a bag of crisps, a phenomenon that Richard knows comes with low blood sugar levels. So instead of following the impulse to hug him, he simply smiles at him and reaches for the crisps.

'You read my mind there.'

He raises his glass and clinks it against Orlando's bottle. 'Cheers.'

Opening the bag of crisps and shaking a small handful into his left palm he then says:

'So, tell me about your day? Any tampon crisis or fainting spells?'

'I honestly don't have a clue why the tampon shit keeps happening,' Orlando says with a shake of his head. 'I mean Mirkwood House - that's my house - actually has a house mother, so you'd think that girls would go to her for that.'

Richard chuckles but seems a little too preoccupied with his crisps to answer elaborately. So Orlando rips open his own bag and lets half of the crisps spill over the table before he leans back in his chair, getting comfortable with his beer, and lifts one shoulder.

'But today, no female hygiene drama. The usual, really, which means you get to pick from a first former smashing a window, a breakup and subsequent tears during my AS-level, and one of my colleagues bursting into song during lunch because, between us, he is completely batshit.'

He picks up a crisp and pops it into his mouth.

'So, take your pick, I guess.'

Richard grins. 'Tearful breakup then. There definitely is not enough of that going on at my work.'

He grabs three more crisps, lets them disappear in his mouth, chews quickly and then licks his
'Sorry,’ he says with an apologetic smile. 'Usually I can control myself a little better when there's a bag of crisps on the table.'

'By all means, go ahead, mate.'

Richard takes a swig of his beer and wipes away the foam that catches on his upper lip with the back of his hand before he asks: 'Who dumped whom, then?'

Orlando rubs his forehead.

'I'm not actually sure, there was just a bit too much wailing going on for me to suss it out. Or to care actually. I think that it was Victoria who dumped Robert for being, and I quote here “a fucking scumbag and why would he do that and oh God I love him why did I do that”.'

He takes a sip of beer and shakes his head.

'Robert is a serial cheat, so that was bound to happen. I'd just preferred it if it didn't right before I was trying to teach Husserl.'

Richard laughs. 'A serial cheat? At age -what- fourteen?'

'He's sixteen. But yeah, he already was a regular cheat when he was 14 as well. Come to think of it, he was like that from the moment he arrived at JC. Within the first week there were two first form girls fighting over him. And I mean literally fighting. We had to separate them.'

Richard shakes his head. 'I can't even imagine how you manage to deal with stuff like that on a daily basis. All that teenage drama.' He chuckles. 'That's why I'm in neonatology, actually. It's a very well-organized environment. And babies never talk back at you.'

He props both his arms onto the table and leans forward in his chair, much more awake after he's had a little snack.

'You're teaching philosophy?'

'Even while they teach, they learn', Orlando quotes and then nods. 'Yeah, from first form to A-levels, the whole range.'

Richard keeps looking at him expectantly, obviously waiting for him to elaborate. Orlando rubs the rim of his bottle with his thumb and regards Richard for a moment before he does.

'I reckon it's the other way around for me. Wouldn't know what to do with babies, or anyone who isn't talking back or can't be held responsible for their actions.'

Richard raises an eyebrow. 'You're one for challenges, I already noticed that.’ He winks at Orlando. 'And if you think about it, mine is the lazy option.’ He shrugs. 'I mean, I do have the parents to deal with, and they talk back, I can tell you, but the neonates- they don't really do all that much. If you're lucky they sleep most of the day. It's quite peaceful on good days. And I always get to go home at the end of the day. How's that, by the way, living there with the kids? Must be tons of them.'

'About 700, give or take a few that got lost in the woods during the last bio field trip,’ Orlando replies. 'But only about half of them are boarders. And from the 66 living in my house, I only want to actively kill about five.' He thinks about it for a moment, then adjusts the number. 'Maybe eight.'
Richard cocks his head to the side. ‘And what have these unfortunate eight done to attract your wrath?’

Absentmindedly, he stretches out his hand towards one of Orlando's crisps that's lying on the table half way between them, but pulls it back it when he notices what he is doing.

'Sorry, I don't mean to steal your food.' He casts a longing glance towards the bar. 'Are those fifteen minutes over yet?'

Orlando looks at his watch.

'Pretty sure it's only been five or so', he guesses, then just pushes his crisps over to Richard's side of the table. 'Is that a regular thing for you? Accidentally starving yourself due to work?'

Richard blushes a little but reaches for the crisps anyway. He regains his composure when he pops another one into his mouth. 'Thanks,' he says quietly, before he continues: 'Some sort of professional hazard, I guess. Either you're stress-eating sweets or you aren't eating at all.'

For a moment, Orlando just watches him, watches how Richard licks salt from the tips of his fingers, and isn't surprised that his thoughts take a short cut to things less appropriate for a public location. When Richard notices him staring, Orlando doesn't look away, though he does return to the previous topic of conversation.

'Another thing to make me appreciate my job, then,' he says casually. 'We do get fed regularly and don't even have to cook for ourselves.'

Richard smirks at him. 'You definitely weren't thinking about food or food preparation a second ago, though,' he says, and brings his thumb back up to his lips. Meeting Orlando's eyes he repeats the licking motion, taking a little more time than strictly necessary. 'You like what you see?' he then asks teasingly.

'Fuck off,' Orlando says lowly but without real heat. 'You're the one who insisted on getting food. You know exactly what I like seeing.'

Under the table Richard shifts his leg so that his knee comes to rest against Orlando's and with a grin he leans a little towards Orlando and says, his voice low: 'Consider it not food, then, consider it foreplay.'

Orlando puts his bottle down and rests his lower arms on the table. His gaze drops down to Richard's mouth, then meets his eyes again. He doesn't say what he's thinking, doesn't argue that his definition of foreplay involves a lot more touching and kissing, and maybe a bit of shoving to keep things amusing. In fact he doesn't say anything. He just narrows his eyes minimally and keeps them locked with Richard's. He hums; a noncommittal sound under any other circumstances.

Richard simply smiles at him and licks his lips, not taking his eyes off Orlando. Then he reaches across the table and lightly brushes his fingertips over the inside of Orlando's wrist where it rests on the table, just below the hem of his sleeve.

'You know, I find there's a lot to be said about delayed gratification. Or at least about a little delay.' He laughs quietly at Orlando's expression.

'Don't look at me like that. Am I going to pay for this later?'

And Orlando would have to be dead for this not to conjure up a whole bunch of ideas in his head.
But it's only after a moment that he moves his hand, his fingers now encircling Richard's wrist.

'Not my kinda thing, but mate, if that's what you like?' He tightens his grip momentarily before letting go entirely, and he leans back in his chair once more. 'I'll delay your gratification plenty later. No problem.'

The corner of Richard's mouth twitches and he raises his eyebrows at Orlando when he leans back in his chair, too, mirroring Orlando. For a moment he just looks at Orlando while the smile on his lips widens. Then he shakes his head and chuckles softly.

'I meant that in the most innocent way possible, actually.'

Without breaking the gaze, he brings up his hand and rubs it across his neck, not quite able to decide if he is more amused or nonplussed.

'Well, but we know that, then.'

He rests his arms back on the table and when his fingers stray to the empty crisps bag and start toying with it he follows them with his eyes. For a moment, he simply watches his index finger trace the bag's outline, seemingly lost in thought. When he then looks back up at Orlando it's with a much more serious yet open expression.

'Hold me down but don't try to tie me up,' he says quietly.

Orlando regards Richard for a moment, assessing, reevaluating his own reply.

'Okay,' he agrees and makes sure none of the innuendo from before darkens his voice.

Richard nods and takes a sip from his pint. Orlando assesses once more, undecided what to make of this.

'Right,' he says after a moment and puts his Nix down, eyes still on Richard. 'Not sure when this turned awkward, but it did. I'm not in the habit of tying anyone up, all right? Each to their own and all that, but that's really not my thing. But you can't know that.' He picks his bottle back up and raises it slightly. 'So, cheers for letting me know, all right?'

Richard simply nods, again, not quite sure how to proceed. His finger prods the crisps bag a couple of times more, before he abruptly pulls back his hand and straightens his shoulders, as if to shake off an unpleasant thought. He searches Orlando's eyes before he speaks, and when he does, it's with hesitation and his voice is even quieter than before:

'There's a story there, of course, and this is neither the place nor the time to share it.' He pauses. 'I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable. ' His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. 'I certainly didn't mean to.'

He pauses again and rubs his palm across his forehead with a sigh. 'Are we good?'

Orlando doesn't move except for a one-shouldered shrug.

'Sure,' he replies simply. 'And you didn't. I appreciate a straightforward answer, no use bikeshedding things.'

Richard's expression changes to one of confusion. It takes Orlando a second to realize what he said.

'Sorry. It's a term used at JC for-,' he halts, makes a vague gesture to encompass the world at large,
'hiding things, I reckon. Well, originally for fucking in places where you're not supposed to fuck.'

Richard laughs. 'I see.' He curls his fingers around his glass but doesn't lift it to his lips. When he looks back at Orlando it's with the same self-assured ease he’s emanated before the conversation got off track.

'So, I should ask for the bike shed to be included into the tour of the premises if I ever visit JC?' he asks with a smirk.

Orlando pulls a face and shakes his head.

'You really don't want to know what's going on in there,' he says, happy enough that Richard seems more relaxed again. 'Hell, I don't want to know most of the time. The amount of safe sex lectures I had to dish out this year alone is almost enough to put one off of sex completely.'

Before Richard can say anything, Orlando raises a hand to stop him.

'Almost, mind. And it's not even all they get up to in there, it's a proper illegal gambling den half the time.'

'Sounds as if that might be the place, to find Cate in between lessons, then,' Richard muses, and then asks: 'How come you weren’t in Paris with them last week, by the way? Not your students?'

'Some of them are, yeah,' Orlando replies, 'but that's not how it works and I doubt Cate would’ve wanted me there. Can't speak a word of French which, I hear it is sort of a requirement over there.'

Richard nods, chuckling. Orlando's fingers worry at the label of his bottle as he rests the heel of his right foot on his left knee.

'How do you know Cate anyway?'

Richard reaches for the crisps bag and peers inside, but there are only a couple of crumbs left which he shakes into his palm before he balls up the bag in his fist. 'She’s a friend of a friend who suggested I give her a call when I moved here from London. We pretty much hit it off right away, and that's that. Not terribly exciting.' He shrugs and smiles at Orlando.

'Not sure I believe that,' Orlando says easily. 'It is the same Cate we are talking about, right?'

'I'm pretty sure it is. But then, you never know, that woman is as mysterious as she is stunning, she might lead some kind of secret double life. How well do you know her?'

'How well does anyone know Cate?' Orlando asks back. 'Not well, I reckon, considering I have known her for 22 years. I guess my trivia knowledge of her doesn't move past her enjoyment of betting and her wine preferences. Well, that and she's popular with my kids.'

Richard laughs, surprised: '22 years? How can you have known her for 22 years?'

Orlando knits his brows together in a minimal frown as he doesn't understand the question.

'Well, I'm 40, and I've known her since I was 18, so that's 22 years, right?'

Richard still looks puzzled. 'You lost me there, mate. How on earth did you meet Cate of all people when you were 18?'

'Cause that's when she started teaching at JC?' Orlando replies, his frown deepening momentarily.
Then finally his brain catches up and fills the gap. He shakes his head. 'Sorry. That took me a while. I was a boarder at JC when she started.'

'You were? Wow. So you've been living there all your life, basically?' Richard looks as if he can't really wrap his head around this particular bit of information. He props one elbow onto the table and rests his chin in his palm while he absentmindedly reaches down with the other hand to scratch his ankle. 'You must be really fond of that place?'

Orlando, whose eyes have momentarily wandered to the bar, looks back at Richard. There is a small frown on Richard's face now and the way he is looking at him Orlando kinda reminds Orlando of visitors at the zoo. He tilts his head to the side, allows vague puzzlement to show on his face.

'How do you mean?'

Richard shrugs. 'I don't know, I mean, for me work simply is that- work. But with living there- and having lived there most of your life- it's your home as well, isn't it?'

The puzzlement seems to go both ways, Orlando reflects dryly, as cogs shift into place in his mind.

'Yeah, sure,' he says, and it's not like he's never been asked that before. 'It's a good place to work at and a convenient place to stay in.'

Richard squints at Orlando and regards him in silence while he contemplates his answer. 'It must be more than that, though? With the memories of two decades attached to it?' he asks, and as an afterthought, adds: 'Have you ever considered leaving?'

'Why would I?' Orlando replies without hesitation. 'Like I said, the work's good and the lack of commute is pretty neat.'

The curious expression on Richard's face doesn't change. It's not exasperation, but there isn't satisfaction either, and Orlando is more and more certain he doesn't get the point of the question.

'I don't understand what you're asking,' he therefore says with a minimal shake of his head. 'I'm assuming you mean personal rather than factual memory? Though in both cases, I don't think they play a role in me wanting to stay at or leave a place.'

Richard doesn't reply while he replays Orlando's answer in his head. Then he bursts into laughter.

Orlando looks at him in surprise, and Richard shakes his head. 'I'm sorry, I think we are not having the same conversation anymore.' He chuckles. 'At least I am completely lost here.'

Orlando knows the feeling and is temporarily at a loss how to change it. He is about to do what he does in philosophical discussions; rephrase what he said and trust the new assortment of words to create meaning that will translate better. But then the waiter arrives at their table with their food.

When he places his burger in front of him, Richard for a fleeting moment looks at him as if he wants to propose, but then simply nods his thanks and turns back to Orlando with a pleased smile on his face.

'Saved by the bell, hm?' he asks and grins at him. 'Or what is it your students say?' He reaches for a paper napkin and places it onto his lap. 'Let's talk about this more another time, if you want, I can't deal with complicated conversation topics when I'm having a burger.'

'Man after my own heart,' Orlando says with a nod of "thank you" at the waiter. 'You want some peace and quiet to go along with your meal?'
His burger already grasped firmly with both his hands, Richard shakes his head.

'No, you're good,' he says. 'You eat in silence at JC?'

Orlando shakes his head as he picks up his cutlery.

'I wish we did sometimes, though. Seems like here is a direct link between the amount of food intake and bullshit being talked.'

Richard, mouth full, arches an eyebrow enquiringly, and Orlando supposes that a highlight reel of stupidest dinner conversations is as good a topic as any. So while he allows his pie to cool down a bit, he tells Richard about Gerry's and Eric's mid-dinner argument with Christopher over the educational value of the Stooges. It's a pretty off-the-rack anecdote if you are acquainted with them, but Richard's eyes go wide repeatedly and he has to keep himself from laughing. And Orlando supposes that spontaneous re-enactments of movie classics over dessert don’t necessarily cater to one's typical idea of boarding school life.

As far as light conversation goes, this is as zero-g as it gets, like pretty much every anecdote involving Gerry Butler. But that's good, just as Orlando's pie is and - judging from the occasional hum of appreciation Richard makes - the burger.

Richard inhales it quicker than a bunch of fourth formers would after a rugby match. When Orlando comments on that - the pace of today's ride in the ambulance being a match for the tempo of Richard's food intake - Richard nods and then remarks dryly in between two bites that the pleasant difference is that nobody is going to vomit right there and then. Orlando is wiser than to ask for further details, and their conversation strays to fast cars and motorbikes. Orlando talks a little about his Yamaha and his BMW and how their performance compares, and after they ordered some dessert, Richard tells him about his trip through Portugal last year and Orlando reciprocates with his plans for the summer vacation that involve Karl, Poland, and several breweries they plan to visit.

Somewhere in between, Richard humorously remarks on the effect nourishment and the subsequent change of his blood sugar have on his conversational skills. Orlando isn't about to argue with that. Not that talking to him before was a hardship. But Richard now, his plate cleaned up to the last crumb, his hand loosely curled around a fresh pint, smiling pretty much continuously while he explains how much trouble exactly one can get into in an Audi in Southern Europe? Yeah, Orlando has had worse meals in his life.

After Richard has pushed the last bite of his brownie into his mouth he licks his index finger and thumb clean and sighs contentedly, smiling at Orlando. He feels much better now than an hour ago when he arrived, very aware of his shirt sticking to his sweaty back after cycling over from his place. Talking to Orlando does not take any effort at all, and he is glad because if it did, it would probably have been a tedious evening after the exhausting afternoon at work. Orlando is talking about his bike again, and he looks relaxed and at ease, the beer bottle in one hand, the elbow of the other resting on the backrest of his chair. It's good to know that they can talk about stuff, too, actually, without things turning weird or boring as soon as they are leaving the sanctuary of his bed (or the bathroom). A smile flits over Richard's face at that thought and Orlando cocks up his eyebrow when he sees that.

Richard shakes his head.

'Nothing,' he says. 'It's just that I had a burger and two pints and am having a good time here.'

Orlando licks traces of beer from his lips.

'Hm, that much torque can do that to a man,' he says, deliberately misunderstanding the reason for
Richard's smile. Before Richard can correct him (not that he seems like he wants to, his smile just broadens slightly), Orlando shakes his head and adjusts his reply to something at least a bit more serious.

'Yeah, mate. Same.'

Richard nods. 'I'm glad. And now that I'm not threatened by starvation anymore, I can actually think of other things than food intake again. What are our plans for the rest of the evening?'

Orlando laughs in response to that, to equal parts amused and intrigued by Richard's absolute disregard of the concept of segue. He drinks the last swallow from his beer before putting the bottle down.

'You mean the obvious aside?'

Richard chuckles and shakes his head. Resting his forearms on the table he leans towards Orlando. 'No, I'm talking about the obvious,' he says in a low voice. 'Not that I don't enjoy talking to you. But I already had to suppress the urge to drag you into the Gents earlier.' He pauses. 'So, tell me.'

Richard's words are the cause of instant arousal, only heightened by Orlando's awareness that it's both the reminder of their first encounter and Richard's casual matter-of-factness that do it for him.

So, he makes sure there is no doubt about what he is thinking as he mirrors Richard's posture and low timbre voice, ditching all light flirtatiousness in favour of bluntness.

'I don't think we can get away with what we did at the 'Riddermark' here, not at this hour. But that's most definitely what I want.'

Richard feels a blush spreading on his cheeks at Orlando's words.

'Fuck,' he says under his breath and shifts in his seat a little when he suddenly feels the confinement of his jeans. He licks his lips and quickly filters through the possibilities at hand, not taking his eyes off Orlando. No, they probably won't get away with what they did at the 'Riddermark', not at that extent. But-

'We don't have to go all the way', he says, and notices that he sounds a little hoarse now. 'Just take the edge off.' He pauses and lowers his voice even further: 'I really want to take you home afterwards, though, and watch you take off all your clothes.'

And look how quickly that mood shifted. Orlando regards Richard for a moment, gauges if he means what he says and finds confirmation in the look on Richard's face.

Orlando knows perfectly well that this is the opposite of a necessity, that urgency is purely measured by personal feelings in this case. He doesn't give a fuck.

His eyes briefly leave Richard's as he assesses the room - it's not crowded, his jacket and helmet hanging among very few others on the rack, the bar man, whom he paid earlier, casually chatting with a regular; nobody paying them any mind.

He looks back at Richard, his body tensing with the intent to get up.

'All right.'

Richard's pulse speeds up almost alarmingly at Orlando's answer and his breath catches when instantly an image of that night at the 'Riddermark' flashes up in his mind. Fuck. He can't recall
when he has wanted someone this much, so much that he really doesn't want to wait. And yes, it's not a very mature thing, sex at the loo. But he really doesn't want to care, either.

He scans Orlando's expression for any sign of hesitation but encounters only determination. The corner of his mouth twitches when he nods and echoes Orlando's words:

'All right.' He nods again. 'Give me two minutes, I actually have to pee.'

He looks at Orlando, waiting, and this kind of considerateness shouldn't go so well with his absolute frankness. The fact that it does, and to a ridiculous degree even, that catches even Orlando off guard.

'By all means,' he says with a nod and a wave of his hand, 'I'm not gonna stand between a man and his bladder.'

Richard laughs. 'Smart move.'

He pushes back his chair, but before he gets up he searches Orlando's eyes once more and says: 'You have no idea how much I want this right now.'

He doesn't wait for Orlando's answer, he doesn't have to, it's all there in his grin, but gets up from the chair and makes his way to the bathroom, past the bar and through the little hallway where the ceiling is so low that he has to stoop so he won't hit his head. The Gents is one flight of stairs down, in the basement, and maybe that's not a bad thing, given the circumstances. Nobody will see them return from the loo together, but people might just think they've gone for a smoke.

When he pushes open the door to the Gents, he faces his reflection in the mirror and encounters a wide a grin on his face. He shakes his head at himself, amused, and proceeds to the urinals. The room is empty, and that's a good thing, too. He unzips his pants and curses softly when peeing proves difficult because he still is half hard. Or already is half hard. That thought doesn't make things any easier. Richard closes his eyes for a second and takes a deep breath, trying to relax. He's relieved when he discovers that that does the trick, flushes and turns to the sinks to wash his hands.

As Richard turns off the tap, Orlando pushes the door open with his shoulder and gives the room a cursory once over. His quick scan ends on Richard's face, and he quirks a questioning eyebrow.

Richard's eyes, too, briefly glance towards the stalls, then he shakes his head in response to the question Orlando didn't ask out loud, smirks.

Orlando gives the heavy wooden door a push, harder than one normally would, and when it falls shut, he is already standing in front of Richard, trapping him against the washing basin. Richard doesn't protest, but licks his lips, his eyes flickering down to Orlando's. Orlando steps closer yet - thighs touching, hips touching, chests touching – takes Richard's face in his hands and kisses him.

Richard doesn't miss a beat and answers the kiss without any hesitation. He wraps one hand around Orlando's neck and the other around his hip to keep him close. He can feel Orlando's erection pressing against his thigh through the denim of their jeans, and fleetingly wonders if Orlando can feel, too, how hard he is, when Orlando's soft growl tells him that he can. Richard lets his teeth graze Orlando's lip and then pulls back a little to look at him, breathless already.

'Come on,' he just says, in want of anything more elaborate, and pushes away from the wash basin, taking Orlando with him and turning them around so he can maneuver them into a toilet stall. His elbow connects with the doorframe and he yelps in pain, causing Orlando to laugh into his mouth.

'Sorry,' Orlando says automatically, both in response to Richard's yelp and preemptively, because he uses the momentum to spin them around and close another door with too much force, using Richard's
body to slam it shut and keep it that way.

He laughs again in response to Richard's grunt, reaches around him to turn the lock, then uses the same hand to grab Richard's belt to simultaneously reel him in and start undoing it.

But Richard almost beats him to it. Without breaking the kiss, he swats Orlando's hands away and undoes his belt himself. He then unbuttons his jeans and unceremoniously proceeds to making short work of Orlando's belt and jeans buttons as well. He nudges Orlando's nose with his, then, to get him to back off a little and searches his eyes when he brings up his hand to his mouth and licks a wet stripe across the palm before he slips it into Orlando's boxers and wraps it around his cock.

'Fuck, yeah,' Orlando grunts, too loud, and of fucking course Richard would look smug about it. Instead of reciprocating immediately or kissing him again, Orlando weaves his fingers through Richard's hair and grips it, not hard enough to hurt, just tight enough to hold. And for an egotistical moment or two he just pushes into Richard's fist and stares at his face and just wants.

And Richard lets him- lets him hold his head in place, lets him thrust into his hand- while he simply keeps looking at him. There is going to be enough time later to have Orlando take care of his needs, and the unmasked expression of raw desire in Orlando's eyes is enough to almost make him come into his pants without even being touched anyway. Orlando's breath catches when he angles his wrist and adjusts his grip around his cock, his thumb now sweeping over its head with every one of Orlando's thrusts.

'Keep going,' he murmurs, not taking his eyes off Orlando's. And not even Orlando is gonna argue with that. He thrusts into Richard's fist, grunts when Richard tightens his grip, drops his hand onto Richard's shoulder, presses his fingers against Richard's throat to feel the rapid thrumming of his pulse.

'Richard,' he grits out, brows knitted together in the effort of keeping at least half way quiet.

Richard just looks at him and Orlando knows he should be doing something about that look, uses the hand that isn't pressed against Richard's throat to grip his butt and pushes harder against him. Richard obliges him by tilting his hip towards him to increase the friction while Orlando's thrusts become more urgent. He is a sight for sore eyes with his pupils blown wide, a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead, causing a stray curl to stick to it. His focus is half turned inwards although he keeps looking at Richard. As much as wants to look down to where his hand his wrapped around Orlando's cock and watch him thrust into his fist, Richard steadily meets his gaze. Orlando has sunk his teeth into his lower lip now so he won't be too loud, and Richard cups his cheek in his palm and lightly rubs the pad of his thumb over Orlando's mouth, beckoning for him to let go.

'Let me hear you,' he says quietly, and, wrapping his hand around Orlando's neck, he rests his forehead against Orlando's so that their lips are only mere inches apart and he can shut him up with a kiss if need should be.

Orlando can't focus on more than one thing anymore. It's either not shouting or not coming. He might be far gone, but he still knows where they are, in the Gents of a popular pub, early on a Wednesday evening. He can't and he won't -

He pushes into Richard's hand, keeps quiet, growls low in his throat, only half in response to Richard, keeps quiet, pushes against Richard and the door of the stall rattles in its hinges, keeps quiet, keeps quiet, squeezes his eyes shut, comes.

Instinctively, Richard presses Orlando's head against his shoulder when his body goes rigid against his and manages to stifle most of the moan that escapes his lips when he spills into his hand (and all
over his jeans, possibly). Fuck. Richard's own erection is straining against his boxer briefs and they must be soaked with precum. He quickly wipes his hand on his stomach before he takes Orlando's head between his hands, kissing him deeply while he's still trembling.

Orlando lets himself be kissed as his mind is blank and his senses are swimming. It's Richard's tongue pushing into his mouth, it's Richard's hands digging into his neck, it's Richard's body hard and tense against his own - and Orlando snaps back, his mind slams back into gear.

He bites Richard's tongue, just hard enough to make him retreat, and when Richard does (hisses and pulls back), Orlando kisses him with his lips closed - dry and firm and quick - before he presses his palm against Richard's chest and drops to his knees.

Richard lets out a shaky breath when Orlando looks up at him, disheveled and flushed, and smug, that bastard. When he swiftly pulls down Richard's boxer briefs, Richard blushes, feeling a little exposed all of a sudden when his erection springs free, and Orlando grins at him.

'Are you trying to kill me?' Richard asks, but there is no heat in his voice, and the faint tremble that is to it betrays his true feelings.

Orlando licks his lips and tilts his head back to look up at him when he grips Richard's naked hips just above his jeans.

'Shit up.'

His voice is soft because he makes the conscious effort to relax his throat already. For a second, Richard looks like he wants to say something anyway, but then he doesn't because Orlando wets his lips and closes them over the head of Richard's dick.

Richard drops his head back against the door and inhales sharply, and that is the second or two that Orlando needs to adjust - to the taste, to the thickness - before he swallows him down.

With Orlando's throat closing around his cock, wet and warm and tight and so fucking perfect, a strangled sound tears from Richard's lips- somewhere between a whimper and a moan. It's not the most graceful sound he's ever made but he really is past caring. Orlando moves his head and he can't form a clear thought any longer, the feeling so intense that it's completely overwhelming. He brings up his right hand to his mouth, balled into a fist and presses it to his lips in an attempt to keep quiet-only to find that he doesn't stand a chance, his moan echoes off the tiles.

Orlando pulls back enough to reply with a growl but that does fuck all to quieten Richard down, on the contrary. So, Orlando opts for quick and dirty because of that, and isn't that fucking lying to himself? He'd opt for that every time, no matter the noise, because this is fucking hot, and so what if Richard sucks at being quiet, so what if Orlando's throat really isn't quite relaxed enough and he feels every thrust just that bit too much? Who the fuck cares.

Richard registers Orlando's growl, but with a moment's delay, it's like an echo of the sound itself- his brain seems to have stopped working properly and he can hear his own heart beat racing. He knows he should be quiet, has to be quiet, it would be so embarrassing to be banned from the pub, but he can't, he can't- He presses his forearm against his lips and closes his eyes for a second, willing himself to be quiet. But Orlando has found the exactly right speed, and he just has to look down at him, watch him-- the way Orlando looks up at him between his lashes, the way his cock disappears and reappears between his lips, stretched around him, he can't- his breath comes in irregular little puffs, and he can't seem to get enough oxygen into his lungs, he's not going to last much longer. He reaches for Orlando's head and slides his fingers into his hair, tugging a little to get his attention.
'Careful,' he rasps. 'I'm going to come.'

His grip in Orlando's hair tightens, intention clear. For a second Orlando resists - selfishly really, not just to be contrary - but Richard grunts, sounds almost pained, and Orlando gives in, again, for now.

Replacing his lips with his hand, he gets back up and - again, selfishly because his mouth feels frustratingly empty - he kisses Richard hard.

Richard is too far gone to engage in anything that resembles coordinated movements. He twists his fingers into Orlando's shirt and lets himself be kissed, Orlando's teeth pleasantly sharp on his lip, while he strains into Orlando's touch. It doesn't take him more than a couple of fast, almost rough strokes of Orlando's hand, and he comes, his eyes tightly closed, moaning into Orlando's mouth. Orlando keeps kissing him and keeps him in place with the full weight of his body throughout. Only when Richard is done, come sticky and warm in Orlando's palm, muffled moans replaced by just heavy breathing, he stops. He presses a close-mouthed kiss onto Richard's lips when he trusts him to stand on his own and rips off some toilet paper to wipe his hand clean.

'Well, that was hot,' he says, stating the obvious, and at Richard's breathless chuckle, he drops the paper into the loo and steps closer again.

Richard takes a deep breath, exhales slowly and smiles at Orlando when he reaches for the front of his shirt and pulls him against his body. The smile doesn't leave his lips when he leans forward and kisses him, slowly, lazily almost, soft, pliant lips and no tongue. When he pulls back, it's only to smirk at Orlando.

'I can't believe we just did that, again,' he says with a chuckle, and the laugh lines around his eyes are deepening. He rests his palm against Orlando's chest right above his heart and rubs his thumb over his collar bone. 'You were breathtaking,' he says quietly.

Orlando leans in for another quick kiss as he buttons up again.

'Ditto.'

Richard laughs in response to the level of eloquence to Orlando's sweet talk, and Orlando likes that sound.

'Quite literally, really,' he adds only then, clears his throat and wipes a hand over his mouth.

Richard grins at him while he fastens his trousers. 'Indeed,' he says, and after regarding him in silence for a moment, he adds: 'You're ridiculously good at this, you know that, right?'

Orlando chuckles.

'Cheers. You know, love what you do, do what you love.'

As far as lines go, this one isn't particularly smooth, and Richard seems torn between groaning and laughing.

'Sorry,' Orlando says in response, less casual now. 'I really like doing that.' And after a beat, lower. 'To you.'

Richard's breath catches, again and he chuckles softly. 'Yeah,' he says, 'I kind of noticed.' His eyes dart back and forth between Orlando's eyes and his lips. 'Maybe almost as much as I like you doing it.'
He reaches out and slowly trails his thumb over Orlando's lower lip. 'I really wanted to come in your mouth,' he says quietly and then asks, his voice low: 'And you wanted me to, didn't you?'

Orlando exhales sharply and shakes his head, leaning back a fraction.

'Mate, don't say shit like that,' he replies, just that side of breathless. 'Or we'll never get out of this damn pub.'

Richard chuckles. He slides his fingers under Orlando's belt and gives a tug, reeling him in. With chests and hips and legs touching once more he lets his breath ghost over Orlando's lips. 'That would be a shame,' he says lightly, 'because I really, really want to take you home now and let you fuck me.'

'You're such a fucking bastard,' Orlando cusses and uses his weight to shove Richard back against the door when suddenly the old staircase outside creaks under the weight of footsteps, accompanied by two voices.

'Fuck,' Orlando says while Richard growls 'Shit'.

They take one look at each other, and then Richard has already turned around and is fumbling with the lock. They manage to get out of the stall moments before the door is pushed open and two men come in, chatting about football while they are already undoing their belts.

Orlando schools his face to a neutral expression and from the corner of his eyes, he sees Richard aiming for the same. And it's one of the harder things Orlando has done this evening, standing next to Richard at the washing basins and rubbing the remainders of his come from between his fingers while pretending he is barely on speaking terms with him.

Richard tries to keep his head down and thus hide the grin that he barely can control. From the corner of his eyes he casts a glance at Orlando who is using half a bottle of liquid soap in his enthusiastic attempt to appear like any regular bloke at the loo. He turns off the faucet and wipes his hands dry on the bottom of his jeans on his way to the door. He steps into the hallway but only takes a couple of steps before he stops and waits for Orlando. He is right behind him, and lets out the breath he's been holding as soon as the door falls shut behind him. Richard just grins at him and Orlando shrugs and mirrors the grin.

'Come on,' he says quietly and places his hand on the small of Orlando's back, steering him towards the stairs. And loud enough only for Orlando's eyes to hear he adds: 'Can't wait to get home.'

Orlando lets himself be pushed up the stairs without protest but turns his head to look back at Richard.

'That, by the way,' he says, 'was bikeshedding. Fucking where you're not supposed to.'

'I see,' Richard says and smirks at him. 'Can't see what anyone would have against that, then. It's fun.'

For a second, Orlando switches on his best look of teacherly disapproval. It costs him a surprising amount of effort, though, and Richard doesn't buy it anyway. He just grins and keeps grinning while they fetch their things from the bar and leave, and Orlando really doesn't mind that it's stupidly infectious.

Orlando knows Richard's flat isn't far away, just about a mile up the road and across the river really, and he decides to leave his bike behind. Richard seems surprised about it for a moment and as they stroll up High Ousegate, Richard pushing his bicycle, he remarks upon it. Orlando responds by
explaining how little of an emotional attachment he has to his means of transportation (unlike some other people) which, he adds, happened to be quite a good thing, considering how bad his BMW looked after the accident he had in spring. Their subsequent conversation about traffic accidents revolves less around gruesome details and more around recent changes in the highway code, and it's just interrupted by Richard's brief interest in the display of Fatboy's front windows.

The air is still fresh, and Orlando enjoys the walk alongside the river, enjoys their easily meandering conversation and Richard's recollection of how long it took him to find a flat here that suited his needs and preferences. Richard talks animatedly, and while he does, his eyes keep seeking Orlando's, as do his hands, occasionally they stray to his body, it's small, unassuming touches to his hand, his arm or his shoulder that Richard doesn't seem to initiate deliberately but to just let happen. It's not unpleasant, actually, but Orlando's pace still quickens a bit when they are within eyesight of Richard's house. Finally.

Richard locks his bike to a lamp post, and turns towards Orlando with a smile.

'Can I kiss you now?' he then asks quietly, always polite. 'Or do I have to wait until we're behind closed doors?'

Orlando steps up to him, and Richard leans back against the lamp post. Pulling his hands out of the pockets of his jeans, Orlando places them on Richard's broad shoulders as he licks his lips and presses a kiss onto Richard's who responds instantly.

'I kinda dig your good manners,' he says lightly, 'but just for future reference: The answer to "can you kiss me" is "yes".'

Richard hums in appreciation before he wraps one hand around Orlando's neck, pulls him close and kisses him. Kisses him like he means business. It's not playful this time, or sweet, but confident and fast-paced, without a trace of hesitation, his tongue tangling with Orlando's.

Orlando responds in kind, and the kiss quickly has them both breathing hard. Orlando finally is the one to pull back a little and growl 'Upstairs now'. He sounds impatient, a feeling that Richard shares wholeheartedly. He lets go of him and pushes away from the lamp post.

'Come on, then,' he says.

They stumble up the stairs in the half-dark because, once in the hallway, Richard pushes Orlando against the wall without turning on the lights, trapping his body between his arms and kissing him deeply. Orlando indulges him for a moment before he places his palms against Richard's chest and starts backing him up the stairs while he continues to kiss him. Richard's back connects with the banister, and he curses, a little too loudly for polite company.

'Easy there,' Orlando murmurs, backing him up another step of the staircase. 'Let's not wake up your nosy neighbour. Still not into exhibitionism.'

Richard couldn't care less about Mrs. L, but he doesn't say so. Instead he simply hooks his fingers under Orlando's belt and pulls him up the stairs with him.

They forego turning on the lights in his hallway as well because they start pulling at each other's clothes as soon as Orlando has pushed the door closed with his hip. Richard briefly bemoans the fact that he can't properly see what his hands are encountering, but then, what he feels might just be compensation enough - Orlando's skin, warm against his own, his sure touches, the soft wetness of his mouth and the sharp contrast of his nipping teeth. And once they have made it to the bedroom where the last evening light filters in through the window he actually gets to see him too, at last.
Orlando sets a pace that almost is a little overwhelming at first, but Richard decides to go with the flow, Orlando is damned good at what he does. Which for now is pulling Richard's jeans and briefs down and off, pushing him onto the bed and kneeling between his legs to swallow him down, again. Fuck. Richard bites into his hand to stifle a moan, the walls are a little thinner than he would like them to be. But Orlando won't have any of it, he reaches up and pulls Richard's hand away from his mouth, shifting his weight to pin his arm to the mattress.

'Don't,' he says simply before his lips close around Richard's cock again.

It's easy to let Orlando call the shots, easier than he is used to, and it's perfect and just what he needs tonight. When he's too close to be able to control himself much longer and he tightly grips Orlando's head and pulls him off his cock, Orlando growsls in disapproval, but when Richard asks him to 'Get up here and fuck me', it's what he does. Neither of them is patient enough for long preparations and when Orlando settles between his legs and pushes into him, it stings a little more than Richard usually would be okay with, but Orlando takes it slow at first, alternating between kissing him and telling him how fucking tight he is, and when he picks up speed, it's good. So fucking good. Orlando's thrusts cause the headboard to knock against the wall a couple of times, and there is the clatter of something heavy falling to the floor, but Richard doesn't care, he pushes his hands against the headboard for leverage and rocks up into each of Orlando's thrusts. The sounds Orlando makes while he fucks him almost are enough to make Richard come, and he digs his fingernails into Orlando's back and just listens. But then Orlando suddenly pulls out of him and rolls him onto his side, only to push back into him from behind a moment later while he wraps his hand around his cock. His teeth almost break the skin of his shoulder, almost.

'Come, Richard,' Orlando pants when his thrusts speed up and become frantic. But he doesn't, he doesn't want to, just a moment longer - just one more moment - when Orlando comes - so good - He can feel Orlando tensing behind his back before he thrusts in deep, a moan tearing from his lips, and fleetingly, Richard wishes they would have done it without a condom and he would actually be able to feel him coming inside of him. And that's the thought that does it for him, he pushes back against Orlando and spills into his hand.

Orlando leans his forehead against the back of Richard's neck, blinking sweat from his eyes as he tries to catch his breath in sync with Richard. It takes conscious effort to move, but he loosens his grip on Richard's dick and replies to the responding grunt by kissing Richard's neck. He wipes his hand on his own thigh - maybe not the nicest way to get rid of come, but the quickest - then wraps his arm around Richard's chest.

He's so fucking spent, and his head is empty; he is still half hard, still inside Richard, and Richard is emanating heat.

He closes his eyes and just breathes for a moment.

Only when Richard exhales in a long contented breath and shifts a little, Orlando lets go of him, props his head up on his arm and looks down at him:

'We're pretty good at this.'

Richard hums and then reaches behind his back and guides Orlando's cock out of his body, so that he can switch the bedside lamp on and look at Orlando properly when he has settled down on his back.

'We are,' he confirms quietly, and there is a soft, content smile playing around his lips. He reaches over to brush his fingers along Orlando's forearm down to his hand and lightly wraps his fingers around Orlando's, his thumb rubbing small circles over his skin.
'You like things a little rough,' he says after a moment of silence, searching Orlando's eyes.

Orlando waits for a follow up on that, like a narrowing of eyes, a minute withdrawal, but there is none. Richard's thumb just keeps rubbing his own. He therefore lifts his shoulder in a light shrug, taking the remark at face value.

'Depends, I reckon,' he says, but then corrects that to, 'Yeah, sure.'

Richard nods, kinda the equivalent to Orlando's shrug, he thinks, but there again is no immediate follow up.

'That's not a complaint, is it?' Orlando asks, still trying to read Richard's expression.

Richard lifts up his eyebrows, surprised, and shakes his head.

'No,' he says, and the smile that never has left his face deepens when he pushes himself up on one elbow and leans in to kiss Orlando. There's nothing there of the raw need, the impatience that has determined all of their kisses during the evening, it's soft and slow, Richard keeping his lips pliant and his tongue to himself.

Richard is still smiling when he pulls back and lies back down, his eyes not leaving Orlando's.

'It's an observation,' he says after a moment.

Orlando nods.

'All right.'

He shifts onto his back to get rid off the condom and grab a tissue from the nightstand. Rubbing at the come drying on his thigh, he pulls a face before tossing the tissue into the waste basket as well. When he glances back at Richard, he finds him still watching, still smiling.

'I'm shit at reading between the lines,' Orlando says as he settles onto the pillow once more, lying on his back. 'So, if you like something, or don't, just tell me straight out. All right?'

'Sure,' Richard replies. He curls one arm under his head, his neck coming to rest on his forearm, and absentmindedly cards his fingers through the hair on his stomach that's still a little sticky.

When he looks back up at Orlando, it's with a grin.

'That was fucking perfect.'

Orlando nods. There really is no need to read between the lines there.

'Well, I'm sticky and exhausted, you're sweaty and probably rather sore. So yeah, I'd say it's pretty close.'

Richard laughs at Orlando's tone of voice, deliberately matter-of-fact, and Orlando turns his gaze away from the ceiling and to him again.

'Tell me what else you like.'

Richard purses his lips, contemplating the question.

'Well, blowjobs, obviously,' he says with a grin that clearly alludes to their earlier adventure. 'I have to admit, though, that I - selfishly - enjoy more to be on the receiving end. Especially -,' he pauses to
trail a finger over Orlando's lips, 'especially when someone is getting turned on by it as much as you are. The sight of you alone -' He doesn't finish that sentence but shrugs instead, almost blushing a little as if taken aback by his own honesty.

'That's not selfish, then, is it,' Orlando replies. 'Cause a good shag, yeah, I can get behind that. But if I had to choose between that and blowjobs?' He weighs his head slighty from side to side to convey the difficulty of that decision.

Richard laughs. 'But that's like asking if you'd rather be deaf or blind! I wouldn't want to forego one or the other.' He shrugs. 'But I actually feel a little cheated if there's no actual, ' he gestures with one hand, 'you know, fucking. As much as I enjoy blowjobs.'

'Talk about positive dilemma, hm,' Orlando says dryly. 'Though I gotta say, it's not really a fair choice so far, considering you keep cutting me off.'

Richard's brows knit together.

'It's not a polite thing to do, to come down someone's throat without a warning.' He pauses. 'Also, it's a virological disaster.' For a second he seems to want to elaborate on that but then just shakes his head and asks: 'You wouldn't have minded, then?'

'No,' Orlando says.

Richard opens his mouth, but then doesn't say anything, obviously expecting Orlando to add something to that one syllable. Orlando, however, doesn't. He very definitely answered the question, didn't he. Richard in turn closes his mouth again.

'A virological disaster?' Orlando then quotes, mimicking Richard's inflection. 'You do rock dirty talk, mate. Kudos.'

Richard laughs. 'Thanks, I take that as a compliment.' And with a grin he leans towards Orlando, nudging his cheek with his nose so that he turns his head a little. His breath ghosts over the shell of Orlando's ear and his voice drops a register when he murmurs: 'Let me tell you something, then. It's a microbiological disaster, too.'

Orlando snorts.

'Good one, I'll give you that.'

Richard hums against his skin and for a moment, Orlando keeps still, enjoying the small touch, then he shifts again.

'But as medically exciting as that sounds,' he says and when Richard's gaze focuses on him once more, he elaborates, 'I recall we had a chat about this before and you said you get tested regularly and so do I. So I don't think I understand your reluctance.'

Richard doesn't have to contemplate his answer. 'Well, but that's only one concern, isn't it? Even though we've talked about this and you don't have to worry about catching HIV from me, that doesn't necessarily mean that you like having me cum into your mouth.' He pauses, and then adds, with emphasis: 'It would've been extremely inconsiderate.'

Orlando nods.

'Yeah, okay.'
Richard nods as well, the intensity of his response still mirrored in the look he keeps giving Orlando. Orlando isn't quite sure what to make of it and where this is coming from, and when in doubt, he opts for bluntness.

'I like it, though.' His tongue automatically wets his lips as if triggered by the words alone. He gives Richard a half-smile. 'Both actually. Your considerateness as well as the idea of a mouthful of your come. So I reckon, you're golden.'

Richard's eyes have widened a little at his words as has his smile. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for a moment. Orlando watches his Adam's apple move when he swallows.

'Damn,' he then says and exhales slowly, turning towards Orlando. 'That's so hot!'

And Orlando certainly doesn't disagree. He hums, and when he leans down for a kiss, Richard grips the back of his neck and lets the strength of his reaction deepen it. Orlando rests his hand on Richard's hip, lets that intensity take hold of him once more because it feels so fucking good to just go with it, just for a moment, before he laughs into Richard's mouth.

'I'm sorry,' he murmurs when Richard squeezes the back of his neck a little tighter. 'It's just - fuck, there's no way I can go another round right now.'

Richard doesn't let go of him but pulls back a little to peer down at his own cock that appears vaguely interested in what is happening but isn't even close to half-hard. Turning back towards Orlando, he places a soft kiss onto his lips, a brief one this time, before he says with a smile:

'Neither can I, apparently.' He sighs. 'That's a shame.' He cards his fingers through the hair at the back of Orlando's neck, playfully tugging at the strands. 'Because it really doesn't feel as if I can wait.'

'To be sixteen again and constantly ready,' Orlando replies with fake nostalgia.

He props his head up with his hand, Richard's fingers in the curve of his neck.

'Actually, no way I want to be that age again,' he corrects himself. 'Puberty is a horrible state of being.'

Richard chuckles in response, and Orlando arches a brow in turn.

'Pretty sure that you won't object to this as a medical professional.'

Richard laughs. 'I most certainly won't! And I for my part am terrified of teenagers in flocks, I have no idea how you do it.'

He pauses and regards Orlando thoughtfully for a moment before he asks:

'Do you want something to drink? My throat's all dry.'

'Wonder how that happened,' Orlando replies, then adds, 'Yeah, sounds good.'

Richard nods and gets up, collecting his underwear from the floor. When Orlando does the same, he seems surprised for a second.

'I could've just fetched you something,' he says as Orlando pulls on his boxers.

Orlando steps around the bed and holds up his hand.
'Appreciated, but I'd rather wash my hands as well.'

Richard grins in response, so they make a de-tour to the bathroom to wash up before they enter the kitchen.

Orlando has been in here before exactly once, but that was in the early morning and his sole focus was on getting as much coffee as quickly as possible. As Richard fetches them something to drink, Orlando's eyes sweep the room - dark gray and wood dominating the colours, layout as clean cut and low-key stylish as the bedroom - until they land on the door of the fridge that Richard just pushed shut. Fridge magnets stick two neatly aligned shopping lists, one postcard, one photo, and a full duty rota to the surface.

Orlando takes the offered bottle of water from Richard's hand and drinks, then uses the bottle to gesture at the rota.

'You weren't kidding about your shitty schedules, were you?'

Richard leans back against the kitchen counter and shakes his head with a sigh. 'I wasn't. But it's usually not quite as bad as this month. One of my colleagues is pregnant and I'm filling in for her.' He pauses to take a sip of water before he continues 'Usually I'm in Leeds one night per week and one weekend from Friday evening to Monday morning.' He smiles at Orlando. 'It's a bit inconvenient at times, but I usually manage to make time for stuff I want to do in the evenings.'

Orlando hums but skips the obvious opportunity for innuendo because he is still reading the rota, shaking his head.

'Still looks massive to me,' he says, allowing his respect to be clear in his voice. 'I'd go insane from the commute alone.'

He steps back, leaning his hip against the kitchen counter as he faces Richard.

'How come you work in Leeds but live here? York hospital not as good?'

Richard smiles at him. 'It's good, I think, but Leeds is one of the largest neonatal units in the country. And maybe the question should be why I'm living in York then.' His thumb nail pushes at the edge of the water bottle's label and his expression sobers a little when he searches Orlando's eyes again. 'I moved here from London to be with someone, actually.' His voice is quiet when he continues but there's a small smile playing around his lips again: 'Now obviously, that didn't work out. But by that time I had a proper life here and friends and grown quite fond of the city.' He laughs and gestures around the kitchen. 'And this place alone is totally worth the commute!'

Orlando nods and drinks from his water.

'Well, that worked out all right for you, then,' he remarks, automatically referring to the end of Richard's reply rather than the potential mine field in the middle.

'But hey, it's good to know where to send any potential teen pregnancies I encounter at JC in the future.'

Richard laughs at that, and Orlando shrugs.

'What got you into this field?'

Richard seems more than okay with not having to elaborate on his relationship history at the moment and answers without missing a beat:
'My love of tiny babies and my profound appreciation for handicrafts.'

His expression is dead serious, but only for a couple of heartbeats before he breaks into laughter.

'You almost believed that!' he exclaims, full of glee, and grins at Orlando.

Orlando gives Richard a dark glare for a moment, but then he really can't be bothered to keep it up.

Richard winks at him.

'No, of course not. During pediatric training I discovered that I was good at it and that it's satisfactory work, most of the days, even though it comes with all the disadvantages of working in intensive care.' He pauses and then adds:

'I do actually like babies, though, and manual dexterity comes in handy when you try to insert a tube the size of a straw into a 500 g baby without squashing it.'

'I suppose people would mind if you squashed their child. Considering they went to a lot of trouble to make it and all.'

Richard hums in response, and Orlando drinks some more of his water as he thinks about it.

'It is a handicraft, though, isn't it? I don't mean that to sound derogatorily, on the contrary really. No one's as good with his hands as a surgeon, right?'

Richard now is the one who gives Orlando a dark glance but it dissolves in laughter quickly.

'I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave now, if you start comparing me to a surgeon! Neonatology is so much more of an art than surgery!' He shakes his head. ' Seriously. I invite you into my home and you- what more, are you going to insult my mother, too?'

'Dunno. Does she deserve it?' Orlando asks back deadpan. But before Richard can either deny or confirm, he raises both his hands in a surrendering gesture.

'Sorry for my ignorance. I'm usually only deliberately insulting, not accidentally.'

Richard reacts to that with a grin and stretches out his leg to playfully nudge Orlando's calf with his bare toes.

'Hope you don't feel the need to do so, though,' he says, and adds, 'I guess it's like comparing your work with that of a P.E. teacher?'

Orlando almost spits out a mouthful of water that he unwisely took. He swallows, barely suppressing a cough, and Richard is obviously delighted by the effect of his words.

'Fuck off,' Orlando replies when he can talk again, his voice rough. He wipes a hand over his grin. 'But for future reference, P.E. isn't half as insulting as R.E. I'd have decked you for that.'

Richard raises an eyebrow. 'R.E.? Who on earth would teach that! Are you even still allowed to do that to children?'

Orlando stares at him.

'Seriously?'

'What?' Richard asks after a moment and puts down his water bottle.
Orlando rubs a hand over his brow and puts the water bottle down onto the counter as well.

'Actually, don't get me started,' he says, and when Richard looks at him expectantly, he shakes his head. 'No, I mean that. Once I get started on organized religion, I promise you, I won't stop. And I'm pretty sure you're not interested in a three hour rant.'

'Well, don't underestimate me,' Richard says, 'maybe not tonight, though.'

After a little pause, as some sort of afterthought, he adds: 'So you passionately hate religion?'

'Yes.'

Orlando holds Richard's gaze while he is trying reigning his automatic anger in. 'I mean it. Don't get me started. I'm not good company when discussing collective delusions.'

'I'm not sure there's much to discuss, we might actually be of the same opinion there,' Richard says, and then adds more quietly: 'But this makes you angry somehow.'

'Yeah, it does.'

Orlando doesn't have to bite his tongue to keep his mouth shut after that, but it's not far off.

Richard keeps looking at him, waiting for him to elaborate, but he doesn't, he looks back at him, the muscles of his jaw tense, the easy manner he has displayed all evening suddenly gone.

Richard doesn't understand what has happened, how his mood has changed so quickly, but really doesn't want to leave things like that. However, he really doesn’t want to overstep any boundaries, so he settles on offering: 'Maybe we can talk about this more some other time?' And with a small smile he adds: 'When we're wearing more clothes and our feet aren't getting cold?'

Orlando tries to focus on his cold feet.

'This place doesn't have underfloor heating?' he asks back, aiming for lightness. 'Now, that's a shame.'

Richard takes that as a 'yes' to his reply and settles on just answering Orlando's inconsequential question as a first step:

'A shame indeed. But then, I already have an unhealthy attachment to this place, so it's possibly a good thing that it does have its little flaws.'

On a lighter note, trying to lead Orlando back onto familiar territory, he adds, with a smile: 'So, no sex on the floor, I fear. Unless you don't mind a chilly bottom.'

Automatically, Orlando looks down at the tiles at his feet.

'Nah, that's all right, I reckon I prefer your bedroom. Or, you know,' he looks up again, smile coming easier once more, 'Some random pub's Gents.'

Richard chuckles, and Orlando lets his gaze sweep through the kitchen once more, this time taking a little more time to look.

'This place really is quite brilliant. I can see why you'd be attached to it.'

Richard nods. 'I feel quite lucky to have found it. And fixing it up was exactly the catharsis I needed at that time.' He smiles and shrugs. 'It's a little silly, but I'm always happy to come back home to this.'
‘Why would that be silly?’ Orlando asks back, again leaning against the kitchen counter, eyes following the display of different wines on the other wall. ‘It’s a great place, and like you said, there’s no danger of accidentally stumbling over any children.’

Richard laughs. ‘No, there really isn’t’, he says and winks at Orlando. ‘I seldom take work home with me.’

‘“Seldom”?’ Orlando asks back as he now tilts his head to read the titles of Richard's cook books. ‘That doesn’t make you sound creepy at all, mate.’

Richard just grins at him. And acknowledging Orlando's interest in his cookbooks, he then asks: ‘I reckon you don't have much opportunity to cook for yourself? If you're eating with the students?’

Orlando drags his eyes away from the impressive collection of Asian recipes to look at Richard again.

‘No, actually I like cooking. The stuff JC serves is all right most of the time, but it's still canteen food, you know.’

Richard pulls a face at that, and Orlando nods.

‘Exactly. Though I'm more roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Definitely not as international as you are.’

Richard smiles at him. ‘If you want I'll cook for you next time, then?’ It's half of a statement, half of a question, his manners getting the better of him.

Orlando cocks his head to the side and regards Richard.

‘As long as you're not serving sushi, I might take you up on that,’ he says and quirks an eyebrow. ‘Do you take payment in blowjobs or do I do the dishes?’

Richard takes a step towards Orlando and slowly leans in until their lips are almost touching. Then he says quietly: ‘There's no payment required. I was going to propose the following order, though: sex-food-more sex.’ He smiles against Orlando's lips: ‘If that's agreeable.’

Orlando tilts his head minutely, not instigating but inviting a kiss.

‘Best plan I've heard in a while.’

Richard's smile widens, and he hums in appreciation, his eyes darting to Orlando's lips. And Orlando understands the implications behind that very well, licks his lips in response and is just about to lean in, when a sound from the hallway catches his attention.

Richard, too, pulls back a fraction, listening, and it's only after the second ring, that Orlando's mind connects the dots.

‘That's mine,’ he says with a displeased sigh. For an egoistical moment, he closes his eyes and focuses on the feeling of Richard's hand on his arm, then he pulls back.

‘Sorry, I have to get that.’

Richard can hear him answering the phone out in the hallway in what barely is a growl: ‘What?’

Silence, and then Orlando saying in a tone of voice that is dripping with sarcasm:
'I'm canoeing on Lake Tahoe.'

Richard smiles at that, but then Orlando adopts a more neutral tone:

'Bishopshill. Why, what happened?' Richard is almost sure that that's not boding well for a continuation of their evening together. Orlando appears in the doorway, and shrugs apologetically while he listens intently to something the caller is saying, a frown on his face.

Richard leans back against the kitchen counter once more and crosses his arms in front of his chest, starting to feel a little chilly. He keeps looking at Orlando, and Orlando keeps frowning into his phone.

'Get to the point, Sean,' he interrupts the caller impatiently. So it's his school apparently. Now, that can't be good. Not at what- he glances at the watch on the kitchen wall- 10:37 p.m.

'And she won't open up?' Orlando now says. 'Have you tried -?' He's apparently being interrupted and is looking more annoyed with every second passing.

Then he shakes his head at Richard and turns back into the hallway, starting to gather his clothes, while he says: 'Same thing that's been going on last week and the week before, I reckon.'

Certainly not good. Richard sighs, a little disappointed. But well. What's a guy to do? He joins Orlando in the hallway and starts getting dressed as well. Orlando has wedged the phone between his shoulder and his ear and is just saying: 'No, don't do that.' He looks up at Richard. 'I'm coming home.'

Richard just nods and bends down to pick up his shirt before he goes to fetch his jeans. When he puts them on, he can hear Orlando sighing: 'No, it's all right. I'll be there in 45.'

When he comes back into the hallway, Orlando is just about to hang up, now clad in his jeans, his shirt dangling from his fingers.

'Appreciate it. Cheers, mate,' he says and hangs up. He quickly pulls his shirt over his head. When his head reappears, Richard asks:

'What happened?'

Orlando slides his phone into the back pocket of his jeans, looking around for his jacket.

'Stupid teenage drama.' The annoyance is strong in his voice. 'Emma, a girl from my house. She's been acting up for months, trouble at home.' He finds his jacket next to the cupboard in the hallway and picks it up, shrugs it on, turns back to Richard. 'And now it seems she locked herself into her room, won't let anyone in and is hysterical.'

The concern on Richard's face intensifies immediately, and Orlando shakes his head. He tries to tone down his anger and concern, though he's not sure for whose benefit, as he tries to locate his helmet.

'Sean likes to exaggerate. He is a fucking drama queen. It's probably nothing.'

He sighs, rubs the now tense muscles of his neck and looks at Richard now.

'Still, I gotta go home. I'm sorry about this.'

Richard shakes his head. 'No, don't be. Of course you need to go.' He smiles and adds in a lighter tone: 'It is a bit of a shame though.'
Orlando scoffs.

'A bit of a shame? Now, that's a fucking understatemen t.' He steadies himself on the cupboard as he pulls on his boots. 'I'll take you up on that offer to cook dinner some time, though, yeah?'

'I'd like that,' Richard replies. 'I can drive you to your motorbike, it'll be much quicker.'

Orlando checks the pockets of his leather jacket for his keys and shakes his head.

'Nah, it's fine, cheers.'

As his right hand closes around his keys, he gives Richard the parody of his stern teacher look.

'And we don't drink and drive, mate, eh?'

Richard looks surprised for a moment before he remembers that he actually had two beers at the Swan.

'Right,' he says and shakes his head. 'Not such a great idea, then. But what about my bicycle? Lock it to a lamp post and tell me where it is, I can pick it up when I go for a run tomorrow. And the poor girl won't have to wait for another fifteen minutes.'

'Trust me, if you'd ever witnessed a seventeen year old have a strop, you'd know that it keeps,' Orlando remarks dryly but nods. 'And it'll give me an excuse to text you, won't it.'

Richard cocks his head to the side. 'If that's what it takes, sure,' he says, and after a second's thought, adds: 'I think you might not need an excuse, though?' He grabs his keys from the little chest of drawers next to the door. 'Come on, then, I'll unlock it for you.'

Orlando nods and follows Richard down the stairs silently. It's less out of consideration for Richard's sleeping neighbours. Half his brain is already occupied coming up with a strategy of how to deal with his sullen teenager. At the same time the other is doing a pretty good impression of a sullen teenager.

Outside Richard fiddles with the lock of his bike in the semidarkness, and Orlando tells himself to get a fucking grip on himself already. Richard straightens up and turns, the bike lock hung across his neck out of apparent habit. Orlando grips both ends, but doesn't even need to give them the slightest tug, as Richard is stepping close anyway, smiling.

'Cheers for the bike,' Orlando says, And for a moment, his mind stops calculating the quickest route back to JC, stops sorting through the words that might calm down Emma, stops running through options of crowd control in the rest of the rooms for the night. Just stops. The street is quiet around them. Richard is looking at him and waiting for him to let go. Orlando wants the silence between them, the quietness in his head to keep for a bit longer. It won't, though, of course not. He exhales, and some of his latent anger dissipates. He tightens his hold on the lock's ends a little, smiles.

'I had a really good time tonight.'

Richard nods. 'So did I. Maybe we don't meet in a public place next time, though, or we will get kicked out of a bar at some point,' he says, his smile widening. He leans in and presses a kiss to Orlando's cheek. 'Drive safely,' he then adds, taking the lock from around his neck and handing it over to Orlando. 'And let me know how it goes?'

'You mean regarding the means I used to kill Emma?' Orlando asks back as he takes the bike and
gets on it, testing the handbrake. 'Yeah, will do,' he then promises before he turns the bike around to drive off.

Richard follows him with his eyes for a moment, before he softly shakes his head and chuckles to himself. Then he turns around, too, and makes his way back inside, taking two steps at a time. His flat smells of sex, he notices, when he steps into the hallway, and proceeds to open the window to his bedroom. For a moment he remains there, peering down the deserted street, but Orlando has long turned the corner.

He goes to the bathroom to take a leak and brush his teeth before he gets himself another glass of water from the kitchen. Orlando's water bottle is still sitting on the counter, and he puts it into the sink, feeling a smile tugging at his lips. He takes a look at the rota before he turns off the lights and walks back into the bedroom. Following a sudden impulse, he sits down on the edge of his bed and fishes his mobile out of the back pocket of his jeans. He hits speed dial and three signals later Zaineb answers the phone. He asks how the baby is doing, and she laughingly chides him for not being able to let go, but tells him that she's doing good, all things considered.

He's turned off the lights not five minutes later, and when he sinks his head into his pillow, it faintly smells of Orlando. And that's not such a terrible thing, he muses when he places his phone onto the nightstand after he's set the alarm to six o'clock.

When his phone buzzes next to him one and a half hours later, he's disoriented for a moment and briefly wonders if it's work. But then he remembers and swipes his thumb over the display to read the message, squinting because the screen is much too bright for his tired eyes:

Orlando [1:23 a.m.]: Just fyi, I didn't kill the girl. She's gonna go to the school counselor tomorrow. We'll see how that goes. Cheers for tonight.

Of course he didn't, Richard thinks, and smiles while he types:

Richard [1:25 a.m.]: Glad you didn't.

Richard [1:25 a.m.]: Sleep tight now, you deserve it.

Richard [1:26 a.m.]: Use my bike as a pretext to text me tomorrow.
Chapter Summary

Orlando has dropped by Richard's place spontaneously during the weekend when Richard was at work. On Monday, Richard texts Orlando.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Richard [7:15 a.m.]: Still a bit bummed about missing you on Saturday because of work.

Richard [7:16 a.m.]: Are you still free an evening this week by any chance?

Richard [7:16 a.m.]: I'm only working days and would be happy to cook you dinner.

Richard [7:18 a.m.]: Or if you want we could meet up on Saturday or Sunday and go for a drive?

Richard [7.20 a.m.]: Up to the coast or the National Park.

Richard [7:20 a.m.]: Or anywhere, really.

Richard [7:25 a.m.]: Dinner and sex is fine, too, though, if that’s what you prefer.

Orlando [8:27 a.m.]: Don't worry about Saturday. Spur of the moment

Orlando [8:28 a.m.]: I'm busy today, tomorrow evening and Thursday, but Wednesday or Friday would work, Sat/Sun too

Orlando [8:43 a.m.]: I'm good with both, dinner or a drive<

Chapter End Notes

This snippet is part of a longer ficlet set in afra_schatz's boarding school AU
20/7/2017 - The same guy

Chapter Summary

Richard and Orlando keep seeing each other and are interrogated about that thing between them by their best friends Cate and Sean.

It takes a moment for Richard to buzz her in, and when he opens the door of his flat, he is wiping his hands on the kitchen towel that he has tucked into his jeans to create a makeshift apron.

‘Am I too early?’ Cate asks and leans in to touch her cheek against his.

‘Not at all,’ he says, smiling, and takes a step backwards to let her in. ‘I was just running a little late.’ He closes the door behind her.

‘Come on,’ he then says, and gestures towards the kitchen. ‘Dinner is almost ready.’

Cate hums approvingly. ‘It already smells delicious.’

Richard chuckles. ‘I certainly hope so. It’s your favorite dish.’ He walks over the stove and lifts the wok’s lid to peer inside. ‘Five more minutes, I’d say.’ He takes two long stemmed glasses from the shelf.

‘Wine?’ he asks, and pulls out a chair for her at the kitchen table that is already set for two.

‘Yes, please,’ she says and sits down.

‘I’ve a white I think you might like, French, I bought it when I was in London.’

He hands her the bottle for inspection and pours them a glass each when she nods.

‘Good, isn’t it?’ he asks when she has taken the first sip, and Cate smiles at him:

‘Very.’

***

In his flat in Wellesley Hall, Sean helps himself to one of the needlessly expensive import beers that Orlando brought with him. When Orlando arches a brow at him, he opens one for him as well before he slumps down in his usual arm chair. When he lifts his bottle to his mouth, he can feel a kink in his neck from carrying Miranda’s moving boxes all afternoon.

Orlando sighs happily at the first gulp of cold beer and sinks a little deeper into the cushions of the leather couch. When given free choice, he still always sits on that side of the sofa, and if one looks closely, one can see the first gray hairs on Orlando’s temple. Sean massages his shoulder and feels a bit old.

For about half a bottle of beer they sit in silence, and when Sean snaps out of his equally spontaneous and directionless reminiscing, he finds Orlando looking at him.
‘What?’ Orlando asks, but Sean just shakes his head.

‘So, you’re seeing someone new?’ he asks back, not really to change the topic, but because that bit of information just floated back into his consciousness. Bless Mir and her lack of discretion during their breaks between hauling boxes.

Orlando gives him a nod.

‘Yeah.’

‘Tell me about him,’ Sean prompts, his fingers flattening out the bottle cap of his beer. ‘Or her?’

‘He’s 45, 6’2’, fourteen stone,’ Orlando reports dutifully. ‘He lives in York, works in Leeds, reads fiction, cooks Asian food, drives an Audi.’

Sean chuckles and shakes his head.

‘So, you met him on OKCupid.’

The bottle, that Orlando has lifted to his mouth, halts.

‘Huh?’

‘I mean you obviously learned his profile from there by heart.’

Orlando rolls his eyes. Then he sips from his beer, licks the taste of it from his lips, no intention to continue the conversation apparent. He hasn’t told Sean to go and fuck himself, though, which is as good as it gets. Sean therefore allows his curiosity to push.

‘What’s he like?’

Again, Orlando replies without hesitation, a smile tugging at his mouth.

‘Fit.’

Sean flicks the cap of his beer bottle in his direction, and Orlando catches it mid-air, the tiny achievement enough to allow two more words to escape.

‘Smart. Frank.’

***

Richard turns of the heat and takes the wok off the stove.

‘Voilà,’ he says, presenting its contents to Cate. ‘Broccoli and chicken stir-fry á la Richard.’

Cate leans back so that he can spoon some onto her plate. ‘You know, maybe you should’ve considered becoming a chef after all,’ she then says when Richard sits down across from her and fills his plate, too.

Richard laughs and shakes his head. ‘Thanks, but if I’m working such crappy hours I might as well get paid properly for my work. Here, take some rice.’

‘Well, but you could have had your own restaurant, who knows?’ Cate says, neatly placing some
rice next to her vegetables.

‘I’m quite happy and satisfied to be a neonatologist, as you might have deduced from my eagerness to talk about my work and tiny babies,’ Richard replies, winking at her, while he piles a generous helping of rice onto his plate. When Cate raises her eyebrows in response he says apologetically:

‘Don’t look at me like that, I skipped lunch.’

Cate laughs. ‘See, as a chef you wouldn’t go hungry!’

Richard shakes his head, chuckling.

‘Eat, before it gets cold. Bon appétit!’

‘Thanks for having me.’

‘Glad you could come. It’s a shame that Andrew couldn’t, though.’

Cate nods. ‘He says hi, by the way. As do the boys. And we’d like to have you over for a barbecue during the weekend, if you don’t have to work?’ Cate lifts a piece of broccoli onto her fork and lets it disappear in her mouth. ‘This tastes amazing, Richard.’

‘Thanks,’ he says with a smile. And in answer to her question he adds: ‘I’ve already made plans for Saturday, but Sunday would be great.’

Cate interrupts chewing for a second to scrutinize him. Then she lowers her eyes to her plate again and while she pushes some rice onto her fork, she asks lightly:

‘Plans, hm?’

Richard laughs. ‘Don’t you even start! All I said was that I can’t have dinner with you on Saturday and you go and assume who knows what.’

Cate grins at him. ‘You said you made plans.’ The word is dripping with innuendo.

‘I certainly didn’t say it like that!’ Richard protests.

‘You didn’t have to,’ Cate answers and goes for another bit of broccoli.

‘I have no idea what you are talking about,’ Richard says quickly, maybe a little too quickly.

Cate winks at him. ‘Of course you do.’ She props her elbow onto the table, resting her chin in her hand. ‘Tell me all about it!’

***

‘How’d you meet?’ Sean asks.

Again, Orlando’s response is immediate.

‘I fucked him in a public restroom.’

Sean instinctively pulls a face as a series of images instantly presents itself. Somewhat frantically his brain tries to shut that down, not entirely successful. Of course Orlando’s response would be
deliberately crude as if to make up for earlier admissions.

‘Lando. I didn’t need to know that.’

Orlando smirks, satisfied, and takes a sip from his beer.

‘You know what they said in US military. Don’t ask, don’t tell.’

Sean chooses to bypass the deliberately false contextualization of that quote.

‘You’re making a bit of a habit of that,’ he says instead.

‘Of what?’

‘Shagging people in loos. First the bloke in that club Karl dragged us to, now this one?’

This time, Orlando doesn’t reply right away. The fingers of his right hand wriggle steadily, making the bottle cap dance back and forth between his fingertips like a cockroach on the run. His face is expressionless but his eyes are trained on Sean.

It’s not disconcerting or off-putting, though sometimes - maybe in a moment like this - Sean wonders what it must feel like for people who haven’t known Orlando for three decades. His own fingers rub over the label of the bottle, feeling the glossy paper slowly disintegrating under the gentle pressure.

***

When Richard doesn't answer immediately, Cate repeats her question with more emphasis: ‘Tell me about it!’

Richard sighs, but there is a smile tugging at his lips. ‘You’re not going to let go of this until I do, won’t you?’ he asks and takes a sip of his wine.

‘I certainly won’t,’ Cate replies with the most amicable smile.

‘You’re impossible!’ he says, but there is no heat in his voice.

Cate beams at him. ‘That’s what Andrew says, too, but I’m pretty certain that it’s part of why you love me.’

Richard just shakes his head, but the grin he doesn’t care to hide gives him away. ‘Fire away, then.’

Cate’s smile widens. ‘So, you’re still seeing Orlando?’ she asks, cocking her head to the side.

Richard forces his face into a neutral expression. ‘I never said his name was Orlando. What kind of name is that even?’

Cate laughs. ‘Don’t let him hear that now! And drop the act already. He’s smelling of your cologne.’

Richard’s fork stops halfway to his mouth. ‘What?’

‘He’s got your scent all over his clothes,’ Cate repeats, looking like the cat who ate the canary.

‘Woman, what did you do?’ Richard asks, incredulous. ‘Did you break into his room and sniff his clothes?’
‘Who said anything about breaking in?’

‘But you actually sniffed his clothes?’

Cate shrugs. ‘I don’t sniff and tell.’

Richard shakes his head. ‘You’re impossible.’

Cate just smiles at him. Then she gently nudges his foot with hers under the table.

‘Tell me about it, now, hm? You must be dying to.’

‘I’m dying of mortification for being associated with a woman who sniffs peoples’ clothes.’

Cate laughs. ‘You’re being overdramatic. And I wouldn’t have had to devise a strategy for finding out in the first place if you simply had told me straight away.’

‘No, no, no, don’t you try blaming this one on me. I was just minding my own business.’

Cate is quiet for a moment and just grins and him before she says, teasingly: ‘Yours and Orlando’s, you mean.’

***

‘It’s the same guy,’ Orlando offers after several minutes.

Sean’s brows arch.

‘You’ve been seeing him since Karl’s birthday?’

There’s something in his voice that Sean didn’t mean to put there, not as plainly anyway, and maybe not at all. It’s there, though, has been lingering in his previous responses as well. He hears it, and so does Orlando.

The bottle cap stops its dance between Orlando’s fingertips. He doesn’t even acknowledge the actual question. His eyes narrow minutely.

‘I know what you’re doing.’ There isn’t even a trace of doubt in his statement. ‘I don’t like it.’

***

Richard picks up his glass and regards Cate over the rim before he takes a sip.

‘You’re not going to let go of this, are you?’ he then asks, clearly amused. ‘It’s one of those moments where you’re turning into a weird little dachshund that refuses to let go of its prey.’

‘Exactly.’ Cate’s smile doesn’t waver.

‘Alright,’ Richard says and sets down his glass. He pushes his plate away from him so he can place both forearms onto the table. Leaning towards her a little, he then offers: ‘Ask me, then. What do you want to know?’

Cate’s smile widens, and for a moment she is just regarding him, the laugh lines around her eyes
deepening. But when she then ventures to speak, the playfulness in her voice is replaced by seriousness:

‘This really is doing you good, isn’t it?’

Richard arches his brows in surprise at her question and contemplates it for a moment before he answers:

‘I think so, yes.’

Cate nods. ‘Good. Tell me about it.’

Richard absentmindedly scratches the back of his hand. ‘There’s not really all that much to tell. We’ve basically just met.’

‘Oh, come on now, you’ve been seeing each other for a month or so!’

Richard’s eyes travel to the photo calendar on the wall. ‘You’re right,’ he then says, and a smile is playing around his lips when his eyes met hers again. ‘It doesn’t really feel like such a long time.’ He pauses and shrugs. ‘Or well, maybe it does.’

Cate cocks her head to the side. ‘How often have you seen him?’

‘I don’t know. Four of five times, maybe. Once a week.’

‘And have you been talking in between?’

‘Not really talking, no, but we text, occasionally.’

Cate sighs. ‘Do I have to worm everything out of you?’

Richard chuckles. ‘You might actually have to. This is all a bit- I don’t know. New, maybe. Unexpected.’

‘But good?’ Cate asks quietly.

Richard smiles at her. ‘I think so, yes.’

***

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.

‘You always know what I’m doing,’ Sean says in very much the same matter-of-fact tone of voice that Orlando used. ‘Doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop, does it.’

Orlando huffs, unimpressed.

‘I’m not sixteen, and I’m not in your house.’

‘Technically you are right now,’ Sean jokes.

Orlando rolls his eyes again but then decides to humour him.

‘I used protection. Like I always do.’
Sean shakes his head.

‘You know I never worried about that with you, I -.’ He cuts himself off.

He knows he is fussing. He could try telling himself it was because he’s being a mate, but that wouldn’t be true, not entirely.

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‘What’s good about it?’ Cate asks, but then lifts up her hands in a deflecting gesture. ‘Wait, but don’t launch into details about the sex, I don’t want to deal with weird mind pictures every time I pass Orlando in the teachers’ lounge!’

Richard just grins at her for a moment before he says in a conspiratorial tone:

‘The sex is fantastic.’

He laughs at the face she pulls and picks up his fork again. Around a piece of broccoli he then chides:

‘Don’t look at me like that. It’s true and there really is nothing weird about it whatsoever.’

Cate shakes herself as if to get rid of an unpleasant thought. ‘Only that we’re talking about one of my colleagues.’

‘Well, you asked,’ Richard deadpans.

Cate sighs. ‘I know. And I do want to know. It’s just a little difficult to imagine the two of you together.’

When Richard raises his brows in mock shock, she huffs indignantly:

‘Not like that, you pervert!’

Richard winks at her. ‘More wine?’ he then asks and just pours her a second glass before she has the chance to nod.

Grateful for the distraction, Cate raises it to her lips.

When she sets it back down, she has regained her composure. ‘Okay. So, the guy is some kind of sex god. And besides that? Do you have anything to talk about?’

‘Talk?’ Richard asks, feigning a lack of comprehension, but doesn’t manage to remain serious.

‘Come on, you know what I’m trying to ask! Don’t make this so hard.’

***

The silence that has enveloped them this evening has not once been interrupted by trampling battalions storming up and down the staircases of Wellesley. The football pitch outside his sitting room window lies abandoned. It’s the first week of the summer holidays, and it’s not Sean’s favourite.
‘Never mind,’ he says.

Orlando’s only reaction is to lift his bottle to his lips.

Sean chuckles and shakes his head at himself and at what Orlando repeatedly called ‘Mr B’s fucking patronizing nannying’ on previous occasions. He gets up, and Orlando’s eyes follow him.

‘You’re right, and I’m sorry,’ he acknowledges with a smile. He makes a haphazard gesture at the kitchenette. ‘You want a sarnie?’

Orlando puts his empty bottle onto the coffee table and uses the momentum to get up from the couch.

‘I’ll give you a hand.’

In the limited space of the kitchen they work around one another - Sean gets out the bread, Orlando hands him the butter, Sean fetches plates, Orlando knives, Sean butters the bread. Orlando looks down at the unevenly serrated side of Sean’s cheddar, then starts cutting off even slices from the other end.

‘Is everything all right with you and Ashley?’ he asks abruptly.

Sean’s thoughts, engaged with the question of cheese or ham or cheese and ham, grind to a halt as his girl-friend takes precedence over food in his mind.

‘Huh?’

‘Is everything all right with you and Ashley?’ Orlando repeats verbatim and in the exact same tone of voice.

Sean thinks of her and her wit, her sense of humour, her sensuality until Orlando gestures him to get out of the way. He steps aside and leans against the counter.

‘Why?’

***

‘You kind of deserve it for sniffing Orlando’s clothes, though,’ Richard says teasingly, but then adds in a more serious tone: ‘But yes, we do have things to talk about.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘Now, who’s not making this easy? I don’t know, what do you talk about with Andrew? Work, his and mine, cars, motorbikes, holidays, philosophy… chose one.’

Cate nods. ‘Good. And?’

‘And what?’

‘And is this going anywhere? Or is this just sex and talking?’

Richard is quiet for a long moment while he thinks about her question.

‘I really don’t know,’ he then says with a sigh and shrugs, an almost apologetic smile on his lips. ‘And of course I’ve been thinking about that. But it’s- I really don’t know.’
‘How are you feeling about him?’

‘I honestly don’t know that, either. I mean, the sex is great and I’m very much drawn to him, physically. And I like spending time with him, too. But other than that? I really don’t know.’ He pauses. ‘Is that weird?’

Cate shakes her head. ‘Not at all. You’ve really only just met him. I don’t think you have to know anything right now.’

Richard nods.

‘Have you talked to him about this?’

‘No. He hasn’t asked, either. And if I’m not even sure about what I want--’ He swallows and when he continues his voice is a little hoarse: ‘And then I really don’t want to drag him into this whole messy Lee-aftermath, either.’

***

‘Why do you want to know about Ashley all of a sudden?’ Sean asks.

Orlando places his stripes of cheddar neatly onto half of the slices of bread that Sean laid out. ‘8 out of 10 times when you drill me like that, it’s because you’re projecting and want to talk about your emotions.’

He turns away to get the chutney. Sean blinks repeatedly. ‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ Orlando says, and the light bang of the closing wall cupboard conveniently works as an affirmation.

‘8 out of 10?’

‘It’s a rough estimate,’ Orlando concedes, opening one of the jars.

‘Huh.’

‘Yeah.’

‘We’re fine,’ Sean answers the original question with a nod. ‘She’s wonderful.’

He can’t keep himself from smiling again. It registers with Orlando, confirmed by a quick glance before he starts spreading Major Grey’s onto Sean’s half of the sandwiches.

‘Cheers for asking,’ Sean says.

Orlando nods and licks a small smear of mango chutney from the side of his index finger before he moves on to Branston’s and his own tea.

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Cate reaches over the table and wraps her fingers around Richard’s arm.

‘It’s time you stopped thinking about Lee,’ she says quietly.

Richard nods, and swallows again, shrugging. ‘I know.’

‘He’s a dick.’

‘I know that’s what you think, I know that. And if anybody would treat you like this, I would say the same thing, but I- I can’t do this, Cate, it’s not a comfort to me, the thought that he’s an arse. Because that would mean that those five years were a complete waste of time. And I can’t deal with that.’

Cate tightens her fingers around his arm.

‘He didn’t make you happy.’

‘Not in the end, no. But he did in the beginning. We just didn’t happen to fall out of love at the same time.’

‘No. And the affair was uncalled for.’

Richard sighs. ‘Yes.’ He places his other hand on top of her arm. ‘And that’s all I want to say about Lee today.’ He squeezes her hand. ‘Keep eating, there’s more. And there’s dessert, too.’

Cate looks at him for another moment and then nods and picks up her fork again. They eat in silence until Richard says:

‘The thing with Orlando is that he makes me feel good about myself, in a way. Or maybe it’s just that I’m beginning to feel like my old self again. My pre-Lee self.’

Cate doesn’t point out that he is back to talking about Lee and just nods.

‘That’s good, isn’t it?’

***

Orlando spreads Branston’s Pickle onto his sandwiches.

‘You got time for a drive before you leave for Italy with Cate?’

It’s the second remark in a row seemingly without a transition which Orlando usually excels at. Sean would ask about that, but the question reminds him of Monday and Orlando’s half hour rant about his motorbike trip to Shropshire with Dom.

‘You’re not going for a follow up with Dom?’ he asks with a chuckle.

Orlando slices the sandwiches with possibly a little too much force.

‘He’s an idiot who can’t read maps.’

‘Terrific trait for a geography teacher.’

Orlando snorts and hands the knife to Sean to put it into the sink. Sean licks the remainders of chutney off it instead. He grins when Orlando shakes his head in response and indicates Sean to
shift, so he can get to the fridge and the beers.

‘So, you want to go for a drive or not?’

‘Sure,’ Sean agrees. The weather will be ideal for an extended motorcycling trip, and Christ, it was March when they last did that.

‘I can do you tomorrow or Sunday,’ Orlando offers as he cleans away the supplies.

‘What are you doing on Saturday?’

‘Richard.’

Sean pulls a face, Orlando smirks.

‘Urgh. I walked right into that one, hm?’

Orlando’s amusement is evident, but instead of following that up with something else to give Sean nightmares, he uncaps a bottle and hands it to Sean.

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Richard nods. ‘It is. Good. And it’s not even something he does, I think, it’s maybe something he doesn’t do. He doesn’t seem to expect anything, really, and it’s just really uncomplicated and doesn’t require any effort at all, you know? It’s just so easy, somehow, and I’m really enjoying that.’

Cate smiles at him warmly. ‘That sounds great, Richard. And you certainly deserve it.’

Richard shrugs. ‘Well, but maybe that’s why I am a little bit reluctant to start poking around and asking questions about what this is all about, I guess.’

‘And maybe you don’t have to, hm? If it feels good like that.’

‘It really does,’ he says with a smile.

Cate mirrors it effortlessly. ‘Cheers to that, then,’ she says, raising her glass.

***

‘Can I meet him?’ Sean asks instead of drinking.

Orlando uncaps the second bottle and tosses the opener back into the small wooden box containing knickknack.

‘Richard?’ he asks, somewhat redundantly.

‘Yes,’ Sean confirms.

Orlando picks up the plate with his sandwiches, regards Sean.

‘You want to?’

‘Yes,’ Sean confirms for a second time.
Orlando silently regards him for another moment, his head slightly cocked. Sean leans back against the fridge, sips from his fresh beer, waits.

Orlando’s brows even out, and the corners of his mouth twitch.

‘You’re gonna lecture him about using condoms, too?’

Sean barks out a laugh.

‘Yes,’ he says for a third time.

Orlando nods, then nudges Sean’s shoulder to get him to move before he walks past him, back into the sitting room.

‘Yeah, sure.’
Richard and Orlando converse about meatballs, bouldering, motorbikes, death and dying, bisexuality and a penis or two, not necessarily in that order.

Richard [4:23 p.m.]: Hi
Richard [4:23 p.m.]: Today was not a good day for neonates and neonatologists in Leeds.
Richard [4:24 p.m.]: I think I need some time to myself after coming home.
Richard [4:25 p.m.]: Can we move our dinner back a little and I call you once I'm home?
Orlando [4:44 p.m.]: Sure
Orlando [4:50 p.m.]: Postpone, if that works better for you
Orlando [4:50 p.m.]: No problem
Richard [4:51 p.m.]: I honestly can't tell right now what works for me tonight.
Richard [4:51 p.m.]: Sorry about that.
Orlando [4:52 p.m.]: Don't worry about it
Richard [4:53 p.m.]: Was looking forward to seeing you, though.
Richard [4:54 p.m.]: Can I call you in an hour or so, when I'm home?
Richard [4:55 p.m.]: If you don't want to make other plans for tonight instead?
Orlando [4:56 p.m.]: Six or so is fine
Orlando [4:57 p.m.]: Make sure to let it ring a couple of times
Orlando [4:59 p.m.]: I'll be in the garage, it might take me a moment to pick up
Richard [5:05 p.m.]: Great. Talk to you in a while.

Richard's hands are still shaking when he stuffs his phone into the back pocket of his jeans and grabs his car keys. He clicks his locker's padlock shut and exits through the back door of the changing room so that he won't run into any of his coworkers on the way to his car. He hurries along the deserted service corridor and keeps his head down when he gets to the parking-lot. It's half empty already, and Richard is glad when he reaches his car. He feels a bit less exposed once he's inside and out of sight, but he still can't seem to get his hands to stop shaking, the adrenaline has not worn off yet. He rests his arms on the steering wheel and closes his eyes for a moment while he tries to just focus on his breathing. But of course the images come back immediately, and he sighs and opens his
eyes again. The little clock in the dashboard shows 5:12 p.m., it's gotten late. But Zaineb was looking just as pale and shaky as he was feeling when they got back to the staff room after the parents had left, and it has probably been a good idea to sit there, share a Mars bar and talk things through, both for her sake and his own.

He stares at his hands for a moment, willing himself to let go of all the thoughts and images swirling through his head, and feels a stab of impatience when his brain won't comply. He knows that it was the right call to make, he knew it five minutes after coming in this morning, when he went through the night's lab reports. He also knows that any delay of the decision would only have caused the infant more pain. And he has done everything in his power to prepare the parents for what was going to come, has been there with them every step of the way, and literally offered a shoulder to cry on. But nothing of that matters, he still feels like a fucking failure, he always does on days like this. And sure, it's part of the process, his process, he knows that, too, it's part of his way to grieve, but why isn't that getting any easier with experience?

He rubs his hands over his face hard enough to cause his cheeks to tingle with heat. Fuck. And Cate is in Italy, and he can't call her, and when he gets home he is going to start missing Lee, he always does when he's particularly low, it's the universe's perverse idea of a joke. He swallows against the tears that are suddenly stinging behind his eyes, and turns the ignition key, he can't sit in his car in the hospital's parking lot for the rest of the evening. There is an emergency stash of shitty canned coffee in the glove compartment and he downs half a can, grimacing at the taste, before he pulls out of the parking space.

He gets home in one piece, and maybe that shouldn't feel like an accomplishment, but it does. He turns on the stereo and flops down onto the couch without even taking off his shoes and lets the music drown his thoughts.

He comes back to with the album's last chords and checks his phone for the time, 6:24 p.m. Shit. He needs to call Orlando. With a sigh, he pushes himself up and off the couch and makes his way into the kitchen to get himself a glass of water. On his way, he toes off his sneakers and dials Orlando's number.

Orlando gets to his phone at the fifth ring, Richard's name in green on the screen. Picking up cuts it close, his phone already rings for the seventh time when the display accepts the touch of his grease-smeared fingers.

'Fucking piece of crap,' he mutters as he raises the phone to his ear and wipes his hand on the back of his jeans. 'Sorry. Hiya.'

When Orlando picks up and he can't seem to get his voice to work, Richard realizes that he probably should just have texted him. For a moment, he stares at his thumb, the nail worrying the label of the water bottle that sits on the table in front of him, and wonders if he shouldn't just hang back up and call it a day.

'Hi', is all he finally manages to get out, and he swallows against the hoarseness he can hear in his voice. Maybe there should be more words, but there aren't any, and he resigns and just waits for Orlando's answer.

'Wow, you sound like shit,' Orlando says. Then he pulls a face. 'Sorry. Summer holidays. My filters are switched off. Hi.'

Richard makes a sound that might have been a chuckle any other day, but just sounds all wrong in
his ears, and he closes his eyes and tells himself to keep breathing, trying to remain in control.

Ignoring the lump in his throat, he says eventually: 'No, you're right, I probably do,' and adds after a moment, aiming for a lighter tone:

'What took you so long? Are you working on your bike?'

Orlando is still absentmindedly wiping his hand on his bum but stops now.

'Yeah, the Yamaha,' he says, looking down at it. 'I told you I lend it to a mate, right? Well, that mate is a muppet, and letting him borrow it wasn't the best decision I ever made in my life.' He frowns down at the engine he removed lying in front of him. 'It's spitting black smoke.'

Richard readily takes up the subject, thankful for the distraction. 'The guy who accidentally ended up in another village?' He watches his thumb lift the label's edge off the bottle when the glue gives way.

'Yeah, that's him,' Orlando responds dryly. 'It's like he deliberately ignores all road signs and the directions I give him.'

Richard feels a small smile tugging at his lips and notices that his breathing is slowly returning to normal again. He unscrews the water bottle and pours himself a glass.

'So you're still friends?'

Orlando crouches down, so he can start sorting through the valves he laid out in front of him.

'I lived with him for several years. Believe me, he's done worse. But he claims so have I, so I'm still waiting for an apology.'

'What's his name again now? Sean?'

Orlando chuckles.

'Fuck no. Sean knows how to drive a motorcycle. Dom on the other hand? He has a license all right, but he probably bribed someone to get it.'

He lifts his shoulder, so he can hold his phone between ear and shoulder as he twists one of the new valves between thumb and index finger.

'Don't tell me you don't have mates like that.'

Richard smiles into his phone but the smile turns into a grimace when he brings up his hand to rub his neck muscles, sore from standing hunched over an incubator all day, and discovers a particularly painful knot.

'Well, I have Cate,' he says, digging his fingers into that knot again, 'never lend her anything. She claims that she got that ratty Volvo second hand and looking like that, but don't believe a word she's saying, she's responsible for every single dent.'

'Is that right?' Orlando replies, amused enough to let the valves be for a moment and sit back on his heels. 'Now, that's useful information. Word around here is that she is incapable of any wrongdoing at all.'

Richard chuckles. 'That sounds like Cate alright. But I can't tell you more, she'd be furious if I wrecked her carefully crafted image.'
'Yeah, yeah,' Orlando says, 'JC usually profits from that image, too. So, I won't ask. Hey, did she ever tell you about the incident in Jorvik Viking Centre?'

'The Viking museum?' Richard asks in return. 'She didn't. Do I want to know, though?' He laughs quietly. 'Well, yes, I sort of do. Did she break something?'

'No, she didn't, on the contrary. A visit to Jorvic Centre is in the curriculum of second form, so we go every year. Sean does, anyway, and he usually takes Cate to chaperone because everyone there is fucking terrified of her.'

Orlando pauses, partly because he needs to shift his phone from one shoulder to the other, partly to wait in case Richard has heard the story after all. But on the other end, Richard just hums enquiringly, so he continues,

'Reason for that dates back a couple of years and it's probably massively dramatized but anyway, the dulled down version is, one of the educators in the Beliefs and Burials Workshop was being a dick to some of Sean's kids and she put the fear of Odin in him without even breaking a sweat.'

It's something about Orlando's choice of words, beliefs and burials, probably, that brings back a series of images - the emergency baptism, the almost superhuman composure of the mother, the eerie quietness of the room after he turned off the respirator - and Richard squeezes his eyes shut with his hand and tries to keep breathing evenly while he hums, hoping to pass that as an answer.

The story has been told and retold so many times, it's almost an autopilot thing. Some of Orlando's attention has shifted to reattaching the valves for a moment, then the silence on the other end of the line registers.

'Hey Richard, you still there?' he asks, though he is pretty sure he can hear him breathing. Might be static in the line, though.

Richard forces himself to open his eyes and blinks into the rays of evening sunlight that filter in through the kitchen window. He can hear a faint rustling sound on Orlando's end, as if something is scraping over the phone's screen. Seconds pass, and he knows Orlando is expecting an answer, but all he manages is another hum.

Orlando puts the valve down, metal clattering on concrete.

He waits for a moment. Richard still doesn't say anything.

'I reckon I told you I'm not good with social cues,' Orlando says, pausing for a moment for a possible reply. When none comes, Orlando rubs over his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Yeah, this is one of those times,' he says. 'Help me out here.'

Richard grips his thigh as hard as he can in an attempt to distract himself. Continuing to hum is not an option, but he is not sure if his voice is going to carry and curses himself for being selfish enough to call Orlando in the first place in a state like this. It would have been easy enough to cancel, by text even, and he could have gone for a run instead that would have left him exhausted enough to sleep. But now Orlando is waiting for an answer and doesn't exactly sound thrilled about this turn of the conversation, and Richard can't really blame him. Try talking to someone who doesn't reply.

'I'm sorry, Orlando,' he finally says, and is relieved to discover that his voice is comparatively steady. 'I just had a really bad day. It's nothing you just said.'

Orlando doesn't instantly reply.
'Yeah, I figured as much,' he says then, in response to both of Richard's last sentences and in about the same low cadence.

He gets to his feet, looks at the pieces of his Yamaha on the ground. He knows how to put that back together.

'I don't know what to say right now,' he says. 'I'm sorry about your day.'

It's exactly the right thing to say as well as it's plain wrong, because Richard has to sink his teeth into his lip hard enough to draw blood to keep himself from bursting into tears. He draws in a shaky breath which he hopes Orlando cannot hear, and clears his throat before he replies:

'Thanks, I really appreciate that.' He does. Even if nothing that Orlando can say is going to make him feel less shitty, talking about it actually makes things a little easier. But he still shouldn't have called and put this on Orlando, and he feels the need to apologize:

'I'm sorry, I'm a bit of a mess tonight. Would you rather hang up and get back to your bike?'

Orlando scoffs quietly and slides his hand into the pocket of his jeans.

'Course I would. I'd also like a million quid and Theresa May to be eaten by a dinosaur.'

Again, Richard is silent on the other end, though this time Orlando can take an educated guess as to the reason for it.

'And you'd rather your shit day didn't happen,' he continues regardless. 'But trying to pretend something doesn't exist just because one doesn't want it to? That's bullshit.'

He leans back against the work bench and crosses his feet at the ankles.

'So talk to me,' he says, but doesn't like the sound of it after all. 'Or don't,' he adds, doesn't like that either. 'I don't know.'

I don't know either, Richard thinks. There are small dust particles dancing in the sunlight over the table. The kitchen window needs cleaning. The phone is a warm weight in his hand, and he should probably get his headset out at some point, if he doesn't want his ear to get tingly from the screen's heat. How does one talk about a dead baby?

'I don't know either,' he says after a moment, voicing his thought. His voice is surprisingly steady. 'It's not about pretending something didn't happen, though.' He takes a deep breath and decides to go all in, and what the hell. 'I think I'm still hoping that this will get easier at some point, but then it never does, and each and every death hits me just as hard as the one before that, and I just don't know what to do.'

There are a lot of things that Orlando doesn't say. He doesn't quote Nagel or Zhuangzi or Epicurus. He knows where that path leads him, and he knows that rants about religion that will inevitably follow make him feel good but hardly anyone else.

'I'm sorry,' he says again because that is what you're supposed to say. 'Do they offer counseling for you?'

Richard's thumb is back to worrying the bottle's label. He sighs.

'They do. And that's good, I guess. But I'm just not a fan of discussing my feelings in a group. And some of the counselors try to sell you this new age - hippy dippy religious bullshit as consolation,
and that just makes me angry.'

He pauses, and then adds in a considerably lighter tone: 'But that's something you can relate to, hm?'

Orlando hums.

'Yeah, but I've been called perpetually angry. I'd be denied entrance at the door.'

Richard laughs despite himself.

'Perpetually angry? That's something I haven't noticed about you yet. I know that you can swear, though.'

'No fucking clue what you're talking about,' Orlando replies, making sure the growl in his tone is overly prominent. In his normal voice he adds, 'Yeah, I'm still on my best behavior to not scare you off. Glad it's working.'

Richard grins to himself, it's probably the first decent grin of the day.

'It is.' He pauses and just lets his grin widen. 'Listen, what about that drive up to the coast we were talking about, this weekend? Are we still on for that?'

'Sure, if you want.' Orlando pushes himself away from the work bench to get back to the parts of his bike on the ground. 'You got anything specific in mind?'

Richard leans back in his chair and stretches his legs out under the table.

'Depends on what we want to do,' he says and reaches for his tablet that is lying on top of the week's pile of newspapers.

'The coast around Fraisthorpe looks nice. And I read somewhere that there's a good place for bouldering close by. Is that something you'd like to do?' He loads the webpage about Fraisthorpe and quickly clicks through the pictures again.

'Haven't been to Fraisthorpe in ages,' Orlando says, trying to recall something about it except that it's on the coast.

Richard hums, distracted this time, and Orlando supposes he's on the internet. Instead of doing the same to give his memory a boost, he switches his phone to speaker, so he can place it on the seat of the Yamaha and finally return to changing the valve seals.

'Bouldering is more fun, though. If you only read about a good place, does that mean you haven't been?'

'Not in Yorkshire,' Richard says, and Orlando nods, fingers slipping on the greasy old seal.

'The place you read about, was that Almscliffe?' Orlando asks, now using more pressure and succeeding in freeing the valve. 'Or Brimham Rocks?'

Richard is silent for a moment, typing the two locations into his search engine.

'Sorry,' he then says distractedly, when he realizes that Orlando is probably waiting for an answer. 'Let me just check where that is.' He squints at the screen when the map loads, and chuckles. 'No, that's not it. That's not even near the coast!' He zooms in closer and opens the picture gallery.

'Almscliff looks pretty cool, though. Have you been there?'
Orlando slots the new valve in place.

'Yeah, couple of times,' he confirms. 'It's nice, not that far from here really. But hey, if you know something closer to the coast, I'm good with that as well.'

Richard hums. 'I read something about Filey Brig, I think. Looks as if it's a cliff right next to the water side, and I thought that it might be nice on a warm day to be able to jump into the water before driving home.'

He switches off the tablet and puts it back onto the stack of newspapers. 'But it doesn't really matter, both places look good. Any preference?'

'Filey Brig, then,' Orlando decides. He fixes the second valve, this time it comes free easily. He chuckles belatedly. 'Though warm day? How long have you been living in the North again?'

Richard huffs, then laughs. 'For five years! I guess that makes me an optimist?'

He gets up and walks to the living room. When Orlando doesn't reply, he asks:

'How's work on the bike coming along?'

'To be honest, might not be Dom's fault after all,' Orlando says, raising his voice a bit, so he can still be heard over the speaker.

At an enquiring hum from Richard he adds,

'I prefer the BMW, even though it keeps trying to off me. I kinda neglected the Yamaha.'

He curses under his breath when the third valve won't slot into place as easily as the first two.

Richard opens the living room window to let in some air and picks up the old white wine bottle he uses as a watering can. It's almost empty.

'What do you mean with it tries to off you?' he asks on his way to the bathroom. When he refills the water bottle, Orlando's last remark registers and he adds:

'What do you mean with it tries to off you?'

Orlando huffs.

'Well, I reckon it has a bit too much horse power for me. About five times as much as the Yamaha, give or take.'

'Five times?' Richard asks back and sounds slightly skeptical.

'Yeah,' Orlando confirms as he wipes his hands on his thighs and gives his work a critical look. 'No one needs that much hp, I know,' he says with a shrug. Remembering Richard's original question, he finally replies, 'Thought I told you? I had a couple of accidents with it, last one this spring when I broke my arm.'

'You mentioned it, and I noticed the scar,' Richard says while he turns off the faucet. 'But you never told me any details.' On his way back to the living room he ponders if he really wants to know the details, but then asks: 'What happened?'

A little bit of water trickles from one of the tomato plant's leaves onto the carpet when he waters it, and he mops the little puddle up with his sock.
'Some idiot cut me off on the motorway, so I crashed. Pretty much textbook,' Orlando says matter-of-factly, counterpoising the slight apprehension in Richard's voice. 'Thing about motorbikes, different to cars, though? Just my life I'm putting at risk, I can live with that. Well, or not, I guess.'

Richard needs a moment to straighten out his thoughts and makes a noncommittal sound. He snaps off a stem that has gotten dry and tosses it out of the window.

'I'd hate to come into work and hear that one of the teachers from that boarding school near York just became eligible for donating two kidneys, though,' he says quietly.

Orlando stops adjusting the valve spring compressor, his brows drawing together.

'Yeah, that wouldn't be my problem, would it,' he says flatly.

Richard replies in the exact same cadence and without a second's hesitation.

'No. Being proclaimed brain-dead certainly comes with certain advantages.'

'Exactly,' Orlando says simply.

Richard feels a frown creep onto his face at Orlando's reply. He fiddles with the string that keeps the tomato plant from keeling over while he carefully considers his next reply:

'Is that really the way you see it? And what about the people you'd leave behind? Your friends, your family, your students even?'

Orlando grunts and his fingers tighten around the compressor's handle again.

'I'm not afraid of dying, so why should other people be afraid of my death? Everyone is entirely replaceable, and I'd be kidding myself if I denied that. And why would I, if the delusion of not being substitutable would mean I'd have to live in constant fear?'

Richard is completely taken aback by Orlando's reply, by its- he's not even sure what to call it-cynicism? Defeatism? He stops fiddling with the tomato plant and turns away from the window, trying to come up with an answer.

'I don't think so,' he then says slowly. 'I don't think people you care about are replaceable or interchangeable. At least for me they aren't. And I can't imagine that those parents who lost their child today are just going to go home and make a new one and forget about that little boy. I don't think that's how it works.'

He pauses. 'That doesn't mean you have to be perpetually afraid of dying, though.'

It's a good thing Orlando isn't doing anything requiring finesse or a steady hand on his bike right now. He'd have to start the whole fucking thing all over again. He forces himself to finish loosening the valve spring compressor, the way it is supposed to be removed, not to just yank it off.

He's making enough noise for Richard to know he's still on the line, he supposes. There's silence coming from his phone now.

Orlando finally is able to pull the compressor off, and if he tosses it onto the work bench with a bit unnecessary force, that's still well within limits.

He rubs a hand over his forehead and turns towards the phone that's still lying on the Yamaha.

'If you see it that way and that works for you,' he finally says, 'I'm not gonna spend the evening
proving you wrong.'

It's a good thing Richard, in turn, has used Orlando's silence (well, silence filled with a lot of clanging) to settle down on the couch because Orlando's reply takes him by surprise, both the content and the anger he seems to detect in his tone. And maybe it's the sudden tension hanging between them, that and the weird emotional chaos he's brought home with him from work, but he almost laughs out loud at Orlando's wholehearted disapproval of his last remark.

'Thanks,' he says and bites back a grin while he aims for a neutral tone of voice. 'I appreciate that. My parents would be so confused if you called them and told them they had to stop caring if I lived or died.'

Orlando frowns at the black screen of his phone for a moment, then he bends down to pick up the tools he still has lying on the floor.

'They are your parents, so I'll leave that to you, mate.'

Richard considers it safe to actually laugh now and does.

'I'll save that for my monthly call, then,' he says lightly. 'And what is happening over there, Orlando? Are you making a new bike from scratch?'

Orlando picks up the phone and switches the speaker function off, turning back to the work bench.

'Nah, fitting new valves just took longer than I anticipated. Hopefully that does it, or I'll have to rip the whole engine apart next.'

Richard hums. 'Is it the bike you are taking for that trip to Poland?'

'No, I'm taking the BMW,' Orlando replies without hesitation. 'It's the better bike, and the Yamaha, well, it's fun, but to be honest, I wouldn't trust it to get me to London and back right now, let alone half way across Europe.'

He starts wiping down the tools he has been using before putting them away.

'It's probably not gonna be Poland, though.'

'Because of the political climate?'

'Yeah, no. Because the guy I'm going with is a P.E. teacher.' Orlando knows that this isn't explanation enough - at least not if you don't know Karl - so he elaborates right away. 'Usually we take turns in planning those trips, and this time Karl was supposed to do it.'

'But he didn't?'

'He did all right, he pretty much slaved over a list of best breweries to visit. Anyway, turns out, Karl planned the perfect trip. To Czechoslovakia.'

That rings a bell in Richard's head.

'Right, sorry, I think you told me about that before,' he says. 'So, it's going to be breweries and sports, then? That sounds like something to look forward to!'

'Yeah, it isn't really what you'd call a culture trip,' Orlando agrees. 'I'd say you've seen one brewery you seen them all. But hey, Prague is good, I guess.'
Richard recalls a trip to Prague a couple of years back, before his relationship turned into a warzone, recalls their long walks through the old city center, their visit to the Jewish cemetery and nights out in the streets with a beer, live music at every corner. He recalls waking up next to Lee, too, and spending two whole days cooped up inside their hotel room, but quickly pushes the thought away.

'I'm sure you'll have a good time,' he says instead. 'What made you agree to go on a brewery tour, though, if that's not really what you'd have chosen? The company?'

Orlando hums.

'Mostly, yeah. We've been doing this for ages, and it's a good way to unwind, and I don't mind last minute adjustments to the itinerary.' He wipes off grease stains from the work top. 'You different?'

Richard laughs. 'Marginally. I'm always so caught up in work that I'm bad at preparing my trips. Usually I book a flight two weeks before I leave and an accommodation that's still available on such short notice, and then I take it from there. Works surprisingly well, if you don't panic because you have no clue where you're actually going.'

Orlando chuckles and removes grime from the back of his hand by rubbing it against his shirt. He leans back against the work bench, his bike in front of him, parts of the engine still lying next to it. 'So you got more specific plans for the summer then?'

Richard hums.

'Well, most of my colleagues do have kids, and they want to go on vacation during the school holidays, so I have some time off in September.'

He lets his gaze sweep over his book shelf, and there they are, the two travel-guides he ordered weeks ago, one never even got unwrapped, he notices.

'And we thought we might be going to France, maybe? Or Portugal? We haven't had the chance to talk about it all that much. Lucy and Jonas, the friends I'm going with, work just as much as I do.'

'Work mates as well?' Orlando asks.

'No, we're playing music together,' Richard replies.

'That so? What kind?'

'The classical kind. We used to be a quartet, but kind of lost a violin, so now there's just the three of us left. So I guess that makes us some weird triplet.'

'I presume it's not your violin that got lost?'

'No, mine's entirely too big to lose,' Richard replies dryly, his eyes travelling over to his cello. He should probably make some time for playing before meeting up with Lucy and Jonas on Sunday, he thinks and gets up to get the travel books from the shelf.

'I think we should probably settle on a destination soon, though, or all the nicer places will be fully booked,' he says a little distractedly while he tears the wrapping off the book about Portugal and thumbs through the pages.

At the sound of paper rustling on Richard's side of the conversation, Orlando asks,

'What are you doing?'
'Taking notes,' Richard says deadpan.

Orlando snorts in response.

'Oh, really?'

'Well, of course, aren't you? I'm jutting down key points for further reference. And remarkable facts. What are we going to talk about on Saturday, otherwise?'

He lets the pages of the travel book rustle close to the phone's mic.

'Let's see what we have here... Orlando, 40 years old, 5 ft 10, enjoys swearing and sex in public restrooms, passion for philosophy and motorbikes, two tattoos, lives at a boarding school, fucking hates sea food, recently started to knit... Did I forget anything?'

Orlando doesn't laugh - teaching requires quite a bit of self-restraint when it comes to one's amusement and hiding it successfully. He keeps that up for a couple of seconds until the silence is bordering awkwardness.

'Don't be a dick, mate,' he says only then, pauses for another beat. 'I'm six foot, easy.'

Richard chuckles.

'If you say so... I'll have to adjust the record accordingly. Something else you're objecting to? Or want to add? Fun facts?'

He puts the two books onto the couch table and flops back down onto the sofa.

'Plenty,' Orlando says. 'I hate Søren Kierkegaard and Liverpool FC with equal passion, prefer beer over wine any day, and I'm not "starting" to knit. Have been doing it for years.'

'You really are full of surprises, aren't you?'

'Mandatory condition of my parole, knitting,' Orlando says, smirking to himself when Richard doesn't react for the fraction of a second.

'Kidding. About the parole, not the knitting. I do know how to do that. Mind, I learned that solely to prove a point to an ex-girlfriend, but I am pretty good.'

It takes Richard a moment to wrap his mind around that particular bit of information. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised, when he hasn't bothered asking, but he still is.

'Ex-girlfriend?' he finally asks, but then quickly adds on an afterthought: 'It’s just that I somehow assumed that you share my disinterest in breasts. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry.'

Orlando squeezes his phone between his shoulder and his ear as he starts washing the remaining grime off of his hands in the small wash basin in the corner.

'I said I liked your manners, and I do, but don't worry about prying. It's just sex. Ask what you like.'

Feeling a little self-conscious all of a sudden, Richard rubs his forehead while he tries to straighten out his thoughts. After a moment's consideration he then asks:

'Am I the lucky exception, then? Do you usually date women?'

Orlando thinks about this question for a moment, goes back a couple of years to people before Katy.
'Not really. About sixty-forty I reckon, but that's more coincidence than preference.'

He dries his hands on an old rag and surveys the garage one last time for remaining tools lying around.

'Why do you ask? Still working on that profile?'

'You bet. The knitting thing goes right in there.'

Richard rummages between the couch cushions in search of his headset.

'And it's always good to know that my lack of breasts won't be held against me in the future.'

His fingers connect with the headset's cable and he pulls it out from where it's stuck between a cushion and the armrest while he asks:

'Is there something you miss, though, while being with a woman and not with a man? Or vice versa?'

Orlando flicks off the light at the entrance.

'If I asked you to compare me to, say, the last two guys you fucked, first of all, you'd say you don't do that cause it's rude.' He's not trying to have a go, his light tone of voice hopefully clear enough, and doesn't let Richard cut in but continues, 'But if I pressed you, of course you could point out similarities and differences, right?'

'Sure I could. I'm not quite sure I can follow you, though,' Richard says while he tries to find words for his actual question that are not too blunt, only to come up empty. He briefly considers just letting the topic go and circling back to climbing or any other harmless topic, but his curiosity is stronger than his reservations. Also, he has yet to witness Orlando becoming flustered, he simply has been taking every question Richard has asked so far in full stride. So, trying not to blush at his own words, but failing, Richard asks:

'I think what I'm trying to ask is if you don't miss getting fucked while being with a woman?'

The embarrassment is clear in Richard's voice. Orlando locks up the garage and turns - and three kids from Sean's house walk past about fifteen yards from him. He laughs out loud, and all three heads twist around and they look petrified.

'What?' Richard asks. His blush is deepening, he can feel his cheeks starting to tingle, and he is glad that Orlando can't see him almost dying of mortification.

Doing his best to scowl at the children, so they'll scram, Orlando starts apologizing at the same time:

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, it's just, fuck, what brilliant timing. I'll tell you later, I promise.'

He wipes a hand over his face and makes sure the kids are well out of earshot as he walks the other way.

'I reckon I don't think about it like that. I mean I usually top anyway, so that probably plays into it. Though,' he pauses mid-sentence for a moment, thinks, shakes his head, 'On second thought, no, it doesn't.' He pauses again as he turns left at the fork in the footpath, towards the forest. 'Like, you like Curry Rice, and Gong Bao Chicken, and what was that called again that you made? Those Vietnamese Meatballs? Yeah, you like all of them and if you have one, you enjoy it, right? And it's not like you're sitting there eating your curry and longing for meatballs, are you?'
Richard hums. 'That makes sense, somehow, but that meatball image is slightly disconcerting.'

He catches himself pulling a face before remembering that Orlando can't see him. 'But then, what if the curry place is closed for business and chicken is all there is? Do you start longing for the curry, then?' He pauses before he adds teasingly: 'Or the meatballs?'

The word is dripping with innuendo, and Richard stays serious for about two seconds before he bursts out laughing: 'Naw, that's gross! Weird, weird mind pictures.'

Orlando snorts.

'Man, you got delicate sensibilities,' he says with a chuckle. 'Not my fault you eat weird Asian shit. That wouldn't have happened if I could've gone with a good and proper Shepard's pie.'

He is pretty sure he can hear Richard suppressing something resembling gagging sounds on the other end of the line.

'Do me a favour, and answer your own question,' he says. 'What if the world ran out of curry - sad thought by the way - and chicken is all there is? Do you start longing for the curry or that Vietnamese dish? Or dumplings, or fucking disgusting sashimi or plain old pizza?'

'Stop doing that, those images might put me off sex altogether!' Richard says, groaning, before he considers the underlying question for a moment.

When he then replies, he sounds more serious again.

'I think I actually would. Start longing for it, I mean. It's not something I'd like to abstain from. Or I'd probably not have let things at the 'Riddermark' go quite this far.'

Orlando frowns and rubs the back of his neck.

'Yeah, not what I was going for,' he says after a moment of contemplating Richard's answer and not really getting anywhere with it. He knows he should possibly ask about that last bit of Richard's response, but his mind is set on something else at the moment.

'Look, I'm pretty sure you find me attractive and like having sex with me, right?'

He waits for Richard to confirm this before he speaks again.

'Sure,' Richard says replies without a moment’s hesitation.

Orlando nods.

'But that doesn't mean that everyone you've ever been with or ever will be with has to be six feet tall with brown hair, brown eyes and a seven inch dick, do they?' He ignores Richard's almost audible cringing at the last bit, so he concedes, 'Substitute my dick and my height for my charming personality, if that works better for you. Was every guy of yours before me exactly like me? Cause I don't think so. And that's the point I'm trying to make. You find different things compelling in different people. Finding one thing attractive doesn't invalidate the other.'

Orlando's description of his personality and physical assets make Richard grin, as does the enthusiasm with which he answers the question.

‘Alright,’ he says, and feels his grin widening. ‘I think I get it. And I’m glad you find my penis compelling.’
Orlando chuckles.

'You have an interesting concept of bisexuality, mate,' he says with a shake of his head but without force. His reputation of being argumentative is well-deserved but this isn't a topic he feels passionate about for more than five minutes.

'Speaking of dicks: Since I promised to explain,' he therefore says instead, 'my amusement earlier was due to me running into a couple of pupils. Mind, they were Sean's and he lumped me with having to mind them. It serves him right if he gets them back slightly emotionally scarred.'

'Your students seem to have a knack for always rounding a corner when there's talk about male genitalia,' Richard replies, laughing. 'That's a little disturbing.'

He pauses while he tries to catch a thought that seems to elude him, fiddling with the headset's cable distractedly.

'You just said something I wanted to ask about, if that's alright,' he says and hesitates slightly before he continues: 'You don't usually bottom?'

Out of habit Orlando glances up before answering, but the path through the forest is deserted.

'Yeah, I said that,' he confirms. 'Doesn't have all that much to do with who sticks what where, though. I like being in charge, and a lot of times that comes with being the one doing the fucking, I guess. Massive cliché, that, to be honest.'

He looks up through the leaves into the sky, trying to judge whether it's gonna rain within the hour.

'Why do you want to know?'

There's a little white stain on his jeans that looks like toothpaste, and Richard wets his thumb and rubs at it while he considers his reply, the picture of Orlando spread out underneath him and moving with his thrusts vivid in his mind.

'Cause I liked that, the other night, when you didn't try to control things.'

He feels himself blush, again, and once more is relieved that Orlando can't see him.

'Not that I don't enjoy the opposite, too, but that was- I don't know.' He pauses, and swallows. 'Hot, I guess.'

Orlando hears the change in Richard's voice, and speaking of hot, that definitely is. He is, however, in a public area where it's not impossible that kids will jump out from the undergrowth.

'Won't hear me arguing with you there,' he says levelly. 'Did you get the impression that I wasn't enjoying myself?'

'Not at all. On the contrary.' Richard's throat feels a little tight, and he hopes that will not transpire over the phone connection.

'Yeah, so why do you ask then?' Orlando repeats.

Richard keeps rubbing at the stain, but it won't come off, and maybe it's paint, from that evening last week when he painted over the window sill in the bathroom, he wonders, while he tries to come up with an answer that won't make him blush even more.

'Because I like that, being in charge. A little more than not being in charge.'
He pauses, before he adds: 'It's not exactly a hardship to let you call the shots, though. You're good at this.'

It's a good thing Orlando can't see him because he starts resembling the little tomatoes he's growing. Damn.

Orlando walks on for a little bit, even after Richard has fallen silent, the little twists and turns of the well-trodden path familiar.

'Yeah, all right,' he finally says, more an acknowledgment of Richard's words than anything else. He frowns as he tries pinpointing what is bugging him.

'You sound hesitant,' he finally states. 'Bit counterproductive to calling shots, isn't it? That just your manners getting in the way?'

It takes a moment for Orlando's words to register, and when they do, Richard feels a faint stab of annoyance, although there has been no malice in Orlando's voice. Any other day he would possibly just laugh at this, but he just can't seem to get his face to cooperate.

'That's uncalled for,' he finally says. It comes out a little more harshly than he has meant it to, and he pauses to takes a deep breath before adding on a lighter note: 'You weren't complaining on Saturday.'

Orlando frowns.

'No, I wasn't,' he repeats simply. 'Nor was I trying to piss you off, but I seem to have succeeded there anyway.'

Richard doesn't immediately correct him, and Orlando takes that as confirmation. He mentally rewinds, rewords, adds segues and apologies.

'My bad,' he says then. 'Let me rephrase. You sounded -' he halts, frowns that his mind still doesn't provide a sufficiently precise word for what he thought he had picked up on. Displeased he has to settle for, '- off. I wanted to know why that was. Whether you just don't like talking about sex or whether you thought I would kick off. If it's the former, we don't have to. If it's the latter, I won't.'

'I'm sorry,' Richard says, sighing. 'You didn't piss me off, I think I just took that the wrong way.'

He drags his heel through the carpet and shrugs before he continues:

'What I was actually trying to ask in a very weird and convoluted way was if you're good with bottoming if that's not what you're usually doing.'

He pauses, and when he continues there is no trace of hesitation in his voice:

'Because I certainly had a good time Saturday and I'd like to repeat that.'

Orlando stops at the fork in the road, paths leading to the village and deeper into the forest.

'Anytime,' he says. 'And I meant what I said,' he adds into the silence. 'I like your manners and your politeness, they are hellishly attractive.'

Orlando's words cause Richard's pulse to quicken a little. Smiling to himself, he shakes his head, and wonders if this is another conversation that will end in phone sex, when Orlando steers them back onto neutral ground:

'Anyway, speaking of Saturday and weekends, we're on for bouldering? Your car?'
'Sure,' Richard says. 'I'm looking forward to it.' And he does, bouldering with Orlando sure does sound good. But the images his mind keeps replaying are not exactly showing Orlando climbing up a rock face. Not quite willing to let go of them yet, he adds in a deliberately low voice:

'I'm looking forward to both, actually.'

'Might've been a while since you went bouldering,' Orlando replies with amusement, 'if you think that after a day of that a repetition of Saturday is physically possible.'

He starts walking back again, though, because of course that tone of Richard's voice does something for him and he needs to move.

'Your car came back from service without any problems then?' he asks, changing back to the most mundane of subjects.

Possibly, the change of topic is a good call, because Richard's jeans are starting to feel uncomfortably tight, so he takes the hint.

'The car is running fine again. And I thought maybe we could grab something to eat on our way back?'

'Glad to hear. And yeah, that'd be nice. As long as it's not seafood.'

'Why, that's a shame,' Richard says, trying to suppress his laughter. 'I was going to propose mussels in a white wine sauce and a dinner conversation about Kierkegaard and religion.'

Orlando answers with a huff of disgust, and after a beat he says,

'Listen, you up for a bite tonight? There's a decent pub pretty much half way between yours and JC. It would give me a chance to try out the Yamaha and still get a ride home if it turns out I'm not as good a mechanic as I fancy myself to be.'

Richard doesn't have to contemplate Orlando's proposal.

'Sure, that sounds good, I haven't eaten anything yet.'

He walks into his study where the clothes he has washed the night before are on the drying rack and searches for his favorite blue shirt. It's a bit too wrinkled to wear without ironing, he decides, and plugs in the iron.

'If you're not sure about the bike for this distance, though, we can pick something closer to yours, too, I don't mind driving.'

'Hey, now don't insult my mechanical prowess, all right?' Orlando replies with mock annoyance as he starts walking back.

Richard laughs.

'I wouldn't dream of insulting any part of your prowess!'  

'The Aldwark Arms it is, then,' Orlando decides with a smile. 'Their food is incredible, trust me on this. Well, it is, if you like pub grub.'

Richard places the shirt on the ironing board and picks up the iron.

'Pub grub sounds perfect today,' he adds, running the iron over the shirt's sleeve.
'Where's that pub?'

'Just off the A19, pretty close to the Ouse.' Orlando explains readily. 'Rather unsurprisingly, it's in Aldwark, considering its name. Should take you about thirty minutes, give or take. But give me an hour or so, I gotta put the engine back in first, and I should shower.'

Richard hums. 'I could use a shower, too. See you there in an hour and a half?'

'You're on.'

Orlando [8:38 p.m.]: Leaving JC in 5 mins

Orlando [8:38 p.m.]: Bike took a moment longer than planned

Orlando [8:39 p.m.]: Stupid chunk of metal

Orlando [8:39 p.m.]: Will be 10 min late max, just fyi

Richard [8:40 p.m.]: No problem

Richard [8:41 p.m.]: Will search every ditch between the pub and your school though

Richard [8:42 p.m.]: if you crash and don't show up

Richard [8:44 p.m.]: Until I find you and can give you a proper talking to

Richard [8:46 p.m.]: Just so you know

Orlando [8:47 p.m.]: Don't text and drive, mate

Orlando [8:47 p.m.]: See you in a bit
10/8/2017 - Fuck

Chapter Summary

10 times Richard and Orlando had sex during the 10 weeks since they first met each other.

(1)

He has never done anything like this before, never. And maybe he should be a bit more bothered by this, by his own recklessness, the sudden complete disregard of his own principles. He is not the guy who has sex with strangers, and certainly not the guy who has sex with strangers at the pub’s bloody loo.

Only that he is, apparently. And fuck, he doesn’t care about principles at all right now, or much else, Lucy and Jonas, for instance, who surely are waiting for him, he really doesn’t care, not with that guy’s lips wrapped around his cock.

He has always thought that the condoms you can get at one of those vending machines at the Gents are meant for taking home, let’s say, when you’ve hooked up with someone and think you might get lucky, later, at home. It has never occurred to him that one could put them to use right away.

But one can. The proof of that is currently kneeling in front of him in the tiny stall he has been pushed into in the middle of a kiss that made him dizzy. And hard. He doesn’t even recall when he had sex for the last time, must be months ago, a couple of weeks before Easter maybe, and the guy is pushing all of his buttons. At once.

And probably he should at least try to keep it down, even if the noise from the bar is filtering in through the door, even if the stalls are in a separate little room behind the urinals and there’s music blasting from the cheap speakers, but he doesn’t want to, not when the guy is doing something with his tongue that makes him want to thrust forward and into his mouth. Richard needs all the self-restraint he possesses to not just do that, and he slides one hand into dark brown curls and tugs at the soft strands, beckoning him to look up at him, and he does, he does and smiles around Richard’s cock, or smirks, smirks that smirk that got them into this position to begin with. That and a kiss that knocked out every single one of Richard’s higher brain functions and left him with nothing but want, want so raw, so acute that sex in a toilet stall suddenly seemed like a good idea.

The guy pulls back a little so that he can talk, dark eyes firmly fixed on Richard’s. ‘Go for it,’ he says, already a little hoarse, ‘I won’t break.’ And with that he sucks Richard's cock straight back into his mouth, this time relaxing his throat, taking it all the way in, and fuck- he can’t-

Richard bites down onto his lip to stifle his moan, almost hard enough to bite through it, and is pushing forward and into that tight heat before he can help it, and-

‘Sorry,’ Richard rasps, and pulls back, but the guy just shakes his head, and quickly wipes away the spit that’s running down his chin. ‘I mean it,’ he says, and firmly grips Richard’s hips to stop him from pulling back again. ‘I won’t break.’

It’s so damn egoistical, but it’s so good, fucking perfect, with his throat closing around Richard's
cock, he’s so good at this, and is picking up speed now, Richard is trying to keep still, but can’t, he thrusts forward and drives deep, once, twice, and the guy doesn’t even flinch, Richard can feel him humming around his cock, and that’s so hot.

Richard’s breathing is labored now, and he presses the back of his hand to his mouth so that he won’t be heard at the bloody bar, the other still tangled in the guy’s hair who just keeps going, keeps going, and now reaches up with his hand to cup Richard’s balls, and that’s- fuck, Richard, thinks, that’s so good- so good- and he’ll-

Richard’s barely gotten his surroundings back into focus when he’s kissed with a force that knocks the back of his head against the cubicle wall. A hand threads into his hair and holds his head in place while his teeth are nipping at his lip. ‘Fuck, you’re hot,’ the guy breathes against his lips before pushing his tongue into his mouth. Against his thigh, Richard can feel how hard he is, even through the denim of his jeans. He’s pushing his hip against him impatiently, and Richard snaps out of his post-orgasmic haze and kisses him back, just as hard, just as fast-paced, one hand on his neck so that he can’t pull back either, the other sliding between their bodies and palming the guy’s cock. He hisses at the touch and deepens the kiss while his hand closes around Richard’s and guides it into his jeans. He starts thrusting into Richard’s fist straight away, his kiss losing nothing of its momentum, on the contrary. When he pulls back, it’s just far enough to be able to look at Richard, breathing hard, lips red from kissing, hair a mess, he probably looks like Richard feels. For a moment he just regards him in silence, his hand still in Richard's hair, grip tight enough to prevent him from moving, his cock still in his hand, although he’s stopped moving now.

‘Fuck,’ he says, his voice still hoarse, ‘fuck.’ He exhales shakily. Richard watches one corner of his mouth lift up with a lopsided smile when he leans back in. ‘I want you,’ he says against Richard’s lips and licks into his mouth. ‘I want to turn you around and fuck you.’

Richard’s heart skips a beat and he feels himself blush violently. Fuck. The three words have gone straight to his cock, it’s stirring again although he’s just spent. Fuck. It shows piss pour judgment, Richard knows that. He knows as well that it’s the whisky talking and his pent up sexual frustration, probably, but he wants this, he wants this so fucking much right now, this feels so good, all of it, and he just nods, without breaking the kiss, receives another muttered ‘fuck’ in return, and then he’s turning around, then he’s bracing himself against the wall, then he can feel the guy pressing against him from behind, and that’s incredibly hot, his breath on his neck, his tongue tracing the shell of his ear, his teeth grazing his earlobe, his hoarse little chuckle when he wraps his hand around Richard’s cock and finds him half-hard again already.

It’s a bit awkward, the angle, the position, with Richard’s jeans and boxers pushed down to the middle of his thighs, his legs spread as far as they will go and his head turned back over his shoulder so that they can keep kissing. It’s messy and uncoordinated, and they keeping bumping their noses against each other, but Richard doesn’t care, not with that hand wrapped around his cock, stroking him slowly, the touch light, teasing even, just enough to keep him interested while he’s being prepped, quickly, efficiently, it’s really just about getting him ready for being fucked.

He feels a fresh wave of embarrassment wash over him at that thought, it makes his cheeks sting, but that doesn’t matter anymore when the guy pulls back his fingers a moment later and Richard can hear the condom wrapper tearing, can hear the guy swearing under his breath when he rolls it on. Richard tenses a little when he feels his cock slide between his cheeks, but there’s a hand on his hip, steadying him, and although his voice is rough with need by now, the guy sounds sincere. ‘Tell me if it’s too much,’ he murmurs, and pushes inside him.

It is. It’s entirely too much at first, it’s been ages, and the fact that there’s a horde of noisy blokes
peeing next door doesn’t really help either, but he goes slow, and gives Richard time to adjust while
he starts stroking his cock again.

Richard reminds himself to keep breathing and relax, and when he does, the guy pushes in deep,
deep, causing Richard to hiss in pain tinged pleasure.

‘All right?’ the guy asks, but Richard can tell how much effort it costs him to stay still, so he nods, he
is, and hears him let out a shaky breath before he starts fucking him in earnest.

It’s hard and fast and fucking perfect. The thrusts drive Richard up onto his toes and knock him into
the wall and he can hear the guy panting behind him. When he grabs his hips with both hands for
leverage, he rasps: ‘Touch yourself.’ Richard does. His next thrust comes from a different angle, it’s
good, so fucking good, and Richard moans loudly, a little too loudly, he can’t stop himself. The
guy’s teeth sink into Richard’s earlobe and he mutters breathlessly: ‘Keep it down.’

And Richard tries, he really tries, but fails, each of the guy's thrusts sends a new spark of pleasure up
his spine, he can’t-

Richard barely feels him letting go of his hips, his rhythm doesn’t falter, but he feels his hand
threading into his hair, feels him tug his head backwards, his other hand coming to rest against
Richard’s jaw and turning his head around so that he can kiss him. But the angle his no good, and it
doesn’t stifle Richard moans, and the guy just closes his hand over Richard’s mouth, wrapping his
other arm around his chest so that he can pull him into his thrusts.

Richard bites into his hand right before coming, and in response the guy growls and doubles his
efforts, thrusting hard into Richard's body, and harder still, chasing his own release, his skin slapping
against Richard’s, and when he comes it’s with a strangled moan that he stifles against Richard’s
shoulder.

'Fuck,' he pants, 'fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck, that was-'

Yes, it was, Richard thinks. Fuck.

(2)

It’s the one time his mind allows a shut down to essentials only. Sex. No train of thoughts in
hypotaxis, mapping out the area. Single words instead - lust, pleasure, want. They affirm concepts he
knows and trusts, for that moment.

Orlando shoves him against the wall in his hallway, and Richard chuckles breathlessly (interesting),
Orlando traps him there. Richard pushes back. Give me an opening, and I’ll take over. No, you
won’t. Orlando holds his head in place with his hands, the rest of him with his body, kisses him.

It’s logical to derive pleasure from something you’re good at. He is. He does.

Orlando eases off in the bedroom, just for a moment. He made his intentions crystal clear, but he’s
not rude. Richard is naked (fuck, he’s hot), and he scoots back on the bed, the muscles in his
shoulders flex, then relax. And that is an invitation. Orlando moves, has one knee between his legs,
fingers of one hand splayed on his chest, pushes him down, the other wraps around both their dicks -
the kiss a statement. This is gonna be fun.
Sex is simple. He knows what he enjoys. When he fucks Richard, he’s sure about what Richard likes, too. Bodies don’t try to sell you half-truths as gospel.

It should be boring, that simplicity. It isn’t.

(3)

It’s a little like being fourteen again and constantly in danger of erections that pop up uninvited and while being in places where you don’t want to have one.

Like at work.

Or in your car.

The grocery store.

At a dinner invitation.

Richard could fill pages with a list like that. Just the sound of his phone receiving a text makes him hard, and thinking of his phone receiving a text message does as well, and it’s not even that Orlando is sending him tons of dirty texts, he isn’t. Well, he occasionally is, but so was Lee, back then, and that didn’t even remotely have the same effect on him.

The problem is that Orlando seems to have short-circuited his brain somehow, and not only does his cock feel compelled to butt in every time he thinks about him, but it leads to having sex in very weird and often very public places when they meet up. And isn’t it a little weird to start having sex at the pub’s Gents at the age of 45? When you have a nice apartment? A very nice apartment?

Richard can’t remember to have been sore from having sex so often in his life ever before, and that’s not only Orlando’s fault, but Richard’s, too, because he just can’t keep his hands still when he’s alone lately. Which of course is entirely Orlando’s fault. But seriously, did he wank that much when he was a teenager? Did he come home and go straight to his room because he couldn’t wait another moment? If he did, he can’t recall it.

That’s what he did a moment ago, though. He got to his hotel room, chucked the keys onto the table together with his phone, toed off his shoes, already unbuttoning his jeans, and is now sprawled out on the bed, his cock in his hand. All because Orlando left him a mailbox message. A mailbox message during which he mainly complained about the motto of the project oriented learning week that’s in progress at his school, ‘Love throughout the centuries’, which Richard thinks is pretty neat, compared to what he went through in his school days (‘The History of Britain and The Commonwealth’, ‘Knights and Castles’, oh, and ‘Aquatic Life’ with its grim highlight- dissecting a frog). Only at the end of the message did Orlando express his regret for not being able to see him in the next couple of days, and only then did he once use the word ‘sex’.

But apparently that one word is all it takes nowadays to make Richard want to drop his trousers and start wanking. Damn.

He sort of can’t help it, it’s the figurative itch he needs to scratch, and fast. Like right now, when he probably could care a bit more about the fact that he’s on back-up duty, and might be called in any time, there’s probably going to be a C-section later, twins, 28 weeks of gestation, and he’ll definitely have to come in for that.
But not right now, not when he’s thinking of Orlando, Orlando on his knees in front of him in that tiny toilet stall at the ‘Riddermark’, his lips wrapped around Richard’s cock, of Orlando kissing him hard enough to make him dizzy, of Orlando pushing him down on his bed and fucking him while swearing under his breath, of Orlando spread out underneath him, his teeth sunk into his bottom lip, pushing himself off the bed and meeting each of his thrusts halfway.

It’s nothing he would ever tell anybody, never ever, but those images are so vivid that he usually is done in no time and comes so hard that he’s shaking and panting heavily, and generally makes a mess of his clothes and the sheets.

Maybe it’s that mid-life crisis Cate keeps talking about, but honestly? If that’s it, he doesn’t get what all the fuss is about. There’s no such thing as too much sex, is there?

Richard is fifteen minutes late and apologizes profusely when he finally arrives at his flat, finding Orlando leaned against his motorbike. He just needs a quick shower, he says, then he’s good to go, and if it’s all right with Orlando, he can just come up and wait for him. And he’s really sorry.

Orlando follows him upstairs while Richard rather humorously sums up the catastrophic state of the traffic between Leeds and York, accepts the beer that Richard pushes into his hand and nods when Richard suggests he can just sit in the living room and switch the telly on or read a book, he’ll really just be ten minutes.

Orlando doesn’t mind waiting; he has all of the internet on his phone after all, and his mind to keep himself entertained. So he sits down with a clear view of the open door, watches as Richard crosses the hallway three times, every time wearing fewer clothes, until the last time when he stops in the doorway, just in his boxer briefs, excusing his lateness again and once more inviting Orlando to make use of his bookshelf. Probably. Orlando isn’t fully paying attention. He’s looking at Richard - pretty much naked, long legs, narrow hips, broad chest, sharp angles of his face.

Richard goes to shower, and Orlando doesn’t pick up a book or his phone, doesn’t switch on the telly. He sits in his armchair and thinks about Kant and Sircello, thinks about judgments of aesthetic value, thinks about pleasure arising from sensation and how the experience of beauty and reflective contemplation are irrevocably interlinked.

Richard reappears in the doorway, showered and dressed and ready to go.

‘Sorry, that took a moment longer.’

Orlando, slightly startled, glances at his watch. Twenty minutes have passed. He gets up and follows Richard into the hallway.

‘No worries. I was thinking.’

Richard half turns, the jacket he just took from the coat rack in one hand.

‘About?’ he asks, shrugging it on.

Orlando leans against the door frame, looks at the line of Richard’s shoulders, at his long fingers adjusting the collar of the jacket.
'Kant.'

Richard laughs and turns around. He gives Orlando a once over, disbelieving and flirtatious to equal measures.

‘Really?’

Orlando lifts his shoulder in a shrug, pushes himself away from the doorway and meets Richard in the middle of the hallway.

‘Sex.’

Richard laughs again. And philosophy of aesthetics aside, that sound goes right to Orlando’s dick.

‘Kant and Sex, hm? That’s a connection I’d like to hear more about over dinner,’ Richard says, picking up his keys. ‘You good to go?’

Orlando steps up to him, lets his right hand touch Richard’s hip.

‘I got a better idea,’ he says before he pulls Richard towards himself.

They do make it to the pub eventually. Two hours late.

(5)

From the few encounters they had so far, Orlando knows that Richard’s default to being pushed is to push back, at least where sex is concerned. So Orlando pushes when they finally make it to Richard’s after a quick dinner. He goes straight for Richard’s dick, and yeah, Richard responds in kind, backs him against the wall, hands on Orlando’s shoulders, and there is a bit more shoving, then Richard just stops kissing him and laughs -

‘If you want to get fucked, just say so, Orlando.’

So Orlando says so, and that’s why he’s on his stomach now, Richard’s weight on top of him, Richard’s dick inside him, Richard’s hands on his shoulder and next to his head as he fucks into him and -

That’s when Orlando’s phone rings.

Richard stills, and Orlando turns his head on the mattress, glares over his shoulder - ‘Don’t you dare stopping now,’ he says, and Richard lightly bites the back of Orlando’s neck as he moves, slower thrusts now, even when the ringing stops.

Orlando closes his eyes, somewhere between absolute focus and nothingness, allows his moan to sound just that bit needy because Richard likes that, and Richard responds by thrusting so hard into him that Orlando has to grip the frame of the bed so he won’t -

His fucking phone rings again.

Orlando curses, words muffled when this time Richard doesn’t ease up but just keeps fucking him, his hand on Orlando’s hip now, and Orlando’s rhythmical grunts have an entirely different reason long before the ringing stops.
And fuck, Orlando *loves* getting fucked like this. He can’t come from it, not without a helping hand, but that makes it even better, means the buildup of pleasure is indefinite, will go on for as long as Richard just keeps moving, one of his hands now in the small of Orlando’s back, the other again on his shoulder, holding him in place just like -

The fucking phone rings for a third fucking time.

Orlando’s anger is so sudden and violent that Richard doesn’t even have a chance to try and keep him from moving. He reaches for his jeans on the floor and pulls out his mobile. It’s Sean’s name on the screen. He picks up, growls,

‘Tell me the fucking school burned down. Cause if it hasn’t, I will fucking kill you.’

It probably says something about their friendship that Sean ignores the outlandish supposition, the death threat, the tone of Orlando’s voice and the swear words.

‘Nah, just calling to ask whether you wanna come over for a pint,’ he says, voice as usual loud enough that Orlando has no doubt Richard hears him as well. He has his forehead resting against Orlando’s shoulder blade, and Orlando can feel his entire body shaking with laughter, weight heavier than before, and Orlando *likes* that and -

‘Sean,’ he says before his brain can excuse itself again, his voice low and hard. ‘If I don’t pick up the first two times, what do you think are the chances that it’s because I’m right in the middle of getting shagged?’

‘Urgh, Orlando, I don’t want to hear stuff like that,’ Sean complains as Richard makes a quiet sound that probably translates to mild embarrassment.

Orlando blindly reaches behind himself with his free hand to touch Richard’s side while he grunts ‘Whatever, Sean. Bye’, hangs up and drops the phone onto the carpet and seamlessly continues, ‘I swear I’m gonna kill that idiot next time I see him. How can anyone be such a fuck -’

Breath and curse are forced out of him when Richard shoves into him hard - once, twice, thrice, Orlando forgets how counting works, mind and voice stuck at that one one-syllable curse that he keeps repeating over and over again - fuckfuckfuck -

- until Richard’s teeth scrape against the back of his neck and Orlando regains some vague appreciation of words and sentences, enough at least to understand what Richard murmurs into his ear -

‘Shut up and lie still now.’

---

There is something wrong with them somehow, deep down in some weird layer, because why can’t they be in the same room for ten minutes without taking each other’s clothes off?

The plan was to have Orlando come over and then drive up to the coast in his car and go bouldering together. That was the plan.

The plan was not to have him on his knees in front of him ten minutes after he walked in through the
door, naked, telling him to ‘get the fuck going already’.

Richard is not entirely sure how that happened either. When Orlando arrived, he was on the phone with Anastasia from work, and all he did was to beckon him to come in and take a seat, he’d be done in a moment.

All Orlando did was to take off his leather jacket, stand at the window, hip resting against the window sill, looking out over the street when he came into the living room, and why was that such an irresistible picture to begin with?

Sure, he could’ve refrained from telling him he wanted him and gotten the car keys and his bag instead.

But then, Orlando could’ve reacted differently, too, could’ve asked for example if he was good to go, instead of grinning, shrugging and just pulling off his t-shirt.

Maybe they would be on their way to the coast, then.

But on the other hand - Orlando is breathtaking like this, his back arched, his head thrown back, rocking into Richard’s thrusts, and he bends down to sink his teeth into Orlando’s shoulder before he wraps one arm around his chest and pulls him up onto his knees, so that his back rests against his chest and he can wrap his hand around his cock. Orlando responds to that with a hiss and a growled ‘About time,’ and Richard laughs into his hair before he starts thrusting deeply.

Yeah. Bouldering might just have to wait a little longer.

(7)

Orlando wakes up in Richard’s bed and gives him a blowjob that Orlando personally considers one of the top five of his lifetime. And he is fucking good at giving blowjobs.

Afterwards, Orlando flops down on the bed. He looks over at Richard who is panting heavily although it was, strictly speaking, Orlando who spent the last fifteen minutes continuously having his air supply interrupted.

‘Fuck, Orlando, that was –.’

Yeah, it rather was. Orlando smirks and rubs his knuckles against a slightly sore muscle in his jaw. With apparently some considerable effort, Richard turns his head towards him and tries a smile that seems a bit unsteady. Because even smiling requires coordination. His eyes flicker down to Orlando’s dick.

‘You want -?’

He trails off after two words, leaving the question wide open for interpretation. A hand? Me to return the favour? To fuck me? Dealer’s choice, probably.

Orlando smiles and shakes his head. They kinda overdid it with bouldering yesterday (which, fine, was mostly Orlando’s fault), and consequently, he is fucking sore all over. Also, he is feeling way too smug right now to be bothered by his own neglected erection.
Who would’ve thought that a pub quiz in a little village pub in the middle of nowhere could be so much fun. Richard has only ever been to a pub quiz once, with Lucy, who insisted, and Richard remembers to have been vaguely bored all evening.

It’s different tonight, though, and that’s because Orlando is sitting next to him and is very seriously not taking this whole thing seriously, after his first impulse has been to simply turn around on his heels and leave (‘What the fuck is this shit?’). But they have both been driving half an hour to get to Tollerton, and the place does have beer, food and a roof, it’s started to rain. When they sit down at one of the tables with a bottle of Nix zero each, Orlando mutters something under his breath that Richard cannot quite make out, but he’s pretty sure that it’s a string of swear words. Orlando’s expression brightens, though, when their food arrives, and then he simply proceeds to nailing every single question while criticizing it thoroughly, while Richard gets to just lean back and watch and be amazed. The conversation in between rounds flows easily, it’s exactly what Richard needs, and he feels himself starting to unwind after his packed day at work.

It’s dark when they leave the pub, and it’s stopped raining. Orlando holds the door open for him, and tells him to fuck off when he remarks upon it, although there’s no heat behind his words, and Richard feels a smile tugging at his lips while they are crossing the parking lot to where he’s left his car.

‘Thanks,’ he says when they reach his Audi. ‘I really had a good time.’

Orlando shrugs. ‘Well, you don’t get to win the pub quiz every week, do you?’

Richard laughs. ‘Certainly not. I was lucky I got to be on your team.’

‘Indeed,’ Orlando replies dryly, ‘you suck at sports questions.’

Richard nods, not even trying to stifle his grin. ‘I do.’

For a moment he just looks at Orlando, watches the corner of his mouth lift in silent amusement, watches him watch him, and then just decides to go with the flow.

He takes a step towards Orlando and searches his eyes when he says, his voice purposefully low: ‘Let me thank you properly, then.’

He doesn’t wait for a reply, doesn’t have to, not when Orlando’s brows lift expectantly, but just leans in and kisses him. He’s intended a brief kiss, maybe a little bit of tongue, nothing more, they are in the middle of a parking lot after all, even if it’s dark, but of course things get out of hand immediately, because Orlando wraps one hand around his neck and pulls him close while the other cups his jaw and tilts his head so that he can deepen the kiss. And he does. From 0 to 100 in less than 10 seconds. Richard answers in kind, how can he not, and wraps his hands around Orlando’s waist, dragging him against his body. He gets growled at for that, and Orlando sinks his teeth into his bottom lip before pulling back enough to say: ‘Car. Now.’

He drops the key once in his haste to unlock the doors and Orlando snorts and asks if he’s going to need help with that or if it’s Richard telling him that he wants to have sex on the hood of his car. It’s Richard’s turn to tell him to fuck off and get inside, which Orlando does, without a single word of protest, he opens the back door and gets inside. Damn.
Richard follows suit, and stops caring about propriety and decorum when Orlando pulls him back into a kiss with one hand while he starts unbuttoning his jeans with the other one. Tinted back windows weren’t a bad idea, then, after all, Richard thinks, while he slides his hand into Orlando’s jeans in turn.

It’s over in no time, it’s not the place to draw things out. Orlando groans into his mouth when he comes into Richard’s hand, and fuck, that’s so hot. Richard’s breath catches and Orlando hums and pulls back a little so that he can look at him.

‘C’mon,’ he says quietly, his voice a little hoarse, and speeds up the pace of his strokes.

And it doesn’t need much more, Richard comes when Orlando twists his wrist and lets him push right up into the tightness of his fist.

Leather seats weren’t a bad idea, either.

(9)

'So, anyway, she said, buddy, it totally is. I said, no way. Not possible. She said yeah it is, and I mean I had my kit off already anyway, so what the hell.'

An elderly couple glances over to Karl's and Orlando's table. Karl's voice carries, and they are sitting in possibly the most crowded café that Prague has to offer this afternoon.

Orlando sips from his beer and stares at Karl intently, not in disapproval - not his problem if other people have delicate sensibilities and a frigid view on sex - but concentration.

'- and that's how I bruised my shoulder.' Karl finishes his account and his beer right after. A wave to the waiter that nearly slaps a passing woman in the face is the logical next step even before he looks at Orlando.

Orlando sips from his beer.

'Two things. First of - simply saying "I can't join you, Lando, hurt my shoulder" would've sufficed. I didn't need a play-by-play of yours and Beth's sport shagging.'

'It wasn't even that sporty.'

'Second of - your grasp on the basic concepts of narrative structure is nonexistent.'

'What now?'

'Half the time I couldn't follow whose limb was where and what was going on.'

Karl gives him the finger and points at the bottles in front of Orlando.

'You couldn't follow cause you're a lightweight and you're pissed already.'

Orlando chooses to ignore that downright slanderous assumption. He had four beers - a Budweiser Budvar (horrible), a Cerna Hora Lezak (all right), a B.B.N.P. (decent), and the mid-level Pilsner Urquell he is drinking right now. He is barely buzzed.
'No wonder it ended with you falling off that thing,' he says.

Karl doesn't bother disagreeing and gives the sweaty waiter with their resupply a toothy grin. Their beer tasting quest is somewhat slowed down by Karl continuously ordering Staropramen.

They drink about half of it in silence, Orlando thinking about Kafka and Karl probably of the Kama Sutra.

'You think I can claim that as a work injury?' Karl asks thoughtfully. 'It was JC's pommel horse.'

'Which you used to shag your girlfriend on,' Orlando reminds him.

From the next table, the elderly couple gives him a very sorry attempt of a disapproving glare; if Orlando wasn't on holiday, he'd offer to teach them how to do it properly.

Only a little belatedly he asks,

'Why would you even want to claim it was a work injury?'

Karl shrugs and gurgles beer like he was a wine sommelier.

'For medical bills and shit. You think that'd work?'

'I think if you went to a doctor with that, you're a massive pussy.'

The elderly husband now demonstratively clears his throat while glaring at Orlando. Orlando tilts his head.

'Honestly, can we help you?' he asks in a tone of voice that maybe could pass as friendly if the recipients were deaf.

'Cause if not, it'd be super nice if you at least pretended you didn't listen in on our conversation. Like we did earlier when you were telling your lovely wife about cousin Theodore's hernias while we were eating.'

The elderly man makes a huffing sound and turns back to his wife who now looks like an overly ripe tomato. Orlando turns back to Karl.

'You were saying?'

Karl grins at him. He has beer foam around his mouth like a rabid dog.

'You're such a dick.'

Orlando lifts a shoulder.

'Could be worse. Could be a pussy.'

Karl barks out a laugh and concedes that with a nod before he decides he needs to go for a slash.

All the way up Charles Bridge there are photographers lined up waiting for couples to pay them outrageous sums for a romantic snap. Orlando watches how two teenagers think it a better idea to climb onto the balustrade of the bridge. During their attempt to take a selfie of their loved-up selves while snogging they nearly fall into the river. Idiots.

Karl returns with a bottle of Gambrinus Pilsen for Orlando and - surprise, surprise - Staropramen for
himself. He straddles his chair which is too small for him.

'So, you got a new bloke?' he asks.

The teenagers on the bridge renew their climbing attempt. Orlando frowns at Karl.

'How did we get there now?'

Karl shrugs.

'I was thinking about pussy and how you're not getting any. So, new bloke?'

One of the photographers on the bridge very loudly yells at the suicidal teenagers to come down.

'Reckon so,' Orlando says.

Karl hums.

'Tall, dark, and broody?'

The description fits Richard quite well. But then, Orlando does have a type, and Karl just could have made an educated guess from past observations. On the other hand, it's Karl. Who right now amuses himself by making faces at a toddler dragged by her stressed looking parents. The toddler returns the favour.

'How would you know?' Orlando asks. 'About Richard?'

'Richard?' Karl is in the middle of rearranging his face again. 'Bit of a prat's name. But yours is Orlando, so that fits.'

'Fuck you,' Orlando replies without heat.

Karl snorts.

'I saw you leaving The Fox in Bishophill with him the other night. Looked like you pulled.'

Orlando did. He and Richard are adults, not dim-witted / mentally unstable P.E. teachers, so no one fell off anything or needed a doctor afterwards. Just a beer and about one hour of recuperation time, then Orlando very subtly suggested a repetition. Well, if pinning Richard to his bed and fucking him for half an hour counts as 'subtle'.

'Oi, Lando!'

Karl's loud voice pulls Orlando out of his reminiscing. Since he doesn't have his whistle around his neck, he clanks his bottle onto the table to get Orlando's attention.

'Confer with me which beer to get next. And stop shooting porn in your head, mate.'

To their credit, the elderly couple on the next table doesn't even look over, and Karl is apparently more observant than assumed.

Gold stars all around, Orlando is so proud.
Orlando’s kisses do not leave room for interpretation, not in any direction; when Orlando kisses him, Richard can tell straight away what he wants, and how he wants it.

If you’d want to describe them, you’d maybe consider the word ‘aggressive’, Richard thinks, they are not, though. They are equally determined and demanding, hard and fast-paced, a little impatient sometimes, if things are going to slow for Orlando’s taste, but they never are aggressive. Because Orlando seems to know exactly how far he can push, and he never lets himself get carried away, never lets his self-control slip, not for a second. It took Richard a while to work that out, he could not quite put his finger on it at first, just had that vague feeling that there was something there that eluded him, another layer underneath that self-confidence, that eagerness to take control, that breathtaking speed: Orlando is attentive as fuck. And not just attentive, he’s one of the most considerate lovers Richard has ever had. Of course he keeps that term to himself because he suspects that Orlando would have a serious fit about it, he doesn’t see it that way, but would probably say that he is not a fucking barbarian, of course he has to watch out for Richard when he’s fucking him. (And yes, he would probably use the word fucking twice in a sentence.)

And maybe he’d be right, and it’s only that other people don’t.

Or maybe he wouldn’t be, because what else would you call it? Observant? Sure, he is. He watches your reaction in the middle of a blowjob, regardless if he’s on the receiving end or you are. Watches and commits to memory.

But he’s more than just observant, because he acts on the information he gathers, too. Richard has never once needed to say that he didn’t like something, not one grimace escapes Orlando, not one grunt, and he immediately adjusts the position, rearranges their limbs, he has never pushed Richard too far, even when he’s been pushing with force, never tried to coax him into something he didn’t want to do.

Maybe chivalry would be a good term to describe it, and one that Orlando actually might be able to live with, not that Richard is going to test that hypothesis any time soon. Because chivalry, in Richard’s eyes, is essentially about manners and a sense of duty, and yes, that’s probably the perfect word for it.

The nice thing about this chivalrous streak of Orlando is, and that’s what makes having sex with him so much fun, is that Richard feels that he can let go in his presence, completely, he doesn’t have to be afraid of being taken advantage of, or worse, hurt, he can just let go and let Orlando take the lead, go with the flow, because it’s always about his pleasure as much as Orlando’s, the two seem invariably connected, and Orlando has never once tried to tip the scales towards his side. Maybe because he takes so much pleasure in Richard’s pleasure, Richard suspects that he gets more out of giving him a blowjob than Richard does, if that’s even possible, because Orlando gives spectacular blowjobs. But he looks just as satisfied afterwards as Richard does, and that’s so damned hot.

The only problem- if you’re inclined to call such a thing a problem- is that it’s the same for Richard: Giving Orlando pleasure turns him on, watching him, hearing him come apart, preferably while he’s on his back, spread out underneath Richard.

But Orlando is not someone who just rolls over and lets you take the lead, on the contrary. He dominates the fuck out of you, if you let him, and tops even when he’s technically bottoming, he never surrenders, never fully surrenders, he’s always still there, even when he’s far gone, always still alert, there’s always a snarky remark on his tongue, it’s almost impossible to get him to shut up, he keeps egging you on, keeps swearing, even when you’re pounding into him and he shouldn’t even be able to talk any more.
There are rare moments, though, where he goes quiet, real quiet, and lets Richard take the lead, when he’s in a particular mood and Richard keeps insisting, keeps refusing to let him call the shots, pins his arms down and weighs him down on the bed with the whole weight of his body, refuses to move until he stops fighting him for the upper hand, and fuck, that’s such a sight.

The first time it happens Richard is convinced that something is wrong, that he’s hurt him. Orlando is on his back underneath him, almost bent in half, his legs resting in the crook of Richard’s arms, and suddenly he stops swearing, stops rocking into his thrusts, and Richard pulls back to look at him, alarmed:

‘You okay?’ he pants but Orlando just nods and growls:

‘Keep moving!’

He digs his fingers into Richard’s thigh, hard, hard enough to leave bruises, Richard’s sure of that, his whole body tight like a bow-string, his eyes closed, his brow furrowed, his breathing irregular.

‘I mean it,’ he adds, and glowers at Richard when he hesitates a second too long, and fuck, that’s good enough for Richard, even if he doesn’t really understand what’s happening, he leans down for a kiss and picks up the same fast rhythm as before, putting his back into it so he can drive deep.

And Orlando still doesn’t move. He holds on to him tightly and pushes toward him for maximal friction, his grip now definitely bruising.

And then he comes. His whole body arches off the bed, and he almost knocks his head against Richard’s, his orgasm rippling through him in waves, his muscles clenching so hard around Richard’s cock that he grinds his teeth, he can hardly keep moving, but does, is unable to stop, keeps thrusting into him, keeps fucking him through his violent orgasm, keeps fucking him until he’s stopped shuddering and twitching, keeps fucking him when his body goes slack, and that’s so good, so, so good—

Afterwards, Orlando just grins at him, relaxed and looking fucking pleased with himself and the world while Richard is still miles away from coherence, composure and a normal heart beat, and he takes that as a sign that even when Orlando lets go, he doesn’t let go 100%, more like 92% or 88%, his brain never seems to shut up completely, and he’s probably still thinking about Kant and concepts of pleasure and aesthetics when he’s in bed with him.

But Richard is still pleased with himself, how couldn’t he be, when Orlando is grinning at him like that.

And maybe he’s fine with 92%, too. For now.
Richard looks at Orlando while he waits for him to respond. But he doesn't, just stares at Richard's mouth.

Richard shakes his head. 'You stopped listening minutes ago, didn't you?' he says with a sigh, but his tone betrays him, and he grins at Orlando.

Orlando chuckles.

'I'm sorry, you said 'bedroom' and my mind decided that this was more interesting than,' he halts, tilts his head, pretends he is trying to rewind the conversation in his head. 'Feelings?' he guesses humorously.

Richard just shakes his head but keeps grinning at him and stretches out his leg, slowly dragging his instep up the inside of Orlando's leg from his ankle to his knee. Orlando uses the backrest of the sofa for leverage and pushes himself into Richard's space. He licks his lips, intention clear, but doesn't kiss him, the distance two inches max.

'Are we done talking for now?'

Richard's eyes flicker from his lips to his eyes and back, but he doesn't move.

'You tell me,' he says in a low voice. 'You're the one still talking.'

Orlando leans in, the kiss open-mouthed but short, after just a couple of moments - just enough to get a taste for it - he pulls back enough to say,

'You're a bit of an argumentative dick, I like that.' Another kiss, more of the same, and his hand settles in Richard's neck, stays there even when he withdraws again, not even as far as before. 'You want to get fucked now or backtalk some more?'

'Depends,' Richard says, voice even lower, and trails his hand down Orlando's side, letting it come to rest on his hipbone where his thumb toys with the waistband of his jeans. 'How much does it turn you on when I talk back?'

Orlando responds with a low growl, and he tightens his grip on Richard's neck a bit more, just as he feels Richard's fingers digging into his hip, pulls him into the next kiss that's wet and messy, and Orlando has no intention of stopping that one any time soon. Neither does Richard, because he answers in kind and threads one hand into Orlando's hair so that he gets a proper grip and can hold him close. But the angle is a bit awkward, and he pulls back a little after a moment, and says:

'Get over here already.'
He tugs at Orlando's hip, beckoning him to straddle his thighs.

'Bitch, bitch, bitch,' Orlando mocks as he does just that, knees trapping Richard between them now. Richard pulls him back into the kiss by his hair, grip just that bit too tight - 'Fuck, I want you.' - that it goes straight to Orlando's dick.

Richard laughs against his lips, a little breathless already and starts tugging at his shirt.

'Off with this,' he says, and watches Orlando pull it over his head before he leans back in for a kiss. 'I can feel your cock through your jeans. That’s hot.'

Orlando grinds down against him in response, deepening the kiss as Richard grips his right shoulder, the one-armed embrace holding Orlando down. Unwilling to draw back yet again, Orlando keeps kissing him while pushing his hands under Richard's t-shirt, lifting it as far as it will go right now, fingers digging into muscle. But it's not enough, and Orlando slides his right hand down Richard's chest until he can close it over Richard's dick.

Richard hums in appreciation, the sound half lost between their lips, and pushes up and into his touch. One hand still wrapped around the back of Orlando's neck, the other around his hip, he drags Orlando with him so that he can stretch out on his back with Orlando on top of him and pushes his tongue back into Orlando's mouth while he does.

'Damnit, Richard,' Orlando curses a moment later, his annoyance over Richard's t-shirt for a second taking precedence.

Now more insistent, he takes his hand off Richard's dick for which he gets growled at, the sound vibrating in his mouth. Ignoring that, Orlando uses both his hands to push up Richard's shirt as far as it will go, all but forcing it off of him. And - fucking finally - Richard gets the not so subtle hint and raises his arms over his head to pull the shirt off. Orlando allows the kiss to be interrupted for just the shortest of necessary instants before his mouth descends on Richard's again, both his hands now digging into the muscles of Richard's upper arms that he’s stretched out over his head, holding him down on the couch.

Richard flexes his arms experimentally, not enough to put up a proper fight but to test the degree of Orlando's determination. When Orlando tightens his grip in response, Richard laughs into his mouth.

'That your way of telling me who's going to be on top?' he says against Orlando's lips, relaxing in his arms for a moment.

'No,' Orlando says and moves on to his jaw, his jugular when Richard tilts his head back to give him access.

'I told you that five minutes ago.' His fingers dig harder into Richard's arms as he levers himself up a bit to be able to look at Richard properly.

'It's me.'

Richard's response is - somewhat predictably - to both push his hips up against him and to laugh again. Orlando leans down again to kiss that smile. Richard simply captures his lips again, the kiss less fast-paced. Then he nudges Orlando's nose with his so that he pulls back a little.

'Here?' he asks quietly, smirking at Orlando. 'So that we can cross the couch off our list of inconvenient places to have sex at?' He lifts his head, so that his lips are almost touching Orlando's and pushes his hip up against him before he adds: 'I really don't feel like moving right now.'
'This,' Orlando replies, grinding down, 'is why it's clever to let me call the shots.'

He really already regrets giving up the advantage he has right now, but he pushes himself up and stands up. He smirks down at Richard who looks somewhat displeased at the sudden loss of body contact, and while he undoes the buttons of his fly with one hand, he counts of reasons with the other.

'No lube, limited space, awkward angles, you probably worried about the upholstery, there is a perfectly good bed just down the hall.'

With the same hand he lightly nudges Richard's knee, grin full in place as he turns towards the door.

'Chop, chop.'

Richard scowls and sighs ostentatiously.

'Right now I'm not sure this is to my advantage,' he growls, but without heat.

Orlando doesn't even turn back.

Richard shakes his head, amused, and pushes himself off the couch.

'Alright,' he calls in the direction of the bedroom. 'Get comfortable, I need to pee.'

'Get comfortable?' Orlando repeats laughingly as he shucks his jeans and underwear in the bedroom. 'How long is it gonna take you to pee, mate? Should I get myself a book and some snacks?'

Richard stops on his way to the bathroom and pokes his head inside the bedroom.

'I'll get back with a report once I've managed to pee with this,' he gestures towards the very visible bulge in his jeans and winks at Orlando before he turns around. 'There's a book on the nightstand I can recommend,' he continues, already in the hallway now, voice raised so that Orlando can hear him.

'I don't want a fucking report of your bladder status,' Orlando shouts back, flopping down on the bed that is still in a state from before. 'Seriously, if you don't hurry the fuck up I'm gonna do this on my own!'

'Don't you dare!' Richard calls back. And damn, the thought of Orlando stretched out on his bed, naked, doesn't really help with the task at hand. He turns on the faucet and lets cold water run over his wrists as a distraction. 'And it's your fault, so stop complaining.'

Orlando does. And because a. the book collection on the night stand wouldn't interest him even if he didn't have a hard-on, b. he has never been particularly patient and c. his own hand around his dick is better than nothing, he wraps his fingers around himself, just applying gentle pressure, not really stroking. He hums under his breath; yeah.

'Fuck you,' he replies only a little belatedly.

Richard catches his own grin in the mirror.

'Yeah, you'll have to wait for that until I'm back,' he mutters and turns off the water. It's done the trick, and he pees and flushes before he turns back to the sink to wash his hands.

He doesn't bother buttoning his trousers back up and feels himself harden again immediately at the sight that presents itself to him when he gets back to the bed room: Orlando is stretched out on his
back, wearing nothing but a grin, one hand curled under his head, the other wrapped around his
cock. Fuck.

Richard leans against the door frame, a grin tugging at his lips when he takes his own cock in hand,
searching Orlando’s eyes.

'Oh fuck you,' Orlando says for a second time, though the dark cadence of his voice clearly betrays
the insult, and with the next slow twist of his wrist he lets his legs drop open, arches his brows.

Richard answers in kind and lets his eyes travel down Orlando's body towards his cock that's in plain
sight now. His appreciation is visible in his expression, he makes sure of it, when he lets go of his
own cock so that he can step out of his jeans and boxers, baring himself to Orlando's eyes.

Orlando's hand stops moving but remains wrapped around his dick as he narrows his eyes.

'Stop being a tease and get into the bed, Richard.'

Richard just grins at him and wraps his hand back around his cock, stroking once, twice down the
shaft.

'Why don't you come get me?' he suggests, his voice so low that it barely carries.

Orlando snorts and shakes his head. He swings his legs out of bed and comes to stand right in front
of Richard.

'Really? Are we really playing the porn version of "Chicken" right now?'

He bats Richard's hand away from his dick and replaces it with his own.

'Fine, you won. Happy?'

'Very,' Richard says, voice only shaking a little when Orlando starts stroking him like he means it.
He wraps his hand around Orlando's neck and pulls him close and into a kiss that's more teeth than
tongue.

It's exactly the way Orlando likes to be kissed, and Richard knows it, too. He responds in kind, his
chest against Richard's, his hand trapped between them providing enough friction for his own dick
for the moment.

'C'mon,' he murmurs, voice coaxing rather than ordering, takes the small step back so the hollows of
his knees touch the frame of the bed.

Richard follows him, so that he doesn't have to break the kiss. He tightens the grip around Orlando's
neck a little and wraps his other hand around his waist when he takes one more step, pushing
Orlando down onto the bed.

The instant Richard comes to lie on top of him, Orlando hooks his legs over Richard's and readjusts
his grip, his hand around both their dicks now, and yeah, that's good, that's great, and Orlando's mind
has already fast-forwarded, has other - better - ideas than this. So his kiss is greedy, his motions are
just that side of impatient, and it's so easy like this, he's got Richard's weight on top of him, Richard's
hand in his hair, Richard's low moans in his ears and fuck, what were his plans again?

Orlando is so fucking good at this, it's unbelievable, he gets the pressure and speed exactly right, has
from the second or third time they had sex, and Richard simply lets himself take pleasure in his touch
for a moment, lets himself enjoy the feeling of Orlando's cock sliding along his with every stroke of
Orlando’s hand before he reaches between them and wraps his fingers around Orlando’s wrist, stilling his movement. He answers Orlando's resulting growl with a brief kiss before he moves to kneel between his legs and bends down to run his tongue up his cock, all the way from the base to the tip while his fingers curl around Orlando's hips and press him into the mattress.

'Fuck, Richard,' Orlando exhales and his eyes want to close as Richard repeats the motion. But he keeps them open, pushes himself half-up onto his elbow as his other hand touches Richard's face, fingertips curling behind his ear. Richard looks up at him, and Orlando swallows down a groan at the look on his face.

'C'mon,' he says again, again quietly. 'Get back here.'

Richard looks at him for a moment, just breathing against his skin, taking in Orlando's expression before he nods almost indiscernibly. He places a kiss against the side of Orlando's cock, then one onto his abdomen before he moves up, and stretches out on his side next to Orlando.

Still propped up on his elbow, Orlando leans over for another kiss, right hand on Richard's hip again.

'Hiya,' Orlando says with a smile, and then, 'How do you want this?'

Richard mirrors his smile. 'You seem to be the one who's got a plan,' he says and nudges Orlando's nose with his. 'You tell me.'

Orlando's brows arch up in amusement.

'Yeah. My plan is to fuck you. Didn't have time to flesh out the details. So, on your back, your side, your stomach?'

On my stomach, Richard's thinks, but then, he really does not want to stop kissing Orlando right now.

'Side,' he says, and leans back in, lightly nipping at Orlando's lip.

'All right,' Orlando replies against Richard’s mouth, then pats Richard's thigh and pulls back. 'Roll over then. I kinda need you on your other side for this to work.'

'A little impatient, are we?' Richard asks, grinning, but complies and rolls over onto his left side, facing away from Orlando for only a moment until he turns his upper body back towards him, so they can keep kissing comfortably. He moans against Orlando's lips when he feels Orlando pressing against him and tilts his head a little bit further to give him better access while he pushes back against him.

And once more, best laid plans and all that - they are kissing again and Orlando gets distracted from his own impatience, from that desire to do it hard and fast and now as he strokes down Richard's side, from his chest to his stomach, and his right hand finds Richard's dick.

'Like this, hm?' he asks even though he already knows Richard will agree, but he still wants to hear it, likes it when Richard talks. 'All right?'

Richard chuckles. 'Sure, or I would've objected earlier.' He grins at Orlando between two kisses before his expression turns a bit more serious.

'Take it slow, though? I'm a bit sore already from before.'

Orlando rests his forehead briefly against Richard's upper arm, chuckling.
'Shit. Sorry, I should apologize instead of finding that so fucking hot, sorry.' He lifts his head again, still smirking, resumes stroking Richard's dick as he looks down at him. 'I can do slow, though. Or do you wanna switch up?'

Richard laughs quietly, the laugh fading over into a moan when Orlando adjusts his grip around his cock.

'Of course you and your destroyer cock find that hot,' he says, shaking his head, before he adds, his voice lower, more intimate:

'So do I, though. That was fucking perfect, earlier. And I'm good with slow, I'll tell you if it's too much.'

'All right,' Orlando responds in kind.

He lets go of Richard's dick, slides his right knee between Richard's legs, feels his balls heavy against his thigh as he stretches to reach the nightstand and the lube and condoms behind himself.

When he turns back, Richard pulls him back into the kiss with his right hand in his neck and kisses him the way Orlando fucked him earlier, it's the opposite of what Orlando just promised to be. He lets Richard's tongue invade his mouth, groans when Richard's hand slides up into his hair to keep him right where he is, the kiss deep and dirty and hard while Orlando preps him slowly, carefully.

Richard looks for distraction in the kiss and finds it, and Orlando is careful. He keeps withdrawing his fingers as soon as they meet resistance, the pace almost agonizingly slow, while he barely can suppress his own want, Richard can tell from the way he is kissed back. He can feel his own impatience growing with every twist of Orlando's fingers, wants him, needs him to get going, but when he tells him, Orlando shakes his head.

'Not yet.'

Orlando gets huffed at in response, laughs against Richard's lips and Richard all but bites him but relaxes a little again. And as much as Orlando wants him, wants him, wants him, Richard seems to be even further gone, and this is addictive, having him like this. Gives him something to focus on and isn't that so much better than just mindlessness.

They stay like this, longer than Richard obviously wants them to, longer than he needs them to - all quiet noises, 'Not yet,' Orlando repeats, 'And stop it, for fuck's sake' with another chuckle and a growl, and all small motions and touches - and when Orlando finally replaces his fingers with his dick, that is the only change; he likes the rest just the way it is.

Richard's breath catches when Orlando slides into him, there is a bit of a sting, but Orlando maintains the slow pace, and it fades when he's fully inside. His thrusts are shallow and feel weirdly intimate somehow. Maybe it's the pace that's such a striking contrast to the one he usually sets, they usually fall into, but Richard likes it, likes the feeling of Orlando this close, likes the intimacy, but wants a fast pace now, needs a fast pace, and pushes back against Orlando.

Orlando grips Richard's hip as he is buried deep, keeps Richard from shifting like that again. As he tries pushing back despite that, Orlando lightly bites his lower lip instead of continuing the by now lazy kiss.

'No. You wanted slow, now you're getting slow. Deal with it.'

Richard groans in frustration.
'Tease,' he growls against Orlando's lips, albeit rather half-heartedly, because Orlando's ridiculously tiny movements actually do feel good. Orlando's warmth is pleasant, the weight of his hand on his hip is, as is the way his body is stretched around Orlando’s cock, nothing of the initial discomfort left. And Orlando keeps kissing him, lips soft, pliant, the pace of the kiss matching the rhythm of his hips. So be it, Richard thinks, and simply closes his eyes, relaxes into Orlando's movements.

Orlando can be patient, if the outcome is worth it, and it so very much is. He keeps the pace slow, enjoys how his own pleasure and Richard's build continuously and yet almost impossible to notice. It's just good, then better, then something more than better; some release found in the kiss that is still all Richard's choice.

Richard blinks his eyes open with Orlando stops moving entirely, and even then only after a long moment. Orlando strokes up his stomach and chest.

'Wanna ride me now?'

Richard considers the offer for a moment, then shakes his head.

'No, I want you to turn me onto my stomach and fuck me properly.'

Orlando chuckles breathlessly; so much for his resolve and composure - Richard and that fucking voice of his.

He doesn’t hesitate to comply, doesn’t even need to pull out, Richard moves with him, is spread out under him the next moment and the angle is perfect. Orlando bends down, a lot of his weight resting on Richard now, and by the way Richard exhales shakily, it's just how he wants it. And he's so hot like this, Orlando doesn't even consider teasing, denying him what he asked for and starts fucking him properly.

Richard lets his head sink onto the mattress for a moment when his pleasure spikes with the force of Orlando's first thrusts, finally, finally- before he props himself up onto his forearms and arches his back so that his body offers more purchase, more resistance, so that Orlando's movements don’t knock him right into the headboard. Orlando's breathing has sped up, but he's still quiet, still so very much in control, and Richard clenches around him and shifts one leg a little so that he can push back against him, trying to coax a sound out of him, because vocal Orlando? He could come just from listening to that.

Orlando bites back a groan, his next thrust harder, despite himself, unable to resist that fucking brilliant tightness, and Richard's muscles flex against his skin. He meets Orlando's next thrusts the same way, tightens just as Orlando pushes in, and Orlando grips Richard's shoulder for support and leverage both, growls, 'Give you an inch and you demand a whole fucking yard, hm?'

'Stop dicking around,' Richard grinds out between two particularly hard thrusts of Orlando, 'or I'll take you up on that offer to switch positions after all.'

Orlando grunts, a sound caught between a snort and a groan. He shifts again, so he can put more of his weight on Richard, making it almost impossible for him to move at all - not that he needs to.

'Yeah, not gonna happen.'

Half a moan escapes Richard's lips before his breath catches with the next thrust, and he closes his eyes and just feels, feels Orlando's skin slapping against him, his cock sliding into him and back out in short, hard stabs, in breath coming in quick little pants.

'Want to- hear you,' he manages to get out, while he gathers fistfuls of the sheets for purchase.
Orlando curses under his breath, means for it to sound light, but his voice is rough instead.

He pushes his arm under Richard, gripping his shoulder, so he can move him in rhythm with his thrusts.

He knows perfectly well what Richard wants - it's exactly this, this hard, fast pace - but he still asks, 'What do you wanna hear? Me telling how I'm gonna fuck you like this till you come? How I'm gonna fuck you through it? What, Richard?'

Thinking requires effort now, with Orlando's speed increasing, his fingers digging into his shoulder, his voice rough with arousal, and Richard feels himself tensing in response, trying to move with him, trying to spread his legs wider so that he can push in deeper, and he reaches behind his back and digs his fingers into Orlando's thigh, trying to pull him closer still, to keep him close. His answer doesn't make sense, but he doesn't care, he wants- 'This,' he rasps, clear his throat, repeats the word. 'This. You.'

And yes, Richard is reduced to single words, and fuck, Richard's fucking voice and how is Orlando supposed to not lose it just from that alone - but no, this is too good, too good to just race it right down that cliff, chasing that high - Orlando reaches under Richard, his flat palm between Richard's dick and the sheet now, closes his hand around him and allows himself one more hard thrust, pushing Richard into his fist, before he stops again.

'You have this,' he murmurs into Richard's ear, throat dry, 'You have me. C'mon, settle down again.'

Richard freezes for a moment before simply flopping down onto the bed, pulse racing, breathing laboured, head spinning, hyperaware of Orlando's fingers around his cock, his breath tickling his skin, his cock buried deep inside him.

'Fuck,' he growls. 'Fuck, Orlando. Move!' Orlando does, finally does, and Richard just lets him, face pressed into the mattress, fingers twisted into the sheet, and focusses on Orlando's movements, on the way his body moves with Orlando's thrusts, on the way his right arm is still around Richard's shoulder, hand gripping tightly and pulling him in, while his left is on Richard's hip, pushing him down, keeping him in place - yes, Richard thinks, yes, yes, yes- and opens his mouth and lets that one syllable spill out: 'Yes-yes-yes-

Orlando curses, can't help it, doesn't care, curses again - something filthy and probably nonsensical, he can't remember the moment the words leave his mouth, too affected by the reaction he gets from Richard in response, who stretches out his arm so that he can press his hand against the headboard to gain leverage and push back into Orlando's next thrust, hard, determined, not bothering to stifle the resulting moan.

Orlando pushes himself up, runs his right hand down Richard's back, over the curve of his ass, then both his hands grip Richard's hips and he pulls Richard towards himself, to bottom out properly.

It was good before, really good, but now the angle is perfect, and Richard knows he's much too loud, but can't keep it down, doesn't want to keep it down. Orlando pushes him down again, one hand on his back, and holds him in place while he fucks him with increasing speed, his breathing heavy. Richard scrambles for purchase on the bed while he slides his right hand under his body and curls his fingers around his cock, and although there's no space to move them, the pressure is good, almost enough to- almost - yes--

Orlando closes his left hand over Richard's on the sheets, close to Richard's face, fingers sliding
between Richard's and he squeezes them tightly. Fuck patience, fuck gentle. This is so fucking, fucking perfect - the speed, the force, the angle- Orlando just wants this, this, this, wants to come something desperate.

Richard can tell that Orlando is not far from coming, not only from the way his thrusts become faster, harder, relentless, but also from the way he is tightening his grip on his hip, gripping it so tightly that his nails almost pierce Richard's skin. He can hear it, too, can hear it in the way his voice is cracking, in the way his breathing becomes heavier and heavier, in the little sounds he makes, sounds of pleasure, of need, somewhere stuck between moans and little growls, and Richard does not want this to be over, wants to keep listening to Orlando making those sounds, to Orlando unraveling, wants to keep feeling this sharp, bright, almost painful spark of pleasure every time Orlando shoves into him, with enough force now to push him towards the headboard.

But neither of them will be able to keep this up for much longer, the pace too frantic, the need to come too acute to control, and Richard pushes himself up on one elbow and his hips off the mattress just far enough to stroke himself without disturbing Orlando's angle, the feeling of Orlando fucking him not quite enough, but almost--

There's too little space for fine-tuned movements, so he just lets Orlando's thrusts push him into his fist, fast, fast, faster, and that's--

"lando,' he pants, the first syllable lost, 'just- yes- '

And Orlando comes.

He's cursing as he pushes Richard down again - cursing because fuck, this feels brilliant, fuck, he's hurting already, fuck, he didn't want to come, but he is and his mind spins in circles as the rest of the world freezes, and Richard, Richard, Richard-

Orlando's rhythm falters when he comes, shoving into Richard's body once, twice, hard enough to knock his breath out of him, and fuck, the way he sounds- Richard reaches behind his back and grips his thigh, pressing him against his body, feels Orlando thrusting all the way through his orgasm, his breathing ragged. A sound tears from his lips that's closer to a sob than a moan, and fuck, he's close, so close, so damn close that he can't think of anything else, keep moving, he thinks while he pushes back against Orlando, keep moving keep moving-

Orlando curses some more, comes back to himself with the same violence that forced his orgasm out of him, eyes refocusing on the display of Richard's broad sweaty back underneath him, of his dick still inside him, and fuck, how has none of this not lost any of its power over him despite his orgasm? He wipes sweat from his brow, then leans down, his lips against Richard's neck soft as his hips picks up an only minutely slower pace again.

Yes, Richard thinks, yes yes yes, hips moving with Orlando's now, short, shallow stabs into his hand while Orlando keeps fucking him, his lips on his neck, murmuring something against his skin, that's so good, so fucking perfect ---

Orlando's focus his back now and there's no blur, no haze, nothing to distract him from seeing, hearing, feeling exactly how Richard is coming apart and coming. He stops panting, stops breathing, and his whole body seems to tense up, and Orlando knows it's now, and when Richard exhales in a shudder, finally there, Orlando keeps thrusting, intend on overloading Richard's mind completely.

It's perfect and too much at the same time, Orlando still moving inside of him, and Richard flops down onto the mattress and surrenders to the feeling, every single nerve end on fire, his hips still moving but without rhythm. He can hear himself, too, can hear his broken moans, but can't do
anything to stop himself, just as he can't stop his muscles from convulsing in waves that only fade slowly, slowly, there's another one, and another one, and yet another one, and he trembles in Orlando's grip helplessly, so fucking good --

His blood is rushing in his ears, his head is swimming, and Orlando keeps moving, keeps fucking him, fucking him, fucking him, he doesn't stop, just slows down.

He lets go of Richard's hand, so he can rest some of his weight on his elbow on the mattress now, lets go of his hip in favor of stroking up his side until his hand covers Richard's shoulder. And still he doesn't stop, just keeps pushing into Richard, as slow and steady as they started out.

He rests his forehead on the back of his own hand briefly, savouring this as he listens to Richard's breathing returning to something resembling normal again, then pushes in deep one last time before he stills.

'All right?' he asks, lifting his head again to look down at Richard.

Richard's reply is a muffled hum and a nod that barely qualifies as one, his brain not back to working properly again, and frankly, the house could be on fire and he wouldn't care. His heart beat is still loud in his ears and his muscles haven't stop trembling, his throat dry.

Orlando has stilled inside of him now, and fuck, he's going to be so sore, but not yet, he doesn't want to think about that right now, wants to just lie there with Orlando plastered to his back, doesn't want to move, wants to feel him soften inside of him, wants more of those small, soothing touches, his hand stroking his side, while he returns to coherence.

Orlando shifts a bit to readjust his weight, and Richard hisses quietly - Orlando can relate, his shoulder is protesting already. He should probably care that he is pretty much lying on top of Richard now with almost his full weight, but he just can't be bothered. He's too fucking old for this, he thinks, and how fucking sad is that. He huffs quietly to himself - pull yourself together, for fuck's sake.

'What the fuck happened to "slow" just now?' he asks.

Richard feels his spirits return slowly and laughs quietly, turning his head to the side a little so that he can get a glimpse of Orlando. His skin vibrates with Orlando's chuckle, and he likes that, Orlando is heavy and it's beyond him why that's comforting to the degree it is.

'Don't know,' he says, his voice still hoarse. 'That just keeps happening somehow.'

Orlando strokes down Richard's side again, his touch gentle now as his hand curls over his hip.

'Yeah, neither of us has anything to do with it. Utter lack of responsibility for one's actions; definitely a school of thought I subscribe to.'

Now it's Richard's turn to snort and he looks over his shoulder at Orlando, so much 'yeah, right' sarcasm in his eyes that Orlando laughs before he attempts to move.

'Shit,' he complains, 'I think I broke my body.'

Richard laughs at that. 'Probably,' he says, 'and mine, while you were at it.'

He shifts a little into Orlando's touch, it's nice, and he hums contently. He reclines his head until it rests against Orlando's and asks: 'You okay?'

'Been worse,' Orlando replies with a smile that probably gives away that that is a massive
understatement. He briefly presses his nose against the back of Richard's neck before he shifts, so that at least the upper half of his body isn't fully resting on Richard's back anymore.

'I really, really like having sex with you,' he says, pretty much stating the obvious.

Richard feels a smile tugging at his lips in response and nods: 'Same here.' He reaches behind his back and runs his fingers over Orlando's thigh.

'Move a little?' he asks quietly. 'So that I can turn around.'

'Course, sorry,' Orlando replies, repeating the last word on auto-pilot when he pulls out of Richard's body as he rolls onto his side.

Richard exhales, just that really, not a groan or a hiss, and doesn't immediately shift, and only judging from himself, Orlando can imagine how he must feel. Orlando rests the hand that isn't currently disposing of the condom on the back of Richard's thigh, lets his head fall back onto the pillow.

Well, that's it for going for a run on Sunday then, Richard thinks, he'll be able to feel that for days. But then, totally worth it. He sighs when he rolls onto his side so that he faces Orlando.

He looks as thoroughly spent as he feels, his hair sweaty, sticking to his forehead and Richard reaches out and brushes those wet strands away, smiling at the way Orlando's brow furrows slightly when he does. He pillows his head on his elbow and covers Orlando's hand that's still resting on his thigh with his own.

'Thanks,' he says quietly.

Orlando doesn't joke what for, for nearly breaking both of us? He doesn't say ditto, you're welcome, or cheers. He doesn't say anything, asks himself what it says about him that he finds politeness, good manners so damn attractive that a simple 'thank you' from Richard, always sincere, leaves him without response.

He flexes his fingers a little on Richard's thigh, inclines his head in a minimal nod, withdraws his hand and wets his lips. He's thirsty.

Richard's eyes instantly flicker to his lips, but he just watches Orlando for another moment, watches him think about something he won't share, and feels his smile widen. He, too, licks his lips, and props himself up on his elbow before he reaches out and cups Orlando's cheek in his hand, tilting his head towards himself a little when he leans over him and kisses him.

Orlando lets out a small huff, the touch of Richard's lips pulling him out of his own thoughts, but he cups the back of Richard's neck - not drawing him in, just a small touch, no further intentions - and lets himself be kissed, kisses back.

It's nice, that striking contrast to the kisses they have exchanged earlier, Orlando's lips are soft, pliant, undemanding probably is the right word, Richard thinks, and can't help smiling against his lips.

Orlando feels the smile and lightly nips at Richard's lower lip when Richard just continues kissing and smiling both.

'What?' he murmurs.

Richard pulls back a little, but only enough to talk, his lips still grazing Orlando's.
'Nothing, really,' he says quietly. 'The change of pace is nice.'

Orlando hums.

'I reckon -,' he starts automatically, but his mind fails to provide a continuation. Like his Yamaha refusing to start. He blinks, frowns (turning the key in the ignition) and the renewed failure isn't ground for panic but impatience. He knows the reasons of course (sweat, thirst, exhaustion), knows how to fix this (shower, water, sleep), but is instantly irritated at his body's lack of reliability, at his mind's inability to either function properly or shut down for real. Fuck this.

'Yeah,' he says, because Richard's soft kiss does feel nice; he doesn't disagree with that. 'I broke my brain, though.'

Richard, again, pulls only back enough for Orlando to make out words, reluctant to break the kiss.

'I'm sure you didn't,' he says with a smile. 'Just let me do this for a moment.' He lets his tongue trace Orlando's lips before slowly sliding it into Orlando's mouth and withdrawing it as soon as it touches the tip of his tongue, only to repeat the motion.

Orlando closes his eyes, settles back on the pillow and stops trying to kick his mind back into action for the moment, focusing instead on Richard's light kiss, the feeling of Richard's hands on his skin, sweat drying as his heart rate slows down.

Richard catches himself waiting for another remark, but there is none, Orlando has gone quiet underneath him, quieter maybe than he's ever been in his presence, and he's just answering the kiss now, not showing any intentions to up the intensity, his hand is still resting lightly on Richard's neck, neither pulling him in nor pushing him away. And fuck, that's nice, the quiet, the light touches, the slow pace, Richard thinks, and licks into Orlando's mouth again.

Orlando's ear itches and when he reaches up to scratch it distractedly, it's the small sound of his watch ticking steadily that does the trick; his brain remembers the concept of time and all that crap that comes with it. And instantly not only his ear itches but pretty much all of his skin and there is a good chance that he sweated all through the sheets onto the mattress which is a pretty disgusting thought.

Richard breaks the kiss and pulls back a little when Orlando automatically pulls a face, and Orlando runs his hand over his forehead - managing to just relocate most of the sweat, definitely not remove it, smiles and lets his brows hop up.

'Okay, watch me try and be sensitive and shit,' he says, his voice warm with humour, rough still from earlier groans, 'so I'll start off with, this was brilliant and I'm very willing to go into embarrassing - probably, for you, not for me - detail about how very good you are in bed later. But in other news, I need to stop kissing you because I feel disgusting and want another shower.'

Richard just laughs at that; it's what he has been waiting for during those past minutes, for Orlando to get restless, but this reaction is so much more charming than he has expected.

'You do that,' he says, and rolls onto his back, stretching like a giant cat. 'I'll join you in a moment, I'll just put on clean sheets.' He turns back onto his side and grins at Orlando: 'I can't wait to hear that detailed account, though.'

Orlando already has his feet on the floor, back turned to Richard, experimentally rolling his shoulders and finding them in something close to normal working order. That's something at least.

'Yeah, I'd offer to yell it to you from the bathroom,' he says, getting up. 'But I'm not sure you'd
approve.' He lets his face express mock horror as he walks towards the door. 'What would the neighbours say?' He doesn't wait for Richard's reply, just taps the wooden frame of the door in a nonverbal bye for now before he disappears in the hallway.

Richard has followed him with his eyes and is smiling to himself while he's shaking his head. He flops onto his back and listens for the sounds Orlando makes at the other end of the flat, the bathroom door, the shower being turned on. He stretches again and then sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bed. The wooden floorboards are pleasantly cool against the soles of his feet when he walks over to the cupboard and gets a fresh sheet. He quickly strips the bed of the damp one and pulls away the mattress cover as well when he finds it wet. When he tucks in the clean sheet on Orlando's side of the bed, he notices the crumpled tissue with the condom on the nightstand. Feeling a fresh smile tugging at his lips, he tosses the pillows and duvets back onto the bed and goes to dispose of the condom in the kitchen. He pours himself a glass of water that he empties in one go at the sink before he walks the bathroom. The water is still running and there's a crack in the door, but he knocks against the frame anyway, calling: 'Can I come in?'

Orlando turns off the water and wipes drops from his face.

'Sure,' he says, opening the glass door of the shower. 'I'm done.'

He steps out, dripping onto the tiles, as Richard comes in, smirks, and hands him a fresh towel from the neat stack next to the wash basin. He looks at Richard - in such a fucking state and Orlando still finds him hot, so clearly he is pretty inconsequential where sweat and bodies are concerned - then down at himself, wet but clean, and starts drying himself off.

Richard steps into the shower, and right before he turns the water on, he asks,

'You feeling like a proper human being again?'

'Yeah, mock me all you like,' Orlando replies easily, voice slightly raised. 'But falling asleep right after sex isn't the ultimate sign of satisfaction. It's the ultimate sign of being lazy, that's what.'

'That's one way to put it,' Richard says dryly and squeezes some shower gel into his hands. 'I was simply feeling sticky.'

Orlando briefly rubs the towel over his head to dry his hair a little.

'My point exactly,' he says, then wraps it around his waist before combing a hand through his hair in front of the slightly steamed-up mirror.

Richard just shakes his head and bites back a grin before he turns his face and chest into the spray, and fuck, that's nice, he can feel his sore muscles relax immediately.

Orlando leaves Richard to it, and after a brief de-tour to the kitchen to take care of the second item on his list - something to drink -, he returns to the bedroom, light flooding in from the hallway. Where he stands in the doorway for a second, asking himself whether Richard hides a chamber maid in one of his fancy closets - the place looks absolutely spotless. It's a little reassuring that Richard didn't also fold Orlando's clothes into a neat pile; they still lie on a heap (and partly inside out) on one of the chairs. Orlando exchanges the towel for his boxers before he steps up to the window that is slightly ajar, looking out onto the deserted street.

Richard just gives himself a quick but thorough rinse, he feels the exhaustion settling in now and would rather be curled up in bed when sleep comes, and not in the shower. He turns off the water and winces slightly when he steps out of the shower, he is sore. Reaching for a towel and starting to
rub himself dry with one hand he rummages through the bathroom cabinet for the lidocaine cream he knows has to be somewhere. The tube is a bit dusty, but well, it's either going to work or not. He props up one foot on the toilet lid and applies some, the feeling not exactly pleasant, and washes his hand before he turns off the light and goes to find Orlando, continuing to towel himself off on the way to the bedroom.

Orlando turns around when the light changes and finds Richard blocking most of it as he stands next to the bed. As he comes closer, it's pretty damn obvious how gingerly he moves. He comes to stands next to Orlando near the window, ignoring the look Orlando is giving him.

'Next time,' Orlando says, voice low, 'when I say we're going slow, you should shut the fuck up and trust my fucking judgment.' He lightly nudges Richard's arm and shakes his head.

Richard reaches around him, towel still in one hand to close the window.

'I'll live,' he just says, and runs the towel over his hair one last time before he hangs it over the backrest of the chair in the corner.

He steps back to where Orlando is standing and reaches out to curl his hand around his hip.

'You staying the night?' he asks quietly.

Orlando looks at him but the light isn't good enough for him to really read Richard's expression, his tone of voice too low to get much from that either. For a second, he hesitates, but Richard doesn't withdraw his hand and just looks at him.

'Yeah, all right.'

Richard nods, and lets his thumb rub small circles over Orlando's hipbone for a moment. Then he smiles and gestures towards the bed with his head, briefly tightening his grip on Orlando before letting go.

'Let's get into bed, my feet are getting cold.'

Orlando just nods and follows him and lies down with him. Richard pulls the duvet up to his hip and turns onto his side to face Orlando. Orlando is looking up at the ceiling, body still, save for his slow shallow breathing.

'You're quiet,' Richard observes after a moment.

Even to that Orlando doesn't respond for quite a while.

'I don't like losing control,' he finally says, still looking at the ceiling. 'And before you say anything, yeah, I know you asked for it, and yeah, I know you're more than capable of deciding what you want and how much of it. That doesn't change that I don't like losing control, and I did.'

Richard feels his brow furrow.

'I'm sorry,' he then says. 'Sorry it feels that way.' He regards Orlando, takes in his look of complete exhaustion and the little frown that's clinging to his lips, the odd tension that he's brought to bed with him.

'For me, it was pretty much perfect.'

'Okay,' Orlando replies, sounding absent. Then he draws in a deep breath, and his tone of voice is
back to mild annoyance when he adds, 'Fuck, I'm tired, and I can't seem to think straight anymore.'

Richard waits for him to elaborate, his eyes fixed on Orlando's face. If this wasn't Orlando right there next to him, he'd probably reach out on another level, too, and touch him, his hand, his arm, but Orlando's body language doesn't call for it, even though he seems a bit calmer, a bit less on edge.

Eventually Orlando turns his head on the pillow, features evened out.

'Sorry,' he says, somewhat vaguely, quirks his mouth up in a half smile. 'But hey, on the upside, I don't snore, eh?'

Richard raises one eyebrow, trying to make sense of Orlando's reply, but can't.

'You lost me,' he finally says. 'What does any of that have to do with you snoring? Or not snoring, that is?'

Orlando rubs a hand over his face.

'Sorry,' he repeats. 'Bit of a non sequitur. It was supposed to be a joke. I get broody sometimes when I'm knackered, but at least I don't snore.'

Richard scratches his chest. 'Snore away, I'm going to be out in a moment anyway. Let's just turn off the lights? Wait, let me -'

He pushes himself up onto his elbow and leans over Orlando to get to the light switch.

When he settles back down, his hand comes to rest in the crook of Orlando's arm.

'Do you have anywhere to be tomorrow morning?' he asks, barely stifling a yawn. 'Or can we have breakfast together?'

'I got something in the afternoon, but my morning is open,' Orlando replies, voice already heavy with sleep. 'You cooking or do you wanna go out?'

'I can cook something,' Richard says, and yawns now. 'Pancakes?'

Orlando closes his eyes, exhales.

'If you cook, you decide. I'm good with anything. As long as it's not seafood.'

Richards chuckles quietly. 'No. No sushi for breakfast.' He brushes his fingers down Orlando's arm before withdrawing his hand and settling down more comfortably on his side of the bed.

'I really had a good time tonight, Orlando,' he says after a moment.

Orlando hums again, systems rapidly crashing.

'Appreciate it,' he murmurs. 'And you.'

Richard feels himself smile into the darkness. He shifts his hand a little, so that his fingers come to rest against Orlando's arm, his skin warm against them.
Chapter Summary

Orlando is not being coy, certainly not, and Richard knows a thing or two about wool, as it appears.

[Whatsapp, 3/9/2017]

Orlando [2.35 p.m.]: Hiya Richard

Orlando [2.35 p.m.]: (Don’t worry, I’m not writing to rant at you some more about the superiority of Beckett over Ionesco)

Orlando [2.36 p.m.]: (Even though I am right)

Orlando [2.36 p.m.]: (But every word is an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness)

Orlando [2.37 p.m.]: I’ve been looking for my blue scar all over

Orlando [2.37 p.m.]: *scarf

Orlando [2.38 p.m.]: Disturbing autocorrect

Orlando [2.38 p.m.]: I still had it when we came back to yours on Friday

Orlando [2.38 p.m.]: So, if you find it, don’t donate it to Oxfam

Orlando [2.39 p.m.]: I’d much rather come and collect it, if you’re free some evening this week

Richard [3:17 p.m.]: Oh words, what crimes are committed in your name!

Richard [3:18 p.m.]: I'm not conceding that point.

Richard [3:18 p.m.]: Beckett...

Richard [3:19 p.m.]: You'll have to try much harder to convince me.

Richard [3:28 p.m.]: You know you don't have to hide your scarf behind my shoe cabinet to have an excuse to come over, right?

Richard [3:29 p.m.]: Wednesday?

Richard [3:30 p.m.]: I can check if this blue scar of yours is dangerous then...
Orlando [12.19 a.m.]: I didn't hide my scarf

Orlando [12.19 a.m.]: What you witnessed there wasn't me being coy

Orlando [12.19 a.m.]: It was me being a slob

Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: Serious dilemma for me here btw

Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: On one hand, your offer of scar checking sounds interesting which in itself is disturbing

Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: On the other, I can't ever be seen with you in public again

Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: Ionesconian

Orlando [12.22 a.m.]: We're all born mad. Some remain so, eh?

Orlando [12.23 a.m.]: Wednesday works for me. Seven, Swan?

Richard [6:28 p.m.]: Logic is a very beautiful thing. As long as it is not abused.

Richard [6:29 p.m.]: I am not capitulating.

Richard [6:31 p.m.]: First you throw you scarf behind my cabinet, then you expect me to carry it to the Swan AND to inspect your scars in public?

Richard [6:32 p.m.]: Is this going to lead to restroom sex again?

Richard [6:32 p.m.]: Should I wear my good underwear?

Richard [6:33 p.m.]: Seven is good.

Richard [6:33 p.m.]: Swan is, too.

Orlando [7.33 p.m.]: Like you have anything but good underwear

Orlando [7.33 p.m.]: I HAVE met you, you know

Richard [7:34 p.m.]: Is that a yes?

Orlando [7:55 p.m.]: To not meeting at the Swan but at your flat because you want sex?

Orlando [7:55 p.m.]: Yes
Richard [8:17 p.m.]: Excellent.

Richard [8:18 p.m.]: That solves the underwear issue, too.

Richard [8:19 p.m.]: None required.

Richard [8:22 p.m.]: And don't tell me you weren't out after that when you stuffed that scarf behind the cabinet.

Orlando [8:40 p.m.]: I wasn't. Because I'm not a fourteen year old with a crush

Orlando [8:40 p.m.]: If I want sex, I'm gonna text you I want sex

Orlando [8:41 p.m.]: I want my scarf

Orlando [8:43 p.m.]: And sex, now that you brought it up

Richard [8:45 p.m.]: I never insinuated that you were like a teenager.

Richard [8:46 p.m.]: I'm pleased that you deem me crush worthy in general, though.

Richard [8:47 p.m.]: But I'm not sure if it's an honour that sex with me comes second on your wish list or if I need to demand a duel?

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Are you drunk? You sound drunk

Orlando [9:02 p.m.]: But by all means, if you want to fight it out with my scarf, be my guest

Richard [9:07 p.m.]: Sober as can be. But bored.

Richard [9:08 p.m.]: I'm in Leeds.

Richard [9:08 p.m.]: I choose the washing machine as weapon.

Richard [9:09 p.m.]: 90°.

Orlando [9:20 p.m.]: Boredom is preferable to the torture that is Sean's fucking board game night. I hate my life

Orlando [9:21 p.m.]: Also, I choose to believe that you're joking and didn't actually wash my scarf at 90°

Orlando [9:22 p.m.]: It's wool, for fuck's sake
Orlando [9:23 p.m.]: Why am I having a conversation about fucking laundry with you?
Orlando [9:24 p.m.]: I really hate my life

Richard [9:26 p.m.]: Of course I didn't!
Richard [9:26 p.m.]: NOW I'm offended.
Richard [9:27 p.m.]: Seriously.
Richard [9:27 p.m.]: Who on earth boils wool?!
Richard [9:28 p.m.]: I'd say you deserve board game night.

Orlando [9:30 p.m.]: Fuck you
Orlando [9:31 p.m.]: No really
Orlando [9:31 p.m.]: Which is not a line of thinking I should be entertaining rn, I'm serious

Richard [9:33 p.m.]: Neither should I. There's a young colleague on call today.
Richard [9:34 p.m.]: I've already had to answer six calls.
Richard [9:36 p.m.]: Maybe I should nip over there for a bit.
Richard [9:36 p.m.]: Might make for a calmer night.

Orlando [9:44 p.m.]: You do that. Meanwhile, I am gonna battle imaginary... trolls I think
Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: Which, in direct comparison to your evening activities, sounds even more meaningful
Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: See you Wednesday, then. Seven at yours

Richard [9:49 p.m.]: I'd rather battle trolls right now than get up again...
Richard [9:51 p.m.]: Wednesday it is!
Richard [9:53 p.m.]: If you don't want to drive I could pick you up after work?

Orlando [9:58 p.m.]: Nah, you're all right, but cheers for offering
Orlando [9:58 p.m.]: Unless you want to drop me off again in the middle of the night / at fuck early in the morning
Orlando [9:59 p.m.]: I'm good with driving

Richard [11:43 p.m.]: I can drop you off before work, no problem.

Richard [11:45 p.m.]: If you want to stay the night, that is.

Richard [11:50 p.m.]: You're definitely welcome to.

Richard [11:51 p.m.]: Good night!

Orlando [11:59 p.m.]:
https://www.google.com/maps/dir//Jackson+College,+Yorkshire+United_Kingdom

Orlando [11:59 p.m.]: Half six, if that works for you
9/9/2017 - Plans

Chapter Summary

Richard leaves Orlando a mailbox message before going on vacation.

[9/9/2017, 7:47 p.m.]

“Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.”

'Hi. It's Richard. I was hoping to catch you in person, actually. Is it board game night again?' [Chuckle] 'Anyway, it turns out we're basically leaving for the airport in the middle of the night, Lucy thought it would be a good idea to arrive early. Oh, well. I guess there'll be coffee. But- what I was going to say- I'd love to see that play with you, in London. I checked the roster earlier, and I can either do the first or third weekend in October, if that works for you? The weekend when I'm getting back might also work- though- no, on a second thought, I don't think so, I'm going to look like a barbarian, then, and I should probably shave and wash off all the travelling grime before going back to work on Monday. So- October? Just let me know.' [Pause] 'Okay. Well, so, I guess I'll talk to you when I get back, yeah? And maybe we can see each other that weekend? Saturday evening? That's- wait, let me see-- the 23rd. I'd like that.' [Pause, then quiet laugh] 'Alright. Take care now, Orlando. Bye.'
Chapter Summary

Orlando and Richard are sexting. And in case you're wondering- why, yes, smart definitely is the new sexy :)
Richard can hear footsteps approaching, then the door his being opened and Jonas steps out onto the veranda.

'Hey,' he says, 'are you not coming in? Lucy has already opened the wine.'

Richard nods distractedly, his eyes fixed on his phone's screen.

'In a moment,' he says.

Jonas snorts in response. 'Which translates to 'eventually, but go away now and let me sit outside in the dark and grin at my phone for another moment', I get it,' he says teasingly, and nudges Richard’s sneaker with his toe.

Richard chuckles. He switches off the display and looks up at Jonas.

'It's not what you think,' he says, still smiling, and pockets his phone.

'Oh, I'm sure it is,' Jonas replies, grinning. ‘I’m sure it’s exactly what I think.’

'I assure you, it's not.' Richard gets up from the bench and stretches.

'You don't even know what I'm thinking,' Jonas observes.

'Course I do,' Richard replies without missing a beat. ‘Something dirty.’

Grinning at Jonas, he turns towards the door.

Jonas laughs. 'So you admit it?


'That you were up to something naughty, of course! Come on, you were grinning at your phone like an idiot.’

Richard huffs at that and Jonas hurries to say: 'Oh, but you looked cute, hunched over your phone like that. Very cute. Like a cute idiot.’

'Shut up,' Richard says pleasantly and smiles at Lucy who is coming out of the kitchen with a plate full of cheese and three glasses.

'Who's an idiot?' she asks and sets the glasses down onto the table.

'Richard,' Jonas says.

'Jonas,' Richard says.
Lucy laughs. 'I see. Well, would one of you two idiots be so kind to get the wine bottle and the bread? And to tell me what happened?' She leans against the table and looks at them expectantly. Richard just shakes his head, amused, and goes to fetch the wine.

'Richard was sexting,' he can hear Jonas say a moment later, his stage whisper carries all the way to the kitchen.

'I wasn't,' Richard calls back over his shoulder, but can't help grinning.

Lucy is still leaning against the table and eyes him critically when he hands her the bottle.

'Your grin says you were,' she observes and winks at him.

Richard shakes his head. 'I might as well say I was, hm? Because there's no way you two are going to believe me if I say I'm having a Whatsapp discussion about Becket vs. Ionesco, or are you?'

'We most definitely aren't,' Lucy says and pours each of them a glass of wine. 'When can we meet him?'

***

[Whatsapp, 17/9/2017]

Richard [11:47 p.m.]: Really looking forward to seeing you, Orlando.
Chapter Summary

Richard sends Orlando a postcard from France. Predictably, sexting ensures...

[23/9/2017, 11:04 a.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, mate. This is Orlando. I'm calling to tell you that I got your postcard just now, along with a half hour lecture on why people shouldn't try to keep rhinos as pets. But I reckon I can neither blame that on you nor on the postal service, it's society's fault for thinking people like Gerry should be allowed out in the open. So, yeah, cheers for the postcard and the Ionesco reference. That allowed me, on two different occasions, to rant about him. I'm sparing you that right now cause I reckon your mailbox has limited capacity. I'm counting it as the declaration of war you intended, though. And Beckett's Happy Days will still be shown in London in a month, I got tickets for that for the third weekend in October, if you're still interested. Let me know. Though possibly not tonight cause I will insist on that debate about Ionesco vs Beckett right away if you do, and I happen to have other plans. So, see you later, yeah?'

[23/9/2017, Whatsapp]

Richard [1:37 p.m.]: Glad it didn't get lost in the mail!

Richard [1:37 p.m.]: The rhino was hard to resist.

Richard [1:38 p.m.]: I'll be home around four. Shall we say seven?
Richard [1:38 p.m.]: And pasta? Tomato, rocket, goat cheese and pine nuts?

Richard [1:40 p.m.]: And do tell me about your plans!

Richard [1:40 p.m.]: In detail...

Orlando [2:09 p.m.]: Forget it

Orlando [2:09 p.m.]: Not sexting w you rn

Orlando [2:10 p.m.]: Not on the sidelines of the football pitch

Orlando [2:10 p.m.]: Mirkwood dominates the game, not that there was any doubt

Orlando [2:11 p.m.]: Re: Food - you cook, you choose

Orlando [2:11 p.m.]: I'm easy

Orlando [2:11 p.m.]: STILL not sexting

Richard [2:14 p.m.]: I sort of see your point.

Richard [2:14 p.m.]: But only sort of.

Richard [2:15 p.m.]: Two weeks!

Richard [2:15 p.m.]: TWO WEEKS!

Richard [2:16 p.m.]: When's the half-time break?

Orlando [2:18 p.m.]: Fuck you, Richard

Orlando [2:18 p.m.]: I am standing on the side of a fucking football pitch

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: And I am not getting a fucking hard on, planning a five minute wank

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: Seriously

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: Fuck you

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: Which yes,

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: Is a promise

Orlando [2:19 p.m.]: Now change the topic or I'll switch my phone off

Richard [2:21 p.m.]: Seems like a sensible idea, given the fact that I'm still on the train.
Richard [2:23 p.m.]: I'll tell you about my plans in person, then, later.

Richard [2:23 p.m.]: Is the match worth watching? Or does the other team not stand a chance?

Orlando [2:28 p.m.]: Good match, yes

Orlando [2:28 p.m.]: Friendly match between JC and a paradox from Selby

Orlando [2:29 p.m.]: Independent Christian School

Orlando [2:29 p.m.]: You may imagine how much I am enjoying the 8:1 rn. Pretty sure you would as well

Orlando [2:30 p.m.]: 9:1

Richard [2:34 p.m.]: 9:1?

Richard [2:35 p.m.]: I most definitely would.

Richard [2:35 p.m.]: Are the little Christians crying for their saviour already?

Orlando [3:05 p.m.]: Sorry for the delay. Match won, celebrations under control

Orlando [3:05 p.m.]: There was a bit of mud bathing going around

Orlando [3:05 p.m.]: Mostly Sean's girls, not mine

Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: Anyway, you still on the train?

Richard [3:08 p.m.]: I am.

Richard [3:08 p.m.]: Why?

Richard [3:09 p.m.]: Are you ready to tell me about your plans now?

Orlando [3:10 p.m.]: While you are on the train?

Orlando [3:11 p.m.]: Not the most elaborate of plans

Orlando [3:11 p.m.]: 1. Arrive at yours

Orlando [3:11 p.m.]: 2.a. Fuck you

Orlando [3:12 p.m.]: 2.b. Get fucked by you

Orlando [3:12 p.m.]: 2.a. and b. are interchangeable and/or can be preceded / changed for blowing
Orlando [3:12 p.m.]: The end

Richard [3:14 p.m.]: Excellent.

Richard [3:14 p.m.]: That happens to coincide with my plans.

Richard [3:15 p.m.]: Don't think fucking you can wait til after you've fucked me, though.

Richard [3:16 p.m.]: What's your take on beards, btw?

Richard [3:17 p.m.]: media content in this message

Richard [3:17 p.m.]: I kind of like it, but can shave if you're not a fan of beard burn.

Orlando [3:19 p.m.]: Fuck you look hot

Orlando [3:19 p.m.]: Seriously I told you I wasn't gonna sext with you

Orlando [3:19 p.m.]: Stop sending me porn

Orlando [3:19 p.m.]: Asshole

Richard [3:20 p.m.]: It's a picture of my face!

Richard [3:20 p.m.]: How does that qualify as porn?!

Richard [3:21 p.m.]: What's going on in your head?

Richard [3:21 p.m.]: Cheers, though.

Orlando [3:40 p.m.]: What for, it's your face and that is objectively handsome

Orlando [3:40 p.m.]: /porn

Orlando [3:40 p.m.]: Relatedly:

Orlando [3:40 p.m.]: Is it 7 yet?

Orlando [3:41 p.m.]: Btw I just got the confirmation for the room I booked in London

Orlando [3:41 p.m.]: You're welcome to stay

Orlando [3:44 p.m.]: No worries if you have other plans though
Richard [4.27 p.m.]: Sorry.

Richard [4.27 p.m.]: Am home now, though.

Richard [4.28 p.m.]: Cheers, again.

Richard [4.29 p.m.]: Count me definitely in for the play, I'm really looking forward to that!

Richard [4.34 p.m.]: Can I get back to you on the hotel room, though?

Richard [4.36 p.m.]: Friends of mine who live in London just had a baby, and I'd like to see them that weekend as well.

Richard [4.38 p.m.]: Which doesn't mean no, let me just work out the practical details?

Orlando [4:48 p.m.]: No worries

Orlando [4:48 p.m.]: Open invitation, decide whenever

Orlando [4:48 p.m.]: As long as you don't bring the fucking baby

Orlando [4:48 p.m.]: Or smell of it

Richard [5:15 p.m.]: I wouldn't dream of bringing a baby to a date with you.

Richard [5:16 p.m.]: Nor would I want to smell of one.

Richard [5:18 p.m.]: Anyway, thanks, I appreciate it.

Richard [5:19 p.m.]: Am back from the store now and just need to put the washing in and shower and change.

Richard [5:20 p.m.]: Just get onto your bike and come over?

Richard [5:21 p.m.]: I really want to be done with waiting.

Orlando [5:27 p.m.]: Smart man

Orlando [5:27 p.m.]: I can do you half six, need to check in at Wellesley to hash out some stuff with Sean

Orlando [5:27 p.m.]: So he won't fucking call again tonight like some NQT in over his head

Orlando [5:28 p.m.]: All right if I stay over yeah?

Richard [5:35 p.m.]: I don't know what a NQT is, but you sure make it sound like an insult.

Richard [5:36 p.m.]: Take as much time as you need, I'll be here.
Richard [5:37 p.m.]: And we've got the whole night if you're staying over.

Richard [5:38 p.m.]: I'd like that.

Orlando [5:45 p.m.]: Great

Orlando [5:45 p.m.]: Possibly issue a warning to your neighbours or something

Orlando [5:45 p.m.]: see you in a bit

Richard [5:52 p.m.]: I can't really picture myself going over there with an offering of ear plugs...

Richard [5:53 p.m.]: Also I'm quite sure that the little old lady next door is practically deaf.

Richard [5:53 p.m.]: It should be fine.

Richard [5:54 p.m.]: Drive safely.

Richard [5:55 p.m.]: Oh, and wear something I can quickly get you out of!

Orlando [5:58 p.m.]: Smooth

Orlando [5:58 p.m.]: Too late tho

Orlando [5:59 p.m.]: Already at the garage. Taking the BMW

Richard [6:01 p.m.]: Good.

Richard [6:02 p.m.]: Not that I mind picking you up in the middle of nowhere when the Yamaha is being a bitch, but today I'd rather not have to.

Richard [6:03 p.m.]: See you in a moment, then.

Richard [6:03 p.m.]: I'm sure I'll find a way to deal with your clothes.
Chapter Summary

In the middle of the night of September, 24th...

Orlando wakes up. Half a second of disorientation - why is he awake, where is he - until the basic functions of his consciousness catch up. He needs to pee, he’s in Richard’s bedroom.

For a moment, ten seconds maybe, or five minutes, he lies awake, with his eyes closed, his sluggish mind letting his body suss out whether getting up really is a necessity. The bed is warm, he doesn’t want to move, hears Richard breathing steadily next to him. He still needs to pee, though.

He sits up, swings his legs out of the bed, blinks. Where are his sweatpants? It takes an age for his mind to provide him with the required info. He hasn’t got any sweatpants here. He doesn’t need them either. He’s in Richard’s flat, there is no chance of a distraught Mirkwooder showing up at the doorstep unannounced.

Behind him, Richard turns his head on his pillow. He exhales like some part of him wants to enquire about the commotion but can’t find words while he is mostly still asleep.

‘Just need the loo,’ Orlando says. His hand automatically moves to his throat, warmth and touch providing relief. ‘Sleep on.’

Again, Richard exhales, something like affirmation in that, and doesn’t shift again when Orlando gets up.

Autopilot kicks in for two minutes - down the hall, bathroom, pee, wash his hands - then the sight of his own reflection in the mirror sparks thoughts back into action. A face (even if it’s his own) demands reflection in turn, if not communication.

Both his hands grasp the smooth ceramic of the washbasin; his body doesn’t trust itself to not just keel over backwards. He watches himself blink. Sleep and physical exhaustion make him feel numb and abuzz at the same time. Even hours later nerve endings are still chasing the thrill of orgasm. He isn’t sore, though technically he should be. He lifts his hand to his shoulder where he should feel a bruise from when Richard slammed him against the wall. Straightening up should be answered by protests from his back. It should remind him that the two shags over the course of the evening both had him on the receiving end. He doesn’t, it isn’t, it doesn’t.

Endorphin; fascinating thing.

His feet are cold. Comes from standing naked in the bathroom in the middle of the night like some idiot. Bedroom, bed; come on.

On the way back, he picks his jacket up from the hallway’s floor, his pullover, Richard’s shirt. Autopilot again. This is not his flat, no kids to be a good example to; and Richard didn’t care enough to gather them up during the brief intermission. Food took precedence over cleanliness; Orlando approved.
The curtains are drawn in the bedroom, despite the faint light from the hallway, Orlando is pretty much blind when he reenters the room. He drops the clothes on a chair, turns to the bed.

While his eyes adjust to the darkness, for ten seconds, or a minute, he stands there and looks at the bed, at Richard. Because Richard is nice to look at, his mind is quiet when he does. Because he is still on backup power supply. Because the bedroom doesn’t have cold tiles.

Richard hasn’t moved since Orlando left, but after a minute, or ten seconds, he exhales again. Another wordless question that probably translates to ‘why are you standing in the middle of the room like a demented stalker’. Only more polite, because it’s Richard.

Orlando responds with a hum, low in his throat, gets back into bed, under the covers. He settles on his back. The heavy fabric of the duvet stored his body heat, or maybe it’s Richard’s. He doesn’t usually get up during the night. His brain keeps sending the same misdirected message now - stayupstayupstayawakestayawake - even though he doesn’t have to be anywhere, certainly doesn’t have class in an hour.

He stares at the ceiling, or into the darkness above him, waits for his thoughts to settle again, like dirt at the bottom of brackish water.

Next to him, Richard shifts, onto his side, facing Orlando, closer than before.

‘All right?’ he asks. His voice is heavy from sleep, there in that deep quiet darkness where Orlando wants to be again as well. Under the duvet, he reaches out, Orlando feels his warm hand on his hipbone, fingers soft on his naked stomach. His own comes to join it there, partly covering Richard’s.

‘Yeah,’ he says. Closes his eyes. ‘Go back to sleep.’
Richard wakes up before his alarm and thinks about Orlando. And Lee.

On Tuesday morning, Richard wakes up before the alarm, fighting the feeling of disorientation before his eyes adjust to the darkness and he recognizes the familiar shape of his wardrobe. Of course. He is not in France anymore. A fact that neatly explains Jonas’ absence, too. And on second thought, he doesn’t really miss his snoring.

With his eyes still half-closed Richard stretches out his arm to grab his phone from the night stand, only to discover that he can’t reach it, he’s on the wrong side of the bed, and that must be a first in months, he usually doesn’t move much during the night. He rolls over and picks up the phone, swiping his thumb over the display while he does. 5:38 a.m. Why? He could’ve slept for another half hour. He sighs and let’s his head sink back into the pillow. It’s pleasantly cool, and a faint smell of Orlando’s cologne still clings to it. Which also is pleasant, come to think of it. Richard closes his eyes again and for a moment just lies there with his face buried in the pillow while he tries to persuade himself to turn on the lights and get up. And get ready for work. It’s still early, though, and maybe he doesn’t have to move yet. Just one more moment. He reaches out for the duvet and pulls it back over his legs, his feet are getting cold. Autumn’s come early this year. It’s still dark outside, and yes, he can definitely stay put for another moment. When he turns his head to the side a little so that he can breathe more easily the smell of Orlando’s cologne grows stronger, and that’s nice, somehow, but oddly disconcerting as well. And maybe that is because it’s not his own smell, maybe it’s as simple as that. Only that is isn’t, of course it isn’t, and he hates his brain for doing this, for fast forwarding, or rewinding, actually, to thoughts about Lee, when he doesn’t want to think about him, doesn’t ever want to think about him again, doesn’t want to be remembered of how he used to sleep on Lee’s side of the bed when he was out of town, or in his shirt, because being surrounded by his smell made him miss him less.

Fuck this, he’s not going to lie there god-awfully early in the morning and think about Lee and feel sorry for himself, not after all these months. Richard pushes himself up onto one elbow and reaches for the light switch. He then just blinks into the too bright light of the bedside lamp for a moment before he rolls onto his back and rubs his hands over eyes to chase away the remnants of sleep and then just lie there counting breaths while he tries to swallow down his anger and frustration and think about something else, anything else but Lee. Lee, Lee, Lee, fucking Lee, when is this ever going to stop? After a year? Two? Is this ever going to stop to begin with? Cate says it is, but then Cate has been happily married for two decades, does she really know? Lucy says he’ll probably feel better when he simply answers one of Lee’s many calls and yells at him for a bit, because that’s the vital part he’s missed and Lee's done everything to deserve it, but Richard doubts that it’ll change anything, that he’ll stop feeling betrayed then, how could he?

Well, but at least he doesn’t think about Lee when he’s with Orlando. Or rarely thinks about him. Definitely doesn’t think about him when he’s in bed with Orlando, though, and he’s glad that he doesn’t, because he would need to stop seeing him if he did. He’d feel guilty. Much more guilty than he already does, than he does when Orlando is asking if he can stay over. Or is asking him to share a room with him in London. It’s not even that he doesn’t want to, he does, he likes spending time with Orlando, likes having him over, it’s good, it really is, and the sex is fantastic, or more than that, it’s
something he doesn’t even have a word for, and he wants more of it, wants to spend more time with him, but-well, can’t stop thinking about Lee, still can’t stop thinking about Lee, and that’s unfair towards Orlando. Fuck. He just wants this to go away, all of it, wants to just lie there and breathe in the smell of Orlando’s cologne and think about Friday night and that kiss, that first kiss when he’d him backed up against the wall before he’d even had time to close the door.

Richard sighs and squeezes his eyes shut for a moment.

Maybe he should tell him. Maybe he should tell him that he’s not exactly- *available*, emotionally. That he is going to need more time, that this maybe is going too fast, that the thought of sharing a hotel room is a little overwhelming because he doesn’t know what to feel and to think and doesn’t know if that’s going to change any time soon. But then, Richard’s always looking forward to seeing him, looking forward to sleeping with him, looking forward to discussing absurd theatre with him, which should be absurd in itself, but he does, Orlando’s smart, incredibly nimble-witted, and Richard likes his sense of humour, simply likes being around him. If he’s honest he even likes waking up next to him. It’s uncomplicated, like everything seems to be with Orlando, he doesn’t make a big deal out of it, just wakes up next to him, yawns, stretches, goes for a pee or asks for coffee. Or sex. He doesn’t invade his personal space with touches Richard feels he hasn’t invited, especially not in the morning, never does, doesn’t want to linger in bed and cuddle, which is a nice surprise, Richard genuinely appreciates his concept of boundaries which is even more restrictive than his own, in direct comparison he might even come off as the touchy one, and that’s definitely a first.

Richard gives a little start when his alarm goes off and interrupts his thoughts. Okay. Time to get up and stop brooding. This is a perfectly good thing and he is not going to ruin this by over-thinking it and telling Orlando about doubts and insecurities that don’t have anything to do with him to begin with, he is not Lee, and he is not like Lee, and Richard will come to terms with this weird mess somehow, eventually. But first he’s going to take a hot shower and go to work. And when he gets back home tonight he’s going to call Orlando and tell him that he’ll spend that night with him, in London. Yes.
6/10/2017 - Dental

Chapter Summary

Orlando spends his evening at the ER, but Richard's texts keep him company.

[6/10/2017, 5:21 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, mate, it's Orlando. I'm sorry but I gotta cancel tonight. I'm actually in Leeds at the hospital right now, though I'm not sure whether it's yours. Well, not this one specifically anyway, since I'm at the Dental Institute; emergency. Not mine; sorry, might've started with that. We're on a field trip and one of my idiot kids decided to charge head first into a lamp post. He knocked half of two front teeth out. So, I'm stuck here for the time being. Anyway, sorry about tonight. If you want to reschedule, give me a ring. My internet is down for some reason, so I'm not on Whatsapp. - Yes, sorry, that's me. I'm with Gavin. - I'm his head of house, yeah, I'm acting in loco parentis. - Gotta go, Richard. Talk to you soon.'

[6/10/2017; SMS]

Richard [5:58 p.m.]: Damn, Orlando, don't start a message like that, I thought you were in an accident. Poor kid, though, how's he doing?

Richard [6:00 p.m.]: Call me if you need a lift home later, I can pick the two of you up, it's no fun to ride the bus with messed up teeth.

Richard [6:01 p.m.]: I'm free tonight, as it appears.

Orlando [6:05 p.m.]: Sorry about that. In my defense I was holding 2 teeth in my hand at the time and trying to find a bathroom cause I looked like a serial killer, blood all over me

Orlando [6:07 p.m.]: We're taking a taxi back once they glued the teeth back on. Am bored out of my skull from waiting. Leeds Teaching Hospitals the place you work at?

Richard [6:09 p.m.]: That sounds horrible, hope they took the teeth off your hands, literally. I work at the Children's Hospital, across the road from LGI.

Richard [6:09 p.m.]: St. James doesn't have a NICU, they just watch tiny babies become a little less tiny. Pretty boring.

Richard [6:10 p.m.]: Speaking of which: talk to me, if you're bored. Beckett?
Orlando [6:35 p.m.]: Sorry for the delay. We're in the taxi now, Gav's instagramming pictures of his battleface, so worst is over

Orlando [6:35 p.m.]: We walked into the children's hospital first by accident. Toothless muppet is as good an excuse as any to stalk you at work, hm?

Orlando [6:37 p.m.]: Not Beckett; my day was bleak enough as it was. NOT IONESCO EITHER. Something else?

Richard [6:40 p.m.]: A toothless child is a good start if you want to meet me at work, it has to weigh less than 5 kg, though.

Richard [6:41 p.m.]: Ok, no Beckett, no Ionesco. What are we going to do in London apart from going to the theatre?

Richard [6:42 p.m.]: And to make up for your bleak day, if the aftermath of this doesn't take up all the rest of your night, we could still have a pint later.

Orlando [6:44 p.m.]: Pint sounds awesome. Might take me a while to get Gav settled, but I reckon he should be all right. Pony ninish?

Richard [6:48 p.m.]: That's a pub, right? Close to yours?

Orlando [6:52 p.m.]: Yes, it is, sorry for the shorthand. In the village; The Prancing Pony. Fair warning, couple of my colleagues might be there, or not

Orlando [6:53 p.m.]: Alternatively, I might be able to do York after all, can't tell rn, but prob in half an hour I should know

Richard [6:54 p.m.]: You had quite the day, you decide.

Richard [6:55 p.m.]: You're of course welcome to come over. There's food, too. And beer.

Richard [6:56 p.m.]: But I don't mind meeting at that pub, even if the place should be packed with your colleagues.

Richard [6:56 p.m.]: 5 minutes alone with you would be great, though.

Orlando [6:58 p.m.]: Pony, nine, then, jic I need to get back. Wouldn't mind hitching a ride to York after if that isn't the case
Richard [7:10 p.m.]: Sounds good. Anything I should know in case any of your colleagues are there?

Orlando [7:18 p.m.]: What, like who's an angry drunk? No, you're mates with Cate, you should be fine. Should be a quiet night anyway, least I hope so. Had my fill of drama today

Richard [7:20 p.m.]: Angry drunks? Now I'm really curious. Very different to my colleagues.

Richard [7:21 p.m.]: What I meant was do you maybe not want to be touched then?

Orlando [7:23 p.m.]: Everything short of breaking public decency laws is fine with me, but cheers for asking. Gotta go for now, finally back at JC

Richard [7:25 p.m.]: Glad to hear that.

Richard [7:25 p.m.]: See you in a bit then.

Richard [7:29 p.m.]: Looking forward to it.
Chapter Summary

Orlando is bored out of his mind at Viggo's birthday party but Richard comes to the rescue.

20/10/2017, 8:21 a.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hey Richard, it's Orlando. I just got an email from the Beckett Theatre in London. About seven pages long and reading it fills one with the same dread as Beckett does. Anyway, the gist of it is that half their cast and crew has mysteriously fallen ill and they cancelled next weekend's performances. And it seems like they don't expect all of them to make it since they were exceedingly vague about a new date. As far as I got it, they are sold out till the end of November but want to schedule extra performances to make up for the cancellation, so - [noise in the background; whooping and laughing, some distorted singing is interrupted by Orlando's annoyed sigh. A door is being shut rather forcefully and the noise is cut off] - sorry about that. Some of my colleagues think it is appropriate to celebrate birthdays like we are first formers, apparently; and now I gotta watch Viggo walk around with a crown on his head all day long; great. Anyway. The long and short of it is, Beckett is cancelled and subsequently I won't be going to London. If you're still going to visit those friends of yours, you're welcome to use my reservation for the hotel, if you want. Otherwise, if you stay in York and don't want to make other plans, I have some time on my hand now, apparently. [a door is being opened and someone laughingly calls Orlando's name; some jostling as Orlando is apparently taken by the arm, then shakes his assailant off] - Fuck off, Sean; it's not like Vig and I are best mates, so he definitely doesn't want me there. - All right, Richard, gotta go, lemme know about the weekend.'

[20/10/17, 12:47 p.m.]

'Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.'

'Hi. It's Richard. I was hoping to catch you in person, but I guess you're in class? That's a shame about London. Um- but to be honest, I'm a little relieved, too, actually, it's been a pretty intense week here at the ward, and the prospect to just be able to go for a run later and then sleep in tomorrow- [Chuckles] 'Well. I guess that means I'm not going anywhere this weekend either, one of my friends was feeling a little under the weather anyway. But I was looking forward to seeing that play with you, so I'm glad if it's just postponed and not actually cancelled.' [Pause] 'And if you're free tomorrow night maybe we could see each other then? I'd like that. Maybe we could.' [Beeping] 'Damn, I'm sorry, I- [Door being opened. Agitated voice: 'Richard? Room 5.'] 'Shit. Coming. Sorry-- I'll call you back later.'
'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'[chuckles] Answerphone again, hm? Seems like we don't even need Beckett but will end up reenacting the 21st century version of "Krap's Last Tape" all on our own. And if you're gonna argue that Krap is alone while there is two of us, I'd say speaking on a mailbox is the next best thing to rambling monologues. Case in point. This is Orlando, by the way. I was indeed in class when you called earlier and am just about to head to lunch. Couple more hours then it's the weekend and autumn break as well. So, I'm free whenever, and I'd like to see you as well. Certain people insisted that there are better alternatives for a date than taking someone to see Jeremy Bentham's severed and mummified head, so - [sudden loud yelling in the background, sounding like a horde of prepubescent Vikings storming past] - Oi! [sudden silence in the background] We don't run in here. We walk. [muffled 'Sorry, sir's in the background; much quieter retreat of the Viking invasion] - Sorry bout that. So, dinner or something, yeah? Give me a ring.'

[20/10/2017, 3:02 p.m.]

'Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.'

'Hi again. Sorry for hanging up like that earlier, I had to see to a patient. And now you're back in class again, hm?' [Sigh] 'Okay. Dinner sounds great, I can cook if you want to come over. [Chuckle] 'And no, there won't be any seafood! That would be a crappy deal, no play, no severed heads and seafood, I won't do that to you! I bought beer, too. Five-ish, maybe? Oh, and quite impressive, by the way, how you managed to discipline that horde of kids with just one word. And- well, surprisingly sexy.' [Short pause] 'Okay, I gotta go. Try to call me later? I should be back from running around eight. Talk to you soon, bye,'

[20/10/2017, 6:25 a.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, it's Orlando again. Just some food for thought; I'm never against you cooking, but I think I'll go and see the Viking exhibition at the Yorkshire Museum in the afternoon - you're welcome to come if you haven't seen it already; Sean won't stop raving about it, though that's not necessarily a solid indicator. So, how about meeting up at the Lamb and Lion Inn around five? That's just a stone's throw from the museum and if you haven't been, I reckon you'll like the food. I'm on my way to the Pony just now, so I won't be in at eight, but if you let it ring, there's a chance I'll hear it over the birthday celebrations and whatnot. And probably be thankful for an excuse to get out. Have a good run, mate.'

[20/10/2017, 8:17 p.m.]

Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the
tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.'

'So, you didn't hear your phone. But never mind, I'll just text you instead.'

[20/10/2017, whatsapp]

Richard [8:19 p.m.]: It's easier to get through to the Queen than to you...

Richard [8:19 p.m.]: I'd love to join you for that exhibition, I've been meaning to go for weeks.

Richard [8:20 p.m.]: Dinner at that pub is fine with me, too.

Richard [8:21 p.m.]: I really, really, really want to have sex, too, though.

Richard [8:22 p.m.]: Afterwards, if you're so inclined?

[20/10/2017, 8:29 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

[laughs] Oh come on, you're doing this on purpose now, mate. I locked myself in the "Pony"'s Gents, ready for a spot of phonesex, and now you don't pick up your bloody phone. [sound of a car driving past, honking] I'm just kidding; I'm outside, having a fag. [chuckles again, sound of his lighter clicking, inhaling; the next words muttered] Bloody madness here; I am definitely not drunk enough for this yet... [to Richard again] So we are doing raiding Norsemen then instead of pessimistic playwrights, yeah? Much more life-affirming anyway. And yeah, that was a euphemism for sex. [a moment of silence, again the sound of a honking car in the background, and Orlando growling low in his throat as a commentary on it] Trust me, that's a pastime I am always up for; unlike this shit here. [noise in the background, Orlando sighs, a muffled voice] - What's it look like, Dom, I'm having phone sex. [muffled reply] No, for fuck's sake, go away. [chuckles, to Richard again] Coincidentally, what are you doing tonight? I really wouldn't mind saving from this. [Dom's muffled interjection again, followed by Orlando's full on laughter]

[20/10/2017, whatsapp]

Richard [8:38 p.m.]: I was in the shower.

Richard [8:39 p.m.]: My phone's right next to me now, try calling again if you still need saving.

Richard [8:40 p.m.]: My plan is to unwind and I could use help with that.

Orlando [8:41 p.m.]: Hell to unkind?

Orlando [8:42 p.m.]: Soz

Orlando [8:42 p.m.]: That was meant to say help to unwind
Orlando [8:42 p.m.]: That's what happens when I am trying to type under the table while pretending to give a fuck about the speech that is being held rn

Orlando [8:43 p.m.]: Help to unwind. You're a fucking tease, that is what you are

Orlando [8:42 p.m.]: I rather approve

Richard [8:44 p.m.]: Is that so?

Richard [8:44 p.m.]: You want me to get you out of there?

Orlando [8:46 p.m.]: Fuck yes

Orlando [8:46 p.m.]: No wait. Wrong emphasis

Orlando [8:46 p.m.]: FUCK YES

Richard [8:47 p.m.]: I'll just get dressed.

Richard [8:48 p.m.]: To you want me to find you inside the pub or meet me at the parking lot?

Orlando [8:49 p.m.]: I'd definitely prefer spending the rest of the evening in your company

Orlando [8:50 p.m.]: You're welcome to come in but I would highly advise against it

Orlando [8:51 p.m.]: [media content in this message]

Orlando [8:51 p.m.]: I sincerely hope you weren't kidding. Because there are charades now

Richard [8:53 p.m.]: Of course I wasn't kidding.

Richard [8:54 p.m.]: I'm already on the way to my car.

Richard [8:54 p.m.]: And to judge from that picture it's probably safer to meet outside.

Richard [8:55 p.m.]: I'll be there in half an hour!

[20/10/2017, 9:07 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

[laughs] Oh come on. I know your fancy Audi automatically connects with your phone. So it's the bloody Dales messing with the signal that I get your message service again, hm? [a short silence, the sounds of a lively pub in the background to which Orlando listens for a moment, chuckling again]
Anyway, I was just calling to tell you that there's a small road construction thing at the Southern entrance of the village, so it'd be easier for you to come from the East. But never mind, it's not that bad. I'll wait for you outside, yeah? See you in a bit.'
Chapter Summary

After Richard has picked up Orlando at the pub, they end up at Orlando's place. Richard is nervous, Orlando is demanding.

Orlando drops to his knees and starts to unbutton Richard's jeans before he has a chance to stop him. Which he usually wouldn't dream of, but right now he can't help feeling a little overwhelmed.

It's all going too fast tonight. When he got into his car an hour ago to pick up Orlando, Richard was sure they'd end up in his bed, maybe after a detour to the pub. But they didn't. They went straight to Orlando's. And that wouldn't be weird if it wasn't for the fact that during all the months they've been seeing each other Orlando has not once asked him to come home with him. It's the first time. And he's standing in the middle of the living room sans pants just three minutes after they've arrived.

Thankfully, Orlando slows down a little when he has gotten Richard's jeans and boxers out of the way and for a moment just lets his breath ghost over the skin he's bared. Then he looks up at Richard to make sure he has his attention before he licks a wet stripe up the inside of Richard's thigh. Damn, that's a sight to behold. And Orlando is very much aware of that, to judge from his smug expression. Richard chuckles softly and reaches out to curl his fingers around Orlando's jaw so that he can trace his lips with his thumb when Orlando pulls back.

It hasn't bothered him, that they've never spend an evening at Orlando's, not really. He lives in the middle of nowhere, after all, and the place is crawling with kids. Which is why it shouldn't be so surprising that Orlando's asked him tonight - it's the first night of the holidays and the kids are gone. And they've met up practically around the corner. So why won't his brain shut up about this?

Orlando swirls his tongue around Richard's thumb before he sucks the tip into his mouth in perfect imitation of what's to come and Richard's breath catches. He'll be able to see that image every time he closes his eyes during the next couple of days, he's sure about that. He pulls back his thumb and Orlando wraps his hands around Richard's hips to steady them both before he takes Richard's cock into his mouth. Fuck. Richard's exhale is a little shaky and he closes his eyes in an attempt to switch off his brain and let himself enjoy this, the tightness of Orlando's throat, the warmth, the wetness.

It's a little easier when the books aren't in sight, must be several thousand, the place is crammed with them, literally. The bookshelves are overflowing and books are stacked up haphazardly on the floor and every other horizontal surface, the arm chair, the coffee table, there even is a stack on the couch. The sheer number is a little intimidating, to be frank, even though he owns quite the collection himself. When Richard has remarked upon it a moment ago, Orlando has just shrugged and proceeded to close the curtains. ‘Ignore them,’ he's then said, making his way back over to Richard. ‘Unless you’re here to discuss literature with me?’ Of course he isn’t. He’s here because he hasn’t seen Orlando in nearly two weeks, between work trying to kill him and that conference coming up, because he didn’t want to wait another day. For this. Sex. Which he right now isn't enjoying as much as he should. What's with him tonight?

Orlando is moving faster now, and it's good, of course it is, it always is. Richard threads his fingers
into his hair and pulls lightly, the way he knows Orlando likes. He feels Orlando hum around his cock in response and, finally, that's enough to make him lose track of his thoughts, yes— but then there suddenly is a sound, a door bangs shut, footsteps are coming towards them, voices, and Richard gives a start, suddenly very aware of his state of undress.

Orlando pulls off him with a sound that causes Richard to blush and squints up at him: ‘What’s up?’

Richard shakes his head, feeling his blush deepen when the footsteps pass. There's no one walking in on them, the sounds are coming from the hallway, of course. 'Nothing. I just thought the kids were gone.'

Orlando shrugs. 'They are. Or well, most of them. But unless they kill each other out there, I'm off duty. Chill out.'

Fair enough. Easier said than done, though. Richard takes a deep breath and then smiles at Orlando. 'Okay.'

Orlando just nods briefly before he swallows Richard's cock right down again. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. The feeling of Orlando's throat closing around him, it's never going to get old, it's just too damned perfect. Orlando sets a faster rhythm now than before and Richard pulls his lip between his teeth to stifle a moan, so good, so, so good, he wants—

One floor above them something heavy clatters to the ground and Richard's hips jerk involuntarily, but Orlando takes it in stride and only slows down for a couple of seconds while he readjusts the angle. Damn it. Richard closes his eyes again and tries to concentrate, concentrate of the way Orlando's tongue moves against the underside of his cock-- but there's more movement above them and he just can't. This won't do. He's feeling exposed, trapped, with his pants around his ankles, and there's a draught, too, he can feel it at the back of his thighs. His concentration is crumbling rapidly and it's only going to take a couple of moments before Orlando's going to notice it, too. He needs him to stop, for now, needs to get back in control.

‘What?’ Orlando asks, a little breathless, when Richard tightens his grip on his hair and beckons him to stop.

'I need you to slow down,' Richard says in want of a more elaborate answer.

Orlando's brows knit together. 'Alright', he says and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. 'Why?'

'I'm a little- overwhelmed.' Conflicting thoughts don't translate well into charades, and Richard ends up gesturing vaguely around the room, trying to encompass the kids, the books, his naked butt.

Orlando's brows almost touch now, his expression one of puzzlement. 'Cheers, I guess?' he finally says, and Richard laughs despite himself.

'That's not exactly what I meant.'

Orlando just raises a questioning eyebrow and Richard sighs.

'I'm sorry,' he then says, still trying to straighten out his thoughts. 'It's-- the kids sound as if they're going to come crashing through the ceiling, my ass is getting cold, I've never been to your place before, you're a little drunk and I'm sober and 5000 books are staring at me. Take your pick,' Richard summarizes the situation while he fights the urge to reach down and pull up his pants, Orlando's saliva is cooling on his skin and he can feel his erection fading. When Orlando doesn't reply, just keeps looking at him with raised brows, he adds:
'You're also kneeling on a rather expensive looking book, by the way, that's a little distracting, too.'

Orlando turns around and retrieves the book in question from where it's half wedged under his left shin. 'Expensive maybe,' he says while he casts a fleeting glance at it. 'But not worth the paper it's printed on.' He pulls a face and carelessly tosses the book in the general direction of the couch. It lands open on crumbled pages and Richard makes a mental note to never lend Orlando any of his books. Never ever.

Orlando’s eyes are still fixed on the book when he continues:

'If the point of a book about the perception of anger is intended on making me want to seek retribution for having to suffer through so much inconsequential and self-contradictory high-handed bullshit, then kudos, five stars for Nussbaum.’

Richard tries to focus on what he’s saying but the mistreatment of the book is still echoing in his head. Also, the footsteps have returned. And he’s still standing half-naked in the middle of Orlando’s living room and really, really wants his pants back.

'I mean she spends the first half of this condemning all forms of anger-based retribution, only to then recommend a recourse to the law which is just another type of fucking payback, of course, that -'

‘Orlando,’ Richard says quietly, interrupting his book review.

‘What?’

Richard feels the corner of his mouth twitch, the absurdity of the situation hitting him with full force. ‘Please, stop talking to my crotch and get up?’

Orlando looks as if that literally is the last thing he wants to do, but then just shrugs. ‘Alright.’

Richard extends his hand and pulls him to his feet before he quickly bends down and pulls his jeans and boxers back up. Better. So much better. He'd sigh in relief if that wouldn’t be impolite.

Orlando adjusts his own jeans and then scans Richard’s expression, his head cocked to the side a little, his eyes narrowed. 'So, you don't want me to blow you and you don't want me to talk about books', he then states the all too obvious. ‘What do you want?’

He strikes a pretty neutral tone, but there still is a hint of impatience under the surface, and Richard can relate to that. He wants to get laid, too. Just maybe not in the living room.

‘Why don’t you start with kissing me?’ he asks and reaches out to wraps his fingers around Orlando’s wrist. He doesn’t really have to pull him closer, Orlando’s immediately right there in his space. His kiss is a little impatient, too, but Richard’s used to that, Orlando simply doesn’t appreciate things standing between him and sex. He tastes of beer, and smoke too, and although that is something he's not used to it's fine, really, for now, it's all good, he's getting his bearings back, finally.

Orlando wraps one hand around his neck, the other around his waist, and pulls him closer until their chests are touching, their hips. He's hard, unmistakably so, of course he is. Richard can feel his erection pressing against him through the fabric of their trousers and that's something that never fails to arouse him, the thought that Orlando's hard for him. His cock twitches in response, that's a relief. He wants Orlando, he really does, the strange environment and the noisy kids be damned. It’s been far too long since they’ve last had sex. And why does it matter where they are to begin with? They've had sex in far more public places.
Richard’s thoughts come to a halt when Orlando slides his hand between their bodies and traces the outline of Richard’s cock with his thumb. No. No, he’s still not there yet, he’s still distracted, he can’t do this here. But before he can say so, Orlando pulls back and regards him with an expression of mild exasperation. Shit. For a moment or two Richard just stares at him while he frantically tries to come up with words for what’s going on in his head, but can’t. And maybe it’s for the better, that there aren’t any words, Orlando is a little drunk, or maybe a bit more than a little drunk, and Richard really isn’t in the mood for lengthy discussions, either, as long as he hasn’t figured out what’s gotten into him.

It’s Orlando who finally ends Richard’s inner debate when he’s done waiting for an explanation for Richard’s erratic behavior. He disentangles himself from Richard and then simply heads in the direction of the door. When Richard doesn’t follow him but just stares at his back, trying to figure out what is happening, Orlando turns back over his shoulder: ‘Come on.’

Richard sighs and can’t help thinking that he’d maybe better stayed on his couch tonight with a book. But alright. Maybe he can still fix this.

There are books in Orlando’s kitchen as well, and unsurprisingly they aren’t all cooking books. Richard doesn’t really get a proper look, though, because Orlando hands him a beer as soon as he steps through the door. He then leans back against the fridge and regards Richard in silence, his arms crossed in front of his chest. Richard has known him long enough to recognize a challenge when he sees one and has to laugh.

‘Alright,’ he says and reaches out for the bottle opener Orlando retrieves from a drawer. He uncaps the bottle, tosses the opener back to Orlando and basically chugs the beer, he only needs to come up for air once. It's something he hasn’t done in years. But it’s certainly worth it, because when he lowers the bottle and wipes the foam from his upper lip, Orlando is grinning at him.

‘Better?’

‘Much,’ Richard says, chuckling. And it’s true, even though it can’t be the alcohol, it’s barely hit his stomach. Maybe it simply is the change of rooms.

‘You going to let me fuck you now?’ Orlando asks, and although he’s still smiling Richard knows that he’s partly serious. He doesn’t want to chit-chat, doesn’t want to exchange niceties, he wants sex, preferably without too much foreplay. And Richard likes that, likes that Orlando’s libido doesn’t take hostages, it’s just easier to surrender to it when he’s on familiar ground.

‘No,’ Richard says and reaches past Orlando to set down the bottle before he takes a step towards him and places his palms against the fridge, trapping Orlando between them. ‘But I’ll fuck you.’

Orlando doesn’t reply, just quirks an eyebrow, clearly amused. He doesn’t move, doesn’t try to evade Richard, on the contrary, some of his impatience seems to vanish, Richard watches his shoulders relax. His eyes are darting back and forth between Richard’s, and now there’s a small smile curling around his lips, still a challenging one, of course, it takes much more for Orlando to lose his momentum.

And maybe it’s a little weird that he needs to trap Orlando against the fridge for that, but this, finally, feels alright, he, finally, feels alright, all of his nervousness gone, the weird insecurity, finally, finally, replaced by want. Yes. He wants Orlando, wants him so much all of a sudden that he can barely keep himself from just grabbing him and kissing him.

But not yet, no, not yet, he doesn’t want this to be over too soon, wants to revel in this tension for another moment, wants to stand there, close enough to touch him, feel his warmth, smell him, and wait, wait for his desire to build further, for his pulse to quicken, his breathing, for his pants to
become too tight. He likes this feeling, the feeling that every nerve ending is ready for reception while his whole body is waiting for the first touch, the one that will be like an electric shock.

Orlando hasn’t moved either, not yet, but now he pulls his right hand out of his jeans pocket and wraps it around Richard’s hip, slips his fingers under the hem of Richard’s shirt and fans them out against his skin.

Damn. This-- Richard tries to suppress the shudder this elicits, manages to keep his breath from catching, but can’t prevent goose bumps from appearing underneath Orlando’s finger tips.

Orlando can feel them, Richard can tell, his small smile widens in response. Slowly he bends his fingers, rakes his nails over Richard’s skin, just above his hipbone, and this time Richard’s breath stumbles, he can’t help it, it’s too much, his skin seems to be on fire. And Orlando knows exactly what he is doing, Richard might have him trapped between his arms, but he is still calling the shots, and enjoying it, of course. Richard watches him wet his bottom lip with his tongue now, another calculated move, before he cocks his head to the side ever so slightly and asks:

“So, what’s it gonna be? You gonna try and stare me into an orgasm or is there going to be any actual fucking?”

It takes a moment for Orlando’s words to register, but when they do, Richard has to laugh. Certainly worth a try, but he won’t be baited like this. Not yet. The moment is far too interesting to ruin rashly. He slowly shakes his head and, without taking his eyes off Orlando’s, he steps closer so that their legs are touching, their hips. Finally. Orlando is warm against him, every muscle is tense, Richard can feel it. He is waiting, too, his eyes don’t leave Richard’s, not for a second.

Richard doesn’t reply, not immediately, counts Orlando’s breaths instead, one, two, three, four, five.

‘Impatient?’ he finally asks, barely raising his voice above a whisper. Orlando’s eyes narrow instantly, but this time Richard doesn’t wait for an answer, but leans in and places an open-mouthed kiss on Orlando’s neck. At first it seems as if Orlando is going to say something, probably something rude, but then he just tightens his fingers around Richard’s hip, hums low in his throat and obligingly tilts back his head to give him better access. Taking full advantage of that, Richard nips Orlando’s skin with his teeth, then sucks, hard enough to redden it, if not bruise.

Orlando’s response comes without delay, he slides his left hand into Richard’s hair and pulls him away.

‘I’ll kill you if you give me a hickey,’ he growls, but manages to sound more aroused than annoyed. Richard can relate to that, he is, too, and Orlando’s tight grip on his hair doesn’t exactly make it easier to stay composed.

With Orlando attack is the best form of defense, and Richard leans against him, pinning him to the fridge with his weight, their chest now touching, too, their faces only inches apart, he can feel Orlando’s breath on his skin.

‘We can of course continue to chat,’ Richard says quietly, his eyes firmly fixed on Orlando’s, he’s close, so close, and Richard just wants—but just another moment, one more moment. Just one more push. He swallows, tries to keep his voice steady. ‘Or you could just show me your bedroom.’

Orlando’s kiss doesn’t leave any room for interpretation, he all but yanks Richard towards him by his hair, his kiss hard, unyielding, impatient, so very impatient, it causes Richard to laugh and moan into his mouth at the same time. Definitely worth waiting for.
The sound Orlando makes in response goes straight to Richard’s groin and he grinds his hip against him, eager to make him repeat it. Orlando does, and Richard feels his fingers digging into his back before Orlando loosens his grip, both on his hip and hair, and then he presses his palms against Richard’s chest and pushes him backwards, off.

‘Bedroom, now, come on,’ Orlando says, just a little breathless, and unceremoniously turns Richard around like an oversized rag doll, then places one hand between his shoulder blades and steers him towards the bedroom.

The room is rather narrow, but that’s mainly due to the fact that bookshelves line the walls, which really shouldn’t come as a surprise to Richard, but still does when Orlando flicks on the lights.

Orlando immediately notices his brief hesitation, of course he does, he is like a bloodhound in this regard, registers every tiny lapse in concentration. And acts on it, immediately seizes control. If you let him, that is.

Orlando is pushing past Richard into the room now and moves towards the window to close the curtains.

‘Don’t you dare,’ he says warningly over his shoulder when he pulls one of them shut. ‘You can stare at them in awe all night, but not now.’

Richard chuckles softly at his tone, back to unmasked impatience. Who would have thought he would ever be intimidated by books, of all things. But not now, not now.

Orlando makes his way back over to where he’s standing rooted to the spot and then bends over the bed to switch on the reading lamps and that does the trick, he is a very alluring sight when he stretches to reach the light switch.

Before he can turn back around, Richard closes the space between them and wraps his arms around him from behind to pull him against his body. Orlando doesn’t fight him but relaxes against him and his hand finds its way back into Richard’s hair when he presses his lips to Orlando’s neck. He’s a little sweaty, and Richard likes that, likes the way he smells, the way he tastes, a little salty, darker than usual. Richard moves his lips to the side of his neck, up towards his ear. ‘Hold still,’ he says and sinks his teeth into Orlando’s earlobe, tugs lightly, while he slides his hands down his chest, traces the outline of his erection with his fingertips through his jeans, before he starts to undress him, first the shirt, than the trousers, boxers. He wraps his hand around his cock as soon as he’s naked and hears Orlando hiss softly before he makes him tilt his head backwards so that he can kiss him properly.

It’s a difficult angle and it’s not enough, it’s not just Orlando who’s impatient now, he needs him to turn around, but doesn’t have to say it, he already does, and slides his tongue straight into Richard’s mouth, his hands under his shirt, huffing in frustration against his lips when he finds it too tight to slide up and off Richard.

Richard lets go of him so that he can swat his hands away. ‘And I’ll kill you if you rip it-- it’s one of my favorites,’ he says in between two kisses and starts to unbutton it.

Orlando just shrugs and pulls him back into a kiss, a kiss that almost makes Richard forget about the buttons. Orlando’s hands move towards Richard’s crotch and he opens the zipper and slides one hand into his jeans at the same time to wrap it around his cock, and that’s so much better than what happened in the living room, he pushes into Orlando’s touch without having to think, he just wants to feel, his body reacts without any delay, no reflection needed, moves with Orlando’s, eagerly matches his frantic pace. Yes.
As soon as Richard reaches the last button Orlando pushes and pulls his shirt off, apparently not at all intimidated by Richard’s threat, then drags his jeans and pants out of the way, pushes them down, before he wraps one hand around his waist, the other one around his shoulder and pulls him with him when he lets himself sink backwards onto the bed.

Richard’s knee hits the edge of the bed, his elbow a book, and he curses into Orlando’s mouth who doesn’t slow down for a second but simply gropes for the book and tosses it over Richard’s shoulder when he gets a hold of it, then removes a second one from underneath his back before he pulls Richard back into a kiss.

This is it, this is what he has been waiting for all evening, all week, to be able to feel Orlando pressing against him, skin against skin, to feel his cock sliding against his own, this is it, it’s perfect. Orlando is nipping at his lip, one of his hands tangled in Richard’s hair again, holding him in place, and now he is sliding the other one between them and wraps them around their cocks. Fuck. Richard pushes forward and into his touch, he’s so hard, so hot, it’s- Orlando swallows his moan before he nudges his nose with his to get him to pull back a little.

‘You can either fuck me now, right now, or you’ll end up bottoming after all,’ he says, and swipes his thumb over the head of Richard’s cock as if to get his point across, smearing the wetness around that has pooled there.

Richard doesn’t need to be told that twice. He pulls back and straightens up. ‘Lube?’ he asks, but Orlando is already moving, turning between his knees and stretching towards the nightstand. He opens the drawer and presses a small bottle of lube and a condom into Richard’s hand before he flops back onto the mattress.

‘Today, Richard, come on,’ he says and is about to turn onto his stomach when Richard stops him.

‘Don’t,’ he says and bends forward to press a kiss against Orlando’s shoulder. ‘I want to see you.’

Orlando rolls his eyes. ‘What’s wrong with my ass?’

Richard laughs against his skin before he stretches out on his left side next to him and pulls Orlando’s right leg over his. ‘Nothing,’ he says, uncaps the bottle and squirts lube into his palm. He closes his fingers around it to warm it up a little at least before he wraps his hand back around Orlando’s cock.

‘But I want to be able to do this.’ He leans back in for a kiss while he starts stroking Orlando’s cock, the slide wet now, so much easier, so much better. Orlando closes his eyes, surrenders to the feeling for a moment, stops pushing him, but only for a moment, Richard is sure about that, so he strokes him just a couple of times before he moves his fingers lower, hoists up Orlando’s leg a little further and rubs the tip of his index finger over his perineum, circles his sphincter.

Not fast enough apparently, because Orlando opens his eyes and glowers at him.

‘Come on,’ he says, and his voice is tight, he wants, too, just as much as Richard, probably.

But they are not there yet, not quite.

‘Almost there,’ Richard murmurs against his lips and kisses him again when he pushes against the muscle, slides in when Orlando relaxes. His breath catches along with Orlando’s, the warmth, the tightness, the intimacy of it all, it never fails to arouse him beyond measure. His cock twitches where it’s trapped against Orlando’s thigh and Orlando chuckles breathlessly and reaches out to curl his fingers around it.
‘You don’t want to wait, either,’ he says, and watches Richard’s reaction when he starts stroking him.

Richard bites his lip and tries to concentrate on the movement of his own finger inside of Orlando, carefully adds a second one. Orlando’s brow furrows but he keeps quiet, stubborn bastard that he is.

‘Course I don’t,’ Richard says and slides his fingers in deeper, scissors them a little, matches his rhythm to the agonizingly slow one Orlando has set.

Orlando raises his brows, the silent question after what the fuck he is waiting for, then, written all over his forehead, but Richard shakes his head.

‘Not yet,’ he says, and curls his fingers, causing Orlando to moan quietly and push into the touch. Orlando closes his eyes, huffs and shakes his head. ‘Fine,’ he then says with a sideways glance at Richard, ‘though you better make this worth my while, then.’

Richard slides his fingers in deeper and bites Orlando’s shoulder, causing him to growl.

‘Like this?’ he asks, aiming at an innocent tone, but Orlando tightens his grip around his cock at the same time and it comes out a little shaky.

‘Or like this?’ He starts to move faster, short, shallow stabs, while he trails his tongue up Orlando’s neck.

‘Dammit, Richard,’ Orlando grinds out and grips his arm tightly, halting his movement, tightly enough to almost make his nails break through his skin.

‘Yes?’ Richard asks, but his calm is a fragile façade, he won’t be able to drag this out much longer, his own desire is rapidly clouding his thoughts, if Orlando pushes him just a little further he will forego preparing him further, against his better judgment, he wants him too much to continue to reason with him now.

Orlando just glares at him, his breathing ragged, his eyes on fire.

‘Be my guest, sit on me and tear yourself up. Or let me do this properly and then let me fuck you properly, without any weird rodeo stuff.’

Orlando snorts despite himself. ‘You’d love to see that, wouldn’t you?’

Richard searches his eyes. ‘What I’d love right now is to finish this and then finally get to the good part.’

Orlando snorts again but loosens his grip around Richard’s arm so that he can move his fingers.

‘Hear, hear, and I was beginning to think this was all you wanted, cuddling and foreplay,’ he says without real heat and twists his hand so that he can cup Richard’s balls.

Richard can’t help but moan, he likes to be touched there, very much, and Orlando knows, perceptive as he is, he knows exactly how to push Richard’s buttons and when. And maybe that should be an unsettling thought, but right now it just makes him want Orlando more. He shifts a little to give Orlando more room and watches him smirk in satisfaction before he kisses him.

The moment for finesse is behind them, and Orlando’s kiss is hard, unrelenting, demanding, his teeth are sharp on Richard’s lips, and Orlando intents them to be, Richard is sure about that, it’s his way of
telling him that he is ready. And maybe he is, there is less resistance now, and he is rocking into his touch, determined to take his fingers faster, deeper.

The touch of his fingers is surprisingly soft in comparison, he’s gently moving Richard’s balls between his fingers, and that’s so good, so fucking good, Richard doesn’t want him to stop, ever.

Richard closes his eyes and just lets himself be swept away for a moment, focuses on Orlando’s touch, on the way his tongue tangles with his own, the way he sounds-- when Orlando bites his lip to get his attention.

‘Now, Richard,’ he says, and if Richard didn’t know better he might think Orlando was about to start begging. He never does, though, or well, he does, but his pleas are always disguised as demands. This time Richard is done stalling, though. He starts fumbling for the condom without breaking the kiss, but can’t find it, starts to swear, Orlando follows suit immediately and starts searching the bed with him, and there it is, wedged under his thigh. He’s barely rolled it on when Orlando spreads a generous amount of lube on his cock, it’s cold despite the latex, but Richard doesn’t really care. He pushes up onto his knees and moves between Orlando’s legs. He makes Orlando lift up his hips and reaches for one of the pillows to ball it up and stuff it under his body, but Orlando catches his arm and tells him not too politely not to make a science out of it and just fuck him the old-fashioned way, but Richard wants to see, almost more than he wants to feel, wants to see what this does to him, what he does to him. But screw the pillow, then, if Orlando doesn’t care about his comfort who is he to force a pillow onto him.

He takes a firm grip on Orlando’s hips and hoists him up a little bit higher to get a better angle, and Orlando humors him by wrapping his legs around Richard’s waist and taking some of his weight off his hands. It’s not perfect, but it’ll do, and Orlando is beautifully stretched out in front of him, hard cock and frown in plain sight.

He is tight when Richard pushes into him, of course he is, but Richard doesn’t get to wonder if he still is too tight, if he’s going to hurt him, not for long anyway, because Orlando uses his legs as leverage and pushes towards Richard with force, makes him slide in the whole way, tightness be damned.

Orlando’s change of expression tells Richard immediately that he is right, though, it’s too soon. He tries to pull back, but Orlando won’t have it, he tightens his legs around Richard’s waist to prevent him from moving, so he doesn’t, and honestly, he doesn’t want to, either, this feels incredible, so tight- so good- too good, maybe, fucking perfect, he can’t move, not yet, or this will be over way too soon, he needs a moment, needs to regain control, Orlando’s so damned tight-

‘Move!’ Orlando all but snarls and tries to push against him but Richard tightens his grip around his waist to keep him in place, shaking his head.

‘For fuck’s sake, Richard!’

Richard searches his eyes, shakes his head again. ‘I can’t, Orlando- fuck, give me a moment, just one moment.’ His voice is hoarse, his breathing unsteady.

His tone seems to do the trick, Orlando stops struggling in his grip for a moment and looks at him, takes in his trembling shoulders, the sweat forming on his forehead, then seems to swallow the words on his tongue and merely nods. ‘Alright, fine.’

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, tries to think of something else, anything else but this, anything else but the way Orlando feels around his cock. Fuckfuckfuck.
‘It would make for a really crappy date if you came now, you realise that, right?’ Orlando says and folds one elbow under his head. He sounds serious, but when Richard opens his eyes the corner of his mouth twitches upwards.

‘Oh, fuck you,’ Richard chuckles, and reaches out with one hand to rake his nails over Orlando’s stomach.

Orlando raises one eyebrow. ‘In my defense, I offered to do exactly that. But you insisted. And look where that got us.’

‘You’re fucking tight,’ Richard replies and wraps his hand around Orlando’s cock to distract him. ‘And stop bitching, at least we’re in your bed and not on the living room floor.’

Orlando huffs. ‘I’ll stop bitching as soon as you start fucking me.’

Richard groans softly which just causes Orlando’s grin to widen, then he takes another deep breath and lifts Orlando’s hips back up before he pulls back a little and pushes in deep.

Richard doesn’t have to ask Orlando if that’s the way he wants it, his reaction tells him straight away that it is, and he sets a pace that is just as impatient and relentless as Orlando’s kisses were moments ago. It’s exactly the way he wants it, he always does, he prefers a proper fuck over gentle lovemaking any time, and Richard does, too, this is perfect, the way Orlando moves with him, meets his thrusts, the way he twists his hands into the sheets so that Richard doesn’t push him into the headboard of the bed, the sounds he makes, it’s almost too much, too fucking much, but then, it always is, this is what Orlando does to him every single fucking time, he always manages to overload his system completely, almost offhandedly, it’s as infuriating as it is brilliant, and this truly is, brilliant, Orlando’s tightness, the way he clutches around his cock, the way he digs his nails into his thighs now while he asks for more, more, more, always more, faster, harder—he never comes from this, from being fucked, not without help, no matter how long Richard manages to keep up this pace, he needs to be touched, and usually is too stubborn or distracted to touch himself, so Richard slows down, ignores Orlando’s growl and changes position without pulling out of him, leans forward so that his body is covering Orlando’s now, most of his weight resting on his left forearm that he braces against the mattress so that he doesn’t crush Orlando. Orlando’s legs are still wrapped around his waist and he can push in deeper this way, so much deeper, his breath catches and he presses his lips against Orlando’s neck to stifle a moan. He picks up the same fast rhythm as before and slides his right hand between their bodies to wrap it around Orlando’s cock. Orlando hisses in response and turns his head towards Richard’s for a kiss. It’s messy and uncoordinated, their noses keep bumping against each other with every one of Richard’s thrusts, but neither of them cares, this is too good, too fucking perfect. Orlando digs his fingernails into Richard’s back, his ass, in an attempt to pull him closer, spreads his legs wider so that he can push in deeper and deeper still, and Richard closes his eyes and rests his forehead against Orlando’s shoulder, tries to match the rhythm of his hand to the one of his hips, but can’t seem to manage, he’s too busy trying not to just surrender to the feeling and come, just come, finally come, to just pin Orlando’s hips down properly and push into him a couple of times more and come, but no, no, he wants Orlando to come first, needs him to come first, and he tells him, kisses his shoulder and tells him, and Orlando chuckles breathlessly and closes his hand around Richard’s, adjusts the angle, adjusts the speed and comes, his whole body tensing up. Richard can feel the wetness of his come against his stomach, feels him become even tighter, hears the moan he stifles against Richard’s shoulder, and stills, just looks at him for a moment, watches him tremble underneath him, watches him close his eyes and let his head sink back into the pillow, hears him exhale shakily. And fuck, he is gorgeous like this, sweaty, spent, fucking beautiful.

When he doesn’t continue to move Orlando halfheartedly cracks open one eye.
‘What’s up? Did you put out your back?’ he asks teasingly, but his voice is hoarse, still remembering the moans.

Richard shakes his head and smiles at him before he leans in for a kiss that Orlando answers lazily.

‘No,’ he says against Orlando’s lips and starts to move again, but slower, so much slower than before. ‘I just didn’t want this to be over yet.’

Orlando hums. ‘I can relate to that. But you sort of forced an orgasm out of me.’

Richard nods. ‘I kind of noticed.’

Orlando snorts. ‘You better did, you’re covered in come.’

He regards Richard in silence for a moment and then takes his face between his palms and pulls him into a kiss, a proper one, all tongue and teeth, while he clenches his muscles around him.

Richard groans into his mouth and Orlando nips at his lip and then just looks at him, one eyebrow quirked expectantly. ‘Come now, Richard,’ he says quietly after a moment, not taking his eyes off him.

And fuck, this is so hot, to have Orlando looking at him like this, with his undivided concentration, as if nothing else matters right now, Richard feels himself blush furiously under his gaze, and he struggles to keep his eyes open, struggles to keep looking at him when he is getting close again, so close, Orlando feels amazing, still so tight, so, so tight, and fuck, he wants to come so badly, so, so badly, almost, almost—

He closes his eyes at the very last moment, when he pushes in deep one last time and comes, convulses, collapses on top of Orlando who lets him be for a moment and drags his nails over his back soothingly before he starts laughing and pushes at Richard’s chest.

‘You’re heavy,’ he complains when Richard turns his head and blinks at him.

‘Deal with it,’ Richard rasps, too spent to move a single muscle. Fuck. That was—

He can feel his chest vibrate with Orlando’s laughter, and that’s nice, he likes that.

‘Come on, move a little,’ Orlando says and half wriggles away, half pushes Richard off of him.

Richard comes to rest on his stomach, and that’s nice, too, he can live with that, he can live with everything right now if no one expects him to move, not yet.

‘That was-’ he starts, but doesn’t finish the sentence, the thought just seems to vanish.

‘Fucking great. And then some,’ Orlando offers and trails his fingers over Richard’s back.

‘It was,’ Richard agrees, his voice muffled by the pillow.

‘But I broke you?’ Orlando asks and slaps his ass.

‘You did,’ Richard agrees and turns his head so that he can look at Orlando.

Orlando grins at him and looks fucking smug and content with himself and the world. Figures.

‘I’m getting another beer,’ Orlando informs him and Richard feels the mattress shift when he gets up.
'Do you want one, too?"
Chapter Summary

Over lunch, Richard catches up with his friend Graham, who has just returned to Leeds from working in a Doctors Without Borders project in Africa.

[25/10/2017, 12:15 p.m., Leeds Childrens Hospital, cafeteria]

‘So. What’s with the brooding?’

‘Hm? Brooding?’

‘Yes, brooding. You’re restless, you’re not talking and those carrots are going to disintegrate if you push them across the plate one more time. What’s up? And don’t even try telling me you’re fine. Spit it out.’

‘Good to have you back, Graham. No one else here dares to call me out on my bullshit.’

‘I keep telling you, neonatology is an unhealthy environment. But seriously, talk to me.’

‘Alright.’ [Pause]

[Clears his throat]

‘Okay. So. That guy I’ve been seeing-‘

‘Orlando.’

‘You remember his name?’

‘Well, it’s not a common name. And I got the impression that it might be worth remembering. You’ve been seeing him for some time now, haven’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, and?’

‘And it’s good. [Pause] ‘I like him.’

‘Good. But?’

‘But- I don’t know. Maybe there isn’t a ‘but’. I like him. Period.’

‘Nah, there is a ‘but’.’

‘Maybe it’s because- this is starting to- or I’m starting to- I don’t know.’

‘Hold up a second. You’re not making any sense whatsoever.’
[Sighs] ‘I know. This is not even making sense in my head.’

‘Try again?’

‘We were at his place on Friday, for the first time.’

‘I’m going to go with ‘yes, and?’ again, I’m sorry.’

[Laughs] ‘No, I’m sorry, I’m a mess, I know. Let’s just forget about it.’

‘No way. Come on now. Let’s figure this out. What’s wrong with his place? Does he buy his furniture at IKEA? Does he collect porcelain dolls? Does his mother live there?’

[Huffs] ‘Very funny. Nothing is wrong with his place. I just sort of lost my nerve.’

‘Elaborate?’

[Quietly:] ‘Let’s just say I don’t usually need any encouragement when I’m with him.’

‘Stage fright?’

‘I don’t know. Definitely a first. Maybe it’s all been a bit too much, the ward was chaotic last week, then there’s this conference coming up, there were children trampling through the hallway only metres away from us— it wasn’t all that bad, though. I kind of snapped out of it once we were in his bedroom.’

[Snorts] ‘Where were you before?!’

‘Um- living room?’

‘Wait, wait, wait, cowboy. Let’s just leave it at that. Weird mind pictures.’

‘You asked.’

[Sighs] ‘I did. But, okay, you went to his place and it was all a bit too much. Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think you do.’

[Long pause] ‘It’s starting to feel like a relationship.’

‘You make that sound like a bad thing.’

‘It’s not. Well, not necessarily. But-‘

‘Lee.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Do you want him back?’

‘God, no. But I keep thinking about him, about us. And I’m still so angry, after all these months, I just can’t let go of it.’

‘Rich, you were together for half a decade, it’s going to take time.’
‘I know. And it’s getting better, but - I can’t be with Orlando and not be over Lee.’

‘But maybe you are over him. No- wait, bear with me. You just said that you don’t want him back.’

‘No.’

‘And being with Orlando makes you feel good.’

‘It does.’

‘Isn’t that the important part? That you’d rather be with Orlando than with Lee.’

‘But that’s the thing- I don’t know if I want to be with him.’

‘You don’t?’

‘Yeah, well, I do, sort of. It’s just- it feels as if I’m being dishonest. I’m still thinking about Lee every singly fucking day. Don’t you think that means I’m not ready yet to commit to something new?’

‘Hm. Has he asked you to marry him?’

‘What? Of course not.’

‘Has he told you he expects something different from what you’re giving him right now?’

‘No.’

‘So where’s all the pressure coming from? Why don’t you just enjoy it and take your time and see where it takes you?’

[Sighs] ‘I don’t know. Lee has broken my brain beyond repair.’

‘He hasn’t. He’s just dealt a solid blow.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Relax, Richard. It really sounds as if you like him.’

‘I do.’

‘So just be with him, spend time with him. You don’t need to label it if you’re not ready.’

‘It’s not that easy.’

[Chuckles] ‘Who promised easy. Nothing is easy after your third birthday.’

‘You’re a pessimist.’

‘Pot, kettle.’

[Laughs]

[Beeping] ‘It's mine. That’s lunch, then. I need to get back to the OR.’

‘Off you go, I’ll take care of your tray.’

‘Cheers.’ [Chair scraping] ‘This conversation is not over, though.’
‘Go see your patient.’

‘I’ll call you.’

‘You do that.’
Chapter Summary

Messages from 9/11/2017 to 11/11/2017

[9/11/2017, 06:14 p.m.]
'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, mate. I hoped I'd maybe be able to reach you in person, but ah, well. I forgot whether or not you're working late this week, but I suppose you probably are. Anyway, I'm calling cause I just finished an essay on death and terror in the works of Ionesco and - believe it or not - didn't hate it. The essay or the references to your favourite idiot. So I thought if you had time, you might be up for a bit of a chat. But never mind, if you're interested, it'll keep, otherwise just ignore this. Pretty sure we can find other things to talk about than that as well. Anyway, talk to you soon, yeah?'

[10/11/2017, whatsapp]
Richard [7:24 p.m.]: Hey you!

Richard [7:24 p.m.]: Sorry that I couldn't take your call, I'd have loved to hear about that article.

Richard [7:25 p.m.]: And to just talk to you, really. Feels as if I'm always working, literally.

Richard [7:26 p.m.]: Sorry.

Richard [7:29 p.m.]: Maybe we can see each other tomorrow evening or Sunday?

Richard [7:32 p.m.]: I'd like that.

Richard [7:32 p.m.]: Hope you're well? Are your students behaving?

Orlando [8:01 p.m.]: Ah fuck, I can't tomorrow night or Sunday

Orlando [8:01 p.m.]: House mother is away visiting family in Manchester tomorrow. And Sunday I'm on for a trip with Sean

Orlando [8:02 p.m.]: Kids are doing well, art club produced some ace sculptures today. Not even phallic shaped. So proud

Orlando [8:04 p.m.]: How about Monday?

Orlando [8:04 p.m.]: If that doesn't work for you, I'll reschedule w Sean, I'd rather meet you

Richard [8:22 p.m.]: That's tempting but I'd hate to steal Sean's time with you.
Richard [8:23 p.m.]: I can't Monday, though, I'm leaving for Dublin Tuesday morning and have to go over my lecture again.

Richard [8:26 p.m.]: Damn.

Richard [8:30 p.m.]: I could come over tomorrow, for breakfast or a coffee, if that doesn't interfere with your duties?

Orlando [8:34 p.m.]: Fuck Sean, he's been complaining nonstop about the rain anyway, wet blanket that he is

Orlando [8:35 p.m.]: You can come over for coffee if you want but I'm on duty, so I'm having breakfast with the kids

Orlando [8:36 p.m.]: Tell me about Dublin, can't recall you talking about it before


Richard [8:14 a.m.]: Sorry, I fell asleep on the couch.

Richard [8:15 a.m.]: I'm going to Dublin for a neonatal conference.

Richard [8:16 a.m.]: Didn't I tell you?

Richard [8:16 a.m.]: Preparing that lecture on top of everything else is killing me.

Richard [8:17 a.m.]: Let's do coffee later and I'll tell you more about it. Four-ish?

Richard [8:17 a.m.]: We can talk about Sunday, too, then.

Orlando [8:28 a.m.]: On my way to breakfast

Orlando [8:28 a.m.]: 4 is good

Orlando [8:28 a.m.]: Pony

Orlando [8:28 a.m.]: They have crumble

Orlando [8:29 a.m.]: Sunday - y/n?

Richard [8:45 a.m.]: Yes!

Orlando [1:49 p.m.]: Nice

Richard [1:51 p.m.]: Looking forward to it!
Richard [1:52 p.m.]: I feel a bit bad for Sean, though. Hope he wasn't disappointed?

Orlando [2:05 p.m.]: Devastated. Can't function a day without my guiding presence and is weeping into a bowl of icecream as I type

Orlando [2:07 p.m.]: Btw if you see zombies in the village later, try not to run them over automatically. It's kids from Erebor playing dress up. One just scared the shit out of a colleague of mine and he nearly punched his lights out. It was hilarious

Richard [2:09 p.m.]: That means he'll live, I guess?

Richard [2:09 p.m.]: Good. I don't want him to hate me before we've even had a chance to meet.

Richard [2:10 p.m.]: Are the kids that convincing or does your colleague scare easily?

Orlando [2:22 p.m.]: Only thing that would warrant Sean's everlasting hate would be if you told him you supported Wednesday

Orlando [2:22 p.m.]: Which would be rather amusing. You wanna meet him and try?

Orlando [2:23 p.m.]: Otherwise he is pretty impossible to rattle

Orlando [2:23 p.m.]: Unlike Gerry, the zombie victim

Orlando [2:23 p.m.]: Mind, the costumes aren't half bad, you can probably judge for yourself later

Orlando [2:23 p.m.]: But Gerry has issues

Richard [2:38 p.m.]: You realise I had to google that, right?

Richard [2:38 p.m.]: I was thinking Addams Family.

Richard [2:39 p.m.]: Football connaisseur that I am.

Richard [2:40 p.m.]: Sure that won't be enough to make Sean dislike me?

Richard [2:41 p.m.]: Doesn't mean I'm not game, though. Just maybe not today, if that's alright.

Richard [2:42 p.m.]: I'm really curious about the zombies now, btw!

Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: Addams Family?

Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: I just spat coffee onto my book fyi

Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: Nice one

Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: And that is all right, I'll break you in gently
Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: Just repeat after me:
Orlando [2:45 p.m.]: Glory, glory Man United!
Orlando [2:46 p.m.]: Support the Reds and you're right as rain
Orlando [2:46 p.m.]: And you should be all right; even if we run into Sean, he won't take notice of you anyway. Or of anyone else, including zombies. It's Saturday, so it's just him and his crumble

Richard [2:48 p.m.]: Damn, Orlando.
Richard [2:48 p.m.]: Don't do that to me!
Richard [2:49 p.m.]: Not if we're just meeting up for coffee!

Orlando [2:51 p.m.]: What did it for you? The coffee spitting, the footie song or my mate's unhealthy fixation with baked goods?
Orlando [2:51 p.m.]: Just asking out of academic interest
Orlando [2:52 p.m.]: Each to their own

Richard [2:53 p.m.]: Now I almost spat coffee at my phone.
Richard [2:54 p.m.]: Stop pretending, you know exactly what you did there.
Richard [2:54 p.m.]: I count on you to distract me with both crumble and Ionesco.

Orlando [2:58 p.m.]: I honestly have no idea what you mean
Orlando [2:58 p.m.]: But I'm all right with that. Does that mean plans for tomorrow are already set?

Richard [3:01 p.m.]: Breaking me in gently.
Richard [3:01 p.m.]: Seriously.
Richard [3:02 p.m.]: Aren't our plans always set?
Richard [3:02 p.m.]: Partly, at least?
Richard [3:03 p.m.]: Which is not a complaint...
Richard [3:03 p.m.]: And I still want to hear about Ionesco.

Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: Oh that
Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: I see your point
Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: And duly noted
Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: Don't set your hopes too high, though
Orlando [3:06 p.m.]: I still think Ionesco's an idiot

Richard [3:09 p.m.]: That's quite alright.
Richard [3:09 p.m.]: Same goes for me and Beckett.
Chapter Summary

Here's a possibly somewhat disturbing insight into Orlando's mind :).

Richard’s fingers dig into his upper arm, the inside of his thigh. It’s pitch-dark, his remaining senses heightened because of it, and his heart races, tries and fails to pump his blood fast enough through his veins. Feels like it can’t keep up because Richard pushes into him, thrusts, thrusts, too fast, just right, too fucking good for him to keep track of cause and effect -

- **sure, the neuronal correlates of consciousness can be viewed as causes, and consciousness may be thought of as a state-dependent property of some undefined complex, adaptive** -

He tries to keep up, he really fucking tries, but Richard adapts again and again, so fucking precise, and his mind is swimming, he should be furious maybe, or ecstatic, but they’re one and the same and he just wants more, is so fucking aroused -

- **you either define it as involving arousal and states of consciousness or as involving content of consciousness and conscious states. But you can’t argue that to be conscious of anything the brain must be in a high state of vigilance** -

Vigilant, yes, forceful, fuck yes, and he would give in if that didn’t take the fun out of it. But this is so past fun, his mind shatters and shatters again and he tries to hold on to the pieces until even that fails to be important, becomes impossible, and he -

Orlando wakes up.

Richard shifts on the mattress next to him, and Orlando’s mind reassembles itself abruptly. Like someone hits reverse on a video tape, all the pieces of the broken mirror fall back into place, cracks erased, and he sees himself in it again.

Richard is breathing slow and even. Orlando isn’t. He lies on his back, listens, until his lungs stop insisting on open-mouthed pants. Then he opens his eyes. Greyish morning light filters through the cracks of the heavy curtains, but no sounds come from the street below yet. Richard is asleep next to him, on his side, facing the wall. Orlando pulls a face when he adjusts himself in his boxers - half-hard like a teenager, for fuck’s sake, get a grip -, glances at his watch. 7:13 a.m.

Just going back to sleep sounds tempting, but he knows that he won’t get a continuation of his dream. It’s more likely that he’ll dream of house duties, lesson plans, detention. A cup of coffee is preferable.

When he gets up, Richard stirs and hums inquisitively. Orlando grunts softly in response, stands next to the bed with his slacks in his hand, leaves the room when the line of Richard’s shoulder relaxes again.

In Jackson College, he has the choice between his own and the common kitchen; in comparison to both, Richard’s is definitely tidier and quieter. Orlando directs his first frown of the day at the
needlessly complicated coffee machine and puts the kettle on instead. Richard keeps his mugs and a small assortment of teas and coffee in the cabinet right above it. There is no instant coffee, though, so Earl Grey will have to do. As he waits for the water to boil, his eyes flick back and forth between the cookbooks, Richard’s work-schedule on the fridge, the stack of Observers on the counter, his mind idling again.

With the steaming mug, he sits down at the table on the chair he usually takes. The bottles of the beer they drank last night are still there - Richard’s in a neat row, his own with their labels partially peeled off - and in the otherwise spotless and so neatly organized kitchen they stand out like sore thumbs.

They had plans to go to the Swan for dinner last night, but Richard ordered take-out curry online around half eight instead, without even interrupting his recollection of his conference in Dublin. About an hour later, Orlando unceremoniously binned the remainders of it. By then they were the middle of a conversation about the relevance of brain development studies and the influence of neurological findings on 21st century philosophy.

They never made it to the Swan. They didn’t even make it to the living room; instead they stood in the middle of the kitchen, with their beers in their hands, and only managed to sit down at the table again about a quarter of an hour later.

Having just recently re-read Patricia Churchland’s essays on neuroscience and morality, there is little that Orlando finds as exciting as the radicalism of eliminative materialism. It makes Nietzsche seem like a proper wuss in comparison. But as much as he appreciates the vastness of the consequences advancements in neuroscience hold for philosophy, the actual science behind it always eluded him.

So, when Richard smiled and apologized for ‘going on a bit’ about his work, Orlando pushed his curry away and rather firmly urged him to continue. Richard, being Richard, hesitated for another moment, but laughed when Orlando told him his modesty and self-deprecation was polite but incredibly annoying.

‘C’mon, I’m fucking interested, don’t be a fucking tease,’ were his exact words. ‘Go on, please.’

And did Richard ever. Orlando isn’t in the habit of bringing pen and paper to a date, so instead his right hand stripped his beer bottles of their labels for want of the opportunity to taking notes.

In the kitchen, in the morning, Orlando puts his by now half-empty mug down, eyes refocusing again. The flat is still silent, Richard apparently still asleep; long week, night shifts, if Orlando remembers correctly. The clock on the oven shows it’s 7:52, and there is a small notepad stuck to the fridge, no groceries listed on it at the moment.

He refills his mug and takes down the notepad, along with the ballpoint pen next to it. In small print, automatically adjusted to the size of the pad, he starts jotting down annotations to what Richard said yesterday, like he would with a properly good book. Main ideas, questions, cross-references. His hand struggles to keep up as his mind reconstructs last night’s conversation.

The way Richard talked about developmental neurology spoke of many lectures successfully held. The occasional shrug, a casting down of eyes, repeated offers to change the subject after all - all of that could be seen as part of his ingrained politeness (“I really don’t want to bore you”), as a sign that he might be embarrassed to showcase the level of his own expertise. Orlando knows better.

When Richard talked about neuroplasticity, connectome genesis and the possibilities functional magnetic resonance imaging in the preterm neonate offers, he made it sound simple, even though he bloody well knows it is anything but, and Orlando had to strain himself to keep up. And later, he calmly waited while Orlando made the case for eliminative materialism, only to then ask two
questions, almost casual, like an idly flicked finger against the base of a house of cards.

Richard is fucking smart and he knows it; all attempts to downplay that just highlighted it even more. It is casually arrogant, it’s infuriating and exhausting, and it’s so fucking hot. Orlando reacted to it with an intensity that should not come as a surprise to him - he bloody knows what pushes his buttons - yet he was on the edge of painful arousal for hours before he even realized it.

When he did, he acted on it. A chuckle rolled from Richard’s throat, debate grinding to a halt, and he suggested that Orlando’s proposal was a bit of a non sequitur. Of course he was wrong, in fact Orlando can’t think of a stronger causal link than that between fierce intelligence and irresistible attractiveness. He had other things on his mind than explaining though - ‘You want to fuck or not?’

Richard’s amusement turned surprise, turned arousal in the matter of a minute, laughing into the kiss Orlando pulled him into, then gasping, then growling before they even reached the bedroom. The sex that followed was the logical continuation of that - fast and hard and forceful. And fuck, is Richard good at that as well. The kind of urgent physicality that is so very pleasurable because you know you’ll get instant gratification from it.

Afterwards, Richard was breathless and back to laughing again, lax enough to reuse a joking complaint (‘You broke me. Again.’) whilst wiping sweat from his face. Orlando slumped down next to him, panting and hurting in all the right places, hoping that the endorphins still coursing through his body were a match for all the fragments of thoughts and concepts in his mind. Hoping that at least temporarily they would blunt their sharp edges and give him at least a respite before he wouldn’t be able to resist touching and rearranging them again.

Turned out, hope wasn’t really enough (when is it ever). Leaning over and kissing Richard again - not slow and languid, not by a longshot, but without much of the desperation now - produced better results.

Sounds of movement from the bathroom jerk him out of his contemplations. The clock shows 8:21 now, Richard is awake, and for some reason Orlando spent the last couple of minutes stirring his tea with the blunt end of the ballpoint pen. He is just done wiping it off on a kitchen towel when Richard comes into the room. Wearing jeans and a t-shirt, he is at least one item ahead of Orlando, a situation that Orlando thinks of modifying when Richard halts and stretching his arms over his head exposes his flat stomach.

‘Morning,’ Orlando says, bites back a smile when it seems to take Richard half a second to focus on him.

‘Good morning,’ he then says, his voice gravelly. ‘Hope you slept well.’

Orlando hums an affirmation, and Richard gestures at the coffee machine, one brow arched. Orlando shrugs.

‘Working that thing takes a degree in rocket science.’

Chuckling, Richard proceeds to go through the twenty step process of preparing coffee where really a spoonful of Sainsbury Roast and a bit of hot water would’ve sufficed. But sure, the Knight Industries 2000 or whatever is just so convenient and user-friendly.

Orlando doesn’t mock him outright and receives a cup of admittedly delicious smelling coffee for his troubles two minutes later. Richard sits down opposite of him, one bare foot saved from the relative coolness of the tiles by resting on his knee. For a bit, they just sit there and drink, waiting for caffeine to work its magic. Eventually, Richard ever so briefly frowns at the assortment of beer bottles on the
table, then spots the handful of small sheets Orlando tore off the notepad. As his eyes meet Orlando’s, Orlando sees the question in them.

‘I have follow up questions for last night,’ he explains.

Richard licks coffee from his lips, but that doesn’t erase the smile from them.

‘Me too, I suppose.’

There is hidden amusement in his voice, like they aren’t really talking about the same thing. It’s faint, though, and mild, so Orlando isn’t necessarily required to address it.

‘You wanna go out for breakfast?’ he asks instead. ‘I reckon I owe you a meal that doesn’t come out of a take-out box.’

Again, amusement tugs at Richard’s lips, and Orlando takes that as confirmation. Food and a decent conversation, maybe another round of sex. Pretty nice plans for a Sunday morning. Orlando gets up, nudges Richard’s knee with his own, smiles.

‘The Pig and Pastry, avocado toast, right?’
Chapter Summary

Richard and Orlando make plans for the weekend. And for the evening, while they are at it.

[29/11/2017, 7:02 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

Hiya, it's Orlando. Hm, thought I would maybe catch you in person, I thought working nights was last week? Anyway, nevermind, I'm calling because - sorry, just a sec, someone is trying to kick in my door... [sound of a door being opened] Sean, what the fuck? I thought someone was murdering a rhino out there?... Yeah, chill out, man, it's just two minutes and it's rather unlikely that Robert gets beaten up again today, is it? - Sorry, Richard. Serves me right for opening the door for that lunatic. Anyway, I'm calling because I just got word from the theatre in London, the one doing Beckett's "Krapp's last tape", yeah? And they said - Sean, shut up!... First of, Charity can fall down a fucking well for all I care, and second of, you really don't need to be narrating everything that is happening. It's a soap, I do possess the mental capability of catching up all on my own. [sound of a door being opened and shut again] I'm sorry, Richard. I'm outside now. So, the people from the Beckett theatre called and told me they had tickets for next Saturday and whether I wanted them. But I wasn't sure whether you were on duty next weekend, so I asked them - [footsteps approaching] Fuck, hold on. - Hey, Noah?... Is there a reason why there's blood dripping from your skull? Come here, let me see that. ... Well, teaches you to not pick a fight with Nolan, doesn't it? ... You better go and see the school nurse. And if you happen to run into Nolan, tell him I'd like to have a word. [footsteps receding] Fuck, I swear, this place sometimes. Again, sorry for this, Richard. Let me make this brief before I get interrupted again: I can get tickets for next Saturday, and I'm sure I can find a hotel as well, I just wanted to check with you whether you were free. If you're not, I'll reschedule, otherwise, Saturday evening, London, Beckett? It'll be fun. Well, it'll be Beckett, anyway. Gotta go now, gotta watch Emmerdale and then tar and feather a third former. Fabulous life of, right? Anyway, let me know about London as soon as, all right?

[29/11/2017, whatsapp]

Richard [8:21 p.m.]: That sounds rather...

Richard [8:21 p.m.]: Wild.

Richard [8:22 p.m.]: Is that what a regular Wednesday afternoon looks like for you? Being forced/persuaded/coerced into watching a soap and dealing with blunt head trauma?

Richard [8:23 p.m.]: Hope the kid is fine and Sean is, too.

Richard [8:23 p.m.]: And, more importantly: yes! I'd very much like to go, and I don't have to work, either.
Richard [8:24 p.m.]: I'm working only days this week, but I'm having dinner with Cate, I didn't hear the phone.

Richard [8:25 p.m.]: Sorry to have missed you.

Orlando [8:44 p.m.]: No idea about the state of Noah's head. Or of Sean's. Emmerdale left him rather discombobulated today. Very tragic

Orlando [8:46 p.m.]: He just told me that Cate ate Dairylea with him to accompany some posh wine

Orlando [8:46 p.m.]: You might want to distance yourself from her after hearing that

Orlando [8:47 p.m.]: Re: London - I booked tickets + hotel. I'm on duty Friday evening, so I'll taking an early train on Sat morning

Richard [9:37 p.m.]: She told me all about that.

Richard [9:38 p.m.]: We were looked at funny because she couldn't stop laughing.

Richard [9:38 p.m.]: And neither could I.

Richard [9:39 p.m.]: Seriously, I'm not even sure that stuff qualifies as food.

Richard [9:40 p.m.]: I just spoke to those friends with the baby in London, I'll stay with them Friday/sat and leave after breakfast to meet up with you, then?

Richard [9:41 p.m.]: Thanks for taking care of all the arrangements!

Richard [9:42 p.m.]: How much do I owe you?

Orlando [11:41 p.m.]: Anytime

Orlando [11:41 p.m]: You owe me the admission that Beckett is the superior playwright

Orlando [11:42 p.m.]: Bargain, I know

Orlando [11:44 p.m.]: My train's supposed to arrive at Kings Cross at 11:41. Pub lunch? You pick


[30/11/2017, whatsapp]

Richard [06:47 a.m.]: Nice try!

Richard [06:48 a.m.]: I'll get back to you on that after we've seen the play.

Richard [06:48 a.m.]: Lunch and dinner is on me, then.

Richard [06:49 a.m.]: That's one of my favorite bookstores in Notting Hill. Count me in!
Orlando [8:46 a.m.]: Just as an fyi, I will take a while
Orlando [8:46 a.m.]: I got a date with Batman
Orlando [8:46 a.m.]: Okay, even I heard how fucked up that sounded

Richard [11:43 a.m.]: Batman?
Richard [11:43 a.m.]: You really are full of surprises.
Richard [11:45 a.m.]: And here I was, thinking you'd be going on a date with ME...

Orlando [3:59 p.m.]: Course I am
Orlando [4:00 p.m.]: I don't think of it as a date, tho
Orlando [4:00 p.m.]: But an exercise in futility
Orlando [4:01 p.m.]: Considering you so far prove to be utterly unreasonable re: brilliant playwrights / iconic DC characters
Orlando [4:02 p.m.]: I would explain to you in detail how neither Batman nor Beckett should actually constitute a surprise
Orlando [4:02 p.m.]: But I'm too lazy to type an essay on my phone
Orlando [4:02 p.m.]: So you're saved by the bell

Richard [6:25 p.m.]: The way I see it you're the one to blame that I remain unconvinced.
Richard [6:26 p.m.]: Though I appreciate the effort you're putting into it and I'm looking forward to finally seeing that play.
Richard [6:28 p.m.]: And that absolutely counts as a date! Or that would you rather be doing?
Richard [6:28 p.m.]: Cruise the Thames?

Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: Fuck you Richard
Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: No really
Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: Don't send me messages like this
Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: Without a warning first that I shouldn't be reading them at the dinner table
Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: I nearly spat tea on Viggo
Orlando [6:41 p.m.]: On second thought
Orlando [6:41 p.m.]: Carry on
Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: Cruise on the Thames, honestly
Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: Way I see it?
Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: You, grub, books, Beckett, fuck
Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: Perfect date
Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: Don’t ruin it

Richard [7:13 p.m.]: Fit beer in somewhere and I wholeheartedly agree.

Richard [7:14 p.m.]: Btw, do you still want to go and see that severed head? Or what are we doing on Sunday?

Orlando [7:23 p.m.]: Beer, definitely
Orlando [7:23 p.m.]: I tried finding out whether Bentham's head was still on display just now but the NHM keeps redirecting me to the ice rink or snake venom which I don't have any interest in whatsoever
Orlando [7:24 p.m.]: I have suggestions as to what to do till checkout time on Sunday
Orlando [7:24 p.m.]: After that, up to you

Richard [7:25 p.m.]: I guess I'd better not ask about those ideas or I won't get any sleep until Saturday, right?

Richard [7:26 p.m.]: And you're still in polite company?

Orlando [7:28 p.m.]: Not polite company
Orlando [7:28 p.m.]: Just Sean
Orlando [7:28 p.m.]: Watching Emmerdale at Wellesley
Orlando [7:28 p.m.]: His house
Orlando [7:29 p.m.]: Why?
Orlando [7:29 p.m.]: You got an alternative suggestion?
Richard [7:30 p.m.]: I might just...

Richard [7:31 p.m.]: Emmerdale is not a cruel name for a kid, is it?

Orlando [7:31 p.m.]: Should've learned my lesson earlier with the tea, really
Orlando [7:31 p.m.]: Emmerdale would be an ace name
Orlando [7:31 p.m.]: Sean agrees
Orlando [7:31 p.m.]: Had to tell him
Orlando [7:32 p.m.]: To explain me snorting beer
Orlando [7:32 p.m.]: Are your plans worth me skipping the second ep?

Richard [7:33 p.m.]: Two episodes? Two?
Richard [7:33 p.m.]: You're killing me.
Richard [7:34 p.m.]: Definitely worth it!

Orlando [7:36 p.m.]: I can be in my flat in 10, at yours in 35
Orlando [7:36 p.m.]: Gotta do rounds at 11
Orlando [7:36 p.m.]: Decision time, mate

Richard [7:38 p.m.]: If you didn't snort all the beer through your nose the second option is off the table.
Richard [7:39 p.m.]: But what about vice versa?
Richard [7:39 p.m.]: Would mean you're not missing out on your show, either.

Orlando [7:40 p.m.]: Nix zero, mate. School night
Orlando [7:40 p.m.]: I'll come to York
Orlando [7:40 p.m.]: Be there in half an hour

Richard [7:41 p.m.]: Can't wait!
Richard [7:41 p.m.]: Drive safely.
Orlando [7:42 p.m.]: Always
Richard and Orlando spend a weekend together in London, go see a play and a severed head and discuss Beckett and Batman, relationships and expectations.

Richard arrives a good 30 minutes early at the station, and that's more than a little inconvenient.

Sure, he would have made a point of being there in time so as not to keep Orlando waiting, but this is a bit extreme, even for his standards. It's Rhys who is to blame, really. Richard would have left from Hampstead later if Rhys hadn't pried the coffee cup out of his hands halfway through brunch and told him to get going already, and stop making them all nervous. He might have had a point there, though, Richard must concede, he'd already woken up jittery and couldn't really seem to sit still. That, and his eyes kept straying to the kitchen clock.

So there he is now, with more than enough time to get himself worked up. Just great. Not what he would've needed, he's already had too much time to fret about this during the train ride yesterday and the better part of the night, when sleep eluded him. Come to think of it, he really should have made the time to go to the hairdresser, and the blue sweater maybe would have-

And just like that he's back to pacing.

When he notices, he stops in his tracks and almost causes an elderly man with a trolley to crash into him. This is just getting better and better. And it's ridiculous to begin with, you'd think someone was having a baby or getting a heart transplant, to judge from the level of his nervousness. But all he is about to do is go see a play with Orlando. That, and spend the night with him in a hotel. It's neither the first time they've spent a day together, nor a night, and surely there is no need to be nervous about this and question what it might and might not mean, just because they are meeting up in London and not in York.

He is nervous, though. Very nervous. Has been for days, weeks even, if he's being honest, he's been getting more nervous with every day that passed. Because he still hasn't decided. Hasn't decided if he is going to ask him, or tell him, rather. Although he probably should.

Richard sighs and runs a hand through his hair. He should definitely have gotten a haircut.

Maybe coffee would be a good idea? Or better yet, tea? He could find somewhere to sit down, read for a while, maybe, he's brought a copy of Beckett's plays with him to distract himself. And to prepare for the discussion Orlando is going to initiate as soon as he gets the chance, probably as soon as he lays eyes on Richard.

That thought makes him smile, and suddenly, it seems a little easier to breathe. It's going to be fine, he's meeting Orlando, Orlando, and not some stranger, they're good together, and they've never had any difficulties to find a conversation topic. It's going to be a good day, it surely is.
Richard is about to go find a coffee stand when his phone vibrates in his pocket. When he fishes it out, the display shows a message from Orlando:

'My train's gonna be half an hour late, probably because some idiot threw himself on the rails. Pick a restaurant near Blackfriars Station and I'll just drop off my bag at the hotel and meet you there, okay? Order starters, I'm starving.'

He needs to read the message twice before the content registers, and when it does, Richard is both a bit relieved and disappointed. Relieved because this gives him a little more time to get his head straight, disappointed because this clashes with the plans he made for lunch. To be fair, he hadn't gotten around to telling Orlando about them, but there is a very promising little French restaurant as well as a gastro pub he's wanted to try. Both have gotten great reviews and he has made reservations, just in case, but neither is anywhere near the Thames.

He contemplates texting Orlando and proposing either one of them, but it would mean time wasted on the tube for them both. Next time, then, maybe, if there is a next time. The French one might have been a little too French for Orlando's taste after all, so maybe it's for the best. He can, however, not recall to ever have been to a restaurant near Blackfriars Station, so he needs to do some research before he gets on the tube. Maybe that's not a bad thing, it'll keep him busy.

Richard finds an empty seat on a bench and opens his phone's browser. The results his search renders are dispiriting, though. The only acceptable option seems to be a little sushi place, of all places, and one thing Orlando has been very clear about- next to his lack of enthusiasm where fine wines are concerned- is that he is not keen on seafood. Or 'fucking hates it', in his own words, Richard can hear them echoing in his head, loudly and clearly.

Okay. He scrolls back to the top of the page and goes through the list again. And again.

But there is nothing else there, at least nothing that would pass as acceptable. The other places within walking distance look truly horrible, fish and chips to go would be a safer bet, it appears.

Great. Just great. So it's either a dump or a fucking seafood place.

Richard frowns at his phone.

This is not what he's planned, a nice lunch in a nice atmosphere, an atmosphere suitable for- well, asking questions, talking about things they maybe should've talked about earlier but haven't. Or for deciding to just enjoy the day, talk Beckett and not ask any questions.

Five minutes pass, then ten, and Richard keeps staring at the menu and can't make up his mind. Maybe he can persuade Orlando to give it a try? They do serve other stuff than sushi, ramen dishes and curries that sound delicious and don't have anything fishy in them, and he could order a selection of tempura and spring rolls for starters. They do have beer, too, different Japanese brands, and Orlando might actually enjoy trying one of them, the Kirin Draught, maybe. Richard could get behind that one, too.

That settles it. There's curry, there's beer, Orlando will be fine, to judge from experience, so maybe Richard can just get over himself and just text him the location. And if he really should dislike the place they can still always go to that gastro pub.

So. Screw all other plans, then, nice atmosphere and all that. He's in London to spend time with Orlando, after all, and not for the food.
He opens whatsapp, quickly types a message and then fiddles with the wording for a bit before he's satisfied with it, partly, at least.

'Sorry the train is delayed. But I'm sure you're in the company of a book. This place is conveniently close: https://www.yelp.de/biz/hare-and-tortoise-london-4 . Tell me when you'll be arriving so that the food is still hot when you get there!'

After he has hit 'send' Richard stares at his phone for a long moment before he adds: 'I know it's a fucking seafood place. But just scroll down the menu, I think they do have stuff you like. See you in a bit.'

***

When the train from York finally arrives at King’s Cross, it inconveniently interrupts Orlando’s perusal of Ionesco's "The Lesson". He gets off, eyes only leaving his book to find the exit, then the platform for the Circle Line. When he is done reading, he briefly checks out the website of the restaurant that Richard texted him. Asian. Nice.

‘Give me twenty minutes.’ he writes back as he gets on the tube. Then he stares unseeingly at his reflection in the window and thinks about Ionesco's ridiculous use of non sequiturs. In Blackfriars, he checks into his hotel to drop off his stuff, then finds the restaurant.

Richard got them a table in a corner where Orlando spots him right away. There’s a half empty cup of tea in front of him, two small plates with starters, and a book. ‘Theatre of the Absurd - Greatest plays’; with the face of Ionesco staring up at the ceiling.

Richard sees him approach and smiles. Rather without Orlando having a say-so in it, his mind abruptly rearranges priorities. He doesn’t start the conversation with a jibe at that idiot Frenchman Ionesco. Instead he sits down and knocks his knee against Richard’s under the table, something which stops his leg from jittering. When asked, Richard goes into detail about the menu and what’s good and what’s subpar in comparison. Orlando eats food from the school canteen every day, his standards are low. But he listens and nods and learns quite a bit about fucking sushi of all things, and it’s not he, but the waitress coming up to them who interrupts Richard’s explanations to take their orders.

Then Richard glances down at the hardcover in front of him, says ‘anyway, I read “Krapp’s Last Tape”’ without even the attempt of a segue, like he does it sometimes. He has that look on his face that would translate to an 80% chance of Orlando ending up bottoming, if they were in Richard’s bedroom right now, not in a crowded restaurant at lunchtime. Orlando arches his brow, food forgotten, which is all the invitation Richard needs. His summary of Beckett’s play is equally hilarious and wrong as fuck; his summary of Krapp’s tapes, recorded younger versions of Krapp, done in different voices even.

Orlando knows when he’s being goaded, he is not a complete moron. He knows that Richard doesn’t much appreciate Beckett, same as Orlando hates Ionesco, knows this is absolutely blatant baiting. Doesn’t mean he isn’t gonna bite.

So they talk about the portrayal of solipsism in a world otherwise lacking meaning, and Orlando uses it to his advantage when Richard’s focus is momentarily deflected by the arrival of their food and his politeness dictates him to be nice to the waitress. Not that Orlando would have needed a distraction to argue his point successfully. The complexity of Beckett’s concept of self-reference is
incontrovertible, as is his deconstruction of human interaction throughout. While eating his sushi, Richard lets the former through on a nod, but his frown grows more and more pronounced when Orlando talks about Krapp’s obvious inability to form any kind of lasting connection with anyone and only noticing it when it’s too late.

‘That’s awfully bleak,’ he says when Orlando is finished.

Orlando shrugs.

‘What else would you want from a relationship if it isn’t the opportunity to call yourself a muppet years later?’

His choice of words is as deliberately flippant as Richard’s was earlier, but Richard doesn’t chuckle.

'You're usually wiser in hindsight,' he says matter of factly whilst poking his food, like it isn’t one of the greatest clichés. ‘But that doesn’t really help with choosing a partner now, does it? Unless you find a way of communicating with your future self.'

Now it’s Orlando’s turn to frown.

'I don't get it. What?'

Richard chews his food in silence for a moment, his eyes on the movement of his chop sticks. Orlando puts down his own as he waits for him to find different words for his hypothesis. After a moment, Richard glances up, as if to check whether Orlando is still listening, then his gaze flickers down again.

'I mean, you have to find a way of choosing someone to be with without knowing how it's going to turn out in the end.'

'It'll inevitably always end the same,' Orlando counters. ‘That’s what Beckett proposes.’

And that, if nothing else, is loud and clear and obvious in the play; futile regret over unfulfilled goals, only at the end of a life realizing that it was, inevitably, pointless, and -

Richard hums.

'That's why Ionesco is the safer bet.'

Orlando’s thoughts grind to an abrupt halt.

Richard is grinning at him now, and if Orlando’s hands weren’t busy, he would flip him off.

'Fuck off. It's not like you can get relationship advice from him either.'

He shakes his head in a display of disapproval he doesn’t really feel, and it’s enough apparently for Richard to not respond with quotes from Ionesco. They eat in silence for a moment instead. For all Richard’s horrid taste in playwrights, he knows how to pick a restaurant. Orlando’s pork dish is easily the best he has eaten in a while. He is about to say so, when Richard puts down his chop sticks and regards him curiously.

'Okay, then tell me: how do you do it?’ he asks. ‘What's important to you in terms of relationships?
Apart from sex, that is.'

Orlando doesn’t see what that has got to do with anything, but he humours Richard anyway. The answer is easy enough.

'Intelligence. Nothing sexier than brains. Nothing more of a turn off than dullness.'

'Now, I can relate to that. What else?'

Orlando’s left hand stills, the task of reloading his fork momentarily aborted. Richard continues to look at him expectantly. Orlando shakes his head.

'Not sure I'm not getting your question again, but you asked what I value, right?’

‘Yes.’

Orlando pushes some more of his food onto his fork.

‘That's the lot, then. Properly engaging conversation and good sex.'

Richard lifts a brow at him.

'That's it?’

‘He's also gotta be a good cook, United fan, and good with motorbikes,’ Orlando adds dryly. ‘No, wait, I can go to a restaurant, Old Trafford, and a garage for that.’

The corners of Richard’s mouth quirk up, but it’s not a smile, it’s the polite thing one gives overly ambitious parents of a mediocre pupil. Orlando wipes traces of grease from his lips with his paper napkin, regards Richard whose expression changes to something vaguely uncomfortable now. Orlando leans back in his chair.

‘What, you were being serious?’

Richard’s nod is a minimalistic thing, weirdly thrown off balance by a half shrug and that not-really-smile a bit firmer in place. Orlando doesn’t understand it, and he doesn’t get how Richard would find his response wanting.

‘Look, consider the worst thing in life, okay?’ he tries explaining anyway. ‘For me, it’s taking shit for granted and trusting in whatever flakey construct is trending right then - religion, romantic love, nationalism, whatever. I'd be bored senseless if I had to endure that. I might as well be dead. Ergo the best thing has to be the opposite. And that's what I appreciate in people; the ability and willingness to challenge me. So yeah, intelligence. That's it.'

He waits for Richard to confirm that, which he does by inclining his head after a moment. He doesn’t reply, looks thoughtful instead. Orlando doesn’t push it, instead finishes his food. The index finger of Richard’s right hand taps in uneven intervals onto the table, like he is sending a message to someone in Morse code.

'Why stick to one person, then, if you're looking for a challenge?’ he finally says when Orlando has pushed his plate to the side. ‘Aren’t different people always going to offer much more variety in terms of intellectual stimulation? Different smart people?’
The Socratic method is all well and good, but Orlando prefers to not be on the receiving end of it.

'No,' he says, and the one syllable holds enough finality for Richard to look surprised. Orlando measures his determination a bit more carefully, takes the edge off with a smile, when he continues, 'You go ahead and tell me what you're looking for. I bet my Yamaha that my reply will be you can get all that from your best mate.'

Richard smiles but rubs a hand over his forehead, evening out the lines that have formed there again.

'I'm not falling for that, I'm not going to discuss feelings with you, Orlando. And I really don't want to have sex with Cate, thank you very much. And that wasn't an answer to my question.'

'No, it wasn't,' Orlando agrees easily. 'But you answered mine. So, not wanting to shag Cate is the one thing you can come up with from the top of your head. I'm keeping the Yamaha then. Cause that's not what makes a relationship in your eyes; sex; is it? It's trust and understanding and comfort, fun and safety and security.'

Richard’s narrowed eyes herald an objection, but that’s when their waitress interrupts again. His sharp focus immediately changes into a soft smile as he asks for the bill. Orlando watches him go through the nice small talk routine, tries to suss out why the contrast is so striking, what exactly it is that warranted Richard’s disapproval. Of course Orlando finds more truth in Judith Butler’s skepticism regarding commitments than Sean’s romanticized view on the matter. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t listen or disputes that the majority of mankind subscribes to a different concept of relationships than he does.

'I'm not trying to marginalize any of that,’ he adds when the waitress turns away with their plates, leaving their bill. ‘If you want that and you believe that you get more or better of that in a relationship, then good for you.’

Richard leans back in his chair, posture less tense now.

'It sounded a bit as if you're working on a dating profile for me.’

Just the idea of online dating makes Orlando pull a face, and this time, when Richard laughs in response, Orlando does give him the finger.

'It's the same for me with being challenged,’ he says without heat. ‘I want that, and I like not having to cover the most basic assumptions over and over again.’

Richard thinks it over for a moment, fingers tracing the spine of his book.

'I don't know, but to me the physicality definitely is part of what sets a relationship apart from friendships,’ he then says. ‘And all the rest, hard to summarize, but yeah, reliability and stability, the good kind, the one that comes with development, not the one that has you bored out of your mind after five minutes, the one that equals stagnation. - I don't think that's necessarily very far away from what you just said.’

Orlando concedes that point with a nod and a shrug.

'Yeah, those two concepts aren’t mutually exclusive,’ he says.
He waits for Richard to now finally tie all of this in with their actual topic of conversation; Beckett’s Krapp. Richard doesn’t. He takes one of the complimentary crackers and bites of a bit, kind of looks pleased and still unsatisfied at the same time; which is no wonder. Who orders just raw, cold fish for lunch anyway?

Orlando shakes his head as it is left to him to steer them back on track.

‘Either way, all that is miles away from what Krapp demonstrates in Beckett’s play. “Never knew such silence” indeed, hm?’

It is bleak, yeah, especially the end, old Krapp, alone, his own voice from the past mocking him, and not even intentionally so, but Orlando never disputed that. That doesn’t make it any less brilliant. Richard, however, just hums, minute amusement in that, like over a private joke. Then he uses his cracker to point at Orlando.

'Ionesco, I'm telling you.'

Orlando groans and is of a good mind to give Richard’s leg a proper kick under the table. He doesn’t, though, but gets out his wallet instead.

'If you’re being like that, I’m gonna go to that bookstore on my own now.'

Richard laughs but takes that as a cue to pull out his wallet as well and drop a couple of notes on the table. He leans forward, mirroring Orlando’s posture, and Orlando can see the change in his eyes, even if his voice remains casual.

'You might appear in a disadvantageous light on my tapes, then.'

And fuck it, Orlando can’t be bothered to hold on to a fake grudge. He chuckles and gets up from his chair.

'C’mon, let's go buy books.'

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In the familiar surroundings of the bookstore Richard begins to feel a little more at ease, finally. It's neat, that calming effects books have, isn't it? The more, the better. The British Library would probably be a perfect fit right now.

But no, it's not that bad, really. His nervousness has lessened considerably during lunch already. The sushi place turned out to be a good choice, the food was delicious, the beer good and Orlando took it in stride and was- well, just Orlando. He didn’t need any encouragement to start a lively discussion on Beckett, naturally, whom else. Certainly a smart move, to have read 'Krapp's Last Tape' before meeting up.

The bookstore still looks exactly the way he remembers it, and smells exactly the same, too, a bit like an old cellar, but not in a bad way.

Maybe it doesn't have to be all that complicated to begin with, this, them. Maybe not. If he only could just relax a little and stop forcing himself to come up with an answer to what this is, all of it, to what it means to be in London together.
Because whatever this is- it's good, really good. And shouldn't that be enough, shouldn't that be all he needs to know? That it feels good to be spending the day with Orlando, that he has been looking forward to it from the day Orlando proposed it, despite all the pondering, worrying. It's a pleasure to talk to him, as always, a pleasure to discuss absurd theatre with him, and- not that he would ever tell Orlando or anyone else- a pleasure to be able to just watch him in a moment like this, watch him while he's standing at one of the bookshelves, an impressive stack of comics in front of him, deeply absorbed in the one he's picked up.

It's something he likes about Orlando, his absolute, unwavering focus, his ability to block out everything else when he's concentrating on something. Right now the shop probably could collapse around him and he wouldn't as much as blink. He seems to be so very much in his element, relaxed, even if there's a small frown clinging to his lips.

Richard feels himself smiling in response to this frown, and for a moment or two he contemplates walking over and asking Orlando what it's about, pictures himself leaning over his shoulder and breathing in his smell for a second, yes... but then, he doesn't want to disturb him. And given their track record two rows of shelves probably have to be considered an adequate physical distance.

Right. Enough of that. There'll be ample time to stare at Orlando later on, but there are a couple of books he can really only get here. Vian's 'Froth on the Daydream' for example, his copy is shedding pages.

When he inquires at the counter, however, he is told that the copy they had was sold a couple of days ago. But the shop assistant offers to call him if they acquire another one, and Richard gladly takes him up on it and jots down his number before he goes to browse the shelves.

He does not only come across a beautiful edition of 'Jane Eyre' that he is sure his sister would love, but there also is a copy of 'The English Patient' that catches his eye, it's the edition he's first read it in, and he's always wanted to have it. Even though it's clearly been read and re-read it's in a decent enough condition and seems to hail from a smoke-free household, which is a rule Richard only very rarely makes an exception from.

After half an hour it feels as if he is carrying around half of the store's contents and he looks for a quiet corner and spreads out the books he has picked out in front of him. Four or five will have to do, even if that's a little disappointing, he'll have to carry them through London all day, after all. Five, then. He debates the selection for a moment, then puts the other five back onto the shelves.

What about a coffee now? And what about Orlando?

Orlando still is in the exact same spot where Richard has left him and in the exact same position, even the little frown is still there. Only the comic book he's reading seems to have changed.

Richard squeezes past a man the size of two to get out of the aisle he's in, and when he rounds the corner he almost walks into a child, or vice versa actually, the child is about to crash head-first into his legs, body bent forwards at a questionable angle in a struggle for balance, the short legs not quite as fast yet as the mind wants them to be, gravity obviously still a challenge. Richard's professional instincts make him reach out and place a hand on the kid's head just in time to steady it and prevent a collision. When it looks up at him, it's with a mixture of astonishment, curiosity and a healthy amount of distrust, but quirking up one eyebrow and making a face produces a delighted giggle. Figures.

When Richard takes a step backwards, the child staggers on and disappears behind a bookshelf, and what seems to be the mother in pursuit of her offspring hastily steps past him, smiling apologetically.
'James,' she calls after the child who responds by crashing into a solid object, to judge from the sound and the startled wail. James. He would have thought Emma. Or Charlotte, Claire. Because of the pink sweater. Hello, gender stereotypes.

Orlando's eyes are still firmly fixed on his comic book, and that doesn't change when Richard comes up next to him and asks how it's going and if he's found anything interesting. He just hums, somewhat distractedly, and raises his finger. 'A second,' he says when he's finished the page, still not lifting his eyes from the comic in his hand. 'I'm almost through with this one.'

They make it out of the bookstore one comic later, part of which Richard reads over Orlando's shoulder to see where the appeal is. Afterwards he can't really say that he gets it, but then, that might be due to the fact that Orlando reads at least twice as fast as he does and Richard loses track of the story halfway through. Also, he's close enough to catch a whiff of Orlando's cologne, finally, and that doesn't really help his concentration either, not when he has to hide his hands in his pockets so that he doesn't touch Orlando.

No, not here. Later.

Orlando seems satisfied when they are leaving the store, even though he hasn't bought anything, and possibly that's because he's already in the middle on an explanation of why only a handful of Batman comics are worth reading before the door has closed behind them. Now, Richard can't say he has wasted many hours thinking about Batman in the second, third, fourth and hell- fifth decade of his life, but Orlando could probably interest him in rocks, if he set his mind to it. So he just listens and watches the people passing them, the street is busy at this hour, and that's actually something he misses, the energy, the colors, the smells, the multitude of languages, even though he likes living in York. And he'd never found a flat like his in London. Or well, he might have, but it would have cost him a fortune.

They walk past Notting Hill Gate and Orlando gets interrupted when the crowd of people leaving the tube station separates them for a moment. Richard hides a grin in his scarf when he watches Orlando stop in his tracks abruptly and frown at an elderly lady who has shuffled right into his path before he unceremoniously steps around her and continues his Batman- monologue, picking up right where he's left off. They get a coffee to go and Richard proposes to walk to Kensington Palace and the park. Orlando just nods, reluctant to interrupt his line of thought, he is now applying the perspective of different philosophers to the figure of the masked vigilante that acts outside the law and is quoting Nietzsche at him. Richard toys with the thought of asking what Beckett would say about Batman, but decides against it, there'll probably be more Beckett than he can stomach in the course of the day as it is.

When they reach the park, the excursus on Batman reaches a natural endpoint, something that's quite rare with Orlando, if he's really invested in a topic he can go on for hours. Not that Richard minds, not usually, anyway, but he is a little preoccupied today. Should he really? Ask him, that is? On a day like this, when all's well?

But it quiet in the park, of course, it's December, and even though the sun has come out and it's a surprisingly mild day, there are not many people there. It's surely a more suitable place for such a conversation than a tube station or a sushi bar and maybe-

In the pocket of his coat his phone starts to ring, it's work, he can tell from the ringtone. He accepts the call without thinking twice before the third ring and only then remembers that he doesn't have to, not today. He turns towards Orlando, but he doesn't seem to mind, just shrugs and nods.
It's Zaineb who asks if he can be in Leeds in about an hour for an unplanned C-section of triplets.

His reply is as quick as her question. 'Sorry, I can't, I'm in London. Try Zara?'

Zaineb tells him she's next on the list and hangs up without further ado, there's still a lot to prepare. Triplets. The Miller babies, maybe? 25 weeks of gestation, rising maternal infection parameters. One of them is tiny, estimated to weigh less than 400 grams, the other two only marginally bigger. Not a good start, they really could have used more time.

He voices that last thought, at least partly, before he interrupts himself and apologizes:

'I'm sorry, Orlando, I didn't mean to be rude. It's almost a reflex by now, I can even answer it when I'm still half asleep.'

Orlando shakes his head. 'It's fine. Work's work.'

He doesn't sound insincere, really doesn't seem to mind, and maybe that's because he never really is off duty, as a head of house for a myriad of kids. But Richard does mind. This weekend is supposed to be about them, about being away from everything else, and he doesn't want sick neonates to play any part in it. The babies take up enough space in his life as it is, days, nights, weekends, holidays, and he doesn't want them to invade his relationships, too. And speaking of relationships- He really should ask him.

Well, but why not start with something easier, work, he's been meaning to bring that up with Orlando for quite some time. But there just never seems to be the right moment, they keep ending up in bed or get caught up in fierce discussions about absurd theatre, philosophy, politics or- and that's a recent addition - neuroscience. A combination of both is also possible, Orlando can keep talking while he gets both his own clothes off and Richard's.

But there shouldn't be any danger of that here, in the middle of the park, with temperatures below 15 degrees. Not when there's a hotel room waiting for them.

He has been quiet for a while, too long, probably, and should come up with something to say. But Orlando doesn't seem to mind his lapse into silence, not at all, he seems to be lost in thought, too, when Richard looks up at him he's just taking a sip of his coffee while his eyes are following the trajectory of a football a couple of kids are kicking around. Richard allows himself to watch them, too, for a moment, before he ventures to speak:

'Listen, there is something I've been meaning to ask you.'

When he doesn't continue straight away, Orlando makes a non-committal sound that Richard chooses to interpret as a sign to continue.

'Am I talking too much about my work?'

It's not the most thought through question, but it's a start at least. A start that has Orlando looking a little confused.

'Are you're asking whether that bothers me?' he asks, and when Richard nods, adds: 'No. It's interesting when you talk about your work.'
Again, he sounds sincere, and that's not bad.

Richard hears himself chuckle softly.

'That's not what I mean. I'm glad, though.'

Come on, now, quit stalling.

'I don't mean talking about my work per se- not about the medical details, at least, or the weird funny stuff, but - the stuff that happens behind the scenes, if you want, the reverse side of the coin.'

He watches Orlando's brows furrow in incomprehension and fleetingly considers to just drop the topic altogether and circle back to Beckett, safer terrain, much easier to predict.

But it's something he needs to ask, just as much as- that other thing.

'Do you remember that one night, for example, when we were supposed to see each other, but one of my patients died? I was a bit of a mess when I called.'

It's an understatement, Richard is perfectly aware of it. The tears were just one wrong turn away during the better part of the conversation and he couldn't get his voice to stop shaking.

'Yeah, I remember,' Orlando says, but only after a moment of hesitation.

Richard takes that as a sign not to continue, expects Orlando to cut in, but he doesn't. He doesn't interrupt him, doesn't change the topic, simply keeps walking, keeps listening. That's a pleasant surprise, definitely not what he's used to when the conversation strays to the downside of his work.

'Was it alright that I called and talked about it?'

That's it, finally, the question that matters. He's been trying to deal with these things on his own for too long, with his frustration, his grief. He's been told that he's impossible to be around in those moments and asked not to drag this home with him at the end of the day, like a cat would drag in a dead rat, or at least try to reign in his desperation, sleep on it. But he can't, he doesn't want to, not any longer, if he tries his thoughts start chasing their tails and he loses sleep, he wants to be done with that, needs to be done with that.

That does, however, not mean that Orlando is fine with having all that thrown at him.

'Yeah,' Orlando says. His tone contradicts the content, though, he still sounds hesitant.

From the corner of his eyes Richard watches him shrug, then hears him repeat the one syllable, more firmly:

'Yeah.'

Again, Richard waits for a moment, waits for him to add something, but again, he doesn't, but keeps walking, keeps listening, like before.

Maybe that's all he needs to say on the matter, then, maybe he really is fine with it?

'Thanks. I appreciate it.'
Again, an understatement.

'That's certainly not a given, being able to talk about dead babies.'

This has Orlando stop in his tracks. There's a small frown on his face when he turns towards Richard and says:

'I didn't.'

Richard feels his stomach twist. Too much, too soon after all?

'I didn't talk about dead babies', Orlando continues, shaking his head. 'All I did was ask whether they offer counseling for you. You know what I think about death and dying. It's not a topic I find gruesome or hard. It's not one I can offer comfort in either.'

His words almost make Richard laugh, or his tone, rather, he manages to sound indignant, as if the last thing he would ever talk about are dead babies. He probably should have known, should have known that it's different with Orlando, he can take this. Because he can stay detached, contrary to Lee, to Cate, to himself.

It's ironic, though, that Orlando seems to find his reaction wanting somehow when it's been the most helpful in a decade. Of course he cannot offer comfort, nobody can, not when a child dies.

'You listened. And managed to take my mind off it. Doesn't get much better than that.'

It's as simple as that, really, all he needs is to talk about it, to talk about it to someone who listens. And it would probably tell Orlando all he ever needs to know about Lee if Richard told him how long it's been since he's not felt left alone with all of this, the thoughts, images, questions.

His throat suddenly is tight, and he tries to ignore that, feels the nail of his thumb toy with the edge of his paper cup, the coffee inside long cold.

Orlando has been wiser, it seems, when he experimentally shakes his cup, he finds it empty. Richard watches him turn it over to get rid of the last drops, then ball it up before he looks back up at Richard and says:

'I'm glad, then. Why do you ask?'

It's a fair question, after all those weeks, but none that has an easy answer. Because it was such an emotional moment. Because it was such a private matter he shared with Orlando that night, so soon after they'd met. Because it was pretty inconsiderate of him. Because he partly wishes he hadn't called him and partly is glad that he did. Because it's something he thinks Orlando should know about him before- well.

'Because I keep thinking about that phone call. I shouldn't have sprung all of that on you. I'm sorry if that was a bit too much.'

Orlando takes a couple of steps away from him to dispose of his cup in a waste basket before he turns back around:

'No, it's all right. I didn't mind. Why are you bringing that up again? That was ages ago.'
He still sounds sincere, and that's a relief, but it causes Richard's throat to tighten further at the same
time. He needs to ask him now.

He takes a sip of his coffee, grimaces when it's ice cold and empties the cup into a shrubbery and
tosses it away. He takes a moment to pick the right words and searches Orlando's eyes before he
continues:

'I've been- Thinking, I guess. When I was in France, and during the past weeks, when you asked me
to go to London with you.'

He halts, but Orlando doesn't cut in, just looks at him, his whole focus on Richard. It's almost a little
too much, almost makes him lose his nerve.

'I thought it might- well, be good to talk about what this is, with us? I mean I'm enjoying this. Quite a
lot, actually. All of it, the sex and the time we're not spending in bed. It's good. Really good. And
easy, somehow, uncomplicated.'

Orlando's lips have quirked at the mention of sex and now he nods and says:

'Yeah, it is. I am enjoying myself as well. But this sounds like a classic build up to an antithesis.'

Smart and perceptive as hell. He'd make a great customs officer, you really can't get anything past
him.

'It's not supposed to. It's just- my friends have started asking when they can meet you-- Rhys kept
complaining all evening yesterday that I didn't bring my new boyfriend for dinner.'

He feels a blush spreading on his cheeks just saying the word, but thankfully Orlando navigates
around his embarrassment.

'The guy with the baby? I'm pretty sure he'd have regretted that.'

Richard chuckles when a bit on the tension subsides.

'I wouldn't have let you alone with that baby for a second. Anyway, I told him to shut up and just let
me enjoy this, and that it's not like that, but then- maybe it's exactly like that?'

He waits for a moment, waits for Orlando to confirm or deny this assumption, but he doesn't, just
raises an eyebrow, and Richard hurries to say:

'Or it isn't.'

He sighs and rubs his brow, shrugs, then searches Orlando's eyes.

'To be honest, I don't really know what to think. So maybe it would be good to talk about
expectations?'

Orlando is silent for a long moment, and Richard can't decipher his expression.

Has he said too much already?
'You don't think so?' he asks after a moment's hesitation and struggles to keep his voice steady.

Orlando shakes his head, takes two steps, three, then stops again, turns back towards Richard.

'No, it's not that. I just don't like the concept of expectations.'

He sounds impatient, a little frustrated even, and Richard feels his courage crumble rapidly.

'They imply that the status quo isn't good as -,' Orlando interrupts himself, shakes his head, clearly frustrated that he can't find the right words, then starts over again: 'They’re designed to make you feel obligated to try and live up to them. And that's idiotic, isn't it, generally it is, and even more so when the status quo is pretty nice. - But that wasn't what you were asking, was it?'

It wasn't. But maybe he already has his answer anyway? If 'pretty nice' is all this is?

Maybe Richard should have known, there never really has been any romantic gesture from Orlando, even if he always seems keen to see him, even if he keeps inviting himself over. But what does that really mean? The sex is good, the conversations are, but none of that makes a relationship, does it? But then, what does? Reciprocated feelings?

He blushes and drops his eyes, lifts them again, only to find that he can't meet Orlando's and ends up staring at a tree left of him.

'Richard?' Orlando prompts.

Well, but Richard can just as well hear him say it and be done with it, then. And maybe he even could live with a buddies-with-benefits-concept, at least for a while. Let's just get this over with and then take a look at the cards on the table.

'I-’ he begins, but can't continue, has to clear his throat. His cheeks are stinging with embarrassment and he has to force himself to look Orlando in the eyes, finds them fixed on his, blushes more heavily.

'I- um- was going to ask if you can imagine this to lead to something in the long run. Not today, or tomorrow or even next month, but in general. But you're not open for that?'

Orlando looks first surprised, than almost a little annoyed. He firmly shakes his head.

'I didn't say that, Richard. I criticized the connotations the word "expectations" has.'

Richard feels his brows draw together.

Wait, what?

'You lost me.'

Orlando snorts.

'I was gonna say the same thing. I'm sorry. You wanted to ask me something - whether I can imagine that "this" might lead to "something". What is this and what is something?'

He looks at him expectantly, and Richard can just stare at him for a moment. If that's supposed to be
joke, it's a cruel one. But that's not like Orlando, and there was no malice there, he genuinely sounds as if he doesn't have any idea what Richard has just asked.

But surely-- no, but what if he really--

Richard shakes his head, attempts a smile, fails halfway, huffs, then takes a deep breath.

'You're really not making this easy for me. But- okay--- Can you imagine this to lead to a relationship?'

Orlando doesn't miss a beat.

'Sure,' he says, shrugging.

Richard stares at him in wide eyed surprise for a moment before his brain catches up.

The blush that colours his cheeks has to make the last one look pale in comparison.

'You can?'

Orlando raises one eyebrow.

'That's a bit of a stupid question, isn't it? You're smart, you're great in bed, you're not annoying. Course I can.'

And that's- it? Just like that?

It sounds logical, his summary, Richard has to admit it, but is this really what Orlando wants? Is it what Richard himself wants? And can something like this be negotiated like a business deal?

While his brain seems to be going into overdrive, he keeps staring at Orlando, unable to come up with something remotely appropriate to say. Or anything to say, really.

Does he really-

Orlando's brows furrow slightly when Richard remains silent, and then he cocks his head, searches Richard's eyes.

'You all right?' he asks.

Richard nods.

'Yeah, I am.'

Yes, surprisingly, or not so very surprisingly, he is.

'That's- thanks, Orlando.'

It's not the answer one would expect, maybe, but then Richard is pretty sure that Orlando wouldn't prefer to hug it out instead and it really is the best answer he seems to be able to come up with, his mind is reeling, his heart beating furiously.

'Any time,' Orlando says and looks a little amused now. 'Come one, let's get someplace warm, I'm
starting to get cold.'

That seems to do the trick, there suddenly seem to be words again to make a whole sentence.

'Wait-- you don't want to talk more about this?'

Surely they can't just- not when he hasn't gotten to say any of what he so carefully has rehearsed in his head, not when he hasn't told him about Lee, and why-

'Well, I'd rather talk about Beckett,' Orlando says with a half-shrug, 'But I wasn't the one who brought this up.'

Richard looks at him in surprised disbelief, trying to gauge if he is serious. But of course he is. Of course he wants to talk about Beckett, to him this probably is one of those weird ripples in the matrix, Richard thinks, and feels a smile tugging at his lips.

'Okay,' he simply says. 'Beckett it is then. I haven't managed to convince you yet that Ionesco is the better choice, after all.'

Orlando's eyes narrow slightly and he appears to want to cut in, so Richard raises his hand to stop him.

'There's something I still need to tell you, though, but it doesn't have to be now, it'll keep. Okay?' he says quietly.

And it's fine, really that Orlando just nods somewhat distractedly because he then launches head-first into a surprisingly accurate critique of Ionesco's writing style and Richard suddenly is busy with trying to suppress a huge grin when he realizes that he is not the only one who's read up for today's discussions.

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The theatre is a somewhat shady back alley kind of place, even for Soho it's rather questionable. But then, Orlando supposes, if there were actual rats sharing the space on the stage, Beckett would probably approve. Krapp's Last Tape is an exercise in futility, and the aged actor portraying Krapp looks like he might actually die on stage. It is brilliant, and Orlando's mind is threatening to overload by the time they are done applauding.

He starts commenting on it immediately, before they even left the theatre, and leaves it to Richard to steer them to some place inside and less freaking cold. Naturally that means they end up in a pub near the Thames that would normally be far too fancy for Orlando's tastes, but he couldn't care less at the moment. He lets his pint go stale while he compares the expertly executed self-referentiality and the unrivaled portrayal of the complete and utter meaninglessness of existence. Krapp's realisations at the end of a wasted life are deeply cynical and moving because of that, and Orlando has to execute quite a bit of self-control to not bring the whole of Camus's views on existentialism into this as well before he even let Richard get a word in edgeways.

So, he shuts up, picks up his pint - notices Richard has all but drunk his, listening to his monologue - and apologizes for using Richard much like Krapp did his tape-recorder. Richard laughs at that, the first laugh after two hours of frowning, repeats his assessment of Beckett being 'just so fucking bleak' and as Orlando forgets his pint again when Richard then proceeds to dissect both play and writer with the precision of a detached coroner. As Orlando listens he alternates between wanting to smash his pint glass over Richard's head and wanting to drag him to the Gents to fuck him right here.
They stay for another pint and a bite to eat, and eventually other topics sneak into the conversation, like sports and film noir and vacations, and they continue to chat about that as they leave the pub and walk alongside the Thames.

After easily agreeing on the best Bogart movie, they walk in silence for a bit. Part of Orlando's brain is still stuck in the play, and while it has been Richard’s suggestion to change the subject because Beckett’s view on human relationships is 'pessimistic enough to make me want to shoot myself', he, too, seems preoccupied. When Orlando steps a little closer to him on the narrow path, the small plastic bag, containing the books that Richard bought, lightly bumps against his leg. Orlando thinks that he would like to have something of Scheler on him now, of Camus; they could read for a while.

And just like that - like ‘The Nature of Sympathy’ and ‘The Myths of Sisyphus’ lying side by side on his kitchen table and links falling into place over coffee - his brain offers a connection between two pieces of conversation, two things Richard said over the course of the day.

'Okay, relationship, expectations,' he says into the silence. ‘Go.’

Richard looks from the Thames to him and seems utterly perplexed.

'Sorry?'

Orlando raises the corners of his mouth in a silent apology; no one would be able to find logic and reason in that cryptic a prompt.

'Earlier, you said you'd like to talk more about relationships, about what you expect from one;' he explains. 'You said that it'll keep for a bit?'

He waits for Richard’s affirmation; and it comes in form of a small nod, albeit delayed.

'What you said about Beckett reminded me of that,' he therefore continues. 'So what was it that you wanted to talk about?'

Richard's expression changes. Instantly, like someone pulling down the sun visor.

'Alright. Sure,' he says, sounds anything but. 'Expectations.'

He falls silent again. They continue walking, and Orlando is about to prompt him once more - because the mere repetition of the subject line makes for shitty conversation - when Richard scratches the back of his neck and looks down at the dirty pavement.

'I certainly didn't expect you to ask about this again today,' he says and attempts a smile. It's a stalling technique.

Orlando prefers it when he has an actual clue why a topic is supposedly relevant. But Richard brought it up, and Orlando trusts that he has a reason for it, Richard said he wanted to talk about it some more, and Orlando trusts that he has a reason for that as well. And yet he doesn't say anything, still doesn't. He just keeps on walking next to Orlando, and he is still trying to smile but really looks like he thinks his own words might turn around and turn against them once he lets them out. Eventually, however, he takes a deep breath, sighs and straightens up.

'The thing is- I don't know. I don't know what to expect and what not to expect. And you don't seem
to even like the word to begin with.'

Orlando doesn't push, doesn't argue his point. This is about something else than semantics. After a second's delay, like he was waiting for Orlando to cut in after all, Richard nods and brings himself to continue.

'That night at the 'Riddermark' - I wasn't even - Lucy and Jonas dragged me there because they thought it'd be good for me to get laid. And then this happened, somehow.' He raises his hand to make the vaguest of gestures to encompass himself and Orlando, matching his partially elliptic syntax. 'And to be honest, I hadn't even considered to start dating again. I think I might still be a little surprised, actually. But don't get me wrong, I meant what I said, earlier. I like you, and I like spending time with you.'

Again he stops, and Orlando isn't sure why; whether it is because he is waiting for reciprocation or is navigating the next turn. The first is a bit redundant and the second something Richard has to suss out for himself anyway.

Still, as Richard glances up at him again, Orlando inclines his head. It's an easy truth.

'Yeah, same. But that's hardly defining expectations, is it?'

Richard's smile looks strained.

'Look, I'd love to tell you that I'm ready to commit to this, us, but I'm still trying to figure this out. But I am sure that I want to continue seeing you, and I certainly wouldn't mind seeing more of you, either. Maybe- do you think we can just take this slow and see where it takes us? And tell each other if it takes a turn we're not comfortable with? I'd very much like that.'

A clear premise, a clean cut path, leaving realistic room for variables. Pretty much the opposite of the belief that certain occurrences can be definitively anticipated. It is something Orlando would appreciate if that was all. But it isn't. Richard doesn't joke, doesn't suggest a new subject to confirm that they concluded this one. Instead his eyes follow one of the boats on the river, and he has balled his hands into fists in the pockets of his coat as if suddenly feeling the cold. They slow down, stop walking altogether, and Orlando leans against the iron-cast railing running along the embankment. He knows how to read body language. Hesitation, discomfort, determination; but without the causal link connecting them, there's fuck all to do with that. Richard looks at the water, thinks. And Orlando waits until he is done and decides on - something.

'I know I haven't been exactly forthcoming about my last relationship,' Richard finally says.

'I wasn't asking you to,' Orlando offers.

'No, I know. But it's important.' There is an odd kind of firmness in Richard's tone. 'That guy I broke up with last year, Lee, he started seeing someone else while- well, while I was still under the assumption that we were working through a difficult spell, you know? And I think what hurt most wasn't that he cheated on me, but that he failed to tell me that how he felt about me, about us, had changed, that what we'd had was long gone.'

He looks away from the river and at Orlando. His eyes can't decide whether to search or avoid him, though.

'I'm still having a hard time trying to get over this, after almost a year. What I'm getting at with this is-
wherever this takes us, please, just- be open with me. About what you want, about what you don't want.'

Orlando can't help but snort at that.

'Have you met me?'

Richard chuckles, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes.

'It's important to me because--'

His hand closes over the handrail, and his knuckles turn white.

'I don't think I can deal with being hurt like that again. And I don't mean to imply that I expect you to commit when I can't promise that I'll be able to. I know that feelings change and attraction wears off. That's just how it is.'

He pauses, then continues.

'If I know what's going on in your head and if I can rely on you to tell me when things change somehow, then I can look out for myself much better. And I sort of need that feeling right now, that I have all bases covered. So, be open with me, always, alright?'

His words are deliberately chosen, the ratio of necessary personal revelations and generalized conclusions so very carefully balanced. Orlando is certain that he must have thought about this before, about what to tell him, of how to explain, and not just now, not just once. He did it, even though he had enough exposure to Orlando's modus operandi for it to be unnecessary. It's not exactly rational.

Richard is still looking at him, however, waiting for confirmation, for a promise. So he holds Richard's gaze for as long as Richard wants to look at him.

'Okay,' he says then. 'Will do.'

Richard smiles, and that is relief now, for a moment, clear as day.

'Thanks, that means a lot. And thanks for bearing with me, I really appreciate it.'

The intensity of his response is confusing, despite his explanations, and instant irritation is Orlando's knee-jerk reaction. He keeps himself from frowning. Richard is just being diligent and conscientious. And Orlando appreciates both. So he nods.

'Sure.'

Richard rubs his beard and looks away.

'I didn't mean for a of this to get so- I don't know, intense,' he says, and again he adds, 'So, yeah, Thanks.'

Orlando growls low in his throat and pushes himself away from the banister before Richard can offer gratitude for a fourth time.
'I know I said I liked your politeness, and I do,' he says, and his voice holds more force than he expected it to. 'But please stop thanking me for something that is just a fucking given. I swear I will shove you into the river.'

Richard laughs and sounds like he is surprising himself with it. Orlando shakes his head, but feels the frown disappearing from his forehead. As they move on, he steps a little closer to Richard and nudges his arm with his own. Richard seems to freeze in mid-movement, but only for the fraction of a moment, then he answers in kind. They walk for a bit longer like this, the lights of the city reflecting on the black Thames, the night air biting Orlando's skin. When Orlando lets his arm touch Richard's again, Richard glances up at him, one eyebrow quirked. Orlando hunches his shoulders.

'I'm freezing my ass off. I'd like to be done with this quaint stroll and get inside before--'

He doesn't get to finish the sentence because Richard stops, grabs his arm, pulls him close and kisses him.

His nose is cold and his bag of books bumps against Orlando's thigh, but his mouth is warm, the kiss firm and I-know-what-I-want, and a flare of instant lust scatters all thoughts in Orlando's mind. As he parts his lips, he cups the back of Richard's head, and he hums into the kiss when Richard's grip on his arm tightens - fuck, he wants him and why aren't they somewhere more convenient already? There's noise from the street nearby and the river, footsteps not too far away. Still, as Richard deepens the kiss, as Richard makes a quiet little sound against, into Orlando's mouth, Orlando's brain comes up with bunch of ludicrous suggestions that entirely disregard concepts like public decency or temperature. It's only when Richard's hand comes to rest against his cheek and his fingertips are absolutely icy that Orlando hisses disapprovingly. He reaches for Richard's elbow to prevent him from pulling back again but mutters against his lips:

'I repeat, it's too cold out here.'

Richard nips at Orlando's bottom lip and grips his ass.

'Stop complaining. I've been wanting to do this all day.'

With a snort Orlando kisses him again, brief and hard; a promise and a demand.

'You can do that all night if we just move this to the fucking hotel.'

With a laugh, Richard pulls back and rubs a hand over his mouth.

'The elaborateness of your sweet talk is a little frightening sometimes, you know that?'

Orlando stuffs his hands back into the pockets of his jacket.

'Yeah, yeah. Like you want to hear sonnets while we're fucking.'

Richard chuckles again and shakes his head, obviously ready to walk on, but Orlando remains where he is for a moment.

- every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness. We always find something to give us the impression we exist. Ever tried, ever failed, no matter, try again, fail better -

A silent question is in Richard’s eyes as he waits for Orlando to walk with him or say something to
him. Orlando has words on his tongue, but Beckett in fragments is like broken glass.

‘You know what I like about Beckett?’ he says anyway, abruptly.

Richard shakes his head again, and Orlando can still feel the slight burn from his beard on his upper lip, the coldness of his fingers right below his left ear.

'I know he's right in the end - existence is bleak and meaningless.'

Richard frowns, but it's true and Orlando has known that for decades. It's neglectable right now. He shrugs lightly.

'But arguing the fuck out of that, giving him the finger and pretending it isn't? That's the fun, that's the whole point of it.'

Richard doesn't reply, but just regards him for a moment. Orlando tells Beckett in his head, and Camus, and Sartre, to zip it for once. He waits and thinks that Richard's face is really quite aesthetically pleasing and his ass is still cold. When Richard steps up to him, Orlando doesn't move, and Richard cups his face and kisses him again; and it's just that bit different.

His mind goes quiet.

***

Their train leaves Kings' Cross Station on time on Sunday afternoon. It's pleasantly warm inside the carriage after the chilly air on the platform, and when Richard sinks into the seat next to Orlando, he is glad to finally be able to sit down. He still is a little sore from their morning in bed, and his back remembers the afternoon spent at the museum. He might have opted for visiting the Museum of Modern Art or the National Gallery if he had been in London alone this weekend, but ever since Orlando had read that Jeremy Bentham's severed head is back on display at UCL, he talked about wanting to see it, so that's what Richard proposed. The head was a sight he would rather have been spared, but the discussion that followed certainly made up for it - taking the exhibition's title 'What does it mean to be human?' as a convenient starting point, the conversation strayed to modern and historical body preservation techniques and got heated when Richard brought up ethical considerations, their positions clashing rather spectacularly. Genetic research as a topic proved to be much safer ground and over a late lunch they circled back to Beckett and 'Krapp's Last Tape'. Richard couldn't be more satisfied with Orlando's choice of play, really, it's a performance he surely would have missed otherwise, and he is sure that he will remember it for quite some time, the brilliant portrayal of the tired, resigned old man so very moving, his recollection of the disappointments of a life-time so very painful to witness in its uncompromising honesty. Orlando in turn appeared to be very satisfied when Richard said so, and the moment was only briefly overshadowed by his remark that one great play was not enough to make him swear off Ionesco.

Orlando bought a football magazine at the station and now settles more comfortably into his seat and opens it. Richard retrieves the two neurodevelopmental articles from his bag that he has been meaning to read on the way to London already, but didn't because his nerves wouldn't let him, he never got past the summaries. In retrospect he almost feels a little silly about fretting like this for days, weeks, when there apparently wasn't any real reason to fret, when Orlando is fine with how things are at the moment, doesn't expect him to commit, not now, anyway. And that's such a relief, that he doesn't have to decide what he wants in the long run, that he is allowed to take his time to explore
this, that he can take more time to let his conflicted feelings for Lee settle further, that he doesn't have
to rush into something that he doesn't feel ready for. Funny, isn't it, how much good one
conversation can do? And a night of rather spectacular sex.

The thought makes Richard smile, and he casts a quick sideways glance at Orlando, who frowns at
his magazine and mutters something disapproving under his breath while he quickly flicks through
the pages. Richard wisely refrains from remarking that conclusions regarding the small entertainment
value could probably have been drawn from the horrible colour scheme and layout of the cover.
With a huff, Orlando closes the magazine and unceremoniously drops it to the floor at his feet,
apparently done with it. Richard expects him to turn towards him and start a conversation, but he
doesn't, looks out of the window instead, lost in thought.

For a moment Richard watches him in silence, watches the frown disappear, his shoulders relax.
Maybe he should offer a conversation topic, but then, maybe there's no need to, Orlando doesn't
seem dissatisfied, and he can't really think of something to say, nothing that's really worth saying,
feels his eyelids grow heavy, he hasn't gotten quite enough sleep during the past two nights. Not that
he minds much, he'd choose sex with Orlando over sleep any time, but he can feel the exhaustion
creep up on him now, and maybe he can just close his eyes for a moment, just one moment. He
settles deeper into his seat, his knee brushing against Orlando's in the process, his arm coming to rest
alongside his on the armrest, and that's nice, he can feel the warmth of his body through his shirt.
Orlando doesn't move away to make room for him, doesn't seem to mind, his mind still elsewhere,
his gaze directed out of the window without focusing on the features of the passing landscape. Just
one moment, then Richard will read his articles. Or maybe he can get them a coffee first, and he has
been meaning to ask Orlando about something he said about Bentham earlier, though he cannot quite
remember what is was right now, the steady hum of the train pleasant in its repetitiveness. He should
probably wash some clothes when he gets back, forgot to turn on the machine when Orlando came
over on Thursday, and he needs to call his parents, too, they have been asking about Christmas and if
he wants to join in on a present for the children. And then tomorrow he needs to go through the list
of scheduled visits for the week with Maisie, there is a family from Skipton who has missed their
appointment last Wednesday, and maybe they can still fit them in before the holidays. If the triplets
are stable, he might be able to nip out for lunch with Graham, but that might be wishful thinking--
talking to the parents will take time and he'll--

He can feel Orlando shift in his seat a little, to retrieve his phone apparently, he can hear the soft tap
of his fingers on the display. The warm weight of his arm is still there, though, of his knee, and
Richard doesn't open his eyes, instead presses his knee a little firmer against Orlando's, feels him
respond in kind, feels the movement of the train, the floor beneath his feet is vibrating softly--- the
next station is announced, more than enough time until they reach York, just one moment-- one
moment---
8/12/2017 - New Year's

Chapter Summary

Richard is at work, Orlando at home, but that doesn't keep them from making plans for the holidays.

[8/12/2017, 6:14 p.m.]

'Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead.'

'Hey. It's Richard. Listen, um- I'm in Leeds this weekend, working, but there's something I've been meaning to ask you- I would've rather asked you in person, but my next week is pretty packed, and I- ' [Soft chuckle] 'I guess I really didn't want to wait. And now you're not answering your phone! Well, alright, here's the thing- do you already have plans for New Year's? If you don't, then maybe we could see each other? I'm going to my parents' for Christmas, and then I'm working the 27th to 29th. But after that- I don't have to be back before January 4th, and I thought that maybe we could go somewhere together for a couple of days? If you're not on duty, that is. London or Edinburgh, or anywhere, really. I'd like that, I'd like to spend time with you when I'm off work. And I had a good time last weekend, in London. So- yeah. What do you say? You can try to call me later, maybe you manage to catch me in between C-sections, there are two tonight, and we can talk about it? That'd be great. Alright, I need to get back to work. Talk to you soon, and I hope you're having a good evening. Bye.'

[8/12/2017, 08:04 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, it's Orlando. Looks like you're still operating, hm? I'm busy till half ten tonight, so I can't call back later either. I'll have to get back to you about New Year anyway cause I normally volunteer to stay at school for the holidays. Could be I can get out of that, though. If not, you could come to my mates' New Year's thing, if you wanted to. Bad trade-off, though, I reckon since it's possibly fancy dress. Never mind. - I'll get back to you, all right? Gotta dash now, have a good night.'

[8/12/2017, Whatsapp]

Richard [8:57 p.m.]: I fear I might have given you the wrong idea about what I'm doing all day (and night)...

Richard [8:58 p.m.]: I wouldn't dream of operating, that's why I'm in neonatology. Much safer for everybody.
Richard [8:59 p.m.]: No, while the obstetricians slave in the theatre, I stand in a very well heated room and twiddle my thumbs.

Richard [9:00 p.m.]: Until someone hands me a baby.

Richard [9:00 p.m.]: Albeit usually a very tiny one or one that hasn't gotten the hang of things yet and refuses to breathe properly.

Richard [9:01 p.m.]: But more importantly, you're usually staying at school voluntarily over the holidays?

Richard [9:02 p.m.]: Wow.

Richard [9:02 p.m.]: Talk about dedication.

Richard [9:02 p.m.]: What about your family, then?

Richard [9:03 p.m.]: When do you see them?

Richard [9:04 p.m.]: I don't mind dressing fancy, as you might have guessed already.

Richard [9:08 p.m.]: But I'd actually prefer to spend some time just with you.

Richard [9:11 p.m.]: Doesn't have to be on New Year's Eve, though, if that doesn't work for you.

Orlando [9:43 p.m.]: My bad about the choice of words; I do remember that you said you're not a surgeon of any kind. Sorry

Orlando [9:43 p.m.]: And yeah, I stay at school. I live here, remember? Pretending to be a homeless tramp is only fun in summer

Orlando [9:43 p.m.]: Kidding of course. JC is pretty nice over the holidays

Orlando [9:44 p.m.]: Regarding relatives and visitation duties, my father is dead, my mother lives abroad last time I checked, no siblings. Your family lives in Yorkshire?

Orlando [9:49 p.m.]: You are having me on, though, yeah?

Orlando [9:49 p.m.]: About the party?

Orlando [9:49 p.m.]: It is fancy dress

Orlando [9:49 p.m.]: As in: Costumes, not cashmere pullovers

Orlando [9:50 p.m.]: You clearly don't have the right impression of my mates if you think they put on suits to get sloshed

Richard [11:31 p.m.]: I'm sorry, Orlando, I should have asked about your family before.
Richard [11:35 p.m.]: Are there many kids that can't go home over the holidays?

Richard [11:35 p.m.]: Or do you simply roam the deserted corridors and enjoy the quiet?

Richard [11:36 p.m.]: Usually I combine fancy dress and dressing fancy and make an appearance as James Bond...

Richard [11:37 p.m.]: But you make scrubs and a stethoscope sound like the safer choice?

Orlando [11:46 p.m.]: Don't worry about it, my family history in as boring as it gets, so there is nothing to ask about

Orlando [11:46 p.m.]: Both costume choices sound appealing

Orlando [11:47 p.m.]: I just learned that it is a theme party, though

Orlando [11:47 p.m.]: Beach party

Orlando [11:47 p.m.]: Meaning boardies and flipflops

Orlando [11:47 p.m.]: In fucking December

Orlando [11:49 p.m.]: Depends on the holiday, how many kids stay here. Not always a matter of "can't go home" but "won't". Some cause flying out is too much hassle for them and/or their parents, some cause they want to spend the time studying etc. Some go out of their way to be allowed to stay. Their mates are here and 'home is where the heart is, Mr Bloom'

Orlando [11:49 p.m.]: = one of my second formers this morning

Orlando [11:49 p.m.]: As for me, I spend them like I spend all holidays here - reading, doing stuff, seeing to it that no one gets killed

Orlando [11:50 p.m.]: How about you?

Richard [11:52 p.m.]: I'm not going to wear flipflops.

Richard [11:52 p.m.]: Not a chance.

Richard [11:53 p.m.]: And I'm on the fence about the question whether or not it's a good idea to be meeting your friends for the first time ever when everybody is drunk and wearing speedos...?

Richard [11:54 p.m.]: Or maybe that has to be considered the ideal setting?

Richard [11:55 p.m.]: Sounds like an old soul, that second former.

Richard [11:56 p.m.]: For me it's either working Christmas or New Year's Eve, so this year is actually pretty special and it would be nice to make something of that.
Richard [11:57 p.m.]: When I'm not working I usually spend Christmas with my family, my parents and my sister, my brother-in-law and my nieces.

Richard [11:58 p.m.]: This year we are all meeting up in Leicester at my parents' house.

Richard [11:59 p.m.]: I fear there won't be much time for reading for me, though, with two and a half kids in the house.

[9/12/2017 Whatsapp]

Orlando [1:35 a.m.]: Sounds very stressful

Orlando [1:35 a.m.]: Didn't know you were from Leicester. And yet you weren't raised to love their FC?

Orlando [1:35 a.m.]: That beach do at Karl's will possibly give you a truer impression of who my mates are than anything else. Up to you whether you want to meet them

Orlando [1:36 a.m.]: Like that or at all

Orlando [1:52 a.m.]: Eric just told me he and Vig are staying at JC for the holidays, and I know that Mir and Em will as well

Orlando [1:55 a.m.]: Sorry that didn't make much sense to anyone who isn't me. What I mean to say was that there's a chance that I can skive off for a couple of days

Richard [3:35 a.m.]: I had to come in to deal with a complicated respiratory situation and am waiting for the baby to get stable.

Richard [3:35 a.m.]: Thought I might just as well seize the opportunity to reply.

Richard [3:36 a.m.]: I wouldn't say stressful, but it's not exactly quiet when my nieces are around.

Richard [3:37 a.m.]: They make up for that by being seriously adorable, though.

Richard [3:38 a.m.]: And it's only for a couple of days.

Richard [3:39 a.m.]: And no, lamentably, I wasn't, my dad's not into football at all. Cricket and rowing.

Richard [3:39 a.m.]: Of course I'd like to meet your friends, Orlando.

Richard [3:40 a.m.]: Just the thought of being half-dressed in a room full of people with you is a little disconcerting, given the fact that we don't always make it home before we have sex.

Richard [3:41 a.m.]: But we should probably be fine if we don't talk to each other, don't look at each other and don't touch each other.

Richard [3:42 a.m.]: So yeah, maybe going away would be safer- if that's what you want?
Richard [3:43 a.m.]: If you'd rather stay for the party we could always just spend the afternoon in bed, to be on the safe side.

Richard [3:44 a.m.]: I'm going to check on the baby now and then try to catch some more sleep.

Richard [3:45 a.m.]: Hope you had a calmer night!

Orlando [4:09 a.m.]: How you work at this hour is really beyond me. I have difficulties even staying upright

Orlando [4:09 a.m.]: Might be the beer, though

Orlando [4:10 a.m.]: And I'm too drunk to make sense out of your suggestions rn. I'll just say yes to the one that comes with the most sex

Orlando [4:10 a.m.]: Priorities and all that

Orlando [4:11 a.m.]: You can meet my mates any time you want

Richard [4:15 a.m.]: Too drunk?

Richard [4:15 a.m.]: Sounds as if you had a good evening, then!

Richard [4:16 a.m.]: I'm all in favour of the option-with-the-most-sex, no point denying that.

Richard [4:17 a.m.]: Sleep tight now.
Chapter Summary

Orlando and Richard chat about kissing girls and falling out of windows.
Richard [5:45 p.m.]: It's an invitation via postcard because it's a Nietzsche postcard!

Richard [5:45 p.m.]: I stuck it into an envelope because I'm never quite sure how many people read
your mail before you.

Richard [5:46 p.m.]: Eight is perfect!

Richard [5:46 p.m.]: Looking forward to seeing you!

Richard [5:47 p.m.]: And thanks for the - slightly frightening- Santa.

Richard [5:48 p.m.]: A very unexpected choice of motive, though.

Richard [5:48 p.m.]: How comes?

Orlando [6:53 p.m.]: Just £4 for the whole set

Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: Gotta love the capitalism of Christmas

Orlando [6:54 p.m.]: The Santa with the massive nose hair is my favourite, closely followed by Maggie Thatcher as a Christmas angel

Richard [7:46 p.m.]: I'm almost glad that the kids at my work don't draw yet.

Richard [7:46 p.m.]: The mailbox is overflowing with pics of babies wearing antlers and Santa costumes, though.

Richard [7:47 p.m.]: Not a fan.

Richard [7:47 p.m.]: But you are actually keeping the Christmas machinery going by buying that stuff?

Richard [7:48 p.m.]: I'm shocked.

Orlando [8:21 p.m.]: Shocked? Oh, no, does that mean you will decline all the beautiful seasonally themed gifts I lovingly selected for you at my house's Creativity Fair this afternoon? What will I get you for Christmas instead then?

Orlando [8:22 p.m.]: No wait, I got it

Orlando [8:22 p.m.]: Blow Jobs

Orlando [8:22 p.m.]: Those'll do

Orlando [8:23 p.m.]: Also, I didn't buy the postcards. I nicked a set from Dom who bought all kinds of useless shit because he is a massive sap, a fact that my kids never fail to exploit

Orlando [8:23 p.m.]: He is also wearing antlers right now. As if I needed further proof that he has the maturity of a newborn child
Richard [8:25 p.m.]: Damn.

Richard [8:25 p.m.]: Blow jobs.

Richard [8:26 p.m.]: I should have thought of that.

Richard [8:26 p.m.]: Well, but I guess you can always swap your present for blow jobs if you don't like it.

Richard [8:27 p.m.]: Oh, and by the way, do want something to drink with your lamb that's not beer?

Orlando [8:43 p.m.]: Beer is good. Or whatever you think should go with what you're cooking. I trust your judgement

Orlando [8:43 p.m.]: Social etiquette dictates that I open that present and say nice things about it before I swap it, right?

Orlando [8:43 p.m.]: You in the hospital still? I really don't get behind your schedule

Richard [8:53 p.m.]: No, I'm at home. I usually finish around 4, 4:30.

Richard [8:53 p.m.]: I'd suggest red wine, but I know you're not keen on wine.

Richard [8:54 p.m.]: You can try it and have a beer if it's not to your taste.

Richard [8:54 p.m.]: I don't see how exchanging blow jobs is connected to opening or not opening presents?

Richard [8:55 p.m.]: Social rule I'm not aware of?

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Possibly Marx has something to say about it

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Social conventions in general, I mean

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Not blow jobs

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Or red wine

Orlando [8:59 p.m.]: Which is fine by me btw

Orlando [9:00 p.m.]: Oh btw, cheers for the quote you sent me this morning. I mentioned it during staff breakfast this morning and it was received as a declaration of war. Good fun

Richard [9:35 p.m.]: I'm glad to hear that.
Richard [9:36 p.m.]: re: the wine and the quote.

Richard [9:36 p.m.]: Who was offended by it?

Orlando [9:40 p.m.]: Johnny, our drama teacher. Granted, he is quite extra in general and even more so right now due to his idiotic Star Wars themed nativity play. But I swear I am not making this up: He actually went out to the cloakroom, fetched a mitten and threw it on the floor in front of me.

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: Jackson College, the place where gauntlets are thrown down in 2017.

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: Mind you, as far as gestures go it is quite effective. I was thinking of asking you to nick a handful of surgical gloves for me, so I can carry them around with me and throw them at people when I can't be arsed to yell at them.

Orlando [9:42 p.m.]: Before you commit any minor criminal offence, I am kidding.

Richard [9:43 p.m.]: Wait, wait, wait.

Richard [9:43 p.m.]: What?

Richard [9:43 p.m.]: Star Wars themed nativity play?

Richard [9:44 p.m.]: You made that up, right?

Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: Why would I make something like that up?

Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: Johnny decided decades ago that 'his creative process mustn't be shackled by social conventions', especially when he goes to the trouble of reenacting the same play over and over again.

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: And Star Wars isn't the most out there one by far.

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: You should've seen the zombie version a couple of years back.

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: If you've gonna tell me you don't have to suffer through any such nonsense, I am seriously considering changing professions and possibly countries.

Richard [9:49 p.m.]: While I can see why watching the same nativity play over and over again might be boring, I'm not sure if adding Zombies or Luke Skywalker is the best solution.

Richard [9:49 p.m.]: I guess it was a real treat, hm?

Richard [9:50 p.m.]: There was a bit of singing at the ward's Christmas party, actually, but luckily no acting.
Richard [9:51 p.m.]: If you ever need a convincing baby Jesus, though, just tell me. We have a dozen suitable ones.

Orlando [9:54 p.m.]: Since I wouldn't put it past Johnny to actually take you up on that offer and since the role of the infant magical carpenter is the most fought over every year, I advise against suggesting that to anyone

Orlando [9:54 p.m.]: They'll perform on Friday, but I had to supervise the dress rehearsal this afternoon and it was all right. The three wise men are members of the fencing team and put up a good show with their light sabers

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: Have you given it some more thought where you want go over New Year's btw?

Richard [10:03 p.m.]: I expect a detailed report over dinner on Friday!

Richard [10:04 p.m.]: And yes, I have!

Richard [10:04 p.m.]: Depends on what you define as 'warmer'?

Richard [10:05 p.m.]: Would Spain or Italy do?

Richard [10:05 p.m.]: Granada or Rome?

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Rome

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Definitely

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: But since I own a coat warmer than the one I foolishly took to London, it doesn't have to be the South. Whatever you fancy

Richard [10:09 p.m.]: Rome sounds great!

Richard [10:10 p.m.]: But to be honest, the place is secondary.

Richard [10:10 p.m.]: Give me good food, a museum and sex two times a day and I'm happy.

Orlando [10:12 p.m.]: Man after my own heart

Orlando [10:13 p.m.]: I am willing to compromise on the quality of the food even. So it's up to you to pick places to eat I reckon

Orlando [10:14 p.m.]: Great, now I want food and sex, and I don't have anything in the fridge
Richard [10:15 p.m]: I sort of wish I that we’d made plans for tonight, not for Friday.

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: I'm on duty till midnight, so that'd have been a tad awkward

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: And considering that I am in the common room of my house, phone sex is out as well

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: So in terms of late evening entertainment, I can't offer sex. I do have embarrassing stories though, if you feel the need for distraction. I'll swap you and I'll even start:

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: When I was in sixth form I started in Johnny's nativity play

Orlando [10:16 p.m.]: Your turn

Richard [10:17 p.m.]: Baby Jesus?

Richard [10:17 p.m.]: King Herodes?

Richard [10:18 p.m.]: I was Peter Pan.

Richard [10:18 p.m.]: In green tights.

Richard [10:19 p.m.]: When I was 14.

Orlando [10:23 p.m.]: I was Jesus / Iggy Pop

Orlando [10:23 p.m.]: There were some people not best pleased by it

Orlando [10:24 p.m.]: 14 hm? Considered an acting career after that?

Orlando [10:25 p.m.]: I wanted to be a car mechanic at 14

Richard [10:27 p.m.]: I briefly considered a change of school.

Richard [10:27 p.m.]: But then it actually was quite a success.

Richard [10:28 p.m.]: And to my surprise and embarrassment I became a favourite with both the girls at my school and their mothers.

Richard [10:29 p.m.]: I wanted to become a professional cellist in a Philharmonic orchestra.

Orlando [10:32 p.m.]: Your passion goes that far back? What happened?
Orlando [10:32 p.m.]: With me it was being told in no uncertain terms that I'd be disinherited

Orlando [10:33 p.m.]: And considering I had planned on using my parents' money to buy a fleet of cars for me to work on, that got me to reconsider

Orlando [10:33 p.m.]: Drove my first Jaguar when I was 13 but switched to motorcycles when I was actually legal to drive

Richard [10:35 p.m.]: I started playing when I was eight. And I was actually quite serious about it for a while, part of a youth orchestra and all that.

Richard [10:36 p.m.]: And then at some point I realised that I didn't want it to be my whole life.

Richard [10:36 p.m.]: That I didn't want to practise four hours a day.

Richard [10:37 p.m.]: But that's quite boring compared to your story!

Richard [10:37 p.m.]: You drove a Jaguar at 13?!

Richard [10:38 p.m.]: Was that the reason your parents thought you'd deserve to be disowned?

Orlando [10:51 p.m.]: Sorry for the delay, a kid fell down the stairs, trying to sneak by me

Orlando [10:51 p.m.]: I reckon some things can be spoiled by doing them too much / taking them too seriously, regardless of talent or passion, while with others it's the opposite

Orlando [10:51 p.m.]: Who / what got you into it initially?

Orlando [10:52 p.m.]: The reason for the possible disinherittance was the blue collar job

Orlando [10:52 p.m.]: My parents didn't know about the Jag. That was over the summer holidays which I spent at Dom's parents' place. The Jag was his grandpa's

Orlando [10:53 p.m.]: Also the car on whose backseat I had sex for the first time

Orlando [10:53 p.m.]: No wait, that was the lyrics of a Bon Jovi's song, not my life

Orlando [10:54 p.m.]: First sex was during a class trip to Mallorca. Very classy all around and not at all awkward af

Richard [11:01 p.m.]: That kid'd better not pursue a career in burglary.

Richard [11:01 p.m.]: Seems pretty harsh, to threaten a kid with disinherittance because he likes cars.

Richard [11:02 p.m.]: But that's not why you're a teacher, is it?
Richard [11:02 p.m.]: I got to choose which instrument I wanted to play and thought the cello looked graceful and dignified.

Richard [11:03 p.m.]: Not kidding.

Richard [11:04 p.m.]: Was that the same summer you stole the car and had sex for the first time?

Richard [11:04 p.m.]: Not with that friend, Dom, though?

Orlando [11:08 p.m.]: We didn't steal it, Mr Monaghan sr actively encouraged us to. He was what rich people call eccentric, i.e. completely off his rocker

Orlando [11:08 p.m.]: No, not that summer. I was thirteen for fuck's sake

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: I was in lower sixth and it wasn't with Dom - which will make a lot of sense when you meet him - but with Jolene, my girl-friend at that time

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: And let's just say that graceful and dignified are not the adjectives that come to mind

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: When was that? Choosing the instrument. Fair warning, if you say anything below the double-digits I will call you a posh little git

Richard [11:12 p.m.]: My parents claim I was around six, but I had to grow a little longer fingers first before I could start.

Richard [11:12 p.m.]: So yeah, posh little git.

Richard [11:13 p.m.]: If your first sex was with a girl, when did you discover that it's not only girls?

Richard [11:15 p.m.]: I would say neither my first encounter with a cello nor my first sexual encounter would be adequately described by using the words graceful and dignified.

Orlando [11:17 p.m.]: Too bad you have that aversion against nick names; I'd rather fancy addressing you as posh git instead of Richard

Orlando [11:17 p.m.]: First time with a guy was in college. He talked about Galois theory for two hours straight and I could follow barely 10% of it because I was hard

Orlando [11:18 p.m.]: Brains do it for me; told you

Orlando [11:18 p.m.]: You do realize that I am picturing you having sex with that cello now, right? Weirdo

Orlando [11:18 p.m.]: Also? Don't think I don't notice you're holding out on me here. You keep exploiting the same embarrassing story details. I want new material
Richard [11:20 p.m.]: Aversion is not strong enough.

Richard [11:20 p.m.]: I loathe nicknames.

Richard [11:21 p.m.]: And who's the weirdo, I never had sex with or even near my precious cello.

Richard [11:22 p.m.]: I'd admit that someone who plays the cello well might have the same effect on me as a sound theoretical excursus has on you.

Richard [11:26 p.m.]: All more private encounters I had with girls in my teens were disastrous.

Richard [11:27 p.m.]: In retrospect that's easy to explain, but those aren’t exactly moments that are pleasant to dwell on.

Orlando [11:29 p.m.]: I wasn't asking for embarrassing sex details

Orlando [11:29 p.m.]: This conversation started out about teenage embarrassment in general

Orlando [11:30 p.m.]: Okay, how is this one:

Orlando [11:31 p.m.]: I once nearly broke my back because I was trying to climb out the window of my house and my compassionate head of house (Sean) had to sit down because he was laughing his arse off

Orlando [11:31 p.m.]: Your turn

Richard [11:33 p.m.]: Sean was your teacher?

Richard [11:34 p.m.]: That's a surprise.

Richard [11:34 p.m.]: I always thought he was your age.

Richard [11:35 p.m.]: And well, you've met me. I was well behaved/boring as a kid.

Richard [11:36 p.m.]: I once got locked into the school building at the end of the day because I was in the music room, practicising too quietly for the janitor to hear downstairs.

Richard [11:37 p.m.]: But that's about it.

Orlando [11:46 p.m.]: How did you get out? I advise against windows

Orlando [11:46 p.m.]: Sorry again btw. For some reason the fact that we are about to break for the holidays makes my kids suicidal. Caught another one trying to sneak out

Orlando [11:46 p.m.]: Sean keeps telling me what goes around comes around
Orlando [11:47 p.m.]: And yeah, he was my head of house. I never mentioned that before?

Richard [11:52 p.m.]: No worries, gave me just enough time to get ready for bed.

Richard [11:52 p.m.]: If one kid tries to sneak out for every time you did, how many attempts do you still have to endure?

Richard [11:53 p.m.]: And what do you do with them? Give them a talking to in that particular tone I've heard you use? The one that makes me want to go check if my room's tidy?

Richard [11:54 p.m.]: I climbed out of a window. Wasn't much of a jump, though. Unspectacular, like I said. The shrubbery I crashed into didn't even have broken twigs.

Richard [11:55 p.m.]: And no, I think you never told me that about Sean.

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: My bad, I thought I did

Orlando [11:58 p.m.]: I don't have to yell at them, kids that try to sneak out. At this hour it's enough for me to just stare at them

Orlando [11:59 p.m.]: And not much longer; I'll turn in in five minutes

Orlando [11:59 p.m.]: When do you have to get to work tomorrow?

[21/12/17, Whatsapp]

Richard [12:01 a.m.]: Have you been sitting in the common room all this time?

Richard [12:02 a.m.]: I have to leave for work at 6:45.

Richard [12:02 a.m.]: Why?

Orlando [12:03 a.m.]: 6:45? Fuck, that's early

Orlando [12:03 a.m.]: Nah, I've been in my flat most of the time, I only was in the common room because I wanted to check something in the library there

Orlando [12:03 a.m.]: I was really just asking out of interest

Orlando [12:04 a.m.]: Don't tell me this conversation got you hot and bothered

Richard [12:05 a.m.]: They usually do.
Richard [12:06 a.m.]: But digging up all the memories about trying to make out with girls and not liking it took care of that.

Richard [12:07 a.m.]: I am curious about that book, though.

Richard [12:08 a.m.]: And then I'll actually have to turn off the lights.

Richard [12:08 a.m.]: Even though I really don't want to.

Orlando [12:10 a.m.]: The book is about second form chemistry, not interesting at all

Orlando [12:10 a.m.]: I am not best pleased to hear about the memories bit

Orlando [12:10 a.m.]: And would offer to over-write that with new ones

Orlando [12:10 a.m.]: But I need to turn in as well, I am knackered

Orlando [12:11 a.m.]: Friday?

Richard [12:12 a.m.]: Friday!

Richard [12:13 p.m.]: If you didn't just mean to imply you'll be bringing a girl.

Orlando [12:14 p.m.]: Fuck off, like I'd want to share you

Richard [12:15 a.m.]: Glad to hear that!

Richard [12:15 a.m.]: Cause I'm not ready to share you, either.

Orlando [12:15 a.m.]: You're planning to, though?

Orlando [12:15 a.m.]: I'm kidding

Richard [12:19 a.m.]: Good to know.

Richard [12:20 a.m.]: There wouldn't have been enough food for three, either.

Richard [12:20 a.m.]: Looking forward to seeing you!

Orlando [12:21 a.m.]: Ditto
Orlando [12:21 a.m.]: And Rome, yeah? Just so I can tell my subconscious to dream about you picking out fancy restaurants while I waylay the pope to yell at him

Orlando [12:21 a.m.]: Have a good day tomorrow

Richard [12:22 a.m.]: Definitely Rome.

Richard [12:22 a.m.]: I want to find the best Burrata there is.

Richard [12:23 a.m.]: Sleep tight now.

Richard [12:23 a.m.]: I'll probably dream about you yelling at the Pope now.

Orlando [12:23 a.m.]: Good on you

Richard [12:24 a.m.]: I could think of more pleasant scenarios...

Richard [12:25 a.m.]: I'll tell you Friday.

Richard [12:25 a.m.]: Or show you.

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: Richard

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: Don't

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: Start

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: Phonesex

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: At

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: Half twelve

Orlando [12:26 a.m.]: For fuck's sake

Richard [12:27 a.m.]: As if not the thought of yelling at the Pope got you turned on already.

Richard [12:28 a.m.]: I plan on making up for it Friday.

Richard [12:29 a.m.]: Wear something without too many buttons.

Orlando [12:33 a.m.]: Will do
Chapter Summary

Orlando asks Richard to come with his to the Boxing Day Beach Party his friend Karl throws- somewhat last minute.

[26/12/2017, 8:44 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

[rustling, the sound of people talking and singing - rather off-key, to Wham - in the background. A door gets closed and the noise dies down. It's followed by some more fumbling, accompanied by muttered incomprehensible curses, then finally]

...stupid fucking thing. - Ah, Richard, sorry bout this. Turns out, wearing gloves and trying to handle one's phone? Not my finest hour. But anyway, hiya. It's Orlando. I just saw you called a bit ago, I didn't hear it over the noise. Not sure whether you're still on the way home right now, I guess we've established that the reception in the Dales is shit. But anyway, if you haven't driven -

[Instant noise cuts Orlando off in the middle of his sentence as the veranda door is being pulled open again, then a voice - very loud]

Lando, come on, it's our song, and you're out here having a wank or whatever.

Fuck off, Dom. Can't you see I'm on the fucking phone?

But it's 'Fairytale of New York', man!

I don't need the excuse of Christmas songs to insult you. Go away.

You scumbag, you maggot, you cheap lousy faggot!

Yeah, yeah, whatever.

[The veranda door is pulled shut again and the music is cut off once more. Orlando huffs and his lighter clicks next to his phone's speaker]

Sorry bout that, mate. It's not even nine and Dom can't stand straight anymore. I'm at my mates' boxing day do, the one with the beach theme? It's actually just Karl and his girl friend in beach gear and that's close to their working outfit, I suppose. So, it's really a pretty normal party, maybe save for the indoor barbeque and the beach towels everywhere. So, if you haven't already driven past by now, you're welcome to drop by and you wouldn't even have to bring Speedos. Up to you, though, and -

[Again, the veranda door is being pulled open again - the sound of even more off-key singing (this time to The Pogues) - drifts out and the person exiting the living room (Karl) bellows the last couple of lyrics back into the room before addressing Orlando]
I'VE BUILD MY DREAMS AROUND YOU!! - Bloom! Get the fuck inside!

I'm on the bloody phone.

Who are you talking to? Everyone you know is already here!

You're hilarious.

Hey, whoever Orlando is talking to -

Richard.

[Rustling, then Karl's voice is much closer to the speaker]

Hey, Richard, come over for a beer!

I realize that this wasn't the best advertising for this party, so I won't hold it against you if you pretend you never received this invitation. Anyway, I'll text you Karl's address if you're in the mood, but no worries if you'd rather not. Talk to you soon, all right?

[09:17 p.m.]

"Hi, this is Orlando Bloom. I can't take your call right now, but you can leave a message after the tone, and I will get back to you as soon as I can. If it's urgent, contact Jackson College under 01904 667700. If it's life or death, you might consider calling the police or the fire brigade instead."

"Hey. It's Richard. The signal is terrible, that's why I missed your call." [Low chuckle.] "Sounds as if you're having a good time!" [Short pause] "And thanks for asking me over." [Pause] "Thing is, I have to work tomorrow. But I sort of-" [Laughs] "I sort of want to see you. And it might actually be a good opportunity for meeting your friends?! So think I am going to drop by? Give me 30 minutes or so. I won't be able to drink, though, so that I can drive myself home later and to work tomorrow. Unless-" [Pause] "Would crashing at your place be a possibility? I actually have everything I need for tomorrow in the car." [Short pause, then quickly:] "But it's fine either way, and I don't have to drink and then I'm still good to drive." [Pause, then quiet chuckle] "Alright, I'll see you in half an hour."

[9:19]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Fuck, Richard, what is the use of your fancy car phone, if you never have a signal? Whatever, I'll just text you the address.'

[Whatsapp]

Orlando [9:20 p.m.]: King's Rd 67

Orlando [9:20 p.m.]: Name on the door is Urban

Orlando [9:20 p.m.]: And sure, you can crash at mine. You can leave your car here if you want to drink (advisable); I was planning to get a cab back to JC later
Orlando [9:20 p.m.]: Now stop reading your fucking texts while you're driving
Chapter Summary

Karl's Boxing Day Party gets a little out of hand. In this part, Dominic Monaghan, Eric Bana, Viggo Mortensen and Sean Bean (on the phone) make an appearance.

'Your ass is buzzing, mate.'

'You don't say.'

'Who's calling at this hour?'

'It's as if you don't know me at all.'

'Viggo?'

'Obviously. Off you go, then. -- When did you change your caller ID picture?'

'While you were asleep. Eric?'

'Yes?'

'That chicken curry you make.'

'Yes?'

'Can I make that with pork?'

'Sure. You can’t call it chicken curry then, though. Why didn't you just get chicken?'

'Sean was in charge of meat.'

'So pork steak, hm? Just make some fried potatoes to go with it?'

'I told him I would cook a proper meal.'

'I think that qualifies a proper meal.'

'Sean says hi and it doesn't.'

'Tell him his car doesn't qualify as a car.'

'Fair point. Are you having a good time?'

'Yes. It’s quite the party, actually. My money is on Dom for falling asleep on the couch and waking up with a moustache drawn onto his face. Or being slobbered to death by Boris. And I told I would not be the only one wearing boardies. I’ll send you a picture of me and Karl. And Orlando, but he isn’t dressed up, he just walked into the picture.'
'Figures. Spoil sport.'

'Oh, but by the way, pass me over to Sean. His secret boyfriend is here.'

'Sean has a secret boyfriend?'

'No. But Orlando does.'

'Really? Why don’t I know that? What does- hey! --- Eric?'

'Hiya.'

'Orlando brought Richard?'

'If that’s what he’s called?'

'What does he look like?'

'I dunno- tall, dark, a little lost.'

'Handsome?'

'I'd say so. But don't tell Vig.'

'Vig says he's sure he looks like a moron.'

'Nah, he doesn't. And it's actually all very promising, he just survived one of Dom’s 20-minute-monologues without even once calling for help and a straightjacket. And you should see him with Orlando. But why haven't you met him, of all people?'

'Orlando keeps hiding him.'

'Do you want me to put him on the phone?'

'Absolutely not. But Viggo wants to speak to him.'

'Yeah, we are not doing that. But put him back on.

'--- as if I would be--- Hej. Did you miss me?'

'Always. But listen, I'm going to crash here.'

'I figured. Sean and I have big plans.'

'If they don't involve my apartment I don't want to know.'

'They kind of do.'

'Just don't tell me and vacuum afterwards.'

'Alright. I see you tomorrow, then. Have fun.'

'Will do.'

'Oh, oh, oh, and Eric, check if he has horns!'

***
'Richard!' Dom says with a lot of enthusiasm and flops down onto the couch next to him, almost knocking Richard's beer out of his hand in the process.

'Dom,' Richard says and gets his beer out of Dom's reach.

'Richard,' Dom repeats and wraps one arm around Richard's shoulder.

'Dom?' Richard tries.

'You really like him,' Dom says and follows Richard's line of sight. Orlando is leaning against the doorframe, absorbed in a conversation with Eric, one knee pulled up, foot resting against the frame. He is gesticulating with the hand that is holding his beer, the thumb of the other is hooked into his front pocket.

'I do,' Richard says after a moment.

Dom nods, all serious, his arm still wrapped around Richard's shoulder.

He smells as if he's drunk at least half of the alcohol the kitchen has to offer and his speech is slightly slurred.

'He is my best mate,' he says thoughtfully and stares at Orlando intently for a while. Then his head snaps around and he grins at Richard:

'And a massive dick.'

As if to prove his point, Orlando calls across the room:

'Would you please not scar Richard for life, Dom!'

Dom just flips him off.

Turning towards Richard he says with a smile:

'At the end of the day? Totally worth it, though.'

He briefly tightens his hold around Richard's shoulder, then let's go of him.

'Thanks,' Richard says.

Dom nods.

'Good talk, mate, but now I need to go take a piss.'

He salutes and pushes himself off the couch, almost toppling over when he steps onto his open shoelace.

***

'Dom!' Orlando hollers and bangs his fist against the bathroom door.

'Get the fuck out of there already!'

'Go away!' Dom hollers back.
'I'm not going to piss my pants because you're watching porn on your phone!'

Behind the door, Dom laughs.

'Seriously?' Orlando says exasperated.

'Don't make me come get you!'

Dom is silent for such a long moment that Orlando wonders if he has keeled over and fallen asleep, but then his voice comes from right behind the door:

'Can you even do that?'

'What?'

'Come get me?'

Orlando bangs his head against the door and closes his eyes.

'Why?'

'There's no key here.'

'Are you fucking kidding me?' Orlando groans.

'Did you manage to get yourself locked in?'

'Maybe.'

'You are such a moron. How did you manage to lose the key after locking the door?'

Silence.

'That's a brilliant question.'

Dom sounds as if he could use a break from drinking.

'Are you going to kick in the door?'

'No, Dom, I'm going to chop it down with an axe.'

'Really?'

'The fuck, Dom?- Hey, Karl! KARL!'

'WHAT?'

Karl pokes his head around the corner.

'Go get Tom. And whoever else is keen on extracting Dom from the bathroom.'

***

Orlando has just taken the first drag of his cigarette when the patio door behind him opens and closes.
'Hey,' Richard says quietly.
Orlando exhales.
'Need a break?'
Richard shakes his head and wraps his arms around himself to fend off the cold.
'I'm having a good time.'
'Despite all the craziness.'
Richard chuckles.
'Or because of it, maybe. But it's gotten late, and I need to work tomorrow.'
Orlando nods.
'Let's call a cab, then. I'm knackered, too.'
Richard raises his eyebrows.
'You sure? I can go on ahead if you want to stay.'
'Yes, Richard, I am sure, and no, I don't want to stay,' Orlando says, pronouncing every word very clearly.
Richard laughs.
'Okay.'
'Okay,' Orlando echoes and stubs out his cigarette.
'Let's go, then.'
Before he opens the patio door, he turns back towards Richard and the corner of his mouth twists up into a lopsided little smile:
'You can be on top, by the way.'
Chapter Summary

Getting up after Karl's Boxing Day Party is unpleasant.

Richard’s alarm goes off in the middle of a sleep cycle and rings for half a dozen times before he even stirs. When he does, it’s because there is movement next to him and quite a lot of grumbling and then Orlando leans over him, depositing at least half of his weight on him while he tries to locate Richard’s mobile and get it to stop ringing.

‘Fuck, Richard, where’s your fucking phone?’ Richard hears him swear before Orlando’s elbow hits him in the head. He groans and Orlando lets up, but only for a second.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, make it stop,’ he growls, and sounds exactly as tired and hung-over as Richard feels. Richard blindly pats the bed next to him, but his phone is not where he has left it, it seems to have slid between the bed and the wall, and Richard’s fingers don’t fit through the tiny crack there is.

When he says so, Orlando sighs and flops back onto his back. Richard watches him rub his eyes, hears him huff in frustration, then watches him sit up, slide out of bed and onto the floor and disappear underneath the bed.

There is more swearing, but then Orlando reappears and tosses the phone unceremoniously onto Richard’s chest.

‘Turn it off,’ he just says and sits down on the edge of the bed. With a swipe of his thumb Richard does and the room plunges into silence, then back into almost complete darkness when the display turns itself off.

‘What time is it?’ Orlando asks, his voice still hoarse after the shouting and singing of last night.

‘Six,’ Richard replies, his voice not even nearly awake yet, either, and unsuccessfully tries to fight the urge to close his eyes again. ‘Sorry.’

‘Fuck,’ Orlando groans and Richard feels the bed next to him dip when Orlando slides back under the covers next to him.

‘Just wake me when you’re ready to go and I’ll drive you to your car, yeah? Tea’s in the kitchen, towels are in the bathroom.’


‘I can call a cab,’ he says, and tries to open his eyes, tries to move, but his body is weirdly heavy and refuses to cooperate.

‘No,’ Orlando says.

Okay, Richard thinks. ‘Thanks,’ he says. ‘That’s---‘
Just five more minutes- five- more--- minutes---
Rome, New Year's Day 2018. Richard gets up early and lets his thoughts stray while he goes for a run to cure his hangover.

The sounds Richard’s shoes make on the cobbled street are rhythmical, steady. His breathing isn’t. He is already out of breath, even though he has only just left the hotel. And the road isn’t even climbing that fast, the residual alcohol in his bloodstream is messing with him.

Damn. But they certainly had a good time, last night. The Circus Maximus turned out to be a good choice for ringing in the New Year, even if half the world appeared to be there, the concert was alright and the fireworks were brilliant. And having Orlando practically pressed up against him throughout the better part of the old year’s last hour, when the place started to crowd in earnest, certainly was a nice side-effect.

***

On stage, somebody yells something into the microphone and in response, there is an enthusiastic cheer from the crowd surrounding them, then everybody starts counting down from… ten? in Italian at the top of their lungs. Orlando interrupts himself in the middle of a sentence, they have been talking about immigration politics for half an hour or so, when he feels Richard’s hand closing around his arm and turns towards him, casting him an inquisitive look that makes Richard smile.

‘You aren’t going to kiss me, are you?’ Orlando asks when Richard beckons him to step closer.

‘Otto!’ the crowd yells.

Of course he is. He has wanted to do so for an hour at least and has only held off because of the ton of people around them. But midnight certainly is as good an excuse as any.

So he just grins in reply to Orlando’s question and takes a steady hold of his lapels.

Orlando’s brows arch as he glances down at Richard’s hands, but he lets himself be pulled closer, and Richard can feel his pulse speeding up in response.

‘Sei!’

‘You know that that huge lady over there has been trying to flirt with you all evening, right?’ Richard asks quietly and inclines his head in the direction of the woman in question while he pulls Orlando closer still, until their hips are touching.

‘Right,’ Orlando snorts but doesn’t take his eyes off Richard, and Richard feels his hand settling on
his hip.

'Tre!'

'Well, better to be safe than sorry,' Richard murmurs while he lifts his own hand and cups Orlando’s cheek, he has taken off his gloves minutes ago to be able to do just that.

Orlando is close enough now for him to feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek and smell the beer they have shared, all he needs to do is tilt his head towards him a little.

'Due!'

Richard watches Orlando’s eyes dart to his lips, then back up to his eyes.

It’s going to be a bitch to leave if this gets us all worked up,' Orlando remarks, but his posture doesn’t signal objection, on the contrary.

Uno!'

Richard just hums and shrugs, there isn’t enough time for an answer, and none is necessary, really, because when the crowd erupts in a deafening cheer and Richard leans in to kiss Orlando, Orlando meets him halfway.

***

The second part of the night is more difficult to recall, its details are mostly fuzzy. Richard vaguely remembers the bar they got dragged to by a group of French guys that Orlando had struck up a conversation with at the Circus. He also remembers a rather passionate if not very stringent debate about Eribon’s book and the new rise of right-wing populism in Europe, a never-ending row of shots and Orlando’s tongue tracing the shell of his ear, his laughter in response to Richard’s little tormented growl.

***

Richard’s heart is racing when Orlando pulls back and it takes a couple of seconds for him to regain his bearings, seconds during which Orlando just smirks at him.

'Fuck, Orlando,' Richard huffs and rubs his fingers over his ear, his neck, as if to chase away the remnants of Orlando’s kiss.

'Here?' Orlando asks and Richard watches his grin widen.

Richard groans.

Oh, come on. Are you’re trying to kill me, two hours into the New Year?'

'What a way to go, though,' Orlando says lightly, and before Richard can reply, raises one finger and adds in a perfect imitation of Richard’s voice: ‘Oh, fuck off.’

Richard just glares at him for a moment, two, while the music that is blasting from the rather cheap speakers washes over them, people are pushing past them, there is laughing, shouting, a glass
shatters on the ground. Richard’s heart is still beating rapidly and he can’t seem to form one decent thought, he is too aroused, too aroused to think clearly, he wants- fuck, how much he wants Orlando, he needs to-

When Richard’s fingers close around his wrist, Orlando tilts his head to one side questioningly.

‘We are leaving,’ Richard informs him, and starts to tug at his wrist, his self-control is coming undone, and fast. It’s either that or having sex at the bloody loo again, and isn’t that getting a little ridiculous.

Orlando’s body is an inert mass and there is still amusement written all over his face, even if there is the hint of something else now, of something that Richard cannot quite place.

Richard checks his impatience and quickly scans their surroundings, but without loosening his grip around Orlando’s wrist. Nobody is paying them any attention, the place is getting busier by the minute, it seems, and the French guys are on the makeshift dance floor, distracted.

Orlando regards him in silence and now there is something outright challenging in his expression and Richard can’t- fuck, fuckfuckfuck, he is so hard, has been hard and half-hard and hard again for the better part of two hours and really wants to be done with that, just wants to get Orlando’s clothes out of the way and his hands on his body.

Richard takes a deep breath and then a step towards Orlando, lets go of his wrist in the process, but only to wrap one hand around his neck, the other around his hip before he leans in and kisses Orlando. He deepens the kiss instantly, it’s more tongue than anything else, and when Orlando laughs and tries to pull back, Richard’s only response is to thread his fingers into his hair and hold him in place. It takes a couple of seconds during which Richard wonders if he is going to die of a heart attack caused by sexual frustration, he can feel his heart beat all the way up to his neck, but then Orlando answers in kind and with enough enthusiasm to knock their teeth together.

***

A car speeds past Richard on the narrow road and comes much closer than he is comfortable with, honking loudly and making him wish he knew any of these rude Italian hand gestures. The road is still climbing and his pulse still is not where he wants it to be, his heart is still beating too fast, but the drizzle has faded now and a few timid sunrays are peaking through the clouds, even though the sky still is mostly grey.

***

The cab ride back to their hotel seems to take forever and a day, despite the late hour the streets are still crowded.

Still almost painfully hard, his jeans uncomfortably tight and Orlando too close and not close enough to redeem any of that, Richard tries to distract himself by counting the churches they pass. He is moderately successful until Orlando leans over to his side of the backseat to get a better look at the Synagogue, the cab sways as a result of a rather daring overtaking manoeuvre and Orlando reaches for his thigh to steady himself.

Any other day Richard’s resulting unsteady little exhale might have passed as a subtle comment on their cabbies’ driving style, but Orlando only has to take one brief look at him to confirm that that’s
not what it is, far from it.

In a wordless response, Orlando just grins at him and leaves his hand right where it is when he straightens back up, resting on Richard’s thigh, halfway between his knee and his hip, halfway between breaking the rules of public decency and an innocent gesture between friends.

Richard’s impatient little huff gets ignored and when he moves into Orlando’s touch, more by instinct than conscious choice, Orlando just shakes his head, and turns back towards the window, looking incredibly smug again, the bastard.

Back to counting churches then, Richard thinks and suppresses a sigh, but then he can suddenly feel Orlando dragging his thumb across the inside of his thigh in slow, steady strokes, strokes as intriguing as infuriating, strokes that cause another wave of arousal to wash over Richard and that make him ball up his fists in the pockets of his coat so that he doesn’t grab Orlando and kiss him.

When they reach their hotel room, it’s Orlando, though, not Richard, who comes first, for the first time, at least, just minutes after they have closed the door behind themselves, pinned to the wall by Richard’s weight, still fully dressed except for his open fly, with Richard’s hand wrapped around his cock and his tongue in his mouth.

Not that Richard lasts much longer, Orlando drops to his knees in front of him as soon as he regains his focus and Richard needs to lean back against the wall to steady himself when Orlando unbuttons his jeans and wraps his lips around his cock.

***

Richard can’t remember falling asleep, but he remembers not sleeping well, probably because of the alcohol, but also because of the strange surroundings, the neon light filtering in through the blinds, the traffic noise. And because of Orlando. It’s not that he is a noisy sleeper, or restless, he is neither, but sleeping next to him still is strange, Richard hasn’t gotten used to his presence yet, he still is very much aware of every single one of his movements, every sound, he still worries that he accidentally might crowd or disturb him. And then there is waking up next to each other, too. Probably that’s not a big deal for most people who share a bed at night, but for Richard it is, always has been. A body still on the brink of sleep doesn’t lie, and the first light of day rarely is flattering when it illuminates wrinkles, imperfections, remnants of sleep, the mind not in any position yet to counteract, to gild, the first thoughts and actions, reactions so much less filtered, so much more honest. It’s so incredibly intimate, all of this, and during those first few moments of the day he is so self-conscious, almost painfully self-conscious, feels exposed, vulnerable. As a result, the first exchanges of the day always feel a little strained, he can’t seem to find his footing, is silent when he doesn’t want to be, silent while he fights the feeling that all intimacy has evaporated during the hours of sleep, that they have to start all over again and revisit, renegotiate all agreements of the night before.

Well, if that isn’t wonderfully self-involved and over-dramatic, Richard thinks, while he wipes the back of his hand over his forehead to prevent sweat from running into his eyes. Way to begin the New Year. Graham would laugh his ass off if he told him about that, as would Orlando, probably. He is absolutely fine with letting him rip off his clothes and whip out his cock, fine with letting him touch and lick literally every inch of his body, or well, almost every inch of his body, fine with letting him fuck him, but isn’t fine with waking up next to him? Brilliant. Maybe he should consider therapy after all.

There is a hole in the road that has filled with muddy rain water and Richard notices it just in time to avoid it. He probably could pay a little more attention to his surroundings, but then, the street is
practically deserted and he isn’t really keen to focus on the strenuousness of his little outing, which would be the alternative to brooding.

What is it exactly that he objects to, that unsettles him? Waking up next to Orlando couldn’t be less complicated now, could it? He never crowds him, apparently prefers to keep to himself, too, until he is fully awake, and there really hasn’t been any indication that he would rather engage in ritualized closeness, e.g. in the form of spooning, or want to share morning breath flavoured kisses with Richard. So maybe he can just let this go and take the 30 seconds or so he needs to get over himself, without worrying about scaring him off? If Orlando wanted anything else, needed anything else, he surely would have told him, or simply showed him, his uncompromising straightforwardness seems to be something that can be counted on without exception.

***

When Richard is woken up by a commotion on the street below their window, screeching breaks and then several people yelling at each other, the street lamps are still on, even if there already is bit of daylight filtering in through the blinds.

There is more shouting and cars doors are being slammed shut, engines roar furiously, then there is a honking concerto. Then silence. Well, comparative silence, there still is the regular traffic, of course. Mildly annoyed, Richard rubs a hand over his still tired eyes and then just lies there for a moment, blinking into the semi-darkness before he feels Orlando stirring next to him.

‘It’s too fucking early for this shit,’ Richard hears him mutter and hums his agreement before he turns his head to look at Orlando. He finds him squeezing his eyes shut with his hand, then hears him huff in irritation.

‘Fuck this, I’m taking a shower.’

He is out of the bed and has disappeared into the bathroom before Richard’s brain has supplied him with anything to say in response. Just as well, Richard thinks, and closes his eyes again.

He can hear Orlando peeing, and if he was more awake, he would probably be a little embarrassed. Or more than a little embarrassed. Too intimate.

But thankfully, he isn’t fully awake, and pulling the duvet over his head to block out the sound is enough for now.

Without really meaning to, Richard manages to go back to sleep and only wakes up again when Orlando emerges from the bathroom.

Richard hears him rummaging through his clothes and put them on, and then the bed dips when Orlando flops back down next to him.

Richard disentangles himself from his duvet and squints at him.

He is wearing all black, of course, slacks and a sweater, and now looks up from the screen of his phone at Richard.

‘Go back to sleep,’ he says simply before he turns his attention back to his phone.

Richard shakes his head even though he is aware that Orlando doesn’t see it and sits up. It’s not even 7:30 yet. Damn.
The thought that Orlando might be able to hear him pee, too, has him turn on the shower before he takes a leak.

His shoulders feel a little stiff and the warm water is pleasant, Richard turns his face into the spray and lets it drown out every sound for a moment, every thought, lets it wash away any lingering discomfort, any lingering disorientation waking up in a strange place in a strange bed brings with it.

Orlando is still on the bed, still in the same position, still busy with his phone when Richard is done in the bathroom, and the small frown he is sporting causes Richard to smile involuntarily.

He should probably say something, like ‘Good morning’ maybe, but his brain still doesn’t seem to be cooperating, so he is about to decide against it when Orlando looks up at him and quirks one brow inquisitively.

‘You know,’ he says, ‘I’ve been with women who spent less time in the bathroom than you do. And you don’t even shave your legs.’

Richard chuckles. ‘Sexism that early in the morning?’ he says and grins at Orlando before he turns towards the closet.

‘I can’t recall to’ve ever heard you complaining about my masculinity when I’ve fucked you,’ he then adds a little distractedly, directing the words at the closet, rather than at Orlando while he tries to decide which shirt to wear. Depends on where they are going, probably, the blue one might be better suited for the museum, and-

‘Richard.’

Orlando’s voice is low, and Richard knows that tone, as does his pulse, it spikes immediately. Suddenly very aware that he is only clad in a towel, Richard turns towards the bed to find Orlando’s eyes fixed on him, the phone is now resting on the nightstand.

‘Don’t bother with putting on clothes just yet.’

***

There is a staircase up ahead and Richard forces himself to slow down and concentrate on his breathing while he tries not to look up and ahead, but keep his eyes fixed on the ground and simply let his body do its job.

When he reaches the top of the stairs, he is completely out of breath and slightly nauseous, however, and makes a mental note not to pick a route that climbs and includes stairs when trying to exorcise a hangover. He manages to continue for a couple of hundred yards more, before a wave of almost violent nausea makes him stop in his tracks. Fuck. He takes a deep breath, then another one, and another one, while he tries to distract himself with the view that is truly spectacular, the wide expanse of the city on the other side of the river beautifully stretching out in front of him. There are a handful of tourists there, of course, this city doesn’t even sleep on New Year’s Day, the most obnoxious ones are Brits, an overweight couple, almost hysterically cheerful, and to make things worse they are taking pictures of themselves with one of those stupid little sticks.

Sudden rage against tourists, Richard thinks, maybe not the way to go either on the first day of the year. But cathartic, apparently, because the urge to throw up into the next shrubbery seems to be fading. He turns to get the couple out of his line of sight and lets his eyes stray for a moment, tries to get the panorama to match with the map of Rome he has seen, tries to make out some of the sights
but the only one he is sure about is the National Monument, which looks huge, even from this distance.

A gust of wind reminds him of the fact that he is outside at temperatures below ten degrees in a rather thin and rather sweaty running jacket and needs to get moving again not to get cold. He takes one last look across the city, before he makes his way past the statue of Garibaldi and follows the road that must lead to the park behind the Villa Doria Pamphilij.

The nausea returns when he picks up speed and Richard suppresses a frustrated huff and slows back down again to give his body time to sort out its issues. He should’ve skipped those last two shots, or three, probably, if he had, he would still have had a good time but would have felt less shitty now. And it’s not that he wasn’t perfectly aware of that last night. What is it that makes him push past his limits when he’s out with Orlando? It’s the second time in one week that he has gotten drunk, really drunk, and that Boxing Day Party and the truly horrible day at work that followed should already have taught him a lesson, having to ask one of his colleagues to give him an i.v. antiemetic after almost being sick in the back of the ambulance isn’t something he ever wishes to repeat.

But drinking with Orlando is fun. Drunk Orlando is- it’s difficult to pinpoint, and Richard wants to say more relaxed, but that doesn’t seem to cut it. Less filtered, maybe, even more straightforward than he usually is, a little louder, a little less prone to shred an argument to pieces just for the hell of it, for the mental exercise, more willing to let something go. And definitely more willing to let Richard be on top, if not less demanding. Richard is not under the illusion that that is anything else than a rather convenient way for Orlando to get what he wants- sex- without having to exert himself too much in his drunken state, but that is fine, because pliant Orlando is something very rare and as much as Richard otherwise likes his spirit, his fierce impatience, his passion, pliant Orlando is an incredible turn-on.

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Orlando is on his back, underneath him, with his arms stretched out over his head and his eyes closed, and that is such a sight.

Richard pushes himself up onto his elbows so that he can look at him, watch him bite his lip when he angles his hips and thrusts deeper, and deeper still.

His hair is a mess and he is sweaty, Richard can feel his skin sticking to his own when he moves against him.

He is quiet, much quieter than he usually is, all Richard can hear are those little pants that seem to get cut off half way. Orlando’s focus is turned inwards, and Richard can’t take his eyes off him.

But he is getting close, it’s too much, Orlando’s tightness, the way he keeps rocking into his thrusts, the way he is now reaching for him, the way his hands wrap around him, around his arm, his neck, to pull him closer, the way he kisses him, open-mouthed, uncoordinated, the way he pants against his lips, his forehead resting against Richard’s—

He knows that Orlando won’t be able to come like this, not if he doesn’t touch him, he has never come just from being fucked, and Richard wraps his hand around his cock, hears Orlando hiss softly when he starts stroking him.

It doesn’t take long and it doesn’t matter that Richard can’t seem to coordinate the movements of his hand and his hips. Orlando arches off the bed when he comes, becomes impossibly tight, and
Richard presses his lips to Orlando’s to swallow his moans while he pushes into him hard, spilling only a couple of heartbeats later.

***

Richard only notices that he has stepped right into a puddle when the water runs into his shoe and he curses, then laughs at himself. So fucking predictable, distracted by thoughts about sex, even when Orlando isn’t anywhere near him.

His shoe makes a squishing sound when he crosses the road, then the small parking lot and enters the park. It’s deserted, unsurprisingly, it’s 9:15 a.m. on New Year’s Day and the sky is overcast. There are just a few people walking dogs. There are no flowerbeds, but lawns and tall pines, palms trees that look oddly out of place, and the traffic noise is much less prominent here and recedes further when he advances into the park.

***

Richard needs a moment to collect himself and try to calm his nerves before he rings the bell. There is music and laughter to be heard from the other side of the door and it takes a while, but then there are footsteps, too, as well as an excited bark, and someone yells: ‘Coming!’

When that someone opens the door, all Richard can see for a moment is a huge dog that bounces towards him and presses its nose into his crotch.

Great.

There is a sigh of exasperation and then a hairy arm reaches out for the dog’s collar and pulls it off Richard.

‘No, Boris, no. Sit down. Sit. SIT!’

Boris, the dog, doesn’t seem particularly inclined to follow that order, but just cocks his head to the side and regards Richard, enthusiastically wagging his tail.

‘Sorry about that, mate,’ Richard hears the owner of that voice (and dog?) say, and when he looks up, he is greeted by a wide smile, the wide smile of a man who wears nothing but flip flops and neon-colored boardies with a tropical theme. And he certainly is fit. And holding a green drink with an umbrella in the hand that is not busy with keeping the dog in check.

‘Hi,’ Richard says, a little uninspired. ‘I’m Richard.’

The guy’s eyebrows lift quite spectacularly and his grin widens while he gives Richard a quick once over.

‘Right,’ he then says, still grinning. ‘Richard. Orlando hasn’t told us anything about you. Come on in.’

He takes a step backwards to let Richard in.

‘I’m Karl, by the way. And you’ve met Boris.’

Richard steps into the hallway, Boris barks in apparent approval and Karl closes the door behind
‘Let me get you something to drink,’ Karl says. ‘And then we go find Orlando. I think he’s out back, smoking.’

Richard nods. ‘Thanks.’

‘Hi,’ someone says behind his back, and when he turns around, a petite woman in a sun dress, and, predictably, flip flops, smiles at him.

‘Hi,’ Richard says.

‘This is Richard,’ Karl says, the four syllables heavy with meaning, and does something with his eyebrows again.

The woman cocks her head to the side, not unlike Boris did a couple of seconds ago, who, by the way, has not taken his eyes off her since she entered the hallway. Which is understandable, Richard thinks, she is very pretty.

‘Richard?’ she says, and lifts her brows, too, what is with those people and their eyebrows?

‘Orlando’s Richard,’ Karl says and Richard feels his pulse spike. He fleetingly wonders if he should veto that amalgamation of their names right away but decides against it. Rude.

‘Oh,’ the woman says and grins at him. ‘Now I understand.’

‘This is Beth,’ Karl says, and after taking one look at Boris who is still staring at Beth, transfixed, apparently deems it safe to let go of his collar.

‘We work with Orlando.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Richard says.

‘Have you seen Orlando?’ Karl asks Beth.

‘He’s having a cigarette and bitching about the music,’ she says, and winks at Richard. ‘Give me your coat,’ she then says. ‘And Karl, why doesn’t Richard have anything to drink?’

‘Because Boris maulled him,’ Karl replies and disappears into the kitchen.

‘Do you want me to take that, too?’ Beth asks with a smile and gestures towards the bottle of gin Richard is still holding.

‘Absolutely,’ Richard replies and hands it to her. ‘Showing up both without a costume and without alcohol seemed impossibly rude, so- yeah, gin.’

Beth laughs. ‘You shouldn’t have. But thanks.’

She finds a place for his coat on the overflowing coat rack and winks at him when she turns back around:

‘I’m sure we can find you some flip flops if you want to go wild, though?’

Richard laughs. ‘I’m good, thanks.’

Karl resurfaces from the kitchen and hands Richard a beer while he slides his hand around Beth’s
‘You’ll need that,’ Beth informs him. ‘You haven’t met Dom yet. There’s more in the kitchen, just help yourself.’

It’s a brand he has never heard of, Tui, and Richard is about to take a sip when someone behind Karl’s back says:

‘Who hasn’t met me yet?’

When Karl steps aside a little, Richard finds two piercing blue eyes directed at him, two eyes that are framed by black eyeliner and that belong to a guy, about a head shorter than Richard, who is wearing a mobster hat and a shit eating grin. Dom?

‘Who are you?’ he asks Richard with unmasked curiosity.

‘That, my friend,’ Karl says and grins at him over his shoulder, ‘is Richard.’

The guy draws in an audible breath. ‘You don’t say,’ he says to Karl, but without taking his eyes off Richard. ‘So he is real, after all.’

Richard nods. ‘Very real. And also: right here.’

Dom laughs. ‘I like you already.’

He elbows Karl out of the way and extends his hand towards Richard:

‘Dom. Pleasure to meet you.’

Beth fills the little awkward pause that follows when Richard misses his cue to say anything in reply because he is too busy trying to remember what Orlando has told him about Dom.

‘Dom and Orlando went to school together. And university. So he’s your man if you want to hear embarrassing stories about Orlando’s youth. Speaking of which, where is he?’

‘Talking cars with Eric?’ Dom says, as if there couldn’t possibly be anything else Orlando could be doing.

Then he pushes himself up onto his toes, whistles sharply and hollers into the direction of what must be the living room:

‘Oi, Orlando!’

It takes a moment but then Orlando hollers back: ‘What?’

‘Guess who’s here?’

‘Your mum?’

‘Yeah. She arrived with your boyfriend.’

Richard fights the impulse to close his eyes and groan or bang his head against the wall.

Orlando appears in the doorway and looks pretty much like his usual self, if a little disheveled, maybe, and he is wearing a dark grey shirt instead of a black one, which must be a concession to the party.
‘You’re such a dick,’ he says to Dom before he smiles at Richard:

‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ Richard echoes and answers his smile, instantly feeling a little calmer.

The hallway remains silent for a moment while Orlando makes his way over to Richard. Then Dom asks:

‘Wait, what, you’re not gonna kiss him?’

Orlando turns to glare at him. ‘What are you, fourteen?’

Dom just grins at him and crosses his arms in front of his chest. ‘Chicken,’ he sing-songs, and next to Richard, Orlando huffs.

‘Mature, Dom,’ he says.

‘Oh come on, you know you want to,’ Dom says, and waggles his eyebrows. Seriously people, eyebrows?

Richard watches Orlando’s eyes narrow, but then he shrugs and turns towards Richard, licks his lips, takes Richard’s face into his hands, knocking his beer bottle against his skull in the process, and kisses him, deep and dirty, tongue and everything.

‘Oh wow,’ Richard can hear Dom saying, and he probably would be incredibly embarrassed if this kiss wasn’t the hottest thing ever and didn’t pretty much instantly made him stop caring about the world at large.

Orlando pulls back and flips off Dom who just hoots.

‘Come on,’ Orlando says and places a hand on the small of Richard’s back. ‘Let’s get you a proper drink.’

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Richard catches himself smiling. He had a surprisingly good time that night, once he got over the feeling of being out of place (and Orlando’s friends got over their initial curiosity). Also because Orlando seemed to be enjoying himself, drinking, laughing about inappropriate jokes with Dom, Karl and Beth, oh and that tall Australian guy who spent half an hour on the phone, seemingly giving bad cooking advice and bashing someone’s car.

He hadn’t been to a party like that in years, to a party where people just hung out, got drunk on questionable alcoholic beverages and had fun. Most of his friends are married or in increasingly serious relationships, have settled down, bought a house, IKEA furniture, had kids, adopted dogs, and there just isn’t this kind of party any longer. Instead there are barbecues and brunches and dinner parties. Which aren’t half-bad, Richard thinks and turns his had to look at a couple of picture perfect ruins to his left while he passes them, but they don’t exactly make you feel ten years younger. That party at Karl’s did, though, as did making out with Orlando in the back of his car while they waited for their cab to arrive and almost having sex in Orlando’s hallway, in the dark, with Orlando’s back pressed against the door and his legs wrapped around Richard’s waist.

All the way to Harrowgate he’d been nervous and had stopped at that petrol station just to buy time,
getting that bottle of gin just a pretense. He had thought that he’d feel weird about himself all evening, and 
*awkward*, trying to blend in with people Orlando had known for years, decades even. And being there as his- well, what? Mate? Boyfriend? Lover? Significant other? Special friend? They had not talked about that, not since London, not since agreeing that this, them, might actually be something they might both want to pursue further, but it had felt way too early to put a label to it, and while Richard had refueled his car, unnecessarily, he had fought against a sudden wave of panic that had caused him to break into sweat and that had made breathing difficult for a couple of seconds.

But then it was *easy*, really, and only awkward for ten, maybe twenty minutes. Beth really made an effort to include him, as did Dom. Which, all in all, was a pretty nice gesture, even if he clearly had an ulterior motive and the detailed questions about their sex life were a little disturbing. Orlando took them as the declaration of war they were intended to be, though, and listening to him and Dom drag up embarrassing stories about each other from their time at university certainly was worth the not inconsiderable embarrassment on his part. Also, because Orlando’s outright dirty laughter made him hard.

And just like that, his cock starts to swell. One stray thought is all it takes, the thought of being hard for Orlando. Richard feels himself blush. Great. In a public place. Way to go. He sighs and shakes his head. Checking that nobody can see him, he then quickly adjusts his pants before he increases his speed, to keep his body busy and distracted, and takes the next turn left to make his way back to the entrance of the park.

It’s something that still surprises him, this overwhelming physical attraction between them. And the fact that it doesn’t seem to have faded one bit during all these months they have been sleeping with each other, on the contrary. It’s this attraction that makes him turn around on his way home to meet Orlando at a party in the middle of nowhere, gets his clothes rumpled and messed up and torn, sometimes, when Orlando can’t be bothered with undressing him in a civilized manner, leaves both of them with scrapes, bruises and love bites, breathless, sore and sweaty, and gets them thrown out of museums. Or one museum, to be precise. The Vatican Museum. Which was a little unexpected, really, because the exhibits really held him captive, particularly the statues, and Orlando was the embodiment of self-restraint for the better part of three hours and contended himself with glaring at all the staggeringly huge paintings with religious motives and muttering something rude under his breath now and then. Until- he cracked and gave Richard - and everybody else who had cared to stay and listen- a rather fiery speech on the enslavement of Europe’s population throughout the centuries in the name of religion. Which didn’t get them thrown out in the first place, the guard actually appeared vaguely interested, but it - rather predictably, Orlando should have known that- made Richard hard and after 25 minutes of trying not to he simply had to kiss Orlando, which apparently is frowned upon inside the galleries. Not that Richard complained. His feet were hurting and spending the afternoon in bed with Orlando appeared like a good way to get off them and give them a rest.

It starts to rain again when he has just reached the Villa and Richard pulls the hood of his jacket over his head and further increases his speed, he really could do without getting wet through, and the sky seems to be getting get darker with every minute that passes. So they probably won’t get to go for this stroll along the Via Appia Antica later then. Another museum? The Centrale Montemartini sounded promising, even if that would mean that Orlando would have to wait yet another day before getting to see that cemetery he has been talking about, the non-Catholic one with the pyramid and the famous Angel of Grief. But he might just be fine with that, really, he doesn’t seem to appreciate traipsing around in the rain any more than Richard does.

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Richard puts down his napkin and smiles at Orlando.

‘That was excellent.’

Orlando hums.

‘And unnecessarily expensive,’ he says and wipes a bit of chocolate mousse from his lip.

Richard laughs.

‘Well, it’s a good thing I’m paying, then.’

Orlando lifts his eyebrows.

‘Which also is quite unnecessary, but cheers, anyway.’

Richards nods.

‘I’m not going to drag you into restaurants you would never set a foot into and then make you pay for your food, that would be rude.’

‘But the dragging into part is fine?’

Richard chuckles and lightly nudges Orlando’s knee with his own.

‘Well, I can only make so many compromises where food intake is concerned. We’re in Rome.’

‘Really?’ Orlando asks, deadpan. ‘What tipped you off? All the Catholics? Or the mind-numbing number of sights?’

‘Speaking of which,’ Richard says, ‘do we still need to go see that fountain? It’s raining.’

Orlando shakes his head.

‘I’m good.’

‘Alright. Coffee, then?’

‘Sure.’

Richards nods at the waiter to get him to come over and take their order.

‘And after that?’

Orlando shrugs.

‘I could read for a bit.’

Richard peers at him over the rim of his wine glass.

‘That’s code for “Let’s go have sex”, right?’

Orlando arches his brows.

‘If I want sex, I say that I want sex.’

Richard sips from his glass, then puts it back down onto the table and leans towards Orlando,
grinning at him:

'So, you actually want to read? You haven't touched a book since we got here.'

Orlando lifts his shoulders.

'I've been busy.'

He pauses, then adds:

'Now I want sex, though. Just get the coffee to go.'

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Richard doesn’t really want to go there, for fear of triggering a fresh bout of anxiety, but this is going well, the whole trip. He really is having a good time. And it’s fine, to be around Orlando all day, he is neither longing for the solitude of his flat, nor is there this weird restlessness that usually tells him that he needs to get out, get some air, get some alone time, take a deep breath and calm the fuck down. No, it really is all good, and that despite the fact that Orlando booked a six night trip instead of the three nights they had agreed on, apparently because the flights were cheaper.

The route back to the hotel is easier to navigate and Richard is thankful for that, because the rain is still getting heavier. He pulls the zipper of his jacket all the way up and pulls the hood more tightly around his head while he tries to stay underneath the trees, even if they don’t offer much protection from the rain in their leafless, wintery state. Ten more minutes, and then he will buy coffee for Orlando and himself and then take a nice hot shower.

He really should send Graham a postcard to say thank you, or buy him a bottle of grappa, maybe, because he might not be here, in Rome, with Orlando, if it hadn’t been for Graham and his weird mixture of pep talk, persuasion and teasing.

***

‘I’m making Pad Thai,’ Graham says while he hands Richard a bottle of beer. Richard doesn’t have to turn it around to know that it’s alcohol-free.

‘You can warm it up later in case you get called in, usually still tastes okay.’

‘I really hope the night will be quiet, but thanks, I appreciate it.’

Richard raises his beer in a silent salute.

‘Sláinte,’ Graham says.

After they’ve both set down their bottles again, Graham takes a cutting board out of one the drawers and selects a knife.

‘Do you want help?’ Richard asks.

‘Nah, I’m good. Just keep me company,’ Graham says and gets the vegetables from the fridge.

‘And before I forget, are you still going to your sister’s for New Year’s Eve? If you aren’t, Elliot and
I would be happy to have you over.’

‘Thanks, Graham, but actually- um- I’m going to Rome,’ Richard says hesitantly.

Graham looks at him over his shoulder.

‘To Rome? Over New Year’s? How did that happen?’

Richard shrugs.

‘Well, it’s been ages since I’ve been off work both Christmas and New Year’s Eve, and I thought it would be nice to do something special.’

Graham hums.

‘That’s certainly special. Are you going with Lucy and Jonas again? Or with Cate?’

Richard shakes his head.

‘With Orlando, actually.’

Graham puts down both the knife and the carrot he has been slicing and turns around to look at Richard, amusement written all over his face.

‘Really?’ he asks and leans back against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Richard pulls a face.

‘Very romantic,’ Graham says and reaches for his beer.

‘Don’t,’ Richard says but without any heat behind it.

‘No, really, a weekend together in Rome…’

Richard’s thumb worries the label of his beer bottle.

‘Six nights, actually.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’

Richard shakes his head.

‘In the same room?’

‘Obviously. I couldn’t very well ask him to get his own room, could I? Sex is fine, but I don’t care for sleeping next to you?’

‘Well, you could have. Maybe in other words, though. But that’s beside the point. You don’t seem very thrilled about this?’

Richard sighs deeply.

‘I was. I really was. But then three nights somehow turned into six and now I’m-‘

‘Freaking out.’

Richard nods.
'Pretty much, yes.'

Graham rubs his forehead.

‘Alright,’ he says, ‘Alright.’

He regards Richard in silence for a moment before he adds:

‘Talk to me, Richard.’

Richard shakes his head.

‘I don’t know. I can’t just bail on him now.’

‘When are you leaving?’

‘Tomorrow afternoon.’

‘That would indeed be a little cruel,’ Graham says quietly. ‘But if that’s what you want, that’s probably the way to go.’

‘But it’s not,’ Richard says quickly, surprising himself with it.

‘It’s not?’ Graham asks.

‘No. I’m looking forward to spending time with him, I really do.’

Graham doesn’t cut in, wordlessly encouraging him to continue.

‘It’s just- I don’t know. It’s just all going a bit too fast, maybe. It was a really big thing to even ask him.’

Graham hums.

‘I can imagine.’

‘And then it’s suddenly a whole week, somehow. And then, the day before yesterday, I was at a party, with him, and all his friends kept referring to me as his boyfriend and I.-‘

Richard huffs in frustration.

‘I don’t think I’m there yet, Graham. I don’t think I’m ready.’

Graham sighs and scratches the back of his head. Then he sets down his beer and walks over to the table, takes a seat across from Richard.

‘You know what I think?’ he asks and searches Richard’s eyes.

‘I think it’s just your fear talking. You got hurt very badly, and you want to protect yourself. And that’s fine, that’s sensible. Be cautious. But don’t deny yourself things you actually want because of it.’

Richard is about to reply, but Graham holds up his hand, asking him to wait.

‘You just told me you want to go, and you asked him, Richard. And it sounded as if you had a really good time together in London. Just go, just try. And if it’s too much to be with him day and night then just spend a couple of hours apart, I’m sure he’ll get it. You’re not the only person in the world
who values their alone-time, you know. And if it’s all too much, you can always come back. It’s Rome, not Sydney.’

Richard is quiet for a long moment.

‘I don’t know,’ he finally says. ‘This is a fucking mess.’

Graham chuckles and nudges Richard’s shin with his foot.

‘You’re a mess.’

Richard laughs in spite of himself.

‘You really think I should go?’

Graham nods.

‘I do. Leave all of those thoughts at home and just have a good time,’ he says, his expression serious. Then he winks at Richard and adds: ‘With your boyfriend.’

Richard groans.

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Orlando is sitting in one of the chairs by the window when he gets back to the hotel room, wearing slacks but no t-shirt, his phone in his hand, his eyes fixed on the screen, his hair still wet from the shower.

‘Hey,’ Richard says with a smile and closes the door.

Orlando looks up from his phone and gives him a quick once over while Richard drops his key card onto the table and carefully sets down the paper bag he has been carrying before he unzips his wet jacket and shrugs out of it.

‘So, what’s with you trying to kill yourself with exercise on New Year’s Day?’ Orlando asks, stretches and yawns.

Richard drapes his jacket over the back of a chair to dry, then shrugs.

‘What can I say. Best way to cure a hangover.’

‘Bullshit,’ Orlando says and Richard laughs.

He sits down on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes.

Looking up at Orlando he asks:

‘What happened to your shirt?’

‘The internet.’

‘I see,’ Richard says, amused.

He gets up with a little sigh and nods towards the bag on the table.
‘I brought you coffee. And the Italian version of croissants.’

Orlando sits up and gestures for Richard to hand him the bag.

‘Cheers.’

‘Mine’s the half eaten one. And the empty cup. I felt a little faint.’

Orlando hums and peers into the bag.

‘Is it jam filled?’

‘Mine was, apricot. Quite good.’

Richard takes off his watch and places it on the table.

‘The place where I bought them looked nice,’ he says, absentmindedly rubbing his wrist.

‘Maybe we can go there for a proper breakfast? After I have taken a shower?’

‘Sure,’ Orlando says and bites into the croissant.

Richard nods.

‘And maybe- that other museum, Centrale Montemartini, maybe we could go there today? I don’t think it’s going to stop raining again anytime soon.’

‘It’s not all sweat?’ Orlando asks.

Richard chuckles.

‘Half of it.’

He grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head while he turns towards the bathroom door.

‘I’ll try to be quick,’ he says and is about to shut the door when Orlando’s voice makes him stop.

‘Wait a second.’

Richard turns back around to look at him.

‘Why?’

‘There’s something on your back, left shoulder.’

Richard’s fingers automatically reach for his shoulder, and he grimaces when that hurts a little.

‘Did you give me another hickey?’ he asks while he tries to get a good look at his shoulder in the mirror.

‘No. But a pretty nice set of tooth marks,’ Orlando says and takes another bite of his croissant.
Chapter Summary

Here is what Orlando and Richard did on the second day of 2018 in Rome.

'Did you know they burn their dead in Singapore?' Orlando asks.

Richard falls back half a step, allowing Orlando to pass through the gate in front of him.

'I didn't. They do?'

Orlando halts on the other side and surveys the scenery in front of him; gravestones and trees, gray sky above them, muddy gravel under his feet.

'Singapore is crammed as it is,' he says as he tries to orientate himself. 'Even without dead people decaying six feet under and occupying valuable building space. So they burn them.'

If they learned one thing over the last couple of days, then it is that Rome is crammed as well. Singaporean pragmatism seems an unthinkable concept here, though, on the non-catholic cemetery or anywhere else. This place is a mess.

'That sounds sensible,' Richard says.

He steps closer, his arm brushing against Orlando’s, but he waits. It’s been Orlando who brought them here after all, he should be the one with the plan.

‘Very sensible,’ Orlando confirms with a second’s delay.

The pyramid on their left should be enough of a landmark to help with orientation. Without taking his hands out of the pockets of his coat, Richard nudges Orlando's arm with his elbow, turning them right to walk on.

'I think you'd be met with resistance if you proposed they should bulldoze this place,' he says, and Orlando can hear the smile in his voice even though he isn’t looking at him.

'Oh, I wouldn't. I like graveyards.'

'Because of the peace and quiet?'

Orlando nods, then pokes his ear. The humming noise of Rome’s busy streets, steady and not even consciously noticed anymore after four days here, has indeed faded away. It’s like someone turned off his hearing aid.

'Fuck, this city is loud, isn't it?' he says, surprised.

Richard chuckles.

'Yes. Particularly when people light up fireworks right next to you.'
Orlando certainly isn’t going to disagree with him there.

For a bit, they walk in silence. Orlando still tries to match the map he saw for the graveyard with the actual location and mostly fails. They seem to be alone, save for a couple of cats who lurk behind gravestones. With amusement, Richard comments on their fitting expressions - ranging somewhere between constipation and gravity.

The average human lives for 35 million minutes, give or take a couple of million. Hard to sum that up adequately on the space of a couple of square feet of stone. Orlando appreciates the ultimate succumbing to silence that finds its representation in the small dash between years of birth and death.

It’s Richard, though, who lingers at some graves, his expression thoughtful. Orlando doesn’t ask but attempts to suss out which ones make him stop before Richard notices him trying. It’s not that difficult - without exception they are the graves of young women.

‘Died in childbed, you reckon?’ Orlando asks.

Richard glances up from the weathered stone, like Orlando caught him in the act. Over the course of the last couple of days, Orlando glared children into behaving in the Centrale Montemartini, the catacombs and various public transports. Yet there is contrition in Richard’s eyes, as if it is rude to think like a doctor when you’re on holiday. As if that word could ever be applied to him.

Orlando keeps his frown to himself, instead he looks down at the grave from the mid 1800s.

‘I think I read somewhere that the mortality rate was about 8%?’

Richard adjusts the figure, but not by much, and what he says about the main causes of death during childbirth and the attempts to fight them makes Orlando glad that he wasn’t born 150 years ago or with a uterus. When he says as much, it is apparently with enough force to cause Richard to laugh and for the lingering maudlin mood to dissipate.

They walk on but don’t really get very far as Orlando prompts Richard to give him an overview of the developments in medical history since 1868. They stand for a while next to the statue of a first year with angel’s wings, using a cross as a crutch, until Orlando sits down on the bench on the side of the gravel path and Richard follows suit.

It could be argued that 50 °F isn’t exactly the perfect temperature to be sitting on a damp bench, that neither puerperal pyrexia nor umbilical nonseverance are topics for an afternoon out in Rome on the second day of the new year. As it is, Orlando is wearing a thick coat and leather gloves, the cemetery is open for another two hours, and he has no objections against spending most of that time listening to Richard.

It was the same last night when they went to that classical concert. Elaborate music doesn’t do anything for Orlando; he doesn’t know anything about harmonies and rhythms, likes the idea of the complexity of the composition more than the actual sound moves him. He spent most of the concert paying more attention to Richard than to the orchestra, found himself much more interested in Richard talking about the performance later on than the music itself.

According to Hegel, music originates in the immediate uttering of feeling, but is more than just spontaneous expression, is organized, is developed, is cadenced interjection. Orlando read his “Aesthetics” decades ago, but it’s the always controlled passion with which Richard speaks - about music, about his job, about the dangers of spiritually motivated birthing techniques - that makes Hegel’s proposition sound true.
At some point, Richard gets up from the bench, like the intensity of feeling behind his words needs to be answered with movement. Orlando follows, and they have passed quite a few graves until Richard finishes his case against ‘that hippy dippy New Age crap’ with a sarcastic huff. However, when Orlando doesn’t immediately respond, his expression changes to quietly apologetic.

'I'm sorry. Have I lost you?'

Orlando shakes his head almost before he is done asking.

'No. I absolutely concur,’ he says with conviction. ‘And I find it hard to imagine how anyone, even someone with way more medical expertise than I have, could disagree.'

Richard nods and his brow evens out again. The corners of his mouth twitch as he keeps looking at Orlando.

'But?'

Orlando shrugs, the rough wool of his scarf scratching his earlobes.

'There’s no "but",’ he says and stops in the middle of the path. It’s not the argument itself that still holds his attention captive. Richard halts as well, a couple of feet from him, and Orlando tilts his head.

‘There's an "also", maybe.'

Richard chuckles, takes a step towards him and mirrors Orlando’s headtilt.

'Okay, also?'

He is amused, and Orlando keeps himself from huffing. Like Richard doesn’t know. Orlando narrows his eyes, allows his tongue to wet his lips. Even if they were standing naked in his bedroom, he couldn’t be more obvious. He doesn’t move but just stares at Richard.

Richard chuckles, of course he does, but it’s not mild amusement anymore, but almost surprised yet equally definite acknowledgement of Orlando’s intentions.

'Now, here? Are you serious?'

Again, Orlando lifts his shoulders. And even though he really isn’t serious, he takes the step forward that closes the distance between them. His hand loosely grasps the end of Richard’s scarf, but he shakes his head.

'Nah, it’s too cold.’

Richard snorts, and over his shoulder, Orlando spots an old man with a camera waddling towards the statue of an angel in slow motion, expression solemn.

‘Besides, even I could understand how people would take offence if we were fucking on their graves.’

He feels the touch of Richard’s hand on his hip, through the thick fabric of his coat, as Richard inclines his head.

'And for a moment you had me thinking you found the atmosphere on graveyards just irresistible.'

It’s the same with flirty banter as it is with foreplay for Orlando; nice for a moment maybe, but he
quickly loses interest in it. He ignores the light tone of Richard’s voice, the deep crinkles around his eyes, and his own smile has retreated as he is back to staring at him. The distance between them is minimal.

'I don't give a fuck about the atmosphere. It's just you.'

He watches Richard’s smile vanish, watches how Richard’s gaze inadvertently drops to his mouth. He could kiss him now. He knows just how Richard would tilt his head to accommodate him; he's just that bit taller than him, and Orlando likes that. He knows how Richard would part his lips to allow him to deepen the kiss instantly and as he pleases.

His grip around Richard’s scarf tightens and it would be easy to just draw him in like that. With his gaze still fixed on him, Richard wets his lips, and Orlando knows how warm and wet the kiss would be. He knows that he’d taste the coffee they had earlier inside Richard’s mouth. Richard would move his hand from his hip to the small of his back or the back of his head maybe, to keep him close.

Orlando enjoys kissing, thinks it’s brilliant when Richard fucks him good and proper and all but sucks the air out of his lungs while he does so. And as they stand there unmoving, as Richard looks at him, watches him, he briefly allows sense memory to work in reverse, his breathing changing again as a low wave of remembered pleasure rolls through him.

He likes kissing, he does. But kissing without sex is like standing on the top of a bungee tower without jumping off, is like having 199 hp between your legs just to let the engine idle. Fun for a second, paid for with frustration immediately after.

He wants to, though. He is hard, and every heartbeat is a punch to the chest. He bloody wants to, even though he knows it won’t make it better, it will make it worse.

The grip on his hip tightens and as Richard breathes out, it is in a low growl.

‘Now what, Orlando?’ he asks. His eyes are all but black, but his voice is steady.

Orlando exhales, hears the quiver, draws in one, two open-mouthed breaths before he lets go of Richard’s scarf and takes half a step back.

‘Fuck.’

The waddling old man still hasn’t reached his angel; it’s been a couple of moments at the most; Orlando runs his gloved hand over his mouth, the leather cold against his damp lips. Mild bemusement clouds Richard’s features.

‘You all right?’

Orlando has to laugh in response. Fuck, this is ridiculous.

‘Yeah,’ he says and nods.

‘Yeah. Just an - error of judgement, if you want.’

Again he laughs and shakes his head - so ridiculous -, then steps in again, his hand against the back of Richard’s head as he closes his lips over Richard’s.

Richard’s response comes with a second’s delay; a small chuckle and then equally soft pressure as he smiles into the kiss.
‘Sorry,’ Orlando murmurs, the word more movement than sound, and continues the kiss for another heartbeat (slower again, now), for two, before he withdraws.

That bemusement made way for something else in Richard’s expression, and Orlando would call it frustration (and possibly be smug about it; that’s what he’s been thinking all along), but it’s not as sharply edged, not as rough.

‘Fuck,’ Richard echoes after a second and lets go of Orlando’s hip.

‘Yeah, my thoughts exactly,’ Orlando says, aiming for lightness and almost nailing it. ‘I really do want to fuck now. But I also want to visit Shelley’s grave. Quite the dilemma.’

Richard raises his eyebrows, as if just like that their surroundings register again.

"'Fear not for the future, weep not for the past"? That Shelley?’

So needlessly dramatic, those romantic poets; only digestible in very small doses.

"'Twin-sister of religion, selfishness.'” Orlando replies. ‘That Shelley. His "Necessity of Atheism" is one of my favourite bedtime readings.’

Richard nods because it’s not like that can come as a surprise. He reaches up to straighten his scarf.

‘Where is his grave?’

Orlando resists the urge to scratch his head while his eyes dart over the scenery, still without being able to make sense of the layout. He makes a vague gesture with his right hand.

‘Dunno, somewhere over there I reckon.’

Richard nods, not bothering to hide his smirk.

‘So, how about we stop by his final resting place now and you tell me about that essay on the way back to the hotel?’

He turns to the left and as he starts walking, he throws Orlando a questioning glance over his shoulder. Slipping his hands back into the pockets of his coat, Orlando falls in next to him.

'Oh, you got yourself a deal.'
Here's what Orlando and Richard talked about on 11/1/2018

[11/1/2018 Whatsapp]

Orlando [6:23 p.m.]: Hiya Richard
Orlando [6:23 p.m.]: I tried calling earlier but it went straight to voicemail, so I presume you're either working or cruising the no-reception-Dales
Orlando [6:23 p.m.]: My money is on work?
Orlando [6:24 p.m.]: Anyway, I was calling cause I just finished an essay on the stabilizing influence of social rituals and I wanted to chat
Orlando [6:24 p.m.]: The reason why I'm writing now, though, is that it has just been pointed out to me that I am expected to buy drinks at the pub on Saturday
Orlando [6:24 p.m.]: Can't remember whether you're in Leeds this weekend, but if you want to drop by, you're welcome to
Orlando [6:24 p.m.]: No worries if you're busy
Orlando [6:26 p.m.]: The reason for the free drinks is that it's my birthday btw

Richard [6:32 p.m.]: Are you kidding me?!
Richard [6:32 p.m.]: It's your birthday?
Richard [6:33 p.m.]: THIS Saturday?
Richard [6:33 p.m.]: Right.
Richard [6:33 p.m.]: Hang on.

Orlando [6:39 p.m.]: Yeah, it is
Orlando [6:39 p.m.]: 41 doesn't warrant all caps, though
Orlando [6:39 p.m.]: Much more importantly, you're not working rn?
Orlando [6:40 p.m.]: Cause I think you'll find that essay I mentioned interesting
Richard [7:42 p.m.]: Just got home.

Richard [7:43 p.m.]: Traffic was pretty bad.

Richard [7:43 p.m.]: Saturday warrants all caps!

Richard [7:43 p.m.]: But well, I guess I can consider myself lucky that you told me in advance?

Richard [7:44 p.m.]: Just in time to get out of work Saturday, btw.

Richard [7:44 p.m.]: And I didn't even have to sell my body to sweeten the deal.

Richard [7:45 p.m.]: Anyway, stabilizing social rituals- go!

Orlando [7:46 p.m.]: Lucky in so far as that I'll be paying for your pints, yes

Orlando [7:46 p.m.]: You're trading sex for favours? Interesting tell me m

Orlando [7:48 p.m.]: Gotta take care of some house business rn

Orlando [7:48 p.m.]: Can I call you round half nine?

Richard [7:51 p.m.]: Nah. The price is too high, given the fact that I work exclusively with women and straight guys.

Richard [7:52 p.m.]: I won't be here in half an hour, sadly, I'm meeting Lucy for a beer.

Richard [7:52 p.m.]: Do you want me to try when I get back?

Richard [7:53 p.m.]: If you're paying for my beer, do I get to make you breakfast Saturday?

Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: Sure, text me when you get home and still want to chat; but it'll keep

Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: I'll be up anyway, but it might take me a sec to ring

Orlando [9:46 p.m.]: Five kids from my house seem to have food poisoning and think they are dying

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: Fucking seafood dishes on Thursdays

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: Serves them right for eating that shit

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: Relatedly,

Orlando [9:48 p.m.]: If you want to make me breakfast, you better send me a shopping list with all the fancypants stuff you consider necessary

Orlando [9:48 p.m.]: As long as I can get it at our Tesco

Richard [10:12 p.m.]: That doesn't sound good, how are the kids doing?
Richard [10:13 p.m.]: I'm making breakfast at your place, then?

Richard [10:13 p.m.]: Alright.

Richard [10:14 p.m.]: Don't worry about shopping, though, I'll bring everything.

Richard [10:14 p.m.]: I'll be home in half an hour or so.

Richard [10:15 p.m.]: But tell me about that article, I'm curious now.

Orlando [10:20 p.m.]: I sent them to bed with a bucket each. They'll live

Orlando [10:20 p.m.]: You can make me breakfast wherever you want, but I would advise against driving after all the free beer you were planning on drinking

Orlando [10:20 p.m.]: Unless you meeting your mate for A beer, singular, is setting an example for the future

Orlando [10:21 p.m.]: Up to you; I'm off duty on Sunday, could drop by yours

Orlando [10:22 p.m.]: The article's premise in a nutshell is that the more ritualized and thus unquestioned or even unquestionable gatherings are, the more efficient they work in forming stable social structures

Orlando [10:22 p.m.]: Which of course is true

Orlando [10:22 p.m.]: Just ask Charles Manson

Richard [10:48 p.m.]: Or the local priest, I guess.

Richard [10:48 p.m.]: I guess you haven't read that book that's based on the Manson Family? 'The Girls'?

Richard [10:49 p.m.]: I was a bit torn about it.

Richard [10:50 p.m.]: Does this apply to your standard relationship, too? Let's say in the form of marriage?

Richard [10:50 p.m.]: Ritualized, sanctioned by the authorities, thus unquestionable, thus stable?

Richard [10:51 p.m.]: Fucking depressing.

Richard [10:53 p.m.]: Is your birthday Sunday, not Saturday?

Richard [10:53 p.m.]: I was talking about making you breakfast on your actual birthday.

Richard [10:54 p.m.]: Saturday morning?

Richard [10:54 p.m]: I can drop by on my way back from work.

Richard [10:55 p.m.]: I'm back home, btw.
Orlando [11:02 p.m.]: I'll call you in a bit, I'm still in the kitchen

Orlando [11:02 p.m.]: My birthday is on Saturday

Orlando [11:02 p.m.]: My bad; misunderstood you

Orlando [11:02 p.m.]: Saturday mornings here are no good, though; think bee hive

Orlando [11:03 p.m.]: I'm happy if you come by for a pint in the evening

Orlando [11:03 p.m.]: Cook me breakfast some other time

Orlando [11:03 p.m.]: You know, the essay didn't mention any social contracts for that limited an amount of people - its main focus is on the social structure of small villages in the early 20th century

Orlando [11:03 p.m.]: But I'd argue that one-on-one interaction follows different patterns, even in marriage

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: But let me consider that for a bit more while I finish up here

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: And I'd like to hear about the Manson book

Richard [11:05 p.m.]: I'll make you breakfast any time you want.

Richard [11:05 p.m.]: Sunday is fine, too, I just thought that- considering the last two times we had drinks together- it might mean wasting a perfectly good breakfast on badly hungover people?

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: I'm not sure relationships between two people necessarily follow different rules.

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: But I'd of course have to read that article.

Richard [11:07 p.m.]: Do you have a link?

Richard [11:08 p.m.]: Do you still want to hear about the book if I tell you it's a novel?

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: I'm fine with fiction as long as I am not the one having to read it

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: So yeah, I'd like to hear about it

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: Can't send you a link to the essay, I have a printed copy

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: I can read it out to you

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: In an angry voice

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: Or you can have my copy, it has some critical annotations, though

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: I agree about breakfast btw

[11:10 p.m.]
Richard's phone rings.

'Orlando, hi.'

'Did you know that temporary marriage has been used in Egypt to make the donation of a human ova legal for in vitro fertilisation, but a woman cannot use this kind of marriage to obtain a sperm donation? - Hiya by the way, how are you and all that?'

Richard laughs.

'Alright, in medias res. What's that about Egypt?'

'I'm sorry, that was rude. Hi, Richard. I spent the last hour of my night watch reading up on marriage. Nothing at all useful in relation to your suggestion regarding the sociological claims of that essay, though.'

'No, don't worry. Tell me about what you read?'

'I read about temporary marriage and came across what I just told you - it's been used in Egypt and Iran, I think, to make it legal to donate a human ova for in vitro fertilisation, but you can't do the same when you're a woman and want some sperm.'

'Sounds pretty dubious. What exactly is "temporary"?'

'I didn't get that far yet, at least not in direct relation to the egg and sperm donation. Generally, I reckon it's best seen as marriage with a best before date that ranges from a couple of months to a couple of years. But don't quote me on that.'

'So basically that's the opposite of what I meant, isn't it? It's a marriage completely void of social rituals? Solely utilitarian?'

'I was thinking the opposite. It's reinforcing norms and rituals to the extreme - and thus reducing them to absurdity even more obviously, sure, but that is not the intention nor is it possibly perceived as such by the ones entering the contract. Neither of temporary marriage nor of any other form of it.'

'I think we are talking about different things. I think you're right when we are talking about societies' rituals- those marriages clearly just serve as front to be able to provide a service that would otherwise be illegal. But what I was interested in was the personal level- marriage as a form of cementing relationship rituals, as a form of legitimizing them.'

'If you think of the former as a front, then yes. If you think of twisting logic in any which way just so it fits your purpose, then yes. Because that's religion. But it's the same if you need marriage to legitimate your relationship status. You just switch from a verification antecedent to the state - which is what religion is - to government-sanctioned.'

'Yes, yes and yes. But- that's still not quite what I meant. Not so much legitimation in a technical or legal sense, no, legitimation, or maybe pseudo-legitimation, of interpersonal agreements, interpersonal rituals in a relationship. Trying to legitimize- and preserve for eternity- an inherently fragile status quo.'

'I don't understand. I thought that was what I just said. Isn't what you said also about needing someone else - religion, society, or even whichever group of people you care to invite - to verify your relationship, so you feel better? How is that different?'

'That's exactly the point- to make yourself feel better about the relationship, more secure. Via
institutionalising it. And maybe you're right, maybe that's not so very different from what you said. I'm just more interested in the effects the social contract has on the individual's intrinsic motivation, I think.'

'Okay. Why?'

'Because I don't get marriage, as a phenomenon, I don't get why people go for it. When it seems to be so very obvious that it's just a front for something else and can't possibly live up to your expectations.'

Orlando is silent for a moment.

'I don't have anything enlightening to contribute to that. Nor does the essay. Its main focus is on harvest festivals in small rural communities.'

Richard laughs.

'Harvest festivals? And you're probably not even kidding, hm? Let's talk about that some other time? 'Cause now I'm curious about your take on marriage.'

'People can get wed every other day for all I care, as long as I don't have to attend some tedious ceremony. It's not a topic that interests me on any sort of personal level.'

'Then it's either harvest festivals as a topic, I guess, or your birthday.'

Orlando chuckles.

'As long as you don't suggest I take pointers from the first for the latter. But, no, seriously now, we can keep talking about marriage, I just can't match your passionate stance. And taking pupils' parents out of the equation, I don't know that many people in long-term relationships, married or not, so I can't even contribute second-hand-data.'

'But you've been in relationships yourself?'

'Sure. I also eat food, but it doesn't make me a cook, let alone an expert on culinary issues. As long as no one forces me in front of the altar, I don't really see why I should care. You do though, yeah?'

'I wouldn't say that. It's just that I'm puzzled by it.'

'Why, though? Your analysis of it makes sense to me. It's just that people who do marry wouldn't describe it as shackling themselves but as security, wouldn't call it expectations that can't ever be met, but, I dunno, hope or something.'

'Probably.' Richard pauses for a moment. 'Which isn't a bad thing, per se. Hope, I mean.'

'Didn't say it was, no.'

'Fucking depressing topic.'

Orlando laughs.

'What, hope?'

Richard, too, chuckles.

'Yeah. Don't you think?'
'Believe it or not, I wrote a paper on it in uni. "Hope in 18th and 19th century philosophy". Got an A- for it and my professor telling me she was inclined to throw herself out of the window after reading it.'

Richard laughs again.

'My feeling exactly. Do you still have that? Can I read it?'

'I think I still have it somewhere. But you've seen the state of my flat. And the reason for the announced suicide wasn't the topic itself - Thomas Hobbes, massive pessimist that he is, says that hope is a pleasure of the mind that arises not from direct sensation but from thinking. Which is quite a neat way to put it at least. Anyway, my conclusions weren't all that depressing. My spelling was, though.'

'Really? Now I'm even more curious. And tell me, what does Hobbes have to say on dashed hope?'

'I don't think he addresses it. He actually uses 'hope' and 'expectations' synonymously most of the time, and while you know what I think about it when it comes to interpersonal relationships, I do agree with what he says about their importance when you apply it to politics. I mean Hobbes defines the equality in the state of nature as an equality of hope, which is the basis for him to argue why it is rational for everyone to pursue their individual advantage. If you're looking for someone to back you up on your pessimistic look on the concept, you'd be better off with, say, Spinoza, I reckon. Fundamentally irrational and a result of false belief because it doesn't take into consideration that everything is governed by necessity. But he, too, argues that it can be used to build a state based on a social contract by getting its future citizens properly invested. - So, I suppose, neither of them are really out to prove or disprove the advantages of hope in romantic relationships.'

Richard is clearly amused.

'Are you calling me irrational?'

'No. I'm saying that when applied to politics or society in general, the supposition of hope as a basis for interpersonal relations probably bears different connotations. How did you get irrationality from that?'

'Didn't you just say Spinoza was the safer bet for me because of his irrationality?'

'No. That's my bad. I wasn't calling Spinoza - or you for that matter - irrational. I was summing up what he said about hope. He said that it was irrational and a result of false believe. I'm sorry, I should've phrased that better. Besides, I don't think I've ever witnessed you doing anything illogical; your weird preference for seafood excluded.'

'Which is a weird thing, I agree. Listen, about your birthday- why didn't you tell me? Before today, I mean?'

'What?'

'Sorry, bit on an abrupt change of topic. It's just-- I was quite lucky that I was able to swap duties with Sarah, but it's never a given, on short notice.'

Orlando is silent for a moment before he replies.

'I told you that it's my birthday, so that, if you had time, you wouldn't be surprised when Dom put a stupid party hat on your head the moment you entered the Pony. He is hilarious like that. I asked if you had time cause I wanted to see you. If you had been busy, then you'd been busy and that'd be
fine. Same as always. I'm sorry, I think I still don't understand the question.'

'I think I might've been a little disappointed if I'd been busy and couldn't have come. Without even knowing about the hats.'

Orlando laughs.

'Believe me, no one who wasn't forced to share living space with Dom for over a decade should have to endure his preference for shitty headwear.'

'Are we talking paper hats? Or cowboy hats? Crowns?'

'It's Dom. All bets are off, mate. But seriously now, I'm happy to see you, but manage your expectations. It's just drinks at the pub, no gifts, no people jumping out of cakes, no embarrassing speeches, all right?'

'Seriously? You want me to cancel the cake? And you are telling me that after I shaved my legs for the occasion?'

'You're a muppet, you know that? You go and have a great time with Dom on Saturday, I'm staying at Mirkwood.'

Richard laughs.

'No, you're not. What about your birthday blowjob, then? Are you going to take care of that yourself?'

'You're not planning to blow me in front of my mates, so there's still no reason for me to be there.'

'I'm getting the feeling here that you're not particularly keen on birthdays.'

'What gave you that idea? I am absolutely behind the concept of celebrating the years plus nine months of my parents having sex.'

'That's one way of seeing it.'

'You disagree? Just so you know I am not gonna shave my legs for your birthday, whenever that is.'

'Although the weather might call for it, actually, my birthday is in August.'

'No chance, mate. What did you do to celebrate last year?'

'It was in the middle of the week, so I just went out for dinner and drinks with Lucy and Jonas. And Cate and Andrew invited me over for brunch the weekend after.' Richard pauses for a couple of seconds. 'And that night I spent with you, actually.'

Orlando laughs.

'I hope I at least let you fuck me. Which, given our track record, I probably did. You're welcome then, and belated birthday congratulations.'

'Thanks. I think you actually didn't, though, not that night.' Richard chuckles. 'Not that that's a complaint.' He pauses, then adds, 'I would've told you, but we'd only just met.'

'You know that I don't mind that, right? I'm good with whatever you want or don't want to tell me, for whichever reason, as long as you don't expect me to guess. Especially if it gets me out of having
to sing happy birthday.'

'I'm glad to hear that. It's not that I'm making a habit out of keeping stuff from you, though. You know that, too, yeah?'

'That's what we talked about in London, isn't it? So, course I know that.' A couple of seconds pass before Orlando asks, 'Am I missing something here again? I thought we were talking about birthdays?'

Richard laughs.

'We are. Sorry, that's my bad, it seems I'm repeating myself, hm?'

'Why, though?'

'Probably because it's been a long day.' Richard pauses. 'And because it's important to me that you know.'

Orlando is silent for a moment.

'I appreciate that.' He halts again. 'Long day, yeah. You wanna ring off?'

'In a moment.' Richard hesitates. 'Is something the matter, Orlando? Did I say something weird?'

Orlando chuckles.

'No, mate. When I say 'long day, wanna ring off', I mean exactly that. Are you tired and want to go to bed?'

'I am already in bed, actually.' Richard yawns. 'But sleep does sound like a good idea. At what time do you want me to come by Saturday?'

'Whenever you want. I am on duty in the morning but have the afternoon off. I reckon I'll be at the pub around half six, seven.'

'Four, then? Unless you have other plans?'

'Four is good. Though, actually, you know what? If you have time, how about some late lunch in York? I need to buy a couple of shirts anyway, and considering it's my birthday, I think I want some loud sex.'

Richard laughs.

'Sounds pretty good to me. I'll even accompany you to the store, if you want. Do I get to take you out for lunch, then?'

'Not sure it's a good idea to take you shopping. You know I buy my t-shirts in bulk, right?'

'I do. But maybe I could persuade you to try something different? Richard chuckles. 'No, wait, that sounded as if I was trying to sell you lacy knickers!'

'So, to sum up this conversation, you have a thing for paper hats, jumping out of cakes and lace.'

'Let's not forget shaving my legs.'

'My bad. So, how about this: I'll meet you at Argos for those shirts, we grab some lunch on
Piccadilly, back to yours for some fucking, your car to the Pony, beer and paper hats there, then-'
Orlando yawns, 'we crash at mine and you drop me off to fetch my bike on Sunday? Sound all
right?'

'As long as they have nice lacy knickers at Argos, I'm game. And the rest sounds pretty much
perfect, I'm looking forward to it!'

Orlando yawns again.

'All right, one at yours then, so I can leave my bike there? - Fuck, I'm tired.'

'Yeah, me, too. Sleep tight now, and I'll see you Saturday, hm?'

'Yeah. Night, Richard.'
Here's what Orlando and Richard were up to on 25/1/2018 (aka the first half of the evening :))

Orlando insists that this is false advertising and says it should be called vlPwPbCiam. The last bit means "because Caro is a muppet". You will figure out what the "vl" stands for, I guess :).

The lock on the door to Richard’s hotel room opens, accepting the key card with a gentle click.

‘And that’s another thing that is just complete and utter fucking bull -’

Richard’s hand between Orlando’s shoulder could be considered the opposite of gentle - it’s not - as he pushes him into the room. Orlando cuts himself off mid-rant and turns around - not to protest but because he knows Richard’s next move.

‘That’s fascinating,’ Richard says, possibly in autopilot-response to Orlando’s words, while his right hand grabs the lapel of Orlando’s coat and the other pushes the door shut behind them.

‘And I absolutely agree with everything you said,’ he adds, right before reeling Orlando in and pushing their mouths together.

The kiss is no-nonsense and direct, exactly the way Orlando likes it, and his brain immediately hits “delete all”. Who the fuck cares what they’ve been arguing about. He parts his lips and Richard takes this as the invitation it is, like he’d maybe have waited for 0.1 seconds max more before he’d pushed his tongue in anyway. With both his hands against Richard’s chest, Orlando applies a little pressure, but only so it is returned ten-fold and he finds himself with his back against the wall, the frame of some picture digging into the back of his head.

He growls in instinctive response to that, and Richard withdraws just long enough to say ‘sorry’ against his lips before instantly continuing to kiss him, to pin him down with quite a bit of his weight, to push his thigh against Orlando’s dick, to hum into the kiss when that finds Orlando hard already. Of course it does; that kind of force, that kind of I-know-what-I-want-and-that-is-you, that bit of too-much-right-from-the-start - there are few things that get Orlando going as easily and effortlessly as that. In fact, he really can’t think of a single one right, not with Richard’s hand against his throat now, touch tender in midst of this all and Orlando can feel his own pulse racing against Richard’s palm.

Still.

He growls again, and the second Richard eases up just a little, Orlando uses the wall as leverage and pushes back with most of his weight. But Richard anticipated that (it’s not like Orlando isn’t predictable; he knows that) and uses the momentum to spin them around, get them that little bit further into the room, and Orlando ends up with his back against the opposite wall of the narrow hallway; this time without a painting trying to brain him.
He lets go of Richard’s hips in order to shrug off his coat, and the fabric gets trapped between himself and the wall. Richard follows his example without breaking the kiss, his hips and chest pressed against Orlando’s now to keep him where he is as he can’t use his hands for the purpose. Orlando huffs, the pressure almost enough to restrict his breathing, and fuck, fuck that is hot. His hands grasp Richard’s skull, and he tilts his head in an attempt to deepen the kiss even further.

Richard makes a sound of frustration when his coat resists for the fraction of a moment, and Orlando laughs, the low vibrations of it swallowed by Richard, goes quiet when - for this unexpected short second or two - Richard radically changes the pace. The kiss is soft, his touch is light, and it creates instant vertigo in Orlando’s mind, for long enough for Richard to properly trap him again.

‘Fuck.’

The word leaves his lungs like air he has been holding for too long.

He pulls at Richard’s shirt, and for once Richard doesn’t protest against the treatment of his clothes; is too busy chasing Orlando’s tongue and tugging at Orlando’s tie. Fucking finally, Orlando succeeds at getting the shirt out of his trousers and instantly, he pushes his hands underneath it. The thick material of his coat and his pullover have stored the heat; Richard’s skin is warm, muscles firm underneath, and Orlando’s thoughts momentarily zone in on one little detail, on one thing in midst the onslaught of sensation - both his thumbs against the outline of Richard’s hipbone and with the littlest shift curling over them just so - fuck -

Orlando comes to (after a merely a second, or so he thinks, at least) when Richard has pulled the knot of his tie apart, a growl and a nip of his teeth informing Orlando that he rather objects to Orlando’s decision to wear a waistcoat over his shirt.

‘Too many buttons,’ he mutters against Orlando’s mouth when he has undone them.

‘Oh, but don’t tear them off, I like this waistcoat,’ Orlando replies in a rather poor imitation of Richard’s slight Leicester accent, and his amused huff is cut short by Richard’s thigh pressing more firmly against his dick.

There is a time for taking the piss, but it is not when the alternative is a good fuck.

His right hand finds Richard’s erection and grips it through his trousers while his left undoes the button. But he momentarily fails to remember how to actually undo a zipper when Richard completely ignores the mock warning, pulls Orlando’s shirt open with one impatient jerk and presses his outstretched hands against his chest.

‘Fuck, Richard,’ Orlando repeats again. ‘Fuck.’

Richard stops him from putting that more eloquently by closing his mouth over Orlando’s again. He pushes into the touch of Orlando’s hand and it’s not exactly like that makes Orlando go weak at the knees - or, well, it does, but just because he really wants to go down on them, get that fucking pair of trousers out of the way and Richard’s dick into his mouth. Hard and thick and -

‘Fuck, Richard,’ he says for a third time, and it’s praise and complaint at the same time. ‘Give me some room, for fuck’s sake.’

Richard has the audacity to chuckle at that, and that annoys Orlando enough to regain enough of his focus to re-prioritize. First things first, then.

He ignores Richard’s protesting huff and breaks the kiss by turning his head away, then pushes shirt and pullover up until Richard finally gets the message. The knee between his thighs still prevents
Orlando from using the seconds which it takes Richard’s to part with his precious clothes to slide down to the floor. And really, he would be annoyed by that as well if he wasn’t busy grinding against it and finally making short work of Richard’s zipper. His hand is down Richard’s briefs, fingers wrapping around his hard dick - now, that’s better.

Richard’s shirt and pullover join their coats on the hotel room’s carpet.

‘About fucking time,’ Richard breathes out, close enough again for Orlando to feel his beard against his already sensitive lips.

‘My thoughts exactly.’

He twists his wrist and tightens his grip, and Richard’s responding open-mouthed groan is better than a hand on his own dick.

Still.

He wraps his free arm around Richard, hand splaying over his shoulder blade; doesn’t continue the kiss but just breathes in Richard’s next quiet groan as well.

‘Fucking time.’

He cups the back of Richard’s head now and holds him close with the next twist of his hand.

‘Your dick, my ass, now. How about it?’

He feels Richard’s slight embarrassment at his choice of words rather than seeing it. But what the pinprick of momentary annoyance always does for Orlando - the instant ability to refocus again -; that touch of bashfulness seems to do the same for Richard.

He chuckles, licks his lips, then Orlando’s. His palm is warm and firm against Orlando’s cheek which is nice and everything, but Orlando would still prefer it on his ass or his dick. He pushes against Richard’s thigh. And again, Richard chuckles and deepens the kiss, all slow and deep and like he has all the time in the world and like he was already balls deep inside Orlando. Which he isn’t.

Orlando growls and shoves him with his right shoulder, but Richard doesn’t even sway, and it really would irritate the shit out of Orlando if it wasn’t so fucking, fucking -

A phone rings.

Not Orlando’s ringtone.

Richard’s.

Orlando stops moving his hand.

Fuck.

Richard squeezes his eyes shut, and Orlando bangs his head against the wall, suppressing a groan that is the opposite of pleased. Richard is on call. And his head hurts.

The phone rings again.

‘Shit,’ Richard says, and as he opens his eyes, the haze is almost gone from them. ‘I’m sorry, I gotta take this.’
‘Yeah, course,’ Orlando says with a nod. He pulls the left corner of his mouth up. His lips feel bruised. ‘You want me to let go of your dick for that?’

Richard’s snort erases the silent apology from his face.

‘That might be a prudent idea.’

So Orlando does, and for the moment it takes Richard to retrieve his mobile from the pocket of his coat and answers, he briefly entertains the thought of just wrapping his hand around his own erection instead. He doesn’t.

‘This is Richard,’ Richard answers.

Orlando is actually a bit impressed that in his voice there isn’t even a trace left of that breathless groan.

'It's fine, don't worry. That's what I'm here for. What's up?'

He sounds like he actually means it. The trick to that is that he probably does. While he listens attentively, Orlando spends a couple of moments trying to suss out how urgent it is. Hard to tell, though.

Richard’s eyes focus on him when he raises his hand and first gestures at himself, then at the door. Immediately Richard shakes his head and places his free hand on his chest again - the call can’t be that urgent if at least part of his brain hasn’t let go of the idea of some fucking in the near future.

‘Okay,’ he says into the phone, just as Orlando leans back against the wall again. ‘And the chest movements seem satisfactory? How are the lung sounds?’

A short pause, in which he listens to the caller’s response. Then a nod.

'What did you change the setting to?'

Again, he listens for a brief moment, expecting a short response to the precise question.

'Right. And did the pCO2 change?'

A couple of other questions like that follow, and Orlando really has no idea what this is about, except it probably involves tiny babies which he really has no interest in, even if he wasn’t in a state of suspended arousal right now.

As Richard talks about work, Orlando’s own mind tries to fill the intermission with the same topic. But the teaching conference in Leeds he attended today - his reason for being in town during the week - wasn’t inspiring enough to warrant detailed reflection nor was it stupid enough for the memory to instantly raise his anger once more. The rest of the day doesn’t provide much food for thought either. The restaurant they went to was nice enough - absently he sucks on his teeth because usually with Thai food he ends up with something sticking to them - and so was the conversation. But really, he doesn’t really want to think about it. What he wants is to get back to the sex. Preferably now.

Richard is still listening to his intern or doctor in training or whatever. His hand stayed on Orlando’s chest even after Orlando settled against the wall, but now he drops it, sticks it into the pocket of his still open trousers; a gesture of habit while his mind is completely absorbed.

'No, that's fine,’ he says after a longer pause. ‘But I'm afraid that'd make it worse. No- wait a second.
Do you have a pen?

Right. Patience is one of Richard’s core qualities, it seems. It definitely isn’t one of Orlando’s. The fact that Richard’s on a time-out right now doesn’t mean that Orlando has to stand around like a rent boy during lunch break.

Smirking at that thought, he raises his hand and pretends to hold a bottle, turns it upside down and squeezes its invisible contents into his palm whilst raising a questioning eyebrow.

Richard frowns at him.

‘What?’ he asks, voice quiet enough for the pen fetching idiot on the other hand to probably not feel like he is being addressed.

‘Lube?’ Orlando mouths back.

Richard’s frown remains on his face long enough that Orlando would remark on it and say something rude about dry-fucking, if they were the only ones in this conversation. As it is and before he has to, another 2% of his brain report back for duty and point out the superfluity of his question.

With Richard’s eyes on him, he picks up his coat, finds his wallet and pulls out two square foils.

‘We’re still doing this?’ he murmurs, watching Richard’s gaze drop down onto condom and lube.

Richard huffs quietly, like Orlando is being stupid, then he nods. Orlando pushes the Durex into his hand.

‘Good.’

‘Good,’ Richard echoes, then repeats it, now into the phone.

‘Uh, good, I mean yes. Now draw the respiratory curve, the frequency, the amplitude.’

While he adds a bit to his instruction, Orlando’s ultra-quick survey of the room comes up with no surprises. It’s a place Richard that more or less voluntarily stays in, so it’s the opposite of spartan. The view over the city is most likely spectacular when it’s not pitch black outside, and the sheets’ thread count is probably in the quadruple digits.

Orlando cares about neither. On his way to the window he kicks off his boots and shrugs off his shirt before he pulls the curtains shut, then he makes short work both of the rest of his clothes as well as the bedspread. He flops down on the bed, feet pushing the comforter out of the way as he settles in the middle. And as he rips the small pack of lube open with his teeth, his eyes meet Richard’s.

Again waiting for his snail of an intern to carry out a simple instruction, he is still holding his phone to his ear, still standing in the doorway, still wearing his trousers. His focus is not in hospital right now, though, but very much on Orlando.

And really, if he had given any indication that this phone call was even a little serious, then Orlando wouldn’t do this. Or he probably would, but not before gesturing Richard to turn around or go into the bathroom or whatever helped him to keep his mind on the job.

Work is work, and Orlando gets that.

Besides, it’s not like he is doing anything particularly watch-worthy.

He certainly won’t argue that a decent blow job is good to look at, no matter that he still prefers
being the one giving it to being on the receiving end. And yeah, all right, there are things to be said for taut back muscles, the line of Richard’s shoulders when Orlando pushes into him from behind - and for a moment, his mind digresses as he looks at Richard’s naked chest now, the curve of his hip bones where his hands rested a couple of moments ago.

The point is, it’s not like he doesn’t get the overall concept of visuals adding to stimulation, he does. It’s just that he really wouldn’t include applying lube on the list of things particularly erotic. Or at all, really. It’s him slicking up his fingers to stick them in his ass. Necessary? Of course. Pleasurable? There are worse things. But erotic? Fuck no.

Still, Richard just keeps staring at him when he proceeds to do exactly that - he squeezes lube onto his left hand and drops the foil on the bed next to him, stays on his side because that way he doesn’t have to perform any acrobatics, pushes two fingers into himself while his right hand (very much lube-free; he hates the feeling of the stuff on his dick) wraps around himself.

‘Uh, sorry?’ Richard says into the phone when the arts-and-crafts idiot on the other end asks something. He blinks twice, and his voice is normal again when he continues to talk. ‘Yes, I know, it takes a moment.’

Orlando snorts at that. It really doesn’t, not when you do it the way Orlando does it, without any of that taking-your-time-and-enjoying-the-build-up bullshit. Slow is boring, teasing is just fucking annoying.

Richard smiles in response to Orlando’s quiet huff - seemingly on autopilot, the curve of his lips caught between embarrassment and amusement - and Orlando adds a third finger.

‘No, don’t worry, you’re doing great.’

He has got to be doing this on purpose now.

‘And now- if you adjust the frequency, or the amplitude, what happens to the area under the curve?’

Orlando really, really couldn’t care less. His muscles have loosened enough for his prepping to not even be the littlest bit uncomfortable anymore, and that is not really adding to his overall forbearance. He isn’t even stroking himself, and yet all it takes for his dick to harden properly again is Richard abandoning his spot next to the door and coming over. He is still listening attentively to the report on the other end and checking facts with little nods of his head, but his eyes remain on Orlando until he stops right next to the bed.

‘Exactly. So how do you bring down the CO2 level, then?’

Orlando pulls out his fingers, scrunches up his face at the lube still sticking to them, wipes that off on his thigh as he shifts onto his back.

‘Perfect,’ Richard says.

The tone of his voice still is nothing but professional. The sympathy and even praise are probably what keep his intern’s hands from quivering right now, but the steely control underneath? He really needs to hang the fuck up right fucking now, because Orlando is so done with this shit.

He stops himself from growling and squeezes his eyes shut. He is forty-one years old, he can wait for five more minutes. He is going to kill that stupid muppet on the other end of the line, though.

The bed dips, and he opens his eyes again when Richard’s hand covers his right knee.
'I know, it's counterintuitive,' he says.

His voice still friendly, still calm.

'I'd increase the amplitude first and then adjust the frequency if that's not enough.'

If he gripped Orlando’s knee any harder, he’d crush the knee cap. Orlando stares down at his hand, and there are some wires short-circuiting in his brain, sending sparks of electricity through his veins at random intervals. He really, really doesn’t like it. He grits his teeth, forces himself to take a breath and holds it instead of starting to pant like an utter moron. Chill out, you idiot.

After a moment or two, it has the desired effect. His jaw hurts, yes, but his stupid pulse has slowed down again and his thoughts stop drowning in flash-forwards of Richard fucking him so hard that he’ll still be feeling it tomorrow.

'Sure. I think that's how it's going to go.'

He exhales, meets Richard’s eyes again. There’s none of that bashfulness now. Orlando is going to feel this tomorrow.

Good.

His gaze doesn’t move, even when Richard does, and the muscles around his knee sting a little once let go. Still sitting on the edge of the bed, Richard takes off his shoes, even undoes the fucking laces, and Orlando would growl at him if he thought that that would make any difference. But he just narrows his eyes at that kind of exhibited self-restraint and uses his calf to not so subtly nudge Richard to get a bloody move on.

Richard’s responding look has him lifting his shoulders before he points at his watch, and the grin on Richard’s face definitely has nothing to do with the conversation he is still continuing.

'Of course we'll have to discuss that,' he says as he gets up. ‘But it's been like that the last couple of days, too, I'd give it some more time.’

Orlando feigns a look of mock horror at his last words. But he nods in encouragement when Richard holds the phone between his ear and his shoulder now to undo his trousers again - which he fastened again earlier for some stupid reason.

'Really, don't worry,' he says, again pausing for a moment, button open zipper down. ‘And everything else is going all right, yes?’

Orlando gives it five seconds before he is going to remove the fucking thing, and then things might be all right. But as he continues talking, Richard finally, finally gets with the programme and pushes trousers and boxers down.

‘That’s good. Just call me if there's a problem, all right?’

Orlando doesn’t object to that. He is too busy fighting down the urge to rearrange priorities at the last minute right now. Because he really, really likes giving head, and Richard is so hard, and this right now is just the perfect set up for - no. Fucking. He wants to get fucked. If Richard would just bloody hang up, so they could finally get to it.

‘And I'm going to call before I go to bed,’ Richard says, just as his right knee makes the mattress dip again.
Orlando turns onto his stomach, looks over his shoulder as Richard touches the back of his thigh, outstretched fingers just bellow his ass.

‘You’re welcome,’ he says, calm and friendly and nice. ‘That’s what I’m here for. - Bye.’

And he rings off.

There is silence between them, and neither of them moves. For a moment. A second maybe. Orlando exhales.

‘Fuck, Orlando,’ Richard says. He sounds very, very different now.

Orlando licks his lips, and he inhales very deliberately.

‘I swear, Richard,’ he then says, his voice low. ‘If I don’t get your dick inside me in the next minute, I am going to kill you. Then I am going to get dressed, drive to that hospital of yours and kill that stupid fucking intern of yours. And then I’m having a wank.’

Richard laughs, and that doesn’t help Orlando any, given that that sound, too, goes straight to his dick. He lets his head drop down onto the pillow and groans in frustration.

Richard squeezes his thigh once before ripping open the wrapper of the condom while straddling his thighs.

‘With that kind of manners, it’s a surprise -’

‘Just fuck me already!’ Orlando interrupts. ‘I mean it. Now!’
25/1/2018 - Now still (Orlando's POV)

Chapter Summary

This is a direct continuation of "Now", and this is what happens right after, on January, 25th 2018.
We tried something new with this: It’s the same story but from two perspectives. So, you can either read Orlando’s version first or Richard’s, or just one of them, or you can switch between them.

"Now still" is from Orlando's point of view (= this chapter)
"Still now" is from Richard's point of view (= the following chapter)

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‘With that kind of manners, it’s a surprise’

‘Just fuck me already!’ Orlando interrupts. ‘I mean it. Now!’

Richard chuckles, the sound low in his throat. Normally, Orlando likes that sound. Now though?

'You really got yourself worked up, didn't you?'

He shifts, his forearms now bracketing Orlando’s shoulders. Then he bends down and closes his lips over Orlando’s skin, right where his neck meets his shoulder and sucks. The small pain is a momentary counteragent against the crawling of Orlando’s skin. His eyes fall shut, and there is just that darkness now and the sharp focus Richard's mouth on his shoulder provides. He breathes through his nose, the exhale a drawn out quiet growl.

'Are you done, by the way,’ Richard asks, ‘or do you want to tell me in detail first what you are
going to do to the neonate who caused that call?'

His tone of voice is intimate, his breath is hot against Orlando’s ear, but what he is saying is firmly rooted in the world that exists outside the simplicity of sex. The contrast feels jarring -

*Senses determine reference and are also the modes of presentation of the objects to which expressions refer.*

- and just like that, Orlando's brain switches itself back on.

Fuck.

It's like the opposite of getting your lights punched out.

Fuck.

*Or do you want me to tell you in detail first* -

'No, I don't,' he says.

He doesn't need to bite down on his tongue, just shuts his mouth as his eyes blink open. The pillow has a faint pattern on it, there is a light on the nightstand they didn't bother switching on, the walls are cream-coloured.

Fuck. He doesn't need this.

'I'm done.'

It works as a response to the question well enough, he guesses.

For a couple of heartbeats Richard's lips remain pressed against his ear before he tenses and pulls back. Orlando doesn't move, but waits. Waits for Richard to go on already, for his mind to stop calculating when they will be done here, how much this hotel room costs, if, if he hadn't closed the curtains, he could see his reflection on the huge windows right now, why -

'You alright?' Richard asks.

Orlando clenches his jaw.

Fuck.

Between Richard’s legs he turns around onto his back. For a moment, his gaze lingers on the place where Richard's shoulder meets his neck. Not because he doesn't want to look him in the eyes, but because he likes looking at it. He wonders what the muscles there are called, whether he learned that in bio and just forgot, why it is pleasurable to bite down -

It's a second or so that his gaze flicks up to meet Richard's. Of course he is all right.

It's just sex. He just wants to get off. Something for which he definitely doesn't need five eloquent alternatives of how to respond to that question - neither of them leading anywhere.

'Yes,' he says. His right hand touches Richard's left knee. 'Now what?
Richard searches his eyes and just looks at him for a moment, his focus flickering back and forth between them.

'You tell me. I thought we were about to have sex until ten seconds ago.'

Fuck.

Ten seconds more; ten seconds more patience; ten seconds of his thoughts to keep to themselves -

'Yeah,' Orlando replies.

He's been in this situation before. He knows why his mind works in overdrive now as if to make up for time lost. There's always that point when he just - when it's too illogical to play along, when not even his dormant ratio can overlook the fact that the outcome can't possibly be as satisfactory as -

Shut up. Shut up, shut up.

His fingers on Richard's knee tap it lightly, readjusting their grip.

'Want me to turn back around?'

Richard's brow furrows.

'Sort of. But I got the feeling, that-'

He interrupts himself and shakes his head before he lowers himself onto his side, facing Orlando, head propped up on his arm.

'What just happened?'

Orlando keeps himself from growling, from sighing, from getting up. He wants to. But he knows it will only make this worse.

'It's nothing,' he says. And it isn't. ‘What I said about how I like sex? The way I like it? Quick and straight forward? That's why.'

Richard doesn't look like he understands nor does he get back on top of him. Orlando clenches his jaw, tries again.

'I don't like power play. If you want to fuck me, fuck me. If you don't, then don't. It's all good.'

Because that’s how simple it is. Or should be.

Richard is silent for a long moment.

'I very much wanted to,' he then says, only to follow that up with another silence. 'You were quite the sight.'

Anger surges up in Orlando. He doesn’t want compliments. Not if they come in any other form than a good hard shag.
'Yeah, cheers,' he says, really, really tries to keep all annoyance out of his voice.

It's his own fault that they're having a conversation now instead of sex. He can't figure out how to keep things on track, never could, not once the initial momentum got lost.

Sod this.

Talking doesn't make it better. It's like reading half-cocked essays on Hegel - their words just make thoughts turn around in ever-tighter circles until someone (Orlando) has to throw up.

He props himself up on one elbow, mirroring Richard's posture.

'You still want to?'

Richard raises his eyebrows, then chuckles softly.

'Sure,' he says and reaches out to place his hand on Orlando's hip, the touch purposefully light.

'But don't just flop back onto your stomach.'

Orlando's gaze flickers down to Richard's hand. Soft, careful. He gets why. Doesn't mean he has to like it.

Not Richard's fault.

He hates this. He wants to get up, read a book, read Hegel even, until the complexity of philosophic discourse has restored the equilibrium. He hates voices shouting in his head, angrily, and he can shout back all he wants and it doesn't make them shut up.

He looks back up, ignores the lightness of the touch, tries to ignore all the noise in his head.

Not Richard’s fault.

'I like it that way,' he says. Because he does like getting fucked on his stomach; that at least is a simple fact that can’t just change.

'So do I.'

Richard lets his fingers tighten around Orlando's hipbone before he trails them upwards. They come to rest on the curve of his ribcage, and Richard’s eyes are fixed on his lips. Orlando licks them, the response instinctive, before he thinks about it. He reaches up to cup the back of Richard's head, so he won't pull away again, so he can lean in - same difference.

He kisses Richard with his mouth open, tongue heavy with words he won't say because they will not help, won't explain, will do the complete opposite. The kiss is slow as a consequence, but not bad; Orlando still has his eyes open.

Richard makes a sound in his throat, one of appreciation, and moves into the touch, lets his tongue meet Orlando's but without pulling him closer.

What is he waiting for? What's this supposed to be? Why is this not -
Shut up. For fuck's sake, just shut up.

It's surprisingly difficult, kissing someone whilst internally trying to beat your mind into submission. His hand doesn't grip Richard's hair tighter, not to the point when it would hurt. He doesn't bite his tongue, doesn't push him down. Because it's no fun when you do it just to prove a point to yourself.

This doesn't have to be brilliant. He has had sex enough times to know that even if it's not always in the top 5 of all times - how could it be, that wouldn't make any sense - it's still good, still fun. And it will certainly (absolutely, definitely, he could not be surer about this) beat the alternative.

He nips at Richard's lower lip, light enough for it not to hurt, nudges Richard's nose with his own.

'Can I flop back on my stomach yet?'

'No,' Richard says simply.

He slides his hand around the back of Orlando's head, into his hair and takes a steady grip, all hesitation, all playfulness suddenly gone.

That's more like it.

Orlando lets his head fall back onto the pillow and pulls Richard with him. That kind of kiss, where it becomes harder to breathe, that kind of kiss is something he can get behind. The change of position has freed his other arm and he wraps it around Richard's side, the curve of his lower back solid underneath his palm.

This is good, this is nice. Shut up.

His hand slides lower, over the curve of Richard's ass, and he feels Richard smiling into the kiss as he squeezes it.

He tells his mind to concentrate on this - Richard's body on him, Richard's skin on his, Richard's tongue in his mouth - and Richard trails his fingers down his chest, rakes his nails over his stomach and along his hipbone. He briefly rests his hand on Orlando's thigh, then, and nips at his lip. When Orlando growls softly in response, he moves his hand between his legs, fingertips grazing Orlando's balls before he wraps his hand around his cock.

'Been looking forward to that,' Orlando murmurs.

Which is true enough, isn't it.

'So have I,' Richard says. 'Ten more seconds and I would have flung the stupid phone across the room.'

Orlando hums vaguely. Richard starts stroking him.

'Don't know whether I believe that. Don't know whether I care.'

He leans up to capture Richard's mouth in another kiss. Richard shifts and slides his right thigh on top of Orlando's, the latex of the condom catching against his skin when his cock comes to rest against Orlando's hip.
The ceiling light makes sparks dance behind his eyelids, he can't remember where he put the rest of the lube, when he slides his hand down from Richard's neck to his arm, he knocks his elbow against something.

He doesn't mean to make a list of things, a list of things not directly connected to Richard (the weight of his thigh on his leg, the firm grip of his hand, his breathing changing), not directly connected to what Richard does to him.

He could use a drink, he hears the rain against the window, latex is one of the less pleasant-to-touch materials that exist.

His dick is hard (that never changed, he thinks), and when Richard shifts again - more of his weight on Orlando - he can feel his erection pushing against the sensitive spot on his side; hard as well.

Richard's watch ticks away against his ear, second after second passing steadily; the band of his own lies heavy around his wrist as he cups Richard's cheek.

'Hey, mate?' he says against Richard's mouth, the responding hum (illogically) loosening a knot in his shoulders.

'Me, on my stomach, etcetera?'

Richard takes a deep breath, licks his lips, before he nods and presses a kiss against Orlando's shoulder.

'Turn around,' he says simply, his voice low, and rolls off Orlando to make space for him.

There is the sound of latex being stretched at released, then a huff or irritation from Richard.

'You don't happen do have a second condom, do you?' he asks.

Orlando stops turning and a glance at Richard's expression is enough to tell him that no, he's not kidding. He wipes a hand over his face - distantly noting the remaining trace of dried lube on it - and can't help but chuckle. Sod it all.

Richard's response is an arched brow as well as a curved up corner of his mouth.

'I take it that's a no?'

Orlando shakes his head.

'Course I do. Given our track record.'

He nods at the night stand behind Richard onto which he dropped his wallet earlier.

'Help yourself.'

He waits until Richard has gotten rid of the first, got out the second condom - looks fine, what else could go wrong now - before he shifts to roll onto his stomach.

He reaches under himself and fishes out the foil with the rest of the lube - so that's where that got to - before holding it out to Richard. As Richard puts the condom on, uses the rest of the lube on himself,
they joke about this - Orlando’s preparedness - and Richard sounds calm, Orlando doesn’t sound impatient, and that’s something, isn’t it.

When he is done, Richard places one hand on his hip before he bends down to place an open-mouthed kiss onto his neck. He trails one finger down the cleft of Orlando's buttocks and further down to nudge Orlando's thighs apart with his hand.

Orlando spreads them willingly because this is what he wants, what can bring his thoughts to settle. A purposeful touch, clarity of what’s going on, of what is gonna happen right after.

'You think you're still good to go?' Richard asks against his skin.

He doesn't think he is good to go, he knows he is; whatever that means, really. Lube doesn't dry up that fast and muscle relaxation is more about frame of mind than anything else anyway. He closed his eyes the moment Richard's hands were on him once more, definitely doesn't care to open them again now.

'Sure I am.’

Come on, he thinks. He exhales, focuses on relaxing his muscles, deliberately focuses on keeping his mind blank. Richard kneels between his thigh, spreading them as much as he needs them to spread. Purposeful. Sure. All right.

'Okay,' Richard murmurs.

His left hand is on Orlando’s lower back, applies pressure when he leans forward and allows his arm to carry some weight, as if ready to pin Orlando down properly if he moves. Right, good.

His exhale is shaky, then Orlando feels his thumb pushing into him, and Richard's other fingers slide under his balls, palm pressed against the curve of his ass.

Come on now.

He bites down on his lower lip to keep himself from pushing, but he can’t help but stir ever so slightly. Immediately Richard's hand around his hip tightens.

'Two seconds, Orlando. I'll get to it in a moment.'

He clenches his jaw, tells it to relax again, without saying anything. Shut up. He knows what you want. He just told you what he’s gonna do. What more do you fucking want. Objecting to the pace would slow it down even further.

He exhales in a purr, more a sound of encouragement than actual pleasure. He likes Richard's touch, he tells himself as he holds still. It's sure, even more so, it's purposeful, he knows what it's supposed to accomplish.

It's not necessary. A thought that keeps returning every two seconds, like clockwork.

Don't, he tells his mouth. Settle down, he tells his thoughts. Come on.

The solidity of Richard's body over his, the hand pressed against the small of his back, his regular breathing - that's nice, he likes that, tells him to focus on that since that's the best he can do right now.
Finally, Richard leans forward so that he is now pressed up against Orlando's ass. He still doesn't remove his thumb, but Orlando feels his dick next to it now. Waits. Richard barely applies any pressure, before he withdraws, repeats the motion, just pushing against, not inside.

Orlando waits, stomach muscles tense, Richard’s knees holding his legs apart; waits. His thoughts take an intermission, stop banging their fists against the inside of his skull; wait.

'Fuck, Orlando. I want-'

There’s a tremble in Richard’s voice as he pushes inside, not far, stills, takes a deep breath.

Orlando exhales slowly. That's it. Focus on that.

He pulls his elbows under himself. Yet another thought in his mind untangles when Richard's response is to grip his hip even more firmly. He rests his forehead on his balled up fist - quietness not really achieved yet, but closer - and yeah, that's good, the feeling of Richard filling him like that as he slowly pushes into him, the extra bit of sensation provided by his thumb; like that.

'Richard,' he exhales in time with the first real thrust. 'Yeah, like that.'

'Fuck,' Richard grinds out and slowly pulls back, only to push in deeper, just as slowly. It’s a tight fit, more so with his cock pressed up against his thumb, it doesn’t hurt, just makes it that bit easier not to -

'Fuck,' Richard repeats, 'fuck, this-'

He pulls back, presses back inside, suppresses a moan when he finally bottoms out.

Still no haze, not that kind of lust that overrides anything. He feels full, just on the edge of hurting, but on the right side of it. It seems a physical necessity to hold still, and so his thoughts still as well. Still there, but waiting, like they are holding their breath.

But it's all right now. If focus is possible, then use it, for fuck's sake. Orlando opens his eyes. His right hand fists the pillow under him, he sees the face of his watch, the hand counting of the seconds steadily moving.

Richard is fully inside - those couple of seconds when he doesn't move stretching into one moment, two, or maybe they always are as long as this; he doesn't have enough reliable data. Richard’s dick feels big inside him, his hand on Orlando’s back, his knees where they are - just how he wants it.

Richard's breathing is laboured, like he wants to curse with every breath but doesn't, not after the initial one; and again Orlando really doesn't know why. He likes Richard's voice, he could give a running commentary to what he is doing and granted, normally Orlando would maybe just catch every tenth word or so, but he likes the sound, the low timbre of it, perfect match for the way he fucks.

Three seconds more tick away on the face of his watch, and Richard's movement is minimal, the hand on his hip readjusting.

Orlando turns his head, looks over his shoulder.
'All right?'

Richard chuckles breathlessly and nods.

He reaches up with his left hand and wraps his fingers around Orlando's shoulder, trailing them over his skin, allows himself another moment. This is not teasing. This is regaining focus, getting a grip. He rolls his hips, more decisively this time, stills again.

'Fuck. You're so tight.'

Orlando just hums in response. That's kinda the point, isn't it, and yeah, that's what it feels like. There's no rhythm to the thrusts, not yet anyway. It's kinda like Richard's breathing that hitches, then steadies out again. Orlando can't suss out a pattern behind it. All the concentration in the world is useless here, each shift still a surprise, something that reminds him, irrevocably of how very true Richard's assessment is.

It's the same even when it's he himself who moves and Richard lets him push up against him. The slight change of angle is like another first thrust, more of his weight on his knees and elbows. Richard's thighs press against the back of his own, muscles taut, solid.

'Continue,' Richard says and bends down to rest his forehead against his neck for a moment while he tightens his grip around his shoulder.

He exhales audibly when Orlando does, when the movement creates something that begins to resemble a rhythm, if an erratic one.

Still no spikes of pleasure, but a low burn instead because the muscles of his thighs strain as they have to hold him up, move in this position. The feeling is counterbalanced by Richard's hand on his shoulder, pulling him back and onto him, and that's not bad.

Orlando grunts and drops his head lower yet when Richard tightens his hold on his shoulder to gain more leverage, reduced to the use of one hand. The new angle makes is easier to move.

And Richard does.

Finally.

He pulls almost all the way out and pushes back in with force.

Orlando grunts, right arm shifting above his head to keep himself from overbalancing, and he steadies himself at just the right moment, so he is able to meet Richard's next thrust.

Just as forceful as the last.

'Fuck, yes.'

He blinks sweat from his eyes, swallows down the sudden hoarseness in his throat, pushes himself up more, ignores the muscles protesting in his legs. Their sharp sting is just enough to take the edge off the next thrust.

His voice is clear and precise and not a grunt, not fierce when he shakes his head free from cluttered bits and pieces. He turns enough to look at Richard behind him, above him, another thrust, and
another, and another - say,

'You're so fucking good at this'

breathlessly, the rhythm of his syntax dictated by the pace Richard is fucking him.

Richard's reply is something between a growl and a chuckle, and he bends down and lets his teeth graze over Orlando's skin, right at the juncture between neck and shoulder.

'It's not me. It's you.'

He straightens up again and moves his left hand from Orlando's shoulder to his hip, so that he can press him down and pull him back into his thrusts at the same time - and fuck, yes, like that, just like - his rhythm is now fast and steady, his thrusts are hard and precise.

Orlando laughs quietly, his lingering amusement (tasting light, refined) in stark contrast to what Richard is doing to his body, and there's another thrust and another in response, and he adds, 'Just. Like. That.' - one word out with each shove into him. Without letting up, without slowing down even for one moment, Richard shifts his hand from Orlando's hip onto the mattress, lowers himself down, slides deeper into him, curses. His skin slaps against Orlando's, and the first ring of his phone almost gets drowned out by that sound, by his breathing, that has become laboured.

Orlando hears the phone all right. He's neither deaf nor too zoned out to care, it's just - thrust after thrust, Richard seems to fuck the breath right out of his lungs.

He pushes himself up against Richard, his right arm carrying both of their weight, or so it feels, so he can lift his left elbow enough to nudge him. But of course Richard pushes into him once more in automatic response to that. Push and you get pushed back, that's what he's like, and fuck, that’s hot, that self-control, that determined - the phone rings again.

'Richard,' Orlando grunts.

He tells himself to snap out of it, the shape of Richard’s name on his tongue not helping any. He uses even more of his body to shove up against him, turns his head.

'Shit, Richard -'

And Richard's rhythm finally breaks, even if just for a beat.

'Your phone is ringing,' Orlando says into the gap.

Richard's response is immediate - his whole body tenses up as he listens while his last thrust still ripples through Orlando.

His phone rings again.

'You got to be kidding me,' Richard groans.

The frustration is audible, is more than that, is tangible, and it does something to Orlando, something that very nearly switches off his thoughts at a rather inopportune moment. For a moment Richard doesn't move, still pressed against his back, half resting on top of him, still inside him.
The phone rings.

'Shit.'

Orlando sinks back onto the mattress as Richard pushes himself up onto his knees, pulls out and leans over him to stretch out towards the night stand.

'Stay where you are.'

Orlando rests his temple onto his lower arm and twists the other to give him a silent thumb up. Not that that was really a question. Richard is straddling him now, the hand not holding his phone rests in the small of Orlando’s back. He couldn’t communicate “you’re not going anywhere” any clearer even if he tried which is more than fine by Orlando.

Richard curses again as he looks at the display, then he picks up.

'Nathan? This is Richard.'

And talk about composure. There is not even a hint of a sod-you in that greeting; kudos. Then again, Orlando is the one with a dick against his ass, and he can still form full sentences, too, albeit just in his head.

He lets out a long breath just as Richard hums briefly in response to whatever is being said; then he closes his eyes again, focuses on the tap-tapping of Richard's fingertips against the small of his back.

Until they still.

'How did that happen? The drip is the same as yesterday, and the respiratory situation was stable all day, the pCO2 was 42 when I left, at a PIP of 18. Is that an arterial sample?'

What previously was the result of anticipation and frustration clashing, was precise control put into a temporary idling position is now something else. Orlando could vanish into thin air right now, and Richard wouldn't notice.

Work's work. He gets that.

Without moving the rest of his body, Orlando tilts his head and tries to stretch a kink out of his neck while he listens to Richard’s half of the conversation with one ear.

‘That doesn't make any sense, does it? Why would he be acidotic?’

There is more of an edge to his voice now, and yet despite of it - or maybe because of it - when Orlando shifts his head again, to find a more comfortable position, Richard’s hand finds his neck, the touch light.

'Who's the nurse taking care of him?’ he asks, and after a beat, ‘What does she say? Is she satisfied with his condition?’

He listens again, and Orlando starts to shift under him. The grip on his neck tightens instantly. And while Orlando very much prefers a touch as firm as that to any kind of stroking, he half raises his hand - would wave a white flag if he had one handy. Richard loosens his grip again but seems to put more weight on Orlando’s thigh to counteract that. Fine, whatever.
Again, Richard says something to the assistant on the other end of the line, but Orlando isn't even trying to make sense of what he is talking about. He's been a head of house for long enough, he is wide awake at the first sound of warning bells - figuratively and literally - and Richard's voice isn't even close to that.

Anything less than that? He doesn't really care at the moment. Not when Richard's fingers apply a kind of pressure to his neck to the point where it almost hurts, only to then ease off again, taking tension with them.

First time he's ever interrupted sex for a massage.

The random thought causes him to snort in amusement and the grip to tighten again as a result.

'Well, then glove up and put me down for a moment, I'll wait.'

The fingers from his neck disappear and tap the phone's screen instead. Orlando opens his eyes when there is a soft thud as the phone hits the mattress next to his left shoulder.

The bed dips when Richard bends down to Orlando's ear.

'I turned the volume down, but it's on speaker,' he whispers and nudges Orlando's cheek with his nose to get him to look at him.

'You all right?'

Orlando snorts at the absurdity of this all, of that question in particular.

'Well, pretty sure my pCO2 level is off the charts,' he murmurs back.

Richard chuckles into his ear.

'I'm quite sure you'll live.'

He bends his head to drop a kiss onto Orlando's shoulder.

'This is going to take a moment. Three, four minutes. Five, tops. I'm sorry.'

Orlando shrugs.

'You're working. I get that. Chill out.'

He feels Richard's forehead against his shoulder, resting there for a second, and he doesn't move, hears Richard exhale; quiet, calm.

There is rustling to be heard from his mobile, so he immediately reaches for it and straightens up, and it's the assistant being an idiot again. But still, Richard shifts. He lifts himself off Orlando's thigh, sits down on the bed next to him, one leg still slung over Orlando's.

Orlando stretches, rolling the muscles in his shoulders and nudging Richard's leg with his, so he gives him some room to move. Richard obliges, humming into the phone.
Orlando shifts onto his back and sits up. Richard remains where he is, looking at him but again humming a response to his caller.

Orlando licks his lips - somewhat dry, despite the saliva - and his mild thirst is back. He rests a hand on Richard's thigh, capturing his attention, while the other mimics holding a bottle that he brings to his lips. His hand lingers as he swings his legs out of the bed, and he squeezes briefly before he uses it for leverage to push himself up to his feet. Richard's eyes follow him while he moves around the room.

There's a small fridge under the desk in the corner, and equipped with two bottles of water in one hand, his other finds that sore spot in his neck again as he makes his way back to the bed.

As it is with kinks, they have a tendency to draw attention to companion pieces as well. So, he sits down on the bed again, with his back against the headboard, like Richard, and his hand moves from his shoulder to the inside of his left thigh, rubbing it absently.

His thoughts stray to the analytical philosophy of Nathan Salmon for half a minute before he even consciously notices. And as much as he appreciates Salmon for disproving the ontological argument - which he does -, he quite hastily abandons it. Philosophical arguments against the existence of God do not go well with wanting a dick in him again asap. How he got to Nathan Salmon of all people right now eludes him until Richard addresses his assistant again; Nathan. Amused by the randomly identical name and its result, he brings his bottle to his mouth at the same moment as Richard.

Richard hums into the receiver in reply to a question before he swallows. His eyes seek Orlando's and he lightly shakes his head, expression apologetic. His hand touches Orlando's knee, rubbing at a spot of dried up lube that has somehow ended up there. His fingers move higher, then, towards the inside of Orlando's thigh, and he rakes his fingernails over his skin, the pattern irregular with his focus switching back and forth.

'Good. Read out the result.'

His hand freezes as his shoulders tense and he sits up.

That catches Orlando's attention, and his short-term memory rewinds and Richard's apologetic expression as well as the content of his reply register with him.

'But- read it again.'

For the brief moment that Richard listens intently, Orlando looks down at his hand, contemplates the theoretical concept of physical comfort without discarding it after half a second. It is probably as close as he gets to understanding it. He puts his bottle down, covers Richard's hand with his own.

'Send me a picture,' Richard says, brow deeply furrowed. 'Cover the name, take a picture and send it to my phone. I need to see it.'

Orlando pats Richard's hand once before withdrawing his. Handholding reduces you to one-armed juggling with your electronic devices.

Richard instantly switches back to using both of his hands and stares at his phone as if that could make either his stupid assistant or his WiFi any quicker. Which granted, considering the fierceness of his stare would probably have an effect on any living being. In case of Orlando it is - and now there isn't a surprise - vague arousal.
Shaking his head at himself, he picks up his bottle again as the phone plings, announcing a message.

Richard's fingers swipe to enlarge the imagine immediately.

He stares at the screen, scrolls, stares again, scrolls again, freezes, huffs, then shakes his head and chuckles.

'Nathan?' he then asks, lifting the phone back to his ear.

'Take a look at the temperature.'

He exhales, shakes his head again before he turns towards Orlando and smiles while he says:

'Exactly. That's the default it's set to, 37 degrees. So, what does that tell you?'

That question? Only Richard could say it and not have any of what his face signals in his voice right now resonate in his voice. Ultimate politeness, whereas Orlando is a very big fan of a slap in the face. Figuratively speaking.

He looks up from Richard's smile to meet his eyes again.

*What does that tell you?*

'Nathan is a bloody moron?' he mouths soundlessly.

Richard bites his lip to prevent himself from laughing out loud. Grinning does however not make any sound.

His hand finds its way onto Orlando's thigh again, coming to rest higher this time. Again he reassures the assistant, even apologizes for not having reminded him of that possibility.

Orlando doesn't scoff or shake his head. Teaching methods differ and as long as it produces decent results - which in this case Orlando is questioning, considering he is obviously an idiot and needs to have the fear of some deity threatened into him, if anyone asked him.

Not his student, though. Not his problem; if one disregards interrupted sex (twice). Which seems to be quite close to what Richard seems to be thinking, given the position of his hand.

But no. Orlando is quite capable of ignoring that entirely until he gets a definite starting signal. He really is done with any form of teasing and build up for the night.

'No, Nathan, listen-' Richard pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes for a second.

'It's fine, the kid's fine, I'm fine.'

His fingers briefly tighten around Orlando's thigh before he slides his palm up its inside, the touch no longer subtle now.

'Yes, but there's a difference between having read something in a book and actually having to do it.'

In general, Orlando highly objects to a causality as faulty as the one that is about to unfold here - an
intern being so obtuse that even Richard loses his longanimity, resulting with a hand against Orlando's dick and a near to definite probability of Orlando getting fucked like there's no tomorrow within the next five minutes.

In this particular case, Orlando has no problem whatsoever with the outcome and will let that slide.

'I am not fine,' he mouths, though that really isn't all that accurate either.

Richard just quirks an eyebrow and winks at him.

'Really. Just let it go,' he says, and some more reassuring and nice things that the stupid idiot on the other hand certainly doesn’t deserve. His tone of voice leaves little room for interpretation; so this is how polite people say "if you bother me with your idiocy in the next two hours, I might be inclined to throttle you".

‘Tell her I'll call around eleven, eleven thirty, would you?’

Automatically Orlando glances at his watch - eleven thirty is still ages away. He’s not sure what Richard thinks he needs two hours for, though. He very much plans to have an orgasm in the next ten to fifteen minutes.

'Sure,' Richard says, back to his routine politeness now. 'Have a good night, then, I'll see you tomorrow. Bye.'

And he finally rings off.

Orlando watches as he breathes a sigh of relief and tosses the phone onto the bed next to him before he turns towards Orlando.

'I'm sorry. That was-’ He interrupts himself, chuckles. 'Exhausting. And a little irritating, towards the end.'

'Uh-huh,' Orlando replies, could say more, doesn't. He just regards Richard silently, until Richard blinks and with that seems to mentally shrug off the encounter.

'So, mate,' Orlando says with a vague gesture at the hand in his lap, covering his half-hard dick.

'What do you think are the chances we might actually finish a round without my lack of patience or your phone interfering? Cause,' he reaches for his wallet on the nightstand, smirks. 'Not even my supply is endless.'

Richard’s gaze darts from his eyes to his lips, to his hand that is closing around his wallet, back to his eyes.

'I like that,' he says in a completely different tone of voice now, soft, private, and wraps his hand around Orlando's hardening cock.

'That you came prepared.'

'Yes, I've always prided myself for my planning skills.' He closes his hand around Richard's wrist and stops it from moving anymore. 'That doesn't really answer my question, though.'
He applies more pressure - not needed because Richard's hand already stilled, but the shape of Richard's strong wrist feels good under his fingers - and there is a sharp intake of breath before Richard reaches out with his other arm, takes a steady hold of Orlando's neck and pulls him into a kiss.

Still not exactly an answer, but Orlando will take it, especially since pushing for one would mean pushing Richard's tongue out of his mouth again. And that's not happening.

He doesn't really let go of Richard's wrist but adjusts his grip as he pushes himself up and straddles Richard's thighs. Only then does he release him in favour of grasping his head with both his hands and change the angle of the kiss just so. A bit deeper, a bit dirtier, a bit just-like-that again.

He breaks the kiss when he really can't be bothered to coordinate kissing and breathing. For a moment they share open-mouthed pants as Orlando pushes his hand between their bodies to find both their dicks and wrap around them. Richard immediately pushes into the touch and tightens his grip around Orlando's shoulder further, wraps his other arm around his hip and half lowers, half pushes him onto his side, then onto his back, stretches out on top of him.

'That's good,' Richard murmurs before he bends his neck and presses his lips against Orlando's collarbone, then licks along its length and dips his tongue into the hollow of his throat.

Orlando lets his head drop back onto the pillow, blinks repeatedly to regain focus and draws in a couple of open-mouthed breaths as he stares up at the ceiling and his senses zone in on Richard's mouth there, Richard's beard against his skin, Richard's tongue.

'Fuck me,' he murmurs, and it’s a breathless curse to counteract the thrill of that sensation rather than demand or suggestion.

Richard barely lifts his lips far enough from Orlando's skin for his words to be discernible.

'My thoughts exactly.'

He moves higher and lets his teeth graze the skin of his neck, halfway between his shoulder an ear, only to suck a small patch of skin between his lips a heartbeat later.

Orlando hums low in his throat but cards his fingers through Richard's hair, gripping it.

'Don't give me a hickey,' he warns while pushing his hips up to meet Richard's. 'I hate wearing high-neck collars.'

Shame, though.

Richard just hums, then continues downwards along Orlando's neck until he stills a couple of inches below Orlando's clavicle.

'Here, then?' he asks but does not wait for Orlando's permission before he closes his lips over the spot and sucks, hard enough to almost instantly bruise.

The pleasure is instantaneous and simple.

He keeps his hand on the back of Richard's head - this is just too fucking nice a sensation to allow him to stop - and blindly pats the bed next to him, turning his head after an impatient second. He
spots his wallet just outside of the reach of his fingertips and unceremoniously pulls Richard with him as he moves over just far enough to reach it.

He gets momentarily distracted by Richard again, and at this rate his chest will look like he was in a serious brawl and he can't bring himself to care. His focus snaps back into place when Richard licks over the last bruise he left, and he fumbles with his wallet for a second or two, swallowing down a curse, until he finds what he's looking for. Talk about ending supplies, though.

Richard glances up from his chest as the foil containing lube crackles in Orlando's hand, and Orlando taps it against Richard's shoulder.

'Here's to not getting interrupted again,' he says in a mock toast. 'C'mon, get to it.'

Richard takes a deep breath, then runs the back of his hand across his lips before he takes the small package from him and rips it open in one single movement.

Getting interrupted mid-shag has one advantage. You really can just pick up where you left off. Orlando wraps his fingers around his dick when Richard pushes two slick fingers into him, slides his other hand to Richard's neck and gives it a squeeze.

'That's really not necessary,' he says, voice low and yet catching when Richard - because he is a bastard - chooses that moment to add a third finger and crook them.

'Will you please just fuck me.'

Richard looks up at him and then just pulls out his fingers and bends over him to kiss him hard. 'Yes,' he murmurs against Orlando's lips between two kisses. 'Yes.' before he pulls back.

'Give me another condom.'

Suppressing a groan of frustration, Orlando hooks his leg over Richard's calf and pulls a face while he keeps stroking himself.

'Mate, don't make me get up and search my coat. Seriously, just fuck me without. We're a mess as it is, I'm gonna shower anyway. C'mon.'

Richard stills and pushes himself up onto his elbows so that he can look at Orlando.

'You sure?' he asks after a moment, somehow still slightly breathless.

'I can get up if you don't want to.'

'Richard,' Orlando says, his hand on his dick stilling. And he really thinks that his tone of voice carries all that needs to be said. 'Are we really discussing my capability to make choices and your knee-jerk politeness right now?'

For the second his patience lasts to leave a rhetorical question out there, Richard doesn't answer, just looks at him without moving. Orlando opens his mouth, flexes his fingers around his dick, does not say the first thing that is on his tongue. Instead he nods with his eyes.

'No, you don't have to get up,' he says slowly. 'Yes, I'm sure.'
Richard chuckles and then mutters 'Sorry', leans back in for a quick kiss and reaches for the small package of lube at the same time. He smears what is left of it onto his dick, searching Orlando's eyes while he does.

'You're not gonna hear me complain.'

Orlando transfers his hand from his dick to Richard's hip, thumb fitting perfectly into the curve just above it. He leans up and kisses him again, stops mid-motion with his lips still against Richard's when Richard finally, finally, finally breaches him.

Slick and hard and and right and the thumping of his own heart echoing in his belly.

He exhales and lets himself fall back again, looks up at Richard, can’t remember how to blink.

'I love sex,' he pants out.

'Fuck, Orlando,' Richard grits out. 'This is- you feel- fuck-'

Orlando blinks his eyes back into focus and wets his lips. And now that he has Richard where he wants him - hard and thick inside of him - it's much, much easier to appreciate the view. So that's what he does for a moment, while Richard still has his eyes closed, isn't really moving, fills him, seems to chase single words in his head. Then he digs his thumb deeper into the curve over Richard's hip, not enough to hurt, but for Richard to open his eyes once more.

'Richard?'

'Yes?' Richard asks, voice just as low, if not as steady.

Orlando shifts, just for the sensation that is caused by it.

"'This is - you feel - fuck", what?' he quotes back at Richard in an attempt that is maybe not the subtlest. Still, it probably serves its purpose - nudging Richard away from the brink on which he seems to be tethering.

Richard chuckles breathlessly and sinks his teeth into his lower lip, about to close his eyes again when the nail of Orlando's thumb keeps him from doing so.

'You feel too fucking fantastic for your own good,' he says and almost manages to keep the slight tremor out of his voice. 'Don't move yet.'

Orlando's responding huff has no real punch to it, and he ignores the instruction anyway, at least partly.

While he keeps his right hand where it is, he moves his left to his dick without looking away from Richard.

He doesn't usually wank with that hand, and with the first flick of his wrist he surprises himself with the slight oddity of the feeling. Interesting, though, and better than nothing.

He exhales in a long breath and with it steadily tenses his inner muscles, smirking at Richard.

Richard groans and now closes his eyes, but only to blink them open a second later and search
Orlando's before he pulls out and thrusts back into him in one single, fluid motion that has enough force to make Orlando's whole body move.

Oh fuck.

Instinctively Orlando lets go of his dick to stretch his arm over his head, hand flat against the headboard. And his next inhale is cut short by Richard's next thrust.

Now they're talking.

He waits for Richard to withdraw again and when he does, he tilts his pelvis, wraps his left leg over the back of Richard's thighs, hooks his right over his lower back and pulls him in.

Richard's breath catches when he can slide in deeper like that and he leans forward and presses his lips against or Orlando's, more panting against them than actually engaging in a coordinated kiss. His hand finds Orlando's hip and curls around it tightly, pulling him into his thrusts, while his other hand wraps around Orlando's shoulder so that he keep him from sliding away.

Hard and fast, quick stabs of his hips that knock his teeth against Orlando's lip.

This is exactly how it should be, and it happens so fast - like he is being slammed right to the edge from one instant to the next - that each and every thrust feels like the very first one. He moves his left hand to Richard's jugular and holds his head in place, so he can push his tongue into his mouth properly while the muscles in his right arm strain in the effort to keep them where they are.

It's just-like-that. Just-like-that - and he can't come like this, not now, not if Richard keeps fucking him for an hour (fuck; the idea alone -), and if that's not a brilliant thing, then he doesn't know. On the edge, but not tumbling over; intense want, and his mind there to record the ride.

For once, Richard just lets himself be kissed, does not instantly push his tongue against Orlando's, his focus elsewhere, on the movement of his hips, his rhythm does not falter once, not even when he bites down lightly, so that Orlando lets him breathe- he is flushed, his lips are red from kissing, his hair is sticking to his sweaty forehead, his gaze is unfocused.

But he smiles, smiles when he takes another shaky breath and slides his hand off Orlando's shoulder so that he can brace himself against the mattress and gain even more leverage. His next thrusts come from a slightly different angle and with even more force, and the sound they draw from Richard's lips is broken, strangled.

And Orlando for once really tries to hang on to his thoughts, doesn't just wipe them from his mind to return to the world half an hour later, hand sticky with his own come. Instead he lets Richard hold him down, thinks it safe to remove his hand from the headboard to wrap it around his dick again.

He feels Richard swallow against his palm, Adam's apple moving under it, does the same.

He thinks that this is pretty perfect, thinks that this really should last for a while, knows it won't - not at that pace, not with that force - regrets it and doesn't care at the same time. There is this moment, right now, and he feels fucking brilliant.

There is that sound again and Richard closes his eyes, rests his forehead against Orlando's for a second, only to pull back again when his next shove knocks their heads together. He blinks to adjust his focus, once, twice, before he attempts to say something, his voice hoarse, words drawn apart and
pushed together by his thrusts.

'Orlando- I just-- I can't- it's too much-

Orlando wants to object and agree at the same time. His knee-jerk reaction is a brief flare of annoyance at himself; he hates paradoxes. Thankfully that is enough incentive for a shift of focus, and instead of cursing or ignoring Richard's unspoken request, he tightens his legs embrace so suddenly and forcefully that it makes it impossible for Richard to move at all.

His hand moves from Richard's throat to his chin, his jaw and he leans up to close his mouth over Richard's, briefly, then say against it,

'Chill out, mate.'

Richard’s whole body tenses and struggles against the tight grip for a moment, his breathing fast, irregular, before Orlando’s words register and he laughs and relaxes. He traces Orlando's lips, then licks into his mouth, and it’s that kind of kiss that almost lets Orlando release him and focus on that orgasm again when Richard pulls back.

'Turn around, onto your side.'

Richard attempts to shift immediately after, but Orlando still doesn't let him. He ignores the responding huff and just holds onto him more strongly, hand closing over his upper arm, too.

'And give up my one advantage?' he says, tensing the muscles in his legs even more for a moment only to then loosen them again. Point proven. 'I don't think so.'

Richard rolls his hips to spite him, but he really can't move much. Reduced to laughing and groaning he bites Orlando's lip for good measure before he asks:

'So this is your way to prevent me from ruining things? Subtle.'

Orlando draws his head away, licking over his bottom lip.

'It's like you haven't met me before,' he says and answers Richard's responding roll of his hips by tightening his inner muscles.

'Besides, stop talking about orgasms as "ruining things". You sound like this is the last time I'm gonna let you fuck me.'

He brushes hair from his forehead before doing the same for Richard who presses a kiss against his wrist, into his palm, says against his fingers,

'I just really don't want this to be over.'

Orlando regards him for a moment. His hold on Richard is so tight, he will have to loosen it pretty soon. Richard's dick is hard inside him, and with every second of him not moving, the simple demand in his head (Fuck me) sounds louder and louder. But there is no desperation because -

'You know, Nietzsche argues that with infinite time and a finite number of events, events will recur again and again infinitely.'
The expression on Richard’s face makes him laugh but not remove his hand from his dick. On the contrary, he shifts, along with the motion of his hand, to feel Richard move inside him.

'So, this Nietzsche guy,' Richard says. ‘Anything I can do right now to make you stop wanting to discuss him?'

'Dunno, possibly. But that involves pending orgasms again, so I reckon we're at an impasse.'

He ends his vice-like grip on Richard’s body. Richard immediately uses his regained freedom to grind his hips down, pushing as deep as the angle allows.

'I'm good with pending orgasms. If we can hold off actually coming for a while yet.'

Orlando groans, and it's mostly because of what Richard's hips are doing, not what his mouth is saying. For two, three of his thrusts, he just focuses on those and on the weight of his dick in his fist. But he still has his eyes open and an objection ready on his tongue. This time around he still has enough of his wits to keep his hand on the handbrake, so to speak.

Slow and long is the opposite of efficient; the end result is an orgasm either way; reason agrees with what his gut says. But the rhythm Richard picks up again while still looking down at him, that acts as enough of a pacifier. Besides, it's not like arguing his point will actually lead anywhere. Take your own advice, idiot. Chill out.

'Whatever, mate,' he finally says, his free hand returning to Richard's side. 'Your show.'

Richard laughs and kisses him, the opposite of slow and gentle.

'Which means you object,' he says, his next thrust less careful.

'It's like -' Orlando replies and gets interrupted by another thrust -

- if he lets someone fuck him, -

- and another, just as right as the last one -

- he'll better feel it -

- and he could stop stroking his dick, should maybe, cause he could come at will any time now, but since he's pretending (or trying, same thing) to play along -

- and Richard knows that perfectly well, just like Orlando knows that Richard will take 90 mph over 190 any time -

He draws his right knee higher, one hand on Richard's hip still, the other on his left arm.

All right.

'- you know me,' he finishes before kissing Richard again.

Richard kisses back and closes his hands around Orlando's hips, grip tight, and pulls him into his next thrust which comes with more force than the last two combined.
'Let's do this then,' he murmurs against Orlando's lips, then pulls back to look at him.

His next thrust has him gritting his teeth.

Orlando laughs, and it turns into a gasp that Richard drives out of him.

'You fuck me -'

Good. Hard. Perfect. His mind provides words whose tight neatness don't cover what Richard's force does to -

'For as long as you want -'

Wantwantwantwant it echoes through him, and fuck, if that's not true, as he tries to keep up with -

'But I'm gonna -'

And he keeps his eyes open, the image of Richard blurring as a slight change of the angle of his wrist means he does.

Come, that is.

Richard doesn't let up, doesn't allow his rhythm to falter for a second. He keeps looking at Orlando, breathes- pants- his name, moans against his lips, into his mouth.

Orlando breaks the kiss to gulp in air, his free hand against Richard's neck. His orgasm ripples through him, and Richard just keeps shoving into him, the sensation brilliant and he just won't let Orlando come down again. He knows consciously that this won't last, not for long, definitely not forever. But that just makes it better. It makes the craving (satisfied and yet so very much not satisfied) even more delicious, makes him want even more.

He uses the first bit of oxygen that doesn't seem to be directly sucked into that void of want for laughing. Because this is so good, and he adjusts the embrace of his legs to move with Richard and get him to continue.

Richard’s face buried against his neck, he whispers something inaudible, the sound lost when his beard moves over Orlando's skin. He laughs again, in sync with Richard's pace. He’s so gonna feel this tomorrow, the slight soreness of his skin where Richard's beard scratches it, where Richard's teeth scrape it, he’s gonna feel this more than the fuck itself. And weirdly, illogically (but who the fuck cares) that keeps him on that high for longer, nerve endings buzzing.

He hears Richard's breathing change, short, breathless intakes of air, feels the tension in his entire body from the exertion. He turns his head, his mouth against Richard's ear as he is once again able to full sentences.

'Still wanna switch positions? Cause I'm still good to go for a while. If you wanna.'

This gets Richard to slow down, if not still entirely. There are small beads of sweat on his forehead when he pushes himself up to look at Orlando, he is flushed, his eyes are hazy.

'Yes, yes, I want-. On your side?'
Orlando hums in agreement and pushes at Richard's shoulder when he doesn't immediately shift.

'Get off,' he says with a smile.

Richard again takes a second to react, but then he does. Orlando grunts when he pulls out and moves, but only his legs and back are slightly stiff, and that's it.

Richard is still trying to catch his breath, so Orlando wipes his right hand clean with a tissue from the nightstand before shifting back into position. He leans back enough until his back is against Richard's chest and pats his thigh.

'Come on, then.'

Richard exhales slowly, chuckles. He kisses Orlando's shoulder, then lightly nips it when he slides his hand under his thigh and hoists it up so that he can push back into him. Orlando fights to keep his eyes open at the sensation, it is like touching a live wire and it briefly short-circuits his -

Richard nips at his shoulder again.

'All right?'

Orlando hums, his eyes somehow refusing to open again.

Richard moves slowly, the sensation is different, deja vue almost, but this is still the same. This - Richard filling him up; this - Richard's solidness against him; this - Richard's mouth on his skin.

'Could be worse.'

Richard's hand comes to rest on his stomach, his nails lightly scrape over the skin below his navel, card through the hair. The pace he sets is slower, but his thrusts aren't shallow, he bottoms out with each of them. He murmurs something into Orlando's hair, and in response Orlando stretches, angle slightly different again, tilts his head, exposes his neck. Richard makes use of all of it, of course he does, and without hesitation. He presses Orlando's body tightly against his, speeds up his thrusts again and kiss-licks a line up his neck.

'We can swap next time,' he says between two kisses. 'I don't care about the mess.'

Orlando’s brain is in post-orgasm haze while his body is still used in a way to suggest the build up.

'If you want,' he murmurs, turning his jaw into the path of Richard's kiss.

'As long as you fuck me like that, though?' He licks his lips lazily. 'I'm pretty happy to bottom for the foreseeable future, mate.'

Richard responds by kissing him deeply and putting his back into his next two, three, four thrusts - and fuck, really just *fuck* - before he slows down to a gentle rocking movement, now and then interrupted by a harder push of his hips.

'Best way. So that I can still feel it tomorrow.'
Tomorrow - the word works like a prompt to unfold a fold-up map of Orlando's Friday schedule, but he really can't be bothered, mentally dropping it after a cursory glance. Lessons, recess, grading, whatever. Richard’s irregular pattern is thrilling despite his systems finally powering down.

He closes his eyes again, and there is blackness. He hears himself breathing in quiet moans, he feels Richard’s arm flexing against his chest every time he pushes into him. Feels Richard's lips against his neck, listens to Richard breathing, say his name, and answers by reaching behind himself to close his hand over Richard's thigh.

'Orlando,' Richard says, between pants, his breathing getting heavier rapidly, thrusts harder. 'Can I-

The renewed vigor shakes Orlando out of the idle state his thoughts have drifted to. He curses and mutters an affirmation. Then though he attempts to pull away - just enough to make this fun, for Richard to have to work to keep him where and how he wants him.

Richard growls, tightens his embrace further, shifts his leg over Orlando's, sinks his teeth into his shoulder; all at the same time, very clear in his message.

No, you don’t.

Orlando struggles for another token second. Because it has Richard bite down and if that's not fucking hot, then Orlando doesn't know what.

Then he gives in.

'Fine. C'mon then.'

Richard’s teeth scrape over Orlando's shoulder when his thrusts get this urgent, almost desperate quality that precedes orgasm. And just for the sake of it, Orlando pretends to struggle again.

'Fuck, Richard,' he half growls, half laughs, having some difficulty to even get the words out, Richard's hold is that tight.

'Now.'

Three more thrusts, and Richard comes with a muffled groan against Orlando's shoulder, his whole body tensing up. Orlando gives in a split second after Richard, muscles going slack. Still, the hold on him doesn't change for long moments as Richard shudders his release. Orlando lets him - okay fine, he can't really move anyway nor do his muscles seem to want to - until Richard seems to remember how to actually inhale properly again.

Then Orlando shifts, purposefully elbowing him in the side.

'Mate, a little breathing room here?'

Richard laughs and kisses his neck while he loosens his grip around him, but stays where he is, pressed against Orlando's back. Orlando rolls his shoulders to loosen the muscles there, and since it worked the first time around, he gives Richard's side another nudge with his elbow. Again, Richard obliges, so he can shift half onto his back, Richard’s dick still inside him.

'You know,' he then says, 'I'm really shit at performing CPR, should you need it. We might have to call your idiot assistant.'
Richard's groan turns into laughter.

'Seriously? That's who you want me to think about now?'

He lifts his head far enough off the mattress to scowl at Orlando, but without real heat, then flops back down. Wiping his forehead with his hand, he then mutters,

'Not sure if I'd want him to perform CPR on me, though. Maybe not the safest bet.'

The wiping motion reminds Orlando of how utterly, utterly sweaty he feels. Plus he has rests of drying come on his hand, the same in his ass and it's just a matter of time before this gets sticky. Urgh. Seriously, if sex in the shower wouldn't require standing up and possibly breaking something, he would always opt for that location.

'Three things,' he says, and predictably, Richard looks curious and taps his hand on Orlando's stomach.

Orlando leans over him and kisses him. It's a closed-mouth and light kiss because his lips feel fucking bruised all of a sudden, and Richard is still not breathing quite regularly again anyway. When he pulls back, he refrains from licking his lips, Richard's saliva cooling on them.

'Secondly,' he says and ignores Richard's chuckle, 'secondly, I very much hope this posh hotel room has a decent bathroom because I feel disgusting. And thirdly, between me and your intern, I'd go with Nathan if I were you. During first aid training last fall, I broke a dummy. JC had to pay for it.'

Richard's brow stays arched, and he smiles at him while he ticks off the three items Orlando has brought up with taps on his stomach:

'Let's come back to that later.' Tap.

'It does. Rain shower head and everything. They even got towels.' Tap.

'Remind me to give you a refresher. That's unacceptable.' Tap. And a grin.

'If you want me to move, though, you'd better give me one of those tissues.'

While his hand is already blindly reaching for the nightstand, Orlando pulls a face.

'Urgh,' he makes, very distinctly. 'Never mind virological disasters. Sex is such a fucking mess.'

Without changing the angle of his hips, he presses the tissue against Richard's chest, briefly lets his hand linger there and leans his forehead against Richard's.

'Worth it, though.'

Richard hums and closes his eyes for a second, exhales slowly before he blinks them open again.

'I like that, how it feels- you feel, without.'

Orlando’s throat provides an instinctive hum in response. He's glad for it, after a split-second when his thoughts catch up. There's no come-on in the tone of Richard's voice, but there is something. And
Orlando has several things he could say - how it's good that Richard enjoyed himself, how he, personally, doesn't feel much of a difference either way; something like that. All suitable, in a way. Or maybe not.

So he remains silent, his low hum exempted, and his fingers do a miniature impression of Richard's drumming on his thigh.

Richard, too, is silent for a moment, then he reaches for the tissue on his chest and pulls out of him.

As Orlando shifts onto his back, sweat tickles where it ran down his back to the curve right above his ass, and when he reaches for his upper arm to rub out a kink there, his hand is sticky and he feels the sweat on his skin.

Right.

He sits up, Richard's eyes following him.

'Right, I'm gonna take a shower.'

He anticipates Richard's reaction and shakes his head.

'I know, mood killer and all. And I owe you an apology - for that, and for earlier, actually, I reckon.'

He swings his legs out of the bed.

'But not now, I feel like a human fly strip.'

Already standing next to the bed, he kneels down on it again anyway to place a brief, smiling kiss onto Richard's mouth.

'Back in two minutes.'

Richard's fingers curl around his wrist, loosely, not tight enough to hold him back, pull him down again. He just looks at Orlando, his brow slightly furrowed, then nods, and lets go of his wrist.

'Take your time,' he says, his voice hoarse.

Orlando knows he won't. What he wants is to get clean and get back into bed. He stretches his arms over his head as he walks over to the bathroom, grimaces when his shoulder protests faintly. As the bathroom door falls shut behind him, he has already located the towels and has one foot in the shower.

The spray is instantaneously warm and strong, not like the sometimes rather vindictive one he has back home. One hand braced against the tiles, he closes his eyes for as long as it takes to breathe out in a low groan, the hot water feeling brilliant against his sore shoulder. But before the heat can do what it always does - put him in a dozing state after about thirty seconds - he washes, runs his hands through his short hair and shakes his head when he turns the spray back off and towels down.

When he returns to the bedroom, two minutes and thirty five seconds later, Richard still is stretched out on his back, but his eyes are closed now.

He opens them when the bed dips under Orlando's weight.
'Hey,’ he says. 'Do you feel better now?’

'I felt pretty great before.’ He lies down on his back once more and turns his head towards Richard. 'Now I feel great and showered.’

As Orlando lets his hand rest on his thigh, Richard's smile briefly widens and his eyes travel down Orlando's chest. He frowns and brings up his hand to trace one of the marks he has left, then runs it over the faint imprint of his teeth.

'Looks as if I got carried away a little. I'm sorry.'

Orlando looks down at his chest.

'Nah, it's fine,’ he says with a shrug. 'As long as you don't get a tattooing needle out, you're golden. I have all the ink I need.’

Richard’s gaze automatically slips to Orlando’s arm and with a smile, Orlando bends it, pillowng his head on it, so the tiny row of words on the inside of his bicep is exposed. Richard traces that with his finger as well, slow as if reading Braille. The touch is light, tickling almost. Orlando holds still, watching Richard.

'This looks pretty hot on you,’ Richard says with a smile when his finger has reached the end of the sentence at Orlando’s elbow.

His hand travels back to Orlando’s chest. He leans over him, and as he splays his fingers out, Orlando feels the faint burn of the marks.

'But those make me regret that I won't be able to go for a second round tonight.'

It's not really news, Orlando was very aware of that. He usually has a mark or two on him after having met with Richard and he's left his own set of bruises as well. It's normal when you like the kind of sex that they have, kind of a logical by-product.

'Yeah, I know that. Why, though?’

Richard’s smile is not his broad one, not the one strongly suggesting amusement, not the polite one either. He pulls back a little while he thinks about the question. He shrugs.

'I have no idea. Some weird, archaic thing, maybe? Marking a mate? Not sure why I'd find it arousing, then, though.’

Orlando scratches his stomach and turns his head to look for his water.

'Well, I find it hot to have someone's dick down my throat,’ he says, stretching, so he can reach the bottle on the nightstand. 'That's hardly logical either.’

'Is it as pleasurable, though, to have your chest bitten as being blown?’

He drinks and puts the bottle back while he tries to make sense of the question.

'You mean part of the pleasure is invoking pleasure? Cause I mean I kinda need you to enjoy getting
head for anatomical reasons, but I just really get off on doing it. Hasn't actually got so much to do with how much you like it.'

Richard hums but doesn’t seem satisfied with the answer.

'That's not what I meant. I was actually asking. What does that do for you? For me that makes a difference, though, a huge one. I don't want to do anything that I know you don't like.'

Orlando shakes his head.

'You'd know if I didn't like something. Cause I'd tell you. Like when you dawdle.'

He adds something about the bite marks, how much he likes getting them. But despite Richard's responding smile his eyes dart away, to his finger that now worries the sheet.

'Too much dawdling, then? After I spoke to Nathan the first time and you- got impatient. And that's what you apologized for?'

Orlando can’t really read his expression. He’s not sure whether he’s just generally crap at it again or because Richard really doesn’t want him to.

Of course Orlando knows what he apologized for, and he is pretty certain that Richard knows as well. He hesitates to repeat it, however.

'I like that, how it feels- you feel, without.'

He remembers how much of a relief the feeling of hot water running down his back was.

It’s very easy to apologize for things. It's not even difficult to explain his behaviour; he knows exactly what he's doing and why he's doing it. Faulty logic would be to assume that that means he's gonna change.

Richard is looking at him again. He doesn’t push, doesn’t frown, doesn’t let up either. Patient and confident and sceptical and reserved, and Orlando spends another second searching for better adjectives to describe his attraction before he finally answers.

He lifts his shoulder in a shrug.

'The reason why I like sex the way I do is because it's uncomplicated. I don't like having to think while I am fucking someone. My mind likes contemplating Sartre and calculating United's odds in the premiere league, and if it's switched on, it just keeps telling me that the quickest route to an orgasm is a wank and that it is bored.'

Richard is frowning by now, and Orlando takes that as a sign that he is doing a shit job at explaining.

'It's why I like having sex with you.'

And that’s basically it. Richard is fantastic in bed; he fucks as well as he is smart, and Orlando is sure he spends a good deal of effort trying to camouflage how wickedly sharp-witted he really is.

‘You say what you want, take what you want. If I say I want to get fucked, I mean that. If I say I don't need any prepping, I mean that. Uncomplicated, yeah?’
'You really got yourself worked up, didn't you?'

Recalling his frustration, his anger at himself is like looking at a half faded, misshaped bruise on his skin. Part of him; odd.

He refrains from scratching himself, even though it feels like his skin is crawling again. Instead he keeps looking at Richard, tries a smile.

‘Teasing, dawdling, and sort of that coy will-they-won't-they, that annoys me because I don't see the appeal. And with stuff I don't get? My brain is conditioned to instantly start looking for the logical fallacy, and that is the opposite of uncomplicated.’

Richard didn’t interrupt him, but the frown is still there. Orlando doesn't think he can explain it any better.

'But earlier, that was my fault. You were working while I wasn't. Makes sense that you need a moment to get back into it.'

He really doesn’t know what else to say now, and yet Richard remains silent. So Orlando waits. Eventually Richard takes a breath as if to say something, but then he doesn't. His frown deepens.

'At what point does your brain shut up?’ he finally asks. ‘What is it that you need for that?”

Orlando exhales. That one is not difficult to answer.

'Momentum, I suppose. It's why or rather how I end up being in charge, I reckon. Not necessarily with you, and like I said, I really appreciate that. But if you were to make a flow chart for my dating, or rather fucking history. I push cause that way I keep the momentum going.’

Richard's frown changes into a small smile.

'I like that. The pushing part.’

He pauses. Something shifts there, and Orlando can’t put his finger on what it is exactly, it’s too subtle.

'And ending up on top.'

He seeks Orlando's eyes while he searches for his next words. Not without hesitation he finally says,

'That's new, actually. That's not how it's been in past relationships.’

Having sex with Richard is the two of them pushing and shouting and laughing. This now is nudging and whispering and the vestige of a smile. It makes Orlando want to sit up and listen very closely. It also makes him want to take Richard by the shoulders, shake him and tell him to bloody speak up.

'What's not?’ he asks, his voice quiet. 'Topping?’

'No, I'd say I ended up bottoming seven out of ten times, something like that.’
Orlando tilts his head, for half a second tries to calculate their ratio before he gives up. It makes so little difference to him who sticks what where that he really can’t remember once his body’s soreness has faded.

'But you prefer it the other way round?' he asks instead.

This time Richard doesn’t hesitate but nods.

'I do. I don't exactly dislike bottoming, that's not it. It's just- I get more out of topping. Not always, but most of the times.'

Really, pushing and shouting and laughing. That’s not so difficult, is it? Orlando shakes his head. He doesn’t bother to try and keep the mild incredulity out of his voice.

'Why didn't you tell me that earlier? We've been fucking for what, half a year or something?'

Richard started shaking his head even before he is done talking.

'That's not- I like it when you're on top, I really do. When I'm in a particular mood. I would have told you if it were an issue. But it's really not. It's great the way things are.'

All right then.

Orlando nods.

'Good.'

He absently rubs the skin under his collar bone, waits for the frown on Richard's forehead to even out completely. It does when his eyes start following the movement of Orlando's hand. After a moment he chuckles, having caught himself doing so, and says how he's surprised by his constant desire for more sex. He sounds more relaxed again, and while Orlando doesn't really get how that happened, he doesn't object when Richard adds that he, too, is going to shower now. Instead he jokes about the questionable plumbing he is used to, very different from what the posh hotel has to offer. Richard’s rather unadulterated horror is not actually surprising but funny nonetheless, makes him stop dead in his movements actually. Orlando just shrugs. He has no problems with Richard picking out the hotels; the less hassle for him, the better. And nice showers aren't something he objects to on principle.

As Richard gets up to make use of those nice facilities, Orlando gets out of the bed as well to fetch his phone and set his alarm.

He has two from Sean and one from Dom. Dom's contains a 9 Gag link that Orlando will definitely leave untouched, Sean's first informs him that 'everything is all right at Mirkwood and good night to your beau'. Orlando would make a note to smack Sean on sight for that if the second message didn't include a link to an article about Bentham’s utilitarianism.

Half way through that, he realizes that he is still standing naked in the middle of the hotel room. So he changes that and reads the second half in bed, already drafting a response to it in his head.

He hears the shower being turned off - when did Richard turn it on? - when he is through, and he turns from his stomach onto his back. He stares at the ceiling and thinks about good acts, increasing
pleasure and happiness while he hears Richard brushing his teeth.

*the end of morality is happiness: morality is valuable no otherwise than as a means to that end*

Despite the quality of the article itself, a few of Bentham’s quotes remain on Orlando’s mind like they usually do. He’s always appreciated that about him, the simple and precise wording of thoughts, the passion behind them. There’s a peace, an enjoyment in that, so much that the content might almost become secondary. It’s like that now as well, and the resulting lazy contentedness lasts longer than it normally would. Mostly a testament to his physical exhaustion, he supposes.

Of course, in the end it makes him restless anyway. If transparency has a moral value, then constantly questioning everything is a part of that. He switches his phone back on to re-read parts of ‘Nonsense Upon Stilts’ until he hears the tap water being turned off in the bathroom.

His focus shifts a bit later when Richard returns. The display of his phone turns itself off a he watches him gathering up their remaining clothes from the ground to put them onto one of the chairs before he makes his way over. He briefly checks in at his hospital for one last time - all quiet on the Western front - before he gets into bed.

'What were you reading?' he asks.

Orlando is confused for half a second, and Richard points at the phone that is still cradled in his hand.

'Bentham, prompted by a mediocre article that Sean sent me,' Orlando answers and puts the phone next to Richard’s on the nightstand.

*create all the happiness you are able to create*

He turns on the side to face Richard.

'He says hi, by the way.'

Richard smiles and bends down to pull the covers over his thighs. The linen is cool on Orlando's naked skin, but pleasantly so and it is maybe slightly weird, but it makes him instantly feel somewhat drowsy.

'Cheers,' Richard says quietly. 'I'd actually- can I meet him some time? It seems a bit weird that I've met a whole bunch of your friends and colleagues but not him. I'd like that.'

*every day will allow you, will invite you to add something to the pleasure of others*

'Sure, any time.' Orlando yawns. 'He keeps referring to you as my imaginary boyfriend, so the moment you meet him, it'd be great if you could punch him in the mouth. Let him figure out how imaginary that is.'

Richard chuckles and turns onto his side, too, head propped up with his left hand. His right finds Orlando's, and his thumb brushes over the inside of his wrist while his other fingers loosely curl around his hand.

'Probably not how that's going to go,' he says with a smile.
He watches his finger move over Orlando’s skin before he asks,

‘Boyfriend?’

As words go, this one is pretty stupid. They are both over 40, and Orlando hasn’t identified as a boy since 1988. He doesn’t pull a face, though.

According to Kant and Hegel, experience and empirical knowledge only then become real, become true, once they are summarized in form of a notion, until they have been given a name.

He flexes his wrist, only to have Richard close his hold accordingly.

He never really liked the translation of Hegel’s *Begriff* as ‘notion’. ‘Notion’ lacks the tangibility, the realness in itself, that the German original provides. *Begreifen* means to grasp, to touch, to grip; *Begriff* means to grasp with words, and it implies the solidity of the object one is holding in one’s hand.

He blinks his eyes back into focus as Richard’s hold on his wrist tightens minutely.

It’s been a second, not longer, since he asked, but it already seems like Orlando has been keeping him waiting.

‘Yeah,’ he says.

Richard raises his brows as if he is waiting for Orlando to follow that up with something else. When he doesn’t, he tightens his hold around his wrist even further, a small smile playing around his lips.

‘Okay,’ he says.

Okay.
25/1/2018 - Still now (Richard's POV)

Chapter Summary

This is the continuation of "Now" (Chapter 30) from Richard's point of view, go back one chapter for Orlando's point of view.

Orlando turns onto his stomach and looks back at Richard over his shoulder.

He is breathtaking, spread out like this, every muscle tense with anticipation, waiting for him, and Richard wants- needs to touch him, needs to-

He reaches out and lets his fingers brush over the back of Orlando’s thigh, just below his buttocks, watches, feels Orlando’s skin respond to the touch, and he-

Nathan’s voice right next to his ear reminds him that he still is in the middle of something else entirely. His reply comes a little late, if not much, and he feels himself blush under Orlando’s gaze while he hurries to wrap up the call as politely as he can.

There is a little thud when he places his phone on the night stand, then silence.

Orlando exhales audibly and Richard watches his chest fall, rise, fall again, before his eyes follow the line of his spine downwards. It’s another one of those moments, he should have gotten used to them by now, but hasn’t, probably never will, another one of those moments when everything seems to shrink down to that one thought, one word, and nothing else matters.

Want.

He wants to touch him, taste him, cover his body with his own, hold him down and sink into him, feel him, finally feel him, his tightness, his warmth, wants to feel him move underneath him, against him, with him.

He tightens his fingers around Orlando’s thigh and is about to slide them higher, between his cheeks, to check- even if he probably is ready, relaxed enough, eager enough to just- when Orlando’s voice interrupts him and that other thought-word takes over.

Impatience.

Inextricably linked with want, desire, need for Orlando and potentiating it, always there, always just below the surface, always chasing him, them, powerful enough to reduce Orlando to swearing frustration within heartbeats.

‘If I don’t get your dick inside me in the next minute, I am going to kill you. -- Just fuck me already!’

Paradoxically, counterproductively Richard laughs, because demands like that - fuck me- have yet to lose their effect on him, they still are thrillingly novel to his ear, even after months, and make him want to forego foreplay and build-up and just give in, shove into Orlando, fuck him, but his brain puts on the brake, the urge to laugh is its way of telling him that he is about to short-circuit it.

He takes a deep breath to clear his head and reign in his desire, a little, at least. His hands tremble
when he rolls on the condom, they always do when his adrenaline levels spikes, at work as well as in bed. And then he is done and can finally move, finally touch Orlando.

He bends down and pulls a bit of skin is between his lips, sucks lightly, not hard enough to bruise, not that high up on Orlando’s neck, but hard enough to draw a little growl from his lips, a sound that goes straight to Richard’s cock.

Their bodies are not close enough to touch, not yet, but almost, almost, Richard can feel the warmth Orlando radiates, the tension, hear every breath he takes, smell him, no cologne tonight, just Orlando. Orlando. Orlando.

He buries his nose in Orlando’s hair for a fleeting moment, then traces the outline of his ear with his lips and asks him quietly, teasingly if he is done bitching, done talking, ready.

It’s subtle, at first, almost subtle enough for Richard to miss. His reply is only a heartbeat too late, and it’s not what he is saying, but what he seems not to be saying- no swear words, no showcased impatience- and the line of his shoulders, tense, all of a sudden.

He waits for a moment, waits for Orlando to close his eyes again, relax again, tell him to continue, but he doesn’t, and his next words come with more force; impatience, frustration and even a little anger tightly woven around the two syllables.

‘I’m done.’

It sometimes only takes a couple of seconds for the atmosphere between them to change like this, and Richard can’t seem to get the hang of it, has yet to find a way that gets them back on track safely, hasn’t yet managed to work out if Orlando merely is frustrated with himself, or with Richard, or both.

He tries to catch Orlando’s eyes, but can’t, asks him if he is alright, but doesn’t get an answer, and then Orlando turns between his arms and knees, turns over onto his back and spends another moment staring at Richard’s collarbone, before his gaze finally flickers up to meet Richard’s, his brows drawn together, jaw set.

Intense frustration.

‘Yes,’ he finally says in reply to Richard’s question, but his expression betrays his words.

It was a little unfair, maybe, presumptuous, to expect Orlando to just ignore the unwelcome interruption and pretend that Richard did not just abandon him for the duration of that work call, to expect him to just pick up where they left off before the phone rang, to expect him to be still as enthusiastic, as aroused. He is used to putting everything on hold like this, but Orlando isn’t.

Orlando’s touch to his knee is light, gentle, unexpected, the intimacy of the gesture a startling contrast to his expression, his next words.

‘Now what?’

He needs to get out of this position, his muscles start to protest from the strain he is putting on them, hovering over Orlando like this, but he is reluctant to move, reluctant to put more space between them, it’s difficult enough to keep things together as it is and not let Orlando discourage him, to trust that they are still going to have sex in a moment.

‘You tell me,’ he says quietly.
Orlando’s hand is still closed around his knee, right above the patella, and his fingers tap against the lateral epicondyle, the pattern irregular, the touch oddly anchoring, soothing, but Orlando’s expression is impossible to read.

‘Want me to turn back around?’

Yes, Richard thinks, no. Not like this, not when his whole body still is this tense with frustration.

Reluctantly, he moves, lies down on his side next to Orlando, facing him, and waits, but Orlando only looks at him when he leans forward and tries to catch his eyes.

Irritation, frustration, annoyance, clear as day, and seemingly no way out of it.

Richard asks him to explain, still contemplates simply grabbing him, kissing him, coaxing him into letting go of all of these heavy thoughts, though, wonders if he would be able to taste them on his tongue if he did, when Orlando does, explain. He tells him that he likes sex quick and straight forward- hardly news- tells him that he doesn’t like power play and that it’s fine, really, if Richard doesn’t want to fuck him, just as it’s fine if he does. It’s all a little confusing, frankly, but Richard refrains from asking him to elaborate further, refrains from objecting to the term power play, chooses to tell him instead how much he wanted to, how gorgeous he looked, stretched out on his stomach like that, feels his cheeks colour when he does.

‘You still want to?’

Of course he does, he always does, he has probably never wanted anybody as much as he wants him.

‘Sure.’

Finally, he allows himself to give into the impulse to reach out for Orlando, touch him. He wraps his fingers around Orlando’s hip, the touch purposefully light, while he asks him to not just flop back onto his stomach, he wants to kiss him, needs to, now, after all of this, he hasn’t been able to since he got off the phone and won’t be, once Orlando turns back around.

Orlando protests, but then relents, humours him, wets his lips when Richard leans towards him a little, cups the back of his neck and kisses him.

The kiss is open-mouthed and slow, and Richard closes his eyes and just lets himself be kissed, lets Orlando lick deep into his mouth.

This is nice. It’s the first slow kiss of the evening, the first one that doesn’t make him breathless within seconds and Orlando’s lips are soft, pliant, his tongue patient, he likes that, really likes that. Orlando tightens his hold on the back of his head, on his hair, just a little, and he likes that, too, likes it when Orlando tugs at his hair like this and his whole scalp tingles with anticipation.

He asks again, smiling against Richard’s lips, if he gets to flop back onto his stomach already, and Richard laughs, but doesn’t let him, slides his hand into his hair and takes a steady grip- Orlando likes that as much as he does, maybe more- so that he can pull him back into the kiss. It’s neither slow nor gentle or nice any longer, though, the moment for that has passed. It’s deep, less controlled, enough to shut Orlando up, for another moment, at least, he lets himself fall back onto the bed and pulls Richard with him, wraps his arm around his back and just holds him for a moment, two, before his hand moves to Richard’s buttocks and the touch loses all innocence.

Nice.
Part of Richard’s weight rests on Orlando now, on his chest, his stomach, he can finally, finally feel him. He could move now, move between his legs, and they could do it like this, Orlando on his back, Richard on top of him, they could keep kissing, then, and Richard could see his face when pushing into him, could watch him come apart, could touch him. Orlando has made it clear, though, that he prefers to be on his stomach today-- in a moment- but first- Without breaking the kiss, he lets his hand travel down Orlando’s body and wraps it around his cock.

It’s not Orlando’s breath that catches when he does, but Richard’s, like it sometimes does when he touches Orlando, he just loves Orlando’s cock, loves how it feels in his hand, smooth, hard, hot, loves how it tastes, too, the way it looks. Not that he is ever going to tell him that.

Orlando doesn’t immediately push into his hand, as Richard has half expected him to, but nips at his lip instead, murmurs words of encouragement, tells him that he has been looking forward to this, and Richard answers in kind, trying to keep the slight tremor out of his voice, he wants-

The tip is a bit wet, it always is when he is this hard- so hot- and Richard rubs the pad of his thumb over the slit, once, twice, spreading the moisture, before he closes his fingers around the shaft and starts stroking him.

Orlando leans in for another kiss, it’s brilliant- fast, hard, wet- and, without letting go of Orlando’s cock, Richard slides his thigh over Orlando’s, desperate to feel more of him. His own cock pushes against Orlando’s hip, and that’s good, that’s a start, even if it doesn’t compare to the feeling of his hand around it, even though the condom clings to it in all the wrong places now.

It takes Richard a moment to bring Orlando back into focus when he cups his cheek, hears his beard rasp over his palm, feels his lips move against his own, Orlando’s words only register a second later. ‘Me, on my stomach, etcetera?’

‘Yes, please.’

Richard almost tears the condom in his haste to adjust the fit but only manages to make things marginally better.

Boy scout that he is, Orlando has another one, in his wallet, where the small package of lube came from.

Of course he does, given their track record.

He almost sounds insulted.

Their track record, Richard likes that. He feels a smile tugging at his lips when he remarks upon it and quickly rolls on the new condom, it’s pleasantly cool in comparison to the other one. Orlando is already on his stomach and holds the small package of lube out for him.

He could tell him that he has never once made use of a condom he’d stuck into his wallet, that he has always felt foolish putting it in there in the first place, pathetic when taking it out weeks or months later. Or that he is going to put one into his wallet tomorrow, right when he gets home. He does neither, because Orlando is looking at him, Richard watches his eyes travel from his face down to his hand, his cock, hard, slicked up, ready, and blushes, suddenly self-conscious.

The moment passes, though, when Orlando tells him that he comes prepared because Richard once told him sex was a virological disaster and makes him laugh, even if herpes, hepatitis and HIV are the last things he wants to think about now.
Orlando spreads his thighs readily, the very light pressure Richard applies to the inside of his leg encouragement enough, and that is so hot, Richard is already moving, already kneeling between his thighs, feels them press against his knees, presses back, curls his fingers around Orlando’s left hip, grip light, but hand in the position he needs it to be in if he wants to pin him down, later.

Orlando tells him that he is still good to go, but he checks anyway, not because he doesn’t trust him, but because he likes it, more than he would be comfortable to admit, for him this first breech somehow is more intimate than the act itself, the ultimate proof of trust, skin on skin. And he likes to see, too, to watch, likes to watch his finger, fingers disappear into Orlando’s body.

Like now. Predictably, his breath catches a little when he lets the pad of his right thumb rub over Orlando’s sphincter, circle it, before he presses against it and the thumb slips in easily.

He is ready, has been thorough, earlier, and already starts to stir, his impatience rearing its head again. Reflexively, Richard tightens his grip on his hip, leans forwards, applies a bit of pressure to keep him in place.

‘Two seconds, Orlando,’ he murmurs, his words serving the same purpose as his hand on Orlando’s hip. ‘I’ll get to it in a moment.’

He expects him to protest, but he doesn’t, just makes a little sound that is halfway between encouragement and impatience.

Richard feels a smile tugging at his lips.

Alright, then.

His fingers are back to trembling when he guides his cock between Orlando’s cheeks, inches closer, thighs now pressing against Orlando’s ass. He has yet to withdraw his thumb, but it’s such a sight, Orlando’s skin, his muscle stretched tight around it, and, following a sudden impulse, Richard lets the tip of his cock nudge against it, against the little opening, barely applying any pressure.

Yes.

He wants to, so much, wants to just snap his hips forward and push his cock in alongside his thumb.

Fuck.

He shouldn’t, though, of course not, he could hurt Orlando, tear something. He closes his eyes for a second, tries to get his breathing back under control, his pulse, this idea.

He bluses, is glad that Orlando can’t see him, pulls back a little, takes a deep breath, but can’t wants to has to-

Against, not inside, just a bit more pressure.

He swears and his voice is shaking just as much as his hand was a moment ago.

‘I want-‘

Not more words, but a little more pressure- Orlando’s opening stretches ever so slightly and he can’t keeps pushing, keeps pushing, and then the head is inside.

So good. So. Fucking. Good.

Richard doesn’t move, doesn’t dare to, can’t fights to stay in control when Orlando pushes himself
up, ready to meet him halfway, and that thought alone, that he- but no, no, no, not yet, he can’t- this is- not yet-

His nails almost break Orlando’s skin when he tightly grips his hip, gets him to still, wait, wait, wait, until he dares to move, pushes deeper and deeper still, slowly, carefully, listening for sounds of discomfort. But there are none and as soon as Richard loosens his grip ever so slightly, Orlando rocks back to meet him, breathes his name, sounds so- and Richard pushes, thrusts all the way in.

‘Like that,’ Orlando murmurs.

Yes.

‘Fuck,’ Richard grinds out and slowly pulls back a little, only to sink back into Orlando half a second later.

‘Fuck. Fuck, this-’

So tight.

‘All right?’ Orlando asks from far, far away, and when Richard lifts his eyes, he finds him looking at him over his shoulder.

Fucking fantastic.

But maybe he should be the one asking this question?

There is no sign of discomfort in Orlando’s features, though, or of pain, he seems fine, and while Richard lets that thought sink in- that this is, indeed, alright- he slides his hand up Orlando’s back, wraps it around his shoulder, he is going to need a better hold, when he-

There is more force behind his next thrust, and again, the sensation threatens to overwhelm him. But again, Orlando waits, doesn’t just push back against him, lets him take his time, and that’s so-

Richard takes a deep breath, then starts out slowly, pulls out, pushes back in, there is no real rhythm in his thrusts yet, also because he still needs to stop after every other little push and breathe before he can repeat. Orlando takes over for a moment, pushes himself up on his knees and elbows, and Richard can slide in even deeper, so good, so tight, he bends down, rests his forehead against Orlando’s shoulder, closes his eyes and just lets him work out a rhythm. He does, and it’s perfect.

When Richard feels him spread his knees wider to make more room for him he inches closer, adjusts the angle, adjusts his grip on his shoulder, feels Orlando’s muscles flex under his fingers and finally, finally dares to move. He starts out with tiny movements of his hips, just grinding against Orlando, really, but that’s not enough, not nearly enough, and his next thrust is all body, no brain, it almost has Orlando toppling over, he reaches out to balance himself, meets the next one halfway and then braces one arm against the headboard for purchase, arches his back.

Beautiful.

‘You’re so good at this.’

Richard chuckles breathlessly, feels himself shake his head. As if he would ever- not without being encouraged like this, this, all of this, is Orlando, and he tells him, then presses his lips against his neck, lets his teeth graze Orlando’s skin, at the juncture of neck and shoulder, before he straightens back up to look at him.
So beautiful.

His rhythm is fast now, steady and Orlando murmurs his appreciation, one word with every thrust.

'Just. Like. That.'

'Yes,' Richard pants, thrusts, pulls back, thrusts. 'Yes.'

Just like that. 

He braces himself against the mattress, shifts his weight onto his forearm and presses against Orlando, his back, his ass, so that he can feel more of him, all of him, dizzy with want.

'Fuck, Orlando, that's-'

The sound of skin slapping against skin makes him blush, and he can’t seem to breathe, his heart beats up to his neck, and he closes his eyes, just focusses on the feeling of Orlando around him, the tightness at every push, every pull, the way his body meets his, sweat is pooling between his shoulder blades and he wants to press his lips to his skin, lick it off him, Orlando pushes against him, and he answers in kind, Orlando starts to swear, turns around, says his name, says his name again, what-?

'Your phone's ringing.'

No.

Yes.

Shit.

Work.

'You got to be kidding me.'

Richard’s throat is dry, his voice rough around the edges.

The signal cuts through the silence again, louder this time.

‘Shit.’

Richard pushes himself up and onto his knees, and it’s not just them protesting, his body seems to weigh a ton, doesn’t want to move, doesn’t want to obey. He can’t reach his phone on the nightstand and has to both pull out of Orlando and climb over his right leg to get to it.

Work.

‘Stay where you are?’

Orlando settles back down again, gives him a thumbs up. Richard smiles despite the interruption and reaches out for him, lets his fingers settle on his lower back, light pressure, reassurance.

Bear with me.

Nathan sounds agitated and Richard’s pulse immediately reacts to his tone. It’s not an emergency, though, no unplanned delivery, no new admission, but a problem with an ABG, and he asks for details, hoping that his voice doesn’t betray him, that it doesn’t tell Nathan more than he needs to
know about his after-hours activities.

Orlando’s head rests on his arms now, and he is perfectly still, but his breathing hasn’t slowed back down yet, 20 breaths per minute easily, 25 even. Nathan’s report lacks stringency, he stumbles over his words, repeats himself, and Richard has to remind himself that he is new to this and that interrupting him will probably only add to his insecurity. It’s the baby in hypothermia, Room 4-Jackson, or no, Jaxon, the spelling matching the parents’ tattoos and hairdos- he has been as stable as can be during the past 48 hours, why would he develop an acidosis now?

Nathan’s reply to this question, asked out loud, makes Richard want to hand him a physiology textbook. Underneath him, Orlando stirs, shifts around until he finds a more comfortable position, starts kneading one of the muscles in his shoulder, he must have strained it, bracing himself against the headboard like that, and Richard gently swats away his hand and replaces it with his own, locates the muscle in question and applies pressure with the pad of his thumb, eases off again, repeats. At least Zaineb is on duty and appears to be satisfied with the baby’s condition, and that’s something, she could probably do this without Nathan. Maybe it simply is a problem with the sample.

Richard switches to speaker phone so that he can hear when Nathan is done drawing a second sample before he places the phone onto the bed next to them and bends down to Orlando to apologize, quietly, make sure that he is fine. Which he seems to be, he makes a joke, tells him to stop fussing already, that it’s fine, he is working. He looks much more relaxed, too, the lines between his brows have evened out and the edge of his impatience, the frustrated tension appears to be gone.

Good.

There is still a trace of laughter left in his voice when Richard picks the phone back up, but Nathan is too polite to comment on it and after a moment of hesitation simply continues to talk, but Richard feels himself blush. This won’t do, he needs to- it might just be easier to think when his cock is not pressing against Orlando’s ass.

He settles down on the bed next to him and Orlando seizes the chance to stretch and turn onto his back. His cock rests heavy against his stomach, still hard, if not fully. Richard drags his eyes away, watches him lick his lips instead, not helpful, either. He closes his eyes, tries to adjust his focus. Nathan, hypothermia, acidosis. Not Orlando, his cock, his slightly parted lips- his hand on Richard’s thigh now- he isn’t trying to- no, just wants to ask him if he wants a drink of water, too, and when Richard nods, he gets up to get two bottles of water from the tiny fridge under the desk.

Richard follows him with his eyes, watches Orlando move around the room. He is at ease, there is no sign of self-consciousness, not even when he bends down, and Richard likes that, likes that he is not shy around him, never has been. And why would he be, with a body like that.

The bed dips when Orlando sits back down next to Richard and hands him one of the bottles, absentmindedly rubs at a muscle on the inside of his thigh. It surely is sore as well, he spread his legs pretty wide, earlier, Richard thinks, he should have looked out for him better.

Nathan asks him a couple of question he can answer on autopilot while he waits for the ABG result and he allows himself to reach out for Orlando again, lightly rakes his fingernails over the inside of his thigh, wants to-

The result is exactly the same. Acidotic.

Oh come on .

Maybe he needs to get dressed after all, if he can’t- No, but they must be missing something- he must
be missing something.

Irritated, he asks Nathan to read out the result a second time, listens more carefully, comes up empty again. Orlando’s hand wraps around his own, the touch light, gentle, comforting, void of any sexual innuendo, and that’s so – nice, so unexpected, so unlike Orlando’s usual- Richard feels his chest constrict a little and tightens his fingers around Orlando’s thigh in response.

*Stop that.*

*Think.*

'Send me a picture. Cover the name, take a picture and send it to my phone. I need to see it.'

It seems to take forever before his phone receives the message, the picture is blurry and upside down, but once Richard enlarges it, he can at least make out the numbers.

It doesn’t make any more sense than it did five minutes ago, though, and Richard feels a fresh wave of irritation wash over him. He takes a deep breath, re-reads. Re-reads again. 37 degrees. Of course. Nathan forgot to punch in the actual temperature. It’s as simple as that.

He can’t help but laugh, relieved and lifts the phone back up to his ear.

'Nathan?' he asks. 'Take a look at the temperature.'

While Nathan tries to work out that clue, Richard turns towards Orlando, smiles at him. Orlando asks him quietly, very quietly, if Nathan maybe is not the sharpest crayon in the box, and Richard has to bite his lip not to laugh. He reaches for Orlando again, hand coming to rest on his thigh, a little higher this time, and for a moment he watches his fingers move over Orlando’s skin, feels the soft hairs bends out of the way of his fingertips.

*Any minute now.*

Nathan finally catches up and starts apologizing on the same breath. Richard tells him that that’s really not necessary, it’s a typical beginning’s mistake, and he should have reminded him that they correct ABG results for the actual temperature, even if other wards might not, actually, he has to remember to discuss that with Graham, maybe over lunch next week. Nathan is still apologizing, Orlando is still waiting, and it might be impolite, but he needs to put an end to this, even if it means interrupting him

'No, Nathan, listen- It's fine, the kid's fine, I'm fine.'

Orlando has settled back against the headboard and looks at him, brows slightly furrowed, and Richard lets his fingers tighten around his thigh a little before he slides his palm further up the inside, he is done waiting, he just needs to-

'Yes, but there's a difference between having read something in a book and actually having to do it.'

Which is true, to a certain degree, but Nathan actually might want to revise some basic physiologic principles, there was quite a lot of guesswork there, more than Richard is willing to let slide. That is not a topic for a phone conversation, though, he can talk to him next week about this, after the weekend. After he has had sex.

'I am not fine,' Orlando mouths, but his smile betrays him, as does his cock, it’s getting hard again, and fuck, this needs to stop, Nathan needs get over himself.
Now.

Richard repeats his words of reassurance for a fifth time, like a weird mantra, tells him to get a good night’s rest once Cassandra takes over the shift—just a little over 30 minutes, thankfully, and then, finally, finally, it’s alright, Nathan stops talking and he can ring off and put down the phone.

Richard breathes a quiet sigh of relief, then turns towards Orlando to apologize, again, for the interruption.

Orlando is still leaning against the headboard and just looks at him for a moment, before the corner of his mouth quirks up and he gestures towards his lap, Richard’s hand that is still resting there, and asks if Richard reckons they might actually get to finish a round now, already reaching out for his wallet on the nightstand.

And that’s so hot, the absence of any form of segue, that he has just been waiting, for him, for them to continue this, that he has put more than one condom, one little foil of lube into his wallet, that he has planned this, prepared for it.

Orlando’s cock immediately responds to his touch, stiffens fully within a couple of light strokes, and Richard’s reacts in kind, even without being touched, the feeling of Orlando’s cock swelling in his hand quite enough to get him hard again, the feeling of Orlando’s hand, encircling his wrist now, even if it halts his movement. Being held like that does weird things to Richard, always, makes him hyperaware, hyperalert, triggers almost overwhelming arousal and the impulse to push back, seize, hold. Like now. Orlando says something, asks something, but he can’t—doesn’t want to—is already reaching out for him, is already wrapping his hand around his neck, pulling him closer, kissing him.

Yes.

Orlando’s grip around his wrist tightens even further, just a bit, just the way Richard likes, then he shifts, straddles Richard’s thighs, and that’s—so much of his skin pressing against him and he is right there, right in his lap, and now he takes Richard’s head between his palms and changes the angle of the kiss, deepens it, pushes his tongue into Richard’s mouth.

Fuck yes.

How much he wants this, him, this speed, this sort of kiss, deep, dirty, straightforward, no trace of hesitation whatsoever, it’s exactly what he wants, and more, much more, more of him, this, them. His hand finds its way between Orlando’s shoulder blades, to keep him in place, pull him closer, and Orlando instantly responds to his touch, to the pressure applied, scoots forward without breaking the kiss so that his cock presses against Richard’s stomach, right next to his own.

Yes, yes, yes.

Richard slides his hand around Orlando’s neck, into his hair, so that he can pull him even closer, tugs, feels Orlando pull away a little, to test the strength of his grip before leaning right back in, and while he does, Richard traps Orlando’s cock between his palm and stomach for a moment before he frees himself of the condom that isn’t even half in place any longer, he wants to feel Orlando’s skin against his own, his warmth, wants to have him closer, wants more, wraps his arm back around Orlando’s shoulder, holds him.

More, closer, closer, more.

Orlando’s muscles flex under his hand and Richard tightens his grip in response but can’t prevent Orlando from pulling back a little, to breathe, pant against his lips, and that’s—he wants—
Orlando’s palm against his cock, around both their cocks almost comes as a shock, threatens to
overwhelm him when he instinctively pushes up, strains into the touch, more—

It’s not enough, he wants, needs to get back inside of Orlando, wants him on his back, this time,
wants to be able to look at him, kiss him, wants him to pant into his mouth, like he did a second ago,
wants him to suck his breath right out of him, wants to feel him come into his hand, against his
stomach, between them, and he moves them, manoeuvres Orlando onto his side, his back, stretches
out on top of him and pulls him back into a kiss.

Orlando struggles with a pillow wedged under him, but doesn’t let go of their cocks, and that’s- the
feeling of Orlando wriggling, shifting while he keeps stroking him, them, keeps kissing him- and
then he hooks one of his legs over Richard’s and arches his back, presses against him for even more
body contact, so fucking good, and Richard wants- He slides one arm under Orlando’s shoulder to
steady him and pushes, pushes into his fist, now trapped between their bodies, rocks his hips so that
their cocks slide against each other in Orlando's grip.

So good.

He tells Orlando, tells him when he pulls out of the kiss to breathe, tells him how much he likes this.
Orlando rests his forehead against his neck, panting, and Richard likes that, too, and he bends his
neck so that he can press a kiss against Orlando’s shoulder, lick his skin, dip his tongue into the
hollow of his throat, taste the salt of the sweat that has pooled there earlier.

‘Fuck me,’ Orlando breathes, head now resting on the pillow, neck bared to Richard’s lips.

Yes- yes, yes, yes-

Richard’s teeth graze Orlando’s skin before he sucks a small patch between his lips.

Fuck yes.

He feels, more than hears Orlando hum in response to this, feels him card his fingers through his hair,
grip it when he continues, ready to pull him off, away, prevent him from leaving a mark that high up
his neck, he hates wearing turtle neck shirts, he reminds Richard, but his hips betray him, they push
up, meet Richard’s, more friction, more pressure, yes-, and Richard wants to needs to wants to- if not
here then there, lower, on Orlando’s chest, where there is more tissue underneath the skin- he sucks,
hard enough to bruise, has to tell his jaws not to tighten further, not to bite, break skin, the impulse to
do so almost overwhelming, almost, almost, but then Orlando releases their cocks and presses him
down while he thrusts upwards.

‘Fuck, Orlando-‘

Richard’s hips immediately answer in kind, he shoves forward, again, again, slides over Orlando’s
skin, feels his cock against his own, so hard, his lips close over another patch of skin and another
wave of desire hits him when he pulls it between his teeth.

Underneath him, Orlando moves- what- his wallet, of course- but keeps his hand on the back of
Richard’s head, continue, and Richard does, moves to the next spot, repeats, it’s beautiful, the
contrast between Orlando’s pale skin and the deep red of the bruises, he bends down again, traces
the outline of one of them with his tongue.

Foil crackles between Orlando’s fingers and then Richard feels him tapping the little package of lube
against his shoulder. And hears him tell him to get to it.

Oh, and Richard wants to- get to it- of course he does, but he also wants- no. He drags himself away
from Orlando’s skin and manages to pull himself together long enough to reach for the package, manages to rip it open with his teeth while he shifts his weight onto his elbows, manages to coat two fingers in lube and only spill some droplets onto Orlando’s stomach in the process.

He quickly wipes them away with his forearm, a little impatient now, and finds Orlando still wet, still pliant, relaxed enough to take his finger, two, which doesn’t really help with Richard’s impatience, he wants- as does Orlando, apparently, he starts protesting straight away, gets close to begging, even.

‘Will you please just fuck me,’ he murmurs, and his voice catches a little.

Those words- Richard can’t find his lips quickly enough, kisses him hard.

‘Yes,’ he breathes against Orlando’s lips, filled with wantwantwant. ‘Yes.’

Condom. Now.

But Orlando shakes his head and pulls a face, he doesn’t want to get up, search his coat pockets, instead he just hooks his leg more tightly over Richard’s and traps him against his body.

And then he just- offers it.

‘Seriously, just fuck me without.’

Wait- what?

Richard’s thoughts trip over each other, grind to a halt.

They are a mess already, are going to need a shower anyway, Orlando adds, and while Richard agrees with that-

They have never- not in all these months. Probably also because Richard has never asked, it’s something that needs to be offered, he feels, and Orlando never has, and that’s been that- but now-

Fuck.

He needs to look at Orlando, needs to know- as much as he wants to- but this shouldn’t be about laziness, reluctance to get up, he should be sure about this, want this, want this as much as Richard does.

‘You sure? I can get up if you don’t want to.’

Yes, yes, he is sure, and no, he really doesn’t want him to get up or to discuss this now and can he stop being so damned polite at all times.

Both his expression and his tone of voice make Richard laugh.

Good enough.

The lube is a little cold against his skin, but warms up quickly when Richard gives himself a couple of quick strokes.

He certainly isn’t going to complain, he tells Orlando who chuckles in response and reaches for him, curls his fingers around his hip and leans up to kiss him just when Richard-

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.
He feels incredible, of course he does, and Richard can’t-

FUCK.

‘I love sex,’ Orlando pants, head now resting on the pillow again, eyes fixed on Richard.

‘Fuck, Orlando—’

Richard allows his eyes to fall shut, he needs to-

‘This is— you feel— fuck—’

Get a fucking grip-

‘Richard.’

Orlando’s voice is low, steady.

Richard blinks open his eyes and tries to bring Orlando into focus. His reply comes with a couple of heartbeats’ delay and his voice is not as steady as Orlando’s, far from it.

‘Yes?’

“‘This is - you feel - fuck’”, what? Orlando quotes back at him and raises his eyebrows.

He is trying to distract him, and that shouldn’t work, not when he feels like this around his cock, but it does, a little, at least, and Richard chuckles breathlessly. He still sinks his teeth into his lower lip for good measure, though, and is about to close his eyes again when Orlando digs his finger into his side to keep him from doing so.

Richard draws in a shaky breath.

‘You feel too fucking fantastic for your own good.’

He almost manages to keep the slight tremor out of his voice.

‘Don't move yet.’

And Orlando doesn’t, not really, anyway, he huffs, as if he would ever, and wraps his hand around his cock, slowly starts stroking himself, Richard can feel his fingers moving against his abdomen and for a moment he can breathe a little easier. Just until his brain tells him that it wants it to be his hand wrapped around Orlando’s cock and Orlando chooses to tense his muscles around him, smirking.

Richard hears himself groan and closes his eyes, tries to- but fuck it, if that’s what he wants, he can just as well-

His first thrust makes Orlando’s whole body move a little across the bed and Richard watches him reach out to brace himself against the headboard.

‘Fuck, yes,’ he says explosively, his next inhale cut short by Richard’s next thrust.

Yes- this- this- this- it is, it’s what he has been waiting for, thinking about for months, the feeling of Orlando without a condom between them, it’s warmer, softer, wetter all at once, and better, so much better.

Yes.
Orlando tilts his hips and hooks his legs more tightly around him, pulls him in- and he can- much deeper-

*Fuck, yes,* Orlando’s words echo in his head and he bends down to kiss him, ends up panting against his lips, wraps his hands around Orlando’s hip and shoulder, wants- needs- more leverage, now-

The next thrusts knock his teeth against Orlando’s lip until Orlando grabs his head and pushes his tongue into his mouth.

Just-like-that, yes, exactly- like that- that deep, that fast, that hard, Orlando’s body in his arms, underneath him, moving with him, his tongue in his mouth, his hand moving between them as he strokes himself in sync with Richard’s thrusts, it’s brilliant, it’s- too much, almost, his tightness, his warmth, he’s so deep inside of him and he-

He needs to- closes his eyes and rests his forehead against Orlando’s, tries to remain in control, pulls back when his next shove knocks their heads together, he needs to-

‘Orlando- I just-- I can’t- it’s too much—’

He sounds hoarse and his words are drawn apart, pushed together by his thrusts.

Orlando looks as if he wants to protest, but then he just tightens his legs around Richard, making it impossible for him to move at all, and that’s- yes, maybe that’s- but of course his whole body tenses in response and he struggles against Orlando’s embrace, struggles, wants to move, wants not to move, wants-

Orlando’s hand moves from his neck to his chin, his jaw, and then he leans up to kiss him.

‘Chill out, mate,’ he says quietly.

The contrast couldn’t be more striking, between the fierce pace Richard just has abandoned and Orlando’s gentle, unhurried touches, his tone, and it manages to take some of the tension away and reel Richard back it.

He hears himself laugh quietly and nods before he bends down to kiss Orlando in turn. Now that he isn’t moving he can feel the strain he has put on his arms, they are trembling, and a muscle in his calf is spasming.

‘Turn around, onto your side,’ he suggests, still breathless, but Orlando refuses, of course, doesn’t want to give up his advantage, tightens his hold on him, loosens it again to prove his point, and Richard can taste the smile on his lips.

Alright, no need for working out tomorrow, then.

He can barely move in Orlando’s embrace, just rock-roll his hips a little, and that’s nice, but not enough, not nearly enough, and this whole little wrestling move has served its purpose, he is not any longer on the verge of coming far too soon and ruining this for them.

Which is a way of phrasing things, by the way, that Orlando seems to be objecting to; while he brushes his sweaty hair from his forehead, then does the same with Richard’s hair, he tells him to ‘stop talking about orgasms as “ruining things”. You sound like this is the last time I’m gonna let you fuck me.’

It’s a joke, of course, but Orlando’s words strike a weird chord, somehow, make something in Richard’s chest constrict, trigger a wave of insecurity, even though that’s not something he has been
worrying about, not a lot, anyway, that Orlando could just walk away, be done, that each time might just be the last time, it just never has felt as if - but then, with Lee, it didn’t, either.

No.

He is not going to think about Lee now, not with Orlando in his arms. Orlando is here, in Leeds, in his hotel room on a work night because he wants to be, is in bed with him because he wants to be and what he literally is saying is that this certainly isn’t the last time they are having sex.

Chill out.

Or how was it Orlando just phrased it?

He turns his head and presses a kiss against Orlando’s wrist, his palm.

'I just really don't want this to be over,' he says against Orlando’s fingers. The double entendre is unintentional, but not lost on him.

Damn.

'You know,' Orlando says and loosens his embrace just enough to be able to rock against Richard a little,' Nietzsche argues that with infinite time and a finite number of events, events will recur again and again infinitely.'

No segue, no by the way. He is unbelievable, sometimes, Richard is buried balls deep inside of him and he is thinking- and talking- about Nietzsche.

Richard pushes himself up far enough to look down at Orlando and the expression on his face makes Orlando laugh. Richard shakes his head but feels a smile spreading on his face when he asks him if there is anything he can do to make him shut up about Nietzsche.

'Dunno, possibly,' Orlando says, still chuckling, and ends his vice-like grip on Richard's body. 'But that involves pending orgasms again, so I reckon we're at an impass.'

Richard moves immediately, grinds his hips against Orlando’s, pushes in deep, and deeper still, as deep as he can, until he can feels Orlando’s balls against his skin.

Finally.

Pending orgasms are just fine, but he doesn’t want to come yet, not for a while, this- the way Orlando groans in response to his thrusts, the way he looks at him when he picks up a rhythm just as fast as before, this is just too fucking good to end rashly.

'Maybe we can hold off coming for a while yet?'

Breathless again, still, has he been able to breathe properly at one point during the evening?

Orlando doesn’t reply, contemplates objecting, Richard can tell from the way his brows furrow, and he tightens his hold on him and increases his speed, wanting to hear another one of those quiet groans- and succeeds.

When Orlando finally replies, he almost is as breathless as Richard.

'Whatever, mate,' he says. 'Your show.'

Right. As if this ever isn’t Orlando’s show. Not that Richard is going to complain, it's one of the
things he likes most about Orlando, that he never submits, not even for a moment, never just lets himself be fucked, that he is always still there, challenging him, spurring him on, talking back, managing to surprise him.

Harder, heavier thrusts, their force matched by their kiss.

‘Which means you object.’ Richard murmurs into Orlando’s mouth when he needs to come up for air.

'It's like -' Orlando starts and gets interrupted by another thrust that knocks the breath right out of him, and fuck, that’s so hot, ‘- you know me.’

And Richard does, indeed, know him a little, well enough to be able to tell that it doesn’t need much more to make him come, he can tell from the way he sounds, moves, from the way his fingers dig into his side, the way his strokes have sped up, the way he kisses him- impatient, desperate, almost- and he just lets himself be kissed and renews his grip around Orlando’s hip, pulls him into his next thrust which comes with more force that the last two combined.

‘Let’s do this, then.’

Orlando’s whole body is moving across the bed know, both of their bodies are, and he can’t hang on to his sentences any longer, but he keeps looking up at Richard, lets him see, watch---

'You fuck me-- as long as you want – but I’m gonna---'

Yes.

This is the best part- those sounds Orlando makes, the way he bucks against him, again and again, the way his whole body tenses in his arms, the way he tightens around him, that’s so- he feels incredible, and he keeps looking at him, keeps looking at him, he is such a sight, Richard can’t take his eyes off him and blushes because of it, blushes because the sight of Orlando coming, the feeling of him coming around his cock makes him want to-

Richard breathes- pants- Orlando’s name, moans against his lips, into his mouth, and he can’t- doesn’t want- to stop- not yet- and doesn’t have to, because Orlando starts moving again, moves into his thrusts, wants him to continue- he is so tight, tighter than before, and he can feel his come sticking to his stomach, sticking their skin together--

Orlando’s lips against his ear send a shiver down his spine- does he still want to swap positions because - ‘I'm still good to go for a while if you wanna.'

Yes.

‘Yes, yes I want-‘

So much.

'On your side?'

He is sweaty, can’t seem to get in enough air, his pulse is racing, there is come on his stomach, his thighs even, but he doesn’t care, doesn’t care that every single muscle in his body seems to be trembling from exertion, doesn’t care that his back hurts, his thighs, his arms, all he can think of is Orlando and how much he wants to get back inside him, wants to - he is going to be sore tomorrow, but he is still so hard, absurdly hard, because just the thought of coming inside of Orlando- fuck, that’s - he wants that, that alone, deep inside of him- now. Nownownow.
The angle is wrong, but he gets it right the second time, Orlando is even tighter like this, with his thighs pressed together- so good--

‘You feel amazing.’

It sounds kitschy, said out loud, but he doesn’t care and Orlando doesn’t object, just hums and wraps Richard’s arm around his waist and stomach so that he can pull him closer; Orlando’s nails dig into his skin when he does.

They can swap next time- next time- next time --

‘I don’t care about the mess.’

He says that, doesn’t say that it’s more than that, he *likes* it- likes the idea of Orlando coming inside of him- yes- Orlando’s skin tastes salty, sweet at the same time-

If he wants- Orlando is more coherent- but if he fucks him like that he is happy to always bottom-

Yes- no- yes- because this feeling -- getting fucked doesn’t compare to it, not really- this is the best way, and he will be able to feel this tomorrow, all day, all of his muscles are going to remember him, all of him, all of this-this-this- it’s -- he wants to- but needs to know if-

He pants his name, his breathing heavy, asks---

‘Can I?’

He wants to- wants to- wants-

Yes, he can, but Orlando thinks the question is superfluous and starts struggling in his arms, toying with him, and that’s- he probably shouldn’t enjoy this the way he does, oh, but he does, he tightens his grip, holds him, holds him down, with his arms, legs, lips, teeth--

Orlando laughs, starts pushing back against him again, and he won’t be able to- and doesn’t have to, because--

‘C’mon then.’

‘Yes--- yes, yes—’

‘Fuck, Richard. Now!’

*Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, that’s* - *fuck- he’s--- inside of him--- fuck-- yes—*

‘YES!’

‘Mate, a little breathing room here?’

Orlando’s elbow hits his side.

*Right.*

160, 170 bpm, maybe even more, and he can’t seem to get enough oxygen into his lungs, is a little dizzy.

*Did he really just-?*
In his arms, Orlando stirs, rolls his shoulders, then he gives Richard's side another nudge with his elbow, and when Richard further loosens his embrace, he shifts, shoulders coming to rest on the mattress while his hips stay where they are so that Richard doesn’t have to pull out yet.

'You know,' Orlando says, 'I'm really shit at performing CPR, should you need it. We might have to call your idiot assistant.'

The mention of Nathan jumpstarts Richard’s brain and his groan turns into laughter when he asks Orlando if he really wants him to think about his colleague now, and besides, Nathan might not be the safest bet if CPR needs to be performed.

That last thought is disconcerting, and Richard berates himself for even thinking that, let alone saying it, Nathan is not a bad doctor, tiny babies just aren't his cup of tea, it seems, and he-

'Three things,' Orlando says, and Richard adjusts his focus.

Orlando leans over him and kisses him.

One, apparently.

'Secondly, I very much hope this posh hotel room has a decent bathroom because I feel disgusting. And thirdly,' he adds before Richard can interject, 'between me and your intern, I'd go with Nathan if I were you. During first aid training last fall, I broke a dummy. JC had to pay for it.'

Alright.

Richard feels a smile tugging at his lips while he ticks off the three items with little taps on Orlando’s stomach, the tiny motion exactly the amount of movement he trusts his body to be able to handle right now.

'Let's come back to that later.'

Tap.

'It does. Rain shower head and everything. They even got towels.'

Tap.

'Remind me to give you a refresher. That's unacceptable.'

Tap. And a grin.

'If you want me to move, though, you'd better give me one of those tissues.'

While his hand is already blindly reaching for the nightstand, Orlando pulls a face.

'Urgh,' he makes, very distinctly and presses a tissue into Richard’s hand. 'Never mind virological disasters. Sex is such a fucking mess.'

As if to counterbalance his last words, Orlando turns his head and leans his forehead against Richard’s. Then he adds, voice quiet, intimate:
'Worth it, though.'

Absolutely.

The tissue is his cue to move, Orlando wants his body back, probably wants to take a shower, he usually does as soon as they are done, gets his bearings back much faster than Richard does, but then, he usually comes first, almost always when Richard is on top.

But Richard doesn't want to move yet, wants to have Orlando this close for another moment, wants to feel his cock getting soft inside of him. And altogether he isn't so sure that he will ever be able to move again in the first place, his muscles feel stiff, uncooperative.

He allows himself to close his eyes for a couple of seconds and just hum in response to Orlando’s words. When he opens his eyes again, he pulls back a little so that he can look at Orlando.

'Yes,' he agrees.

'I like that, how it feels- you feel, without.'

So very much.

It’s not something that needs to be emphasized, maybe, something that is self-evident, of course sex without a condom is more intimate, more pleasurable, more intense, but he wants to, wants him to know how he feels about this, and isn’t that enough of a reason for telling him.

Orlando just hums and looks at him, far away in his thoughts somewhere it seems, maybe he has circled back to Nietzsche, Richard thinks, and when Orlando does not venture to talk, does not venture to tell him what Nietzsche has to say about unprotected sex, he turns his head a little and places a kiss onto his cheek, right next to the corner of his mouth.

‘Okay,’ he then says simply and reaches for the tissue on his chest.

Time to move, time to let Orlando take his shower.

He manages to catch at least some of his come with the tissue when he pulls out, disappointed for a moment that he doesn’t get to watch- see- he would like that. The mere thought makes him blush, though, and he is glad that Orlando isn’t looking at him, he grimaces a little and shifts onto his back straight away, stretches out his legs. With a sigh, Richard follows suit, feeling an all-encompassing, pleasant exhaustion settling in pretty much instantly. He definitely is not going to move again any time soon.

Orlando is, however, it seems, and Richard can’t help wondering how he does it, all his muscles seem to have gone into hibernation, while Orlando doesn’t seem to have any trouble moving.

When he feels Richard’s eyes on him, he turns his head to look at him.

'I'm gonna take a shower.'

Richard just raises his brows, about to nod, sure he is, he always is, but Orlando is already continuing.

'I know, mood killer and all. And I owe you an apology - for that, and for earlier, actually, I reckon,' he says and swings his legs out of the bed. 'But not now, I feel like a human fly strip.'

Richard wants to ask him to slow down a little, wants to ask him why he would think that he owes
him an apology for anything, wants to tell him that it’s fine, they did just cuddle, didn’t they, and he
is going to be back in a moment, but doesn’t get to any of it, because Orlando- already standing next
to the bed now- bends back down and places a brief kiss onto Richard's mouth.

'Back in two minutes,' he murmurs, smiling against his lips.

Richard manages to move his arm enough to curl his fingers around Orlando’s wrist, not tight
enough to hold him back, pull him down again, just to catch his attention.

'Take your time’, he says, still sounding a little hoarse, he should get something to drink.

Orlando probably won’t, take his time, never seems to do, but he could, Richard really wouldn’t
mind, it’s not as if he is going anywhere.

He lies there, just staring at the ceiling for a moment after the bathroom door has closed behind
Orlando and the water has started running. He should check his phone, maybe, probably, but then,
they would keep calling until they got a hold of him, so it’s fine, really. And he needs to call
Cassandra anyway before they turn off the lights. It’s a good thing she is on call, she can put out
most of the fires herself and he won’t be called in unless it’s something big.

There are no other sounds than those caused by the running water, and that’s nice, steady, soothing,
Richard feels his eyes drift shut, blinks them open again, doesn’t bother to a second time, though.
Every single one of his muscles seems to hurt a little, it’s not necessarily unpleasant and/or he just is
too content to care, either way- and his lips still remember Orlando’s last kiss, and that’s pretty nice-
He actually manages to drift off, doesn’t hear Orlando turn off the water, open the door or make his
way across the room, only opens his eyes again when he feels the bed dip under Orlando’s weight
when he settles back down next to him.

'Hey,' he says with a moment’s delay. 'Do you feel better now?’

Orlando hums in confirmation.

'I felt pretty great before,’ he says then as he turns towards Richard, 'now I feel great and
showered.'

Richard's smile widens in response to that, even more when Orlando’s hand comes to rest on his
thigh, but then the bruises on Orlando’s skin register and he feels it turn into a frown.

There are three, one a little fainter than the others, apparently aborted half way through, and in
another place the faint imprint of his teeth is visible.

Damn.

At least the skin isn’t broken anywhere, they are all smooth underneath his fingertips, and that’s a
relief.

'Looks as if I got carried away a little. I'm sorry.’

It’s an understatement, it looks as if someone forgot to feed him breakfast and Orlando was the next
best thing, but Orlando just shrugs it off, says it’s fine as long as he doesn’t get a tattooing needle out,
he really has all the ink he needs.

Richard’s eyes instantly move to Orlando’s arm and when Orlando notices it, he bends it and pillows
his head on it, fully exposing the tattoo on its underside.
He likes the look of it, the contrast the small black letters form against Orlando’s skin, and Orlando is fully aware of that, his smile is testament to that.

He still tells him again, while he traces their outline with his finger, then leans a little closer towards him, he could kiss him like this, is going to, maybe, in a moment, but first- first he tells him that those marks he left- that he finds them even hotter than the tattoos.

Orlando regards him in silence for a moment, as if pondering something, before he nods once more.

'Yeah, I know,' he replies. 'Why, though?'

That’s a good question. Richard doesn’t have the faintest idea.

But looking at them definitely makes him regret that a second round is out of the question tonight.

'Some weird, archaic thing, maybe?' he suggests. 'Marking a mate?'

Which still wouldn’t explain why he finds looking at them arousing, though, must be a thoroughly weird underlying pattern of neuronal connections.

My brain likes love-bites, and yours?

‘Well, I find it hot to have someone’s dick down my throat,’ Orlando says as if he has heard that question. ‘That’s hardly logical either.’

Not if procreation is the goal, no. That can hardly be considered their goal, though.

What, then? Pleasure?

Definitely.

Following that line of thought, he asks:

'Is it as pleasurable, though, to have your chest bitten as being blown?'

Because that’s what blowjobs also are about, isn’t it, about giving someone pleasure, while getting one’s chest bitten might not necessarily feel as good as being allowed to bite someone’s chest.

It takes a moment for Orlando to reply.

'You mean part of the pleasure is invoking pleasure? Cause I mean I kinda need you to enjoy getting head for anatomical reasons,' he smirks when Richard chuckles, then continues, 'but I just really get off on doing it. Hasn't actually got so much to do with how much you like it.'

Richard is about to protest, surely it always is about giving pleasure, too, must be, so that this can work to begin with, this can’t be about compromises, one-sided pleasures, or can it? Knowing that he gets off on it, would he let Orlando give him a blowjob if he didn’t particularly care for getting blown? Yes, maybe, he would, watching, hearing Orlando take pleasure in it would certainly have its very own appeal. But then, he definitely wouldn’t want to stuff his cock down Orlando’s throat if he knew he didn’t like it, would never dream of biting his chest if he wouldn’t respond the way he does.

He tells Orlando that, that he wouldn’t knowingly want to do anything that Orlando doesn’t like, and Orlando chuckles and shakes his head.

'You'd know if I didn't like something,' he says easily. 'Cause I'd tell you. Like when you dawdle.'
Dawdle?

Before Richard can ask about it, though, Orlando shifts, he turns onto his side so that he is facing Richard now.

'I like that,' he says quietly and gestures at his chest without taking his eyes off Richard. There is not a trace of hesitation in his voice whatsoever.

'It feels great.'

Richard feels himself blush, feels himself draw his lower lips between his teeth, but keeps looking at Orlando. There is no doubt in his eyes, either.

'I'm glad', Richard says after a short pause. 'I really like doing it.'

It’s still something that costs quite an effort, to share things like this, say them out loud, particularly afterwards, when his brain is working properly again, it’s easier to say them during sex, much easier. But some things better are talked about with a clear head. Liked a badly bruised chest.

And *dawdling*, apparently. He knows what Orlando means, of course he does, they prefer different tempi, while Orlando almost always pursues a full-steam-ahead-approach, driven by his impatience to get to the real thing- which for him are blowjobs and penetrative sex, mostly, hand-jobs are okay, too, if the other two aren’t available- Richard prefers to take a little more time, likes to feel the tension between them build. And like Orlando’s pace sometimes overwhelms Richard, his *dawdling* sometimes annoys and frustrates Orlando. He knows that. Only that- something was different, earlier, he wasn’t *dawdling*, he was practically good to go right after he ended that call, and still, his impatience somehow got the better of Orlando.

When he asks about it, about what happened and why he feels that he needs to apologize, Orlando explains readily, tells him that he likes fast, forceful sex because it’s uncomplicated, because it allows him to switch off his brain for a moment and just enjoy himself, loose himself in the physicality of the act.

So far, that is hardly news. And it’s the same for Richard, basically, only that he enjoys kissing, undressing and *getting ready* more than Orlando does, Orlando wouldn’t probably even blink if he opened the door naked and with a condom between his teeth.

'It's why I like having sex with you. You say what you want, take what you want. If I say I want to get fucked, I mean that. If I say I don't need any prepping, I mean that. Uncomplicated, yeah? Teasing, dawdling, and sort of that coy will-they-won't-they, that annoys me cause I don't see the appeal and with stuff I don't get? My brain is conditioned to instantly start looking for the logical fallacy, and that is the opposite of uncomplicated.'

He doesn’t quite seem finished and Richard just waits, eyes fixed on Orlando’s, even if he dies to remark that it’s never will-they-won't-they, they always will.

Orlando shrugs when Richard doesn’t weigh in, then adds:

'But earlier, that was my fault. You were working while I wasn't. Makes sense that you need a moment to get back into it.'

So, the actual question is, then, how he can get Orlando’s brain to shut up, if not by means of his cock, or how he can get his own brain to just go with the flow, which it usually does, with a bit of encouragement.
'At what point does your brain shut up? What is it that you need for that?'

'Momentum, I suppose. It's why or rather how I end up being in charge, I reckon. Not necessarily with you, and like I said, I really appreciate that. But if you were to make a flow chart for my dating, or rather fucking history. I push cause that way I keep the momentum going.'

That’s actually something that-

'I like that. The pushing part,' Richard says quietly.

He pauses, swallows, then adds:

'And ending up on top.'

He seeks Orlando's eyes while he searches for his next words.

'That's new, actually. That's not how it's been in past relationships.'

Certainly not. Even though it’s what he always has preferred, to be on top. Probably because he doesn’t have to be, he is fine with bottoming, really. But if he gets to choose- he gets more out of topping, most of the times.

After he has finished explaining, Orlando regards him for a long moment. Then he chuckles and shakes his head, asks him why he waited half a year for telling him, and Richard hurries to reply:

'That's not- I like it when you're on top, I really do. When I'm in a particular mood.'

He pauses, feels himself frown.

'I would have told you if it were an issue. But it's really not. It's great the way things are.'

'Good,' Orlando says.

It’s true, he likes how things are between them, likes how they can switch so very effortlessly and how it’s always fine, somehow, it’s not something they need to talk about or quarrel about, it just happens, and it’s not as if either of them is particularly passive anyway, regardless of who gets to stick his penis where.

He watches Orlando absent-mindedly rub the skin under his collar bone, and that shouldn’t give him ideas, but it does, weirdly enough, and he laughs.

'That's new, too. This constant desire for more sex.'

He reaches out and curls his hand around Orlando's hip, lightly rubbing his thumb over his hipbone.

'I should take a shower, too.'

'You do that,' Orlando says, and the corner of his mouth quirks up. 'This place has much nicer facilities than the group showers at youth hostels that I am used to.'

Richard involuntarily cringes at that- foot fungus and stray pubic hairs of strangers- and makes Orlando laugh.

They talk a bit about that, group showers; growing up at a boarding school, Orlando says, leaves you with a different concept of privacy, and luxury, maybe, particularly when the pipes are old and the heating constantly broken.
'Anyway,’ he concludes eventually, ‘we can agree that it should always be you who picks hotels, not me.’

Richard’s brain that has been in a peaceful idling position while he has been listening leaps up, startled.

_It should always be you who picks hotels._

_Aways._

_Right._

Orlando’s tone hasn’t changed, there is no gravitas there that sets this sentence off from the others, it blends in perfectly into the flow or words. A sentence so full of significance uttered _en-passant._

_It should always be you who picks hotels._

Not: ‘Should we ever do this again you should-’

_Right._

'Alright.'

It’s the best answer he can come up with, unable to decide how he feels about this, about Orlando planning another getaway, series of getaways even.

To make up for the ultra-shortness of his reply he adds a little belatedly:

'Unless I'm in an adventurous mood.'

_Alright._

_Shower._

_Now._

His hand rests on Orlando’s lower abdomen, he has absently been running his fingers over his skin during the past minutes and now he taps it lightly with the pad of his middle finger while he apologizes in advance for the fact that he won’t be back in two minutes, like Orlando, then leans towards him for the briefest of kisses.

'Just call if my phone rings?'

Orlando nods and offers to scare some bedside manner into Nathan, alternatively, should he have the audacity to call again.

The mere idea makes Richard laugh, Nathan would never be able to meet his eyes again, were he to receive a scolding from Orlando for his bedside manner- the bedside in the expression traditionally not referring to the consultant’s bedside.

Thankfully, Nathan is almost on his way home, though, and if he gets called during the night, he can take the phone into the bathroom with him so that Orlando can sleep on.

'I'm glad you're staying.'

Orlando nods.
‘Cheers for letting me.’

Richard finds himself smiling into the mirror once he has closed the bathroom door behind himself, Orlando does that to him, sometimes.

‘Hey, is it all right if I set my alarm for 6:30?’ he hears Orlando’s voice through the door.

‘Sure,’ he replies, voice slightly raised.

45 minutes more sleep than on a regular Friday, pretty damn nice.

He sets his washing bag onto the little ledge above the washing basin and retrieves his shampoo and shower gel before he turns on the water and suppresses a groan when he steps under the spray.

This really has been more than a half-decent work out, he thinks, while he soaps up, he can feel every single muscle in his shoulders arms and thighs. A bit of Orlando’s come has dried in the hair on his stomach and he needs a moment to wash it away, catches himself smiling again while he does.

Right.

He squirts a bit of shampoo into his hand and quickly washes his hair, then his beard, face, while he is at it and then just closes his eyes and lets the warm water run over his back and shoulders.

Is that something Orlando has been thinking about? Going away again together? It’s nothing they have been talking about. But then, they had a good time in London, and in Rome, too, they definitely had, it couldn’t have been better, frankly, he didn’t even have to ask for alone time once, just enjoyed being with Orlando.

And if he is being honest, isn’t this something he has been thinking about, too? Not in great detail, maybe, but at least briefly, when they tried to straighten out a couple of things about the holiday schedule at work? He did double check that part of his holidays overlapped with the school holidays, didn’t he?

So whom is he trying to kid here, Orlando is not the only one who has been thinking about this.

He waits for the familiar surge of panic, waits for his heart rate to react to this revelation, but it apparently can’t be bothered to do so, his heart beats steadily with 60 bpm. Post-orgasmic contentment, funny thing.

What is he even doing there, checking his own pulse in the shower, he should towel off, brush his teeth and get back to Orlando before he powers down and gets too drowsy to talk, he can go from being wide awake to fast asleep as quickly as a toddler, it’s quite fascinating.

When he has dried himself off, he spends a good ten seconds trying to locate his boxers before he concludes that they probably still are where he dropped them earlier, on the hotel room floor, which really can’t be considered the best place for them to be, even if the carpet is vacuumed frequently, to judge from its looks. Oh well. Orlando is not going to see anything he hasn’t seen before.

He stifles a yawn when he retrieves his tooth brush, another one when he is finished brushing his teeth. It’s been a long day, and particularly one pair of parents is challenging to talk to, they are still too overwhelmed to take in the news that their child, the child they have been waiting for so long, is going to require intensive care for the next weeks, months probably, and that it is far too early to be able to make any prognosis about the outcome whatsoever. Richard has answered the same questions today, twice, that he has answered yesterday and the day before and that he is probably going to answer again tomorrow. Which is fine, really, they will get there, eventually, and maybe they can
hold the child for the first time tomorrow, but it’s still exhausting.

Orlando is stretched out on his back in the middle of the bed when Richard emerges from the bathroom, engrossed in something he is reading on his phone. He is still completely naked, so Richard certainly does not have to worry about his own state of undress. He quickly gathers up their clothes from the floor and arranges his own on the chair that is the closest to the door for easy access during the night, should he be called in, then slips on his boxer shorts, so he is at least half-prepared. He straightens out their coats, hangs them up, then turns off the ceiling lights and makes his way over to his side of the bed.

The sheet is still a little damp to his touch, no wonder, and not exactly in the pristine condition they found it in. He rubs at one of the stains which of course won’t come off, dried body fluids don’t budge that easily, and has to laugh when he finds Orlando looking at him with slightly raised eyebrows.

'It's a good thing the cleaning staff doesn't know me, or I would have to find a new hotel. Which would be a shame,' he says before he picks up his phone from the nightstand, he’s just going to check quickly if everything is fine at the ward.

It is indeed, Cassandra says, the babies are fine and the midwives are expecting a quiet night, too, which is excellent news, he could use a good night’s sleep and so could Orlando, probably, after all of this. He still tells Cassandra to call any time if need should be, he always does, even if he keeps repeating himself, he doesn’t want them to hesitate to ask for help if they are in over their heads, he is going to survive to be woken up during the night one time too often, it’s better than the alternative, better for his patients.

He bids her good night and places the phone onto the nightstand within easy reach before he slips under the covers next to Orlando.

'What were you reading?' he asks, searching Orlando’s eyes, when he has found a comfortable position.

'Bentham, prompted by a mediocre article Sean sent me,' Orlando says with a little shrug and turns onto his side, so that he faces Richard. 'He says hi, by the way.'

Richard smiles and pulls the covers up a little more.

Philosophy as a nightcap. And that, too, is apparently something that he shares with Sean. Speaking of which- he really should meet him at some point, Orlando seems to be very fond of him, and vice versa, if the frequent messages are anything to go on. And he has met a whole bunch of Orlando’s friends and colleagues already, putting the cart before the horse, really.

'Sure, any time,' Orlando says around a yawn when he asks him. 'He keeps referring to you as my imaginary boyfriend, so the moment you meet him, it'd be great if you could punch him in the mouth. Let him figure out how imaginary that is.'

**Imaginary boyfriend?**

This just keeps getting better and better.

The completely over-the-top proposal make him laugh, he has never hit anybody in his life, or well, maybe his sister, when they were kids and quarreling about their favorite toys.

He turns onto his side, too, head propped up on his left hand now. His right finds Orlando’s and he runs his thumb over the inside of his wrist while his other fingers loosely curl around his hand.
'Probably not how that's going to go,' he says with a smile.

He watches his finger move over Orlando's skin for a long moment while he tries to piece together a proper sentence in his head, but can't seem to find the right words, he is tired, and he can practically watch Orlando's eyelids grow heavier with every minute that passes. They can talk about this some other time, maybe. But then-

'Boyfriend?'

He feels Orlando flex his wrist a bit, feels his own fingers curl around it a little more tightly in response, but Orlando doesn't want to pull away at all, it seems, he looks pretty content.

'Yeah,' he just says.

He waits for a moment, waits for Orlando to elaborate, object to the word, but he doesn’t, just keeps looking at Richard.

Right.

It's not impractical, he reckons, to have a word for this, even if *boyfriend* has an anachronistic ring to it, they are both in their forties and boyhood isn't more than a distant memory. But it's definitely shorter than 'the guy Orlando has been sleeping with for a while now but with whom he hasn't had that conversation yet and yes, it's a little complicated', he has to give Sean that. So, if that's how he wants to refer to him, it's fine, it doesn't really matter in any other context anyway, it's not as if he is going to introduce Orlando as his *boyfriend* to anybody any time soon or tell his parents or anything, and Orlando definitely isn't, either. So, yeah, why not, for now, they can talk more about this another time, should talk more about this, they haven't for a while, not since that afternoon in London.

But not now.

Orlando hasn't moved a muscle. He is still looking at him, hand resting in Richard's, not much time can have passed.

Alright.

Richard feels a small smile playing around his lips when he tightens his fingers around Orlando's wrist just a bit further, so that he can feel the steady beat of his pulse against his thumb.

'Okay,' he says.
Chapter Summary

Neither Richard nor Orlando care about Valentine’s Day, so this is what they talked about on February 14th instead of murmuring terms of endearment into each others ears.

[14/2/2018 - Whatsapp]

Richard [9:16 p.m.]: Hey you. I hope you had a good day. Are you free for dinner Friday or Saturday?

Orlando [9:36 p.m.]: Both work for me. I'm off duty on Friday at six, have to work from nine to two on Saturday, same on Sunday. You got anything else planned but food and the obvious?

Richard [9:38 p.m.]: I do indeed.

Richard [9:38 p.m.]: Saturday, then. Around four?

Richard [9:39 p.m.]: Do you want to meet up at the castle or at my place and leave your bike here?

Richard [9:44 p.m.]: And this may sound weird, but you didn't stuff a rose into my letter box, did you?

Richard [9:45 p.m.]: And left without coming up for a drink and/or sex?

Richard [9:46 p.m.]: Which would be a little rude.

Richard [9:47 p.m.]: And doesn't sound like something you would do.

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: Plans? Other than food and fucking? Picture me intrigued

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: Don't get me fucking started on flowers, man

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: Remind me to tell you all about the shitfest that is the prank war between my house and the self-proclaimed army of God

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: And be happy you just got one

Orlando [9:55 p.m.]: I have 43 of the pointless things wilting away here

Orlando [9:56 p.m.]: Unless you carelessly gave your address to one of my colleagues on Boxing Day, you should be in the clear though
Orlando [9:56 p.m.]: Tell me more about those plans of ours on Saturday

Richard [9:58 p.m.]: 43?

Richard [9:58 p.m.]: Are you serious?

Richard [9:58 p.m.]: I already find that one upsetting.

Richard [9:59 p.m.]: Who walks by my house past 8 p.m. and leaves a rose without a card?

Richard [9:59 p.m.]: I'm not involved in a prank war with my neighbours.

Richard [10:00 p.m.]: Put them in water and give them away tomorrow?

Richard [10:01 p.m.]: The cleaning ladies at work were touched when I gave them the flowers I got at work.

Richard [10:02 p.m.]: And about Saturday-

Richard [10:02 p.m.]: We're going someplace in York after an early dinner.

Richard [10:03 p.m.]: Nothing too fancy, no need for dressing up.

Richard [10:03 p.m.]: Involves sitting in the half-dark for quite some time.

Richard [10:04 p.m.]: (and no, I'm not just going to drive you around town in my car)

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Nothing too fancy by your standard or mine?

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Can I pawn of my 43 roses to your cleaning ladies?

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Cause my house mother just had a hysterical laughing fit when she saw mine

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: They clutter my kitchen sink now and I can't wash up

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Officially I say taking the high road is the way to go

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Unofficially I'm gonna murder Sean

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: So if you still wanna meet him, the window is closing fast

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Enough about that

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Dark and sitting?

Orlando [10:07 p.m.]: Theatre?

Richard [10:08 p.m.]: Sure, why not.
Richard [10:08 p.m.]: But I'm sure there are plenty of people at your school who deserve praise for their work and flowers, occasionally. Administration? Kitchen?

Richard [10:09 p.m.]: Or just turn the joke around and sprinkle the petals over their desk. Or bed.

Richard [10:09 p.m.]: Or stuff them into their letter box. Creepy as fuck.

Richard [10:10 p.m.]: And yes!

Richard [10:10 p.m.]: Theatre.

Richard [10:10 p.m.]: I am no good at giving subtle clues, it seems.

Orlando [10:17 p.m.]: Well it was either the theatre or a seedy strip club

Orlando [10:19 p.m.]: Or a concert. Forgot your preferences aren't as limited as mine

Orlando [10:19 p.m.]: Please don't tell me it's Ionesco, tho

Orlando [10:19 p.m.]: Unless you want very aggressive sex in the theatre's Gents with you definitely on the receiving end

Orlando [10:19 p.m.]: In that case you're good

Orlando [10:21 p.m.]: [media content in this message]

Orlando [10:21 p.m.]: I call it "still life with dirty dishes"

Orlando [10:21 p.m.]: And am far more intrigued with your one than my 43

Richard [10:24 p.m.]: I think that looks brilliant, I wouldn't change a thing.

Richard [10:24 p.m.]: And yes, so am I.

Richard [10:24 p.m.]: But more creeped out than intrigued.

Richard [10:25 p.m.]: I have no idea who would do that.

Richard [10:25 p.m.]: It’s my favourite colour, even.

Richard [10:25 p.m.]: Unsettling.

Richard [10:26 p.m.]: I wouldn’t drag you into an Ionesco play and then yell 'surprise', btw.

Richard [10:26 p.m.]: I hope you know that.

Richard [10:27 p.m.]: And I have to confess to being a strip club virgin.

Richard [10:27 p.m.]: But hold that thought about me being on the receiving end.
Richard [10:28 p.m.]: I like the sound of that.

Orlando [10:31 p.m.]: We already established that you got more mature mates, so clearly any stag/birthday dos of theirs won't take place in any seedy establishment

Orlando [10:31 p.m.]: There is such a thing as favourite colour of flowers? Who'd have thought

Orlando [10:31 p.m.]: You dragging me to Ionesco and yelling surprise sounds v. Ionesconian

Orlando [10:31 p.m.]: You don't have to infuriate me to get shagged though. Simply asking does the job

Richard [10:32 p.m.]: Sounds like the healthier way.

Richard [10:32 p.m.]: White.

Richard [10:32 p.m.]: Red is a little vulgar, isn't it?

Richard [10:33 p.m.]: Flowers, underwear, cars, shoes...

Richard [10:33 p.m.]: Just not a good idea.

Orlando [10:34 p.m.]: What's not a good idea?

Orlando [10:34 p.m.]: Favourite colours?

Orlando [10:34 p.m.]: Favourite CARS, that we can discuss

Richard [10:35 p.m.]: Red never is a good idea.

Richard [10:35 p.m.]: Seriously?

Richard [10:35 p.m.]: You want to talk cars via Whatsapp?

Richard [10:36 p.m.]: Is there even a strip club in York where guys dance?

Richard [10:37 p.m.]: If stripping qualifies as dancing.

Orlando [10:39 p.m.]: Agreed on the colour. Except for angry rants next to mediocre essays

Orlando [10:39 p.m.]: No strip club I know, but that's not really an indicator for anything

Orlando [10:39 p.m.]: Come to think about it I don't really want to discuss anything via whatsapp when as of nine minutes ago, I am in my flat and can just talk to you

Orlando [10:39 p.m.]: Ring me if you're not at work
Richard [10:45 p.m.]: [outgoing call: Orlando]

'Cars or underwear? I'm not discussing flora with you. - Hiya.'

Richard chuckles softly.

'Hi. You know, I certainly work long hours, but I am not always at work.'

'Well, I don't really understand how your schedule works. Mind, mine is no easier. So you're off?'

'I am. I actually got home early today and had time for a long workout. Did you have a good day?'

'I did, cheers. I had an interesting discussion about Marx with my A-level and managed to get out of last-minute-chaperoning a skiing trip. As good as it gets.'

'You don't like skiing?'

'Nah, naturally untalented. I'm not too bad at snowboarding. You?'

'I'm not a pretty sight on a snowboard. But I ski alright. And I like cross-country skiing, too. Even if that's something else entirely.'

Orlando chuckles.

'Sorry, I'm not laughing at you, just at the thought of our kids doing cross country. Half of them would get lost after ten minutes.'

'Which would spoil all the fun. Because I guess there is no margin? You have to get all of them home again?'

'Depends on who you ask. Some say it's enough to just come back with the amount you set off with. Eric, remember him? The Aussie?'

'The one who was on the phone half the time on Boxing Day?'

'Yeah, as per. At least when Viggo's not around. Did you talk to him?'

'Just briefly. And who's Viggo now again?'

'Head of Hippie House. Arnor, I mean.'

Richard hums.

'He and Eric are friends, then? And what were you going to say about Eric in the first place? Did he lose any kids in the woods?'

'Not that I know of, no. He is just notoriously bad with names and faces. He lives at Arnor and I'd bet you fifty quid that the only other inhabitant he could identify in a crowd is Viggo. He thinks your name is Patrick, by the way. Any chance you talked to him about someone with that name?'
'I'm quite sure I didn't. I talked to him about cars, actually, both his and mine.'

'Strange that he doesn't call you - no, wait, he did refer to you as "that Audi bloke". I guess there could be worse names to be called.'

'Definitely. One step up from being "Orlando's bloke".'

Orlando laughs.

'Good to know I rank under your car, mate.'

'Oh come on, would you want to be referred to as my bloke? And bloke, not mate or friend or whatever, but bloke.'

'Usually people prefer "that bastard" when it comes to referring to me. And "Richard's bastard" suggests that you use your free time gallivanting around and impregnating random women in the 1800s. - So if you introduce me, I'd prefer Orlando.'

'Bastard, hm?'

'This conversation is fairly odd. How did we get here?'

'I have no idea. Underwear, then? Since you don't want to talk about flowers? Or do you want to tell me what your students had to say about Marx?'

'No it's fine. I'm sorry, I'm just a bit knackered. Sorry, mate. Tell me about our plans for Saturday, or your day.'

'My day was pleasantly uneventful, actually, apart from that one mysterious rose, the ward was quiet and the parents of my 4 p.m. study patient had to reschedule the appointment, so that I got to leave early. And Saturday- I thought we could have dinner at that French place, "Rustique"? You liked what you had there last time, didn't you? And those theatre tickets- do you want to know? Or are you fine with anything that is not Ionesco?'

'No I trust you, if you don't want me to read up on it before. The French place? Help me out, which one is that again?'

'It's the bistro-style one on Castlegate. I think you had beef? It's quite close to the theatre, but I don't mind changing reservations, if you'd rather eat someplace else? And no, there is no reading up required for the play, I think. It's a bit of a risk, actually, opening night is Friday, so there aren't any reviews out yet. But it doesn't sound half bad, and I thought we might just try.'

'You don't have to change anything, I just don't remember restaurants. Was that the one we talked about Rousseau and you told me that story about - I'm sorry, I seem to be as shit with names as Eric tonight. What was your friend's name again?'

'Graham, maybe? The guy who was in Africa all summer?'

'Africa? No, that doesn't ring a bell. Where do you know him from?''

'Really? Haven't I told you about him? We know each other from London, but he works at LGI, too, now, in anesthesiology. And last year he spent three months in Yemen, with Doctors without
'Fuck, sorry, you must think I don't listen at all. Course you told me about him. It's just when you said Africa, my mind automatically went to safari and lion spotting.'

Orlando laughs, but Richard sounds serious when he replies:

'No, Orlando, I'm sorry, I should've-'

He interrupts himself, then asks:

'Do you want to meet him? I really should've asked you earlier.'

'Sure, why not, if you like. Though not if that interferes with our shagging plans on Friday.'

Richard chuckles.

'You make it sound as if I keep making up stuff to get out of having sex with you!'

'I'd say it speaks for how much I like getting fucked by you, especially considering that food and a good play already rank pretty high on my list', Orlando says, tone light. Then he adds, more serious again, 'But no, I didn't mean it like that. Graham sounds interesting, I'm sure I'd enjoy talking to him. Any time.'

'I think you might. I'm going to ask him to join us for a beer, then. I'd like that.'

Richard pauses for a heartbeat, and when he continues, it’s in a completely different tone of voice.

'If you can't wait until after the theatre you can always swing by a little earlier. Or we can skip dinner.'

'I'm good with whatever you plan.'

'Come by a little earlier, then.'

'Three?'

'Three is perfect. And we should actually be able to make it to the restaurant, too, then. I booked a table for 5:30, the play starts at 7:30.'

'Sounds like my idea of a day well spent. Pub after?'

'Sure. Listen, I've been wondering- has it been like that in other relationships for you as well, that you've had as much as we do?'

There is a short silence before Orlando responds to the abrupt change of topic.

'I dunno, I haven't thought about it.' He pauses. 'Yeah? I reckon?' Again, he halts. 'I'm sorry. I don't think I understand the question?'

'Sorry, I don't mean to pry. It's just- I've been-'
'You're not prying, mate. I'm just not sure where you're going with that.'

'Is this something that's going to wear off, do you reckon?'

'Are you asking me whether I had sex a lot or whether I had sex a lot at the start of a relationship? Are you -' Orlando halts, then huffs. 'Sorry, I still don't think I get it. - I like having sex. I like having sex with you. And I don't think that any past experience regarding the frequency and or quality of sex really is an indicator for anything in the present. - Does that answer any part of your question?'

Richard laughs.

'I'm sorry. That came out a little weird. I think what I'm trying to say is that I really like the way things are. And that I hope that that's not going to change any time soon.'

'Oh, all right then.'

'Yeah?' Richard sounds cautious. 'Did I say something wrong?'

'No, course not. I just -' Orlando pauses. 'I'm confused. If you're good, and I'm good, then why - I don't understand why we're talking about this?'

Richard chuckles softly, then hums.

'You're right, I think we're done with this. And I'm really looking forward to Saturday. So, Marx?'

'What? Oh, you mean my A-level?'

'Yes, you said you had an interesting discussion?'

'Yeah, I did. We're in the middle of Marx's Communist Manifesto and everyone has to prepare a presentation on an aspect of it they chose themselves and lead a debate. This morning's topic was Marx's thoughts on the bourgeois marriage. You know "The bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production which is to be exploited" and so on. That led to a debate on how applicable that still is today.'

'Perfect topic for this horrible commercial pseudo-holiday. And what's your students take on that?'

'Well, in the heat of the moment most of them tend to forget about the context. I mean they can think about social constructs like marriage and romance whatever they want, but their personal feelings really aren't relevant when we are trying to understand Marx. The question actually relevant here is whether or not his take on bourgeois society in the mid-1800s was correct and whether his characterisation of power dynamics in a world dominated by capitalism is still applicable today. About half of them agreed with him in the end, the other half didn't.'

'Do they manage to keep up a discussion among themselves or do you need to get involved a lot?'

'Ideally, I don't have to say anything at all, that's the whole point of this kind of lesson. But if I have to, it's to remind them to stay on topic. If the moderators failed to include central aspects into their presentation and the debate is wonky because of it, that is reflected in their grades, and I usually try and fix it by providing the remaining input a couple of lessons later. It's not like Marx suffers if he is misunderstood for a couple of days; not like there are lives depending on it, like in your field.'
'Luckily not every decision I have to make at work is about life or death. Today I helped pick out baby blanket patterns. But that must be pretty satisfying, to teach them how to hold a proper debate and them watch them debate Marx.'

'Yeah, it is, though -' Orlando interrupts himself and laughs. 'Fuck, you not only have favourite colours for underwear but also an opinion on blanket patterns? I'm not judging but am genuinely astonished.'

He chuckles again, and Richard, too, laughs.

'That makes me sound like a very weird man, doesn't it? But if I don't get involved in stuff like that, I'll have to suffer through little girls getting wrapped in pink and boys in blue for the next decade, too. We are getting gender neutral colours now. My contribution to Valentine's Day.'

'Huh, I never thought about it like that, but yeah, makes sense. Glorious capitalism gives us that many choices that we even have to spend a day picking out blanket colours and shapes of office chairs - JC has a committee for that.'

'Let me guess- you're not on it?'

'Nah, not on that one, but that's merely luck of the draw. JC's headmasters believe that it's good fun to just randomly assign duties like that, whether or not you're actually give a shit is pretty irrelevant to them. It's now I ended up being chair of a gardening committee a couple of years back, for instance.'

Richard snickers.

'That's horrible, to force people to deal with things they don't care for. Or a very weird method of trying to further personal development. Did you get philosophical quotes mowed into the lawn?'

'I was too busy keeping myself from braining myself with a shovel just to end the misery. Viggo took over, and it's honestly pretty much the one and only time in the last 25 years that I've been glad of his existence. I really, really, really don't give a toss about nature and wildlife.'

'Hence the lack of a favourite colour in flowers.'

'Exactly. Both Sean and Viggo spend days each spring coming up with what to put in their houses' flower beds. I'm not even sure my house has flower beds.'

'It does. I accidentally stepped into one on Boxing Day.'

'Now that you mention it, that's right, there is one. I've been wanting to turn that into a parking space for my kids' bikes for years. I'll get on that in spring, I reckon. By the way, it's Sean's birthday in a couple of weeks and he said I'm not allowed to come if I don't bring you.'

There is a short pause before Richard speaks again.

'Did he really?'

'He did. Never mind him, though, if you don't care for it. Saves me the money of having to arrange a trip for him and me, so that'd be an additional plus.'

'No, that's not what I- I'd like to meet him.'
'I know, you said. - But?'

'No but. I think I'm just a little surprised still that we are doing this. But in a good way. When is his birthday? So that I can make sure that I don't have to work that day.'

'It's on April, 17th.' Orlando pauses. 'Surprised that we are doing what?'

'Meeting each other's friends.'

'Okay?' Orlando says, then halts. 'But why wouldn't - I don't understand, I'm sorry.'

'Why wouldn't we be meeting each other's friends, you mean?' Richard asks quietly.

'No. - Yes. - I reckon? - I don't understand this conversation.'

'Well, I would probably not bother with introducing you to Graham if I thought I might lose interest in you anytime soon. Do you understand what I mean?'

'Hm.'

Orlando doesn't say anything else, so after a moment, Richard clears his throat.

'I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Orlando. Maybe this is a bigger deal for me than for you. But that's fine. I had a good time, on Boxing Day, I'd be happy to join you for Sean's birthday.'

'Okay,' Orlando tries and stops again. 'I still don't understand why that means so much to -. ' He interrupts himself again, then offers, 'You can pick me up on Saturday. Sean'll be here. If you want to meet him.'

Richard doesn't immediately reply.

'I don't know,' he then says then. 'I mean, sure, I can pick you up and say hi. But I- I kind of like that other plan we just made. The one that involves sex before and after the theatre.'

'You know I'm never against the plan with the most amount of sex. Won't hear me arguing.'

Richard chuckles.

'I'm glad to hear that. On the other hand, if I wait for a day that we don't have lots and lots of sex planned, then I'll probably never get to meet him, am I? Okay. What time do you want me to pick you up?'

'I clock off at two, and Sean and I'll be doing house schedules till then. So any time after that, half two or something? He has footie practice at three.'

'Sounds good. Do you want to meet me at the parking lot?'

'Sure, I can do that, if you want.'

'Well, both times I've been at your school it's been pitch dark. But I can probably find my way to your flat, if you want to meet up there. Or just ask someone?'
'That wasn't what I meant. I meant you could just park on the road, behind Mirkwood,' Orlando says, but doesn't continue explaining. He pauses, then continues, 'Why is this such a big deal for you? I really don't understand any of this.'

Richard is silent for a long moment.

'It's not about Sean. I really would like to meet him.'

He falls silent again, and this time the pause is even longer before he continues.

'When we were in London- I told you that I'm still struggling to get over what happened in my last relationship, right, and that I'm- well, not as available, emotionally, as I would like to be. And this- with Sean, with Graham, this is me being cautious. If that makes any sense at all?'

'Yes, but - I'm sorry, I - no,' Orlando says, responses aborted one after the other. 'I'm sorry you feel that way, but you know I'm not asking you to be, as it were, available or anything when I'm inviting you to a party or something, right? I just think you might enjoy the laugh, or talking to some people. - Is it about compartmentalizing? Keeping things separate? Cause I'm all right with that. I just - when I ask you to meet my mates, it's just that, all right? I'm not - I'm not trying to trick you into some kind of - I really am out of my depths here.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make this complicated. I didn't think for a second that you were trying to trick me into anything or to make me do anything I don't want to, not at all. Actually, you never seem to expect me to react in a certain way when you're asking something. And I appreciate that, so much. I just sometimes need a little longer to find out what I want, and how much intimacy I'm comfortable with. But I want this, I want to meet Sean, and I want you to meet Graham, I don't want to keep things separated. I'm just going to need a little more time.'

'Okay,' Orlando says, the two syllables followed by a pause. 'Graham sounds interesting, and Sean is, well, Sean. He's my best mate, and he is a bit of a prick. But he's gonna be that two months from now as well, so it'll keep.' He pauses again, the proposes, 'So, how about this: I'll just come over round three on Saturday, and we do dinner and watch that play. All right?'

'Thanks, Orlando, I appreciate it,' Richard says, sounding relieved. 'I'm not saying that I don't like how things are, between us, alright? I really do. My brain just needs a moment to catch up.'

Orlando laughs quietly.

'That's fine. Mine very possibly has undiagnosed ADHD, so who am I to judge. You know I've been keeping myself all evening from using google to find out about that play, right?'

Richard chuckles.

'I can just tell you. Might spare you some disappointment?'

'No, I just wanted to brag with my powers of self-control, mate. For once. So that I can say I used up all my patience for the month the moment I get you alone and naked. Well, partly naked will do as well.'

'No, it won't. I'm not going to let you fuck me with my pants around my ankles if we have more than enough time to get undressed and dressed again.'
'I'd say you could avoid that by just answering the door naked, but for one, that sounds like something out of bad porn, and for another, your old lady neighbour might just be ringing to borrow some milk. Besides, trousers around your thighs worked well for us in the past, so I don't understand your problem.'

'True. But I quite enjoy skin to skin contact.'

Orlando is silent for a moment.

'Fuck,' he then says. 'I don't have anything to counter that. I forfeit.'

Richard laughs.

'That's a first!'

'I know. I'm shocked myself.'

'Now I'm even more looking forward to seeing you.'

'Yeah, same.' There is a clanging noise coming from Orlando's end. 'Fuck. These stupid - I'm sorry. I was trying to get a glass of water and - you have any tips for how to get rid of those fucking roses?'

Richard laughs again.

'I'm sorry, but I can see you getting attacked by a by an army of roses on your way to the sink.'

Orlando, too, chuckles.

'Fuck you, I'm asking for your help here, not your ridicule. And I was serious, I've never given anyone roses or gotten any, how do I trash them? They have fucking pricks everywhere.'

'Well, if you don't want to give them to the cleaning ladies or the kitchen staff- any colleagues you like? Or just put them on the breakfast tables?'

'Clearly you've never been involved in a prank war or you'd know that none of those suggestions is a valid option. What I need is a wood chipper.' He hisses in pain. 'Fuck. Honestly, why would someone give this to someone other than to mess with them? And be careful what you answer, or I'll pawn the fucking things off on you on Saturday.'

'I wouldn't mind. But they are not going to be pretty any longer on Saturday. I'd offer to come fetch them tomorrow morning before work and give them away at work, it never hurts to be on good terms with the nurses, but this appears a tad extreme.'

'You don't say.' Again, there are clanging noises from Orlando's side of the conversation, followed by the sound of several cupboards being opened. 'Never mind, hold on a sec.' Something rustles, which is followed by a muttered curse, then Orlando picks up the phone again. 'Here we go. I found a bucket, stuffed them into that and put the whole thing on my dining table. I'm not using that anyway. I'm still gonna murder Sean.'

'You really think he sent you 40 roses? Kind of expensive for a prank.'
'43 quid is nothing, trust me. Besides, Sean is the head of JC's biggest house. Wellesley Hall has 113 kids, and yeah, I am sure he's able to get half of them on board for shit like that, easy. And even if their cards hadn't been signed - which they were, by the way - who else would send me flowers? I hate the fucking things. But never mind, I solved the problem.'

Richard’s phone vibrates as it announces a received message, and Orlando can hear him laugh when he looks at the picture he has just sent him.

'That looks as if you're preparing for a very kitschy proposal.'

'With a bucket? Very classy.'

'Just as classy as the colour. How are you planning to retaliate, by the way?'

'I told you, by murdering him in his sleep. - No, I don't know yet. I'm open to suggestions.'

'Have your students write angry return-to-sender letters that criticize the capitalist nature of this day and discuss why this is an utterly empty and lazy gesture there and then dump them on Sean's doorstep?'

Orlando snorts.

'That's not a prank, that is my usual Valentine's day homework; save for the bit about dumping them on his doorstep. A prank is more - spray-painting his car white and blue. Sheffield Wednesday's colours. But my kids already did that a couple of years back. I mean someone already did that.'

'You actually have them write anti-love letters? And spray paint cars?'

'I never told you about that? Not the car bit, I'm denying that that happened for liability reasons, but the letters thing? Huh. Some of them are quite clever, too.'

'You didn't. But I'd love to hear them. Can you bring one Saturday? Or does that violate your students’ privacy?'

'No, it's fine, of course you can read them. As long as you don't mind me gushing over them like a mother over her first-born. I'd be happy to.'

'I'd really like that. And I have quite a lot of experience with proud new mothers, that'll be fine.'

Orlando laughs.

'I'm already regretting my choice of words there.'

'Don't. Of course you are proud.'

'Nah, let's just forget I said that and move on. - You got anything interesting planned for the rest of the week?'

'Nothing spectacular. I'm on duty tomorrow and am staying over at Graham's and then I'm going to have a quiet night in on Friday and read, I think, and sleep in on Saturday. What about you?'

'Grading, planning the next couple of weeks in my house and football on Thursday; so nothing
special either. But I kinda need to do some lesson prep for tomorrow still, which is a bit annoying. You mind if we ring off?"

'Not at all. I'm going to get out of bed much easier tomorrow morning if I turn off the lights now. I hope your preparations won't take too long?'

'No, at least not if I don't get distracted and spend half the night reading Kant again. Chances are, I'd say, 50:50.' Orlando chuckles. 'I'm looking forward to Saturday - sex and a mysterious play, hm?'

Richard hums, amused.

'Don't forget dinner and more sex. But yes, so am I. Good night.'

'Same to you, see you on Saturday.'
Richard and Orlando spend a couple of days in Glasgow.

‘Ya want anything else?’

The waitress’s tone is bordering on rude, and it’s more that than her words that immediately captures Orlando’s attention. His brows automatically furrow and he pointedly doesn’t look at her but at Richard on the other side of the table. He, too, must’ve heard it, but there is none of Orlando’s irritation on his face.

Instead there is quiet amusement in his eyes as he looks at Orlando, brows arching minutely in a silent question.

Orlando raises one shoulder.

‘Another coffee?’

Richard’s smile changes into one that is both a little broader and less genuine as he looks up at the waitress and adds his own order to Orlando’s. She shuffles back to the counter where obviously gossiping takes precedence over anything else.

Orlando shakes his head and finds Richard watching him.

‘Well, but at least the coffee is pretty decent,’ Richard says.

Orlando drinks Tesco’s own instant coffee at home, so he’s really not gonna weigh in on this. Instead the ‘Guardian’ that Richard brought with him catches his attention. He blinks when he finds that Richard seems to be almost done with it; several sections have been neatly folded and put aside. He glances at his watch and blinks again, slightly astonished.

‘We’ve been here for an hour.’

Richard’s gaze flickers to the large clock on the wall, and there is a flash of surprise in his eyes as well.

That happens sometimes. Orlando is in the middle of reading when the ideas on the page trigger something. He stares at the ceiling for an unspecific amount of time while he follows that initial thought to see where it takes him. Sean once compared it to Alice following the white rabbit. It’s annoying that he keeps remembering that comparison because it’s wonky on so many levels and Sean mostly just used it because he knew it would piss Orlando off.

‘So we have,’ Richard says, only a little belatedly, and leans back in his chair. ‘You’d rather we left? We could still cancel our order.’
They could do that. Could go back to the posh hotel on West Regent Street, again make use of the bed and its fancy linens (and honestly, what kind of hotel puts the thread-count of their linens onto their website). They also could give one of Glasgow’s art museums a go, since all they have done today is visit a cemetery.

But Orlando shakes his head.

‘Nah, I’m good for a while longer if you are.’

Richard’s responding smile is confirmation enough.

‘Do you mind if I -’ he starts and slightly raises the paper to finish the question. Orlando isn’t too good at reading upside down, but from what he gathers from the headline Richard is in the middle of an article about the gender wage gap.

Again Orlando shakes his head.

‘We came here for some time to read, didn’t we?’

It’s pretty much verbatim what Richard suggested when they left the historical cemetery, and Richard nods and goes back to reading his article.

Even on a trip, he prefers the printed word, seems to enjoy the haptic experience of actual newspaper and treats his books (all hardcovers, all in pristine condition) with great care. Most of Orlando’s reading takes place online. But for the last seventy minutes, his phone has been lying untouched on the table.

Ever since they passed Thomas Reid’s monument on Glasgow’s Necropolis, he’s been contemplating Scottish enlightenment. In his mind, he dissected Reid’s reasoning for God given common sense as they exited the cemetery, questioned his contribution to action theory until Richard lightly touched his arm because the traffic light switched to green. He stared unseeingly at the display of newspapers while Richard picked up his ‘Guardian’ as one of Reid’s propositions on language popped up in his mind (‘There is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words’ - talk about the glass being half empty). He smiled and nodded and followed when Richard suggested coffee.

Their refill still hasn’t arrived at their table, and the world’s worst waitress is currently busy applying lip gloss onto her permanently down-turned lips. Richard is engrossed in his article once more, the minute change of his expression the only indication of his apparent approval.

Orlando remembers ordering his first coffee and some cake or other, but as he tries to reconstruct his thoughts from then on, he fails. His right hand holds a cheap Biro, idly toying with it, but it’s more a surrogate for a cigarette than a writing instrument; he hasn’t even jotted down a single word. He waits for the flash of annoyance that is bound to follow - he is indeed like stupid Alice, mindlessly wandering around a nonsensical labyrinth. What’s the point of contemplation if at the end there is no clarity? But the frustration doesn’t come.

His eyes follow the steady motion of Richard’s as they read. Much slower than Orlando himself, much less impatient, very possibly much more thorough. He holds the paper with both hands, his right thumb moves in miniature circles; unconsciously caressing the words it covers.

Thomas Reid doesn’t make it onto Orlando’s list of top ten philosophers who should be shot in the
head; he enjoys his libertarian views and some of his thoughts on language too much for that. Maybe that’s the reason why right now, he can’t seem to be arsed to pick up the threads of his interrupted thoughts. Maybe it’s because of this that it doesn’t even bother him.

‘There ya go.’

A new coffee cup is put down onto the table in front of him. Some of its content sloshes over the rim and onto the saucer. The same happens with Richard’s. The shitty waitress at least deserves points for consistency.

‘A colleague of mine is from round here,’ Orlando says, once she has turned her back to them and Richard’s laughing eyes look at him. ‘He claims that Glasgow has been voted the friendliest city in the world.’

Richard hides his smile behind his cup, and he licks a trace of coffee from his upper lip before he replies.

‘Well, the coffee is all right.’

Orlando chuckles.

‘That’s setting the bar pretty low, mate.’

Richard doesn’t argue, just sips from his cup again, his left hand resting on the folded up newspaper. He keeps looking at Orlando, though, and there are things he isn’t saying, doesn’t need to say because they are inarguably true. Orlando doesn’t give a shit about poor customer service, of course he doesn’t, and it’s not just the coffee that is all right (much more than that). He feels his lips curving into a smile.

‘What would you like to do next?’
6/4/2018 - Pluralis majestatis

Chapter by noalinnea

Chapter Summary

While Orlando is browsing the shelves of a bookstore, Richard has time for a Whatsapp chat with Graham.

[Whatsapp, 6/4/2018]

Graham [2:43 p.m.]: Do you want to come over for dinner tonight after work?

Graham [2:43 p.m.]: Elliot is out with a friend and Annie is usually asleep by seven.

Graham [2:43 p.m.]: I found an excellent Portuguese red that you might enjoy!

Richard [3:10 p.m.]: I’d love to, but I’m in Glasgow.

Graham [3:15 p.m.]: Are you off work today?

Graham [3:15 p.m.]: Or are you picking up babies all over the place now?

Richard [4:26 p.m.]: I have a couple of days off.

Richard [4:26 p.m.]: Didn’t I tell you?

Richard [4:26 p.m.]: But we’ll be back tomorrow.

Richard [4:27 p.m.]: Sunday, maybe?

Graham [5:17 p.m.]: 11, ours?

Graham [5:17 p.m.]: But more importantly:

Graham [5:17 p.m.]: WE?

Graham [5:17 p.m.]: Pluralis majestatis?

Graham [5:17 p.m.]: Or the obvious?

Richard [5:19 p.m.]: Are you going to buy pluralis majestatis?

Richard [5:19 p.m.]: That is the really important question.
Graham [5:20 p.m.]: What do you think?
Graham [5:20 p.m.]: Of course not.
Graham [5:20 p.m.]: So, another romantic get away with mysterious Orlando?
Richard [5:21 p.m.]: No, my mother wanted to see the city.
Graham [5:22 p.m.]: Really?
Richard [5:22 p.m.]: Graham!
Richard [5:22 p.m.]: And there really is nothing mysterious about him.
Graham [5:23 p.m.]: Well, you keep hiding him.
Richard [5:24 p.m.]: I know, I’m sorry.
Richard [5:24 p.m.]: We have talked about this, actually, a while ago, and he’d like to meet you.
Graham [5:25 p.m.]: I’d be thrilled.
Graham [5:25 p.m.]: You know it’s fine though if he doesn’t want to or you don’t want to, for any reason whatsoever?
Richard [5:26 p.m.]: I do.
Richard [5:26 p.m.]: Cheers.
Richard [5:26 p.m.]: We thought maybe we could have a beer together in York some evening?
Graham [5:27 p.m.]: Sounds great.
Graham [5:27 p.m.]: Let’s talk about it on Sunday?
Richard [5:28 p.m.]: But far away from Annie’s ears, or she’ll want to come.
Richard [5:28 p.m.]: Is she still mad at me for meeting you behind her back?
Graham [5:29 p.m.]: Nah, I told her it was a one time thing, harmless lunch in the cafeteria.
Graham [5:29 p.m.]: She was satisfied with that.
Graham [5:29 p.m.]: 5-year-olds, seriously.
Graham [5:30 p.m.]: She'll be happy to hear you're coming.

Richard [5:30 p.m.]: Tell her I'm looking forward to seeing her.

Graham [5:31 p.m.]: Will do.

Graham [5:31 p.m.]: And now off with you, back to your man.

Richard [5:32 p.m.]: It’s fine, he is picking out books, I have another couple of minutes.

Graham [5:32 p.m.]: So, what are you doing in Glasgow?

Graham [5:33 p.m.]: Apart from the obvious?

Richard [5:33 p.m.]: You have a filthy mind, my friend.

Graham [5:34 p.m.]: Don't tell me you didn’t get laid already today?

Richard [5:34 p.m.]: Just twice, though.

Graham [5:34 p.m.]: Twice?

Graham [5:34 p.m.]: That’s more sex than I've had in a fortnight.

Graham [5:35 p.m.]: Why do I always have to ask.

Richard [5:35 p.m.]: One can only wonder...

Richard [5:36 p.m.]: We were at the Nekropolis yesterday and then just read for a while, actually, at a café, kind of a slow day, pretty nice. And then we also did the Gallery of Modern Art and the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, definitely worth a visit.

Richard [5:37 p.m.]: And the usual, nice restaurants, beer etc.

Graham [5:37 p.m.]: Sounds as if you’re having a good time.

Richard [5:38 p.m.]: I am.

Richard [5:38 p.m.]: Or we are.

Richard [5:38 p.m.]: We really are.

Richard [5:39 p.m.]: I thought it might bother me, at least a bit, that I used to come here with Lee so often.
Richard [5:39 p.m.]: But it doesn’t.

Richard [5:40 p.m.]: Which is a really nice surprise.

Graham [5:40 p.m.]: That sounds pretty great, Richard.

Richard [5:41 p.m.]: It does, doesn’t it?

Richard [5:41 p.m.]: I’ll tell you more Sunday, I have to go, Orlando is ready.

Graham [5:42 p.m.]: Enjoy!

Graham [5:42 p.m.]: See you Sunday!
Richard is worried about his dad. Orlando isn't exactly offering a shoulder to cry on, but somehow manages to be supportive anyway.

[14/4/2018, 4:04 p.m.]

'Hi. This is Richard Armitage. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you want you can leave a message and I'll call you back. Cheers.'

'Hiya, mate, it's Orlando. I'm calling because of Tuesday. Sean's amazing birthday bash, remember? That's the official title, in case you wondered, though I really have no clue why it would deserve that adjective. He's just doing dinner in a pub. Anyway, I have to be in York around four to pick up Dom's car about three miles from your house. He's having it resprayed in the most obnoxious green, and I owe him a couple of favours since Amsterdam. Long story short, I could pick you up, leave my BMW at yours and we could drive to Harrogate in Dom's car, if you want. We could take a cab back to yours after Sean's thing, or you could go back with Cate and I'll pick up my BMW some other time; whatever. No worries if you made other arrangements or just would not want to be seen dead in a green Scirocco. I'd very much understand the latter, actually. Dom is an idiot. - Yeah, so, let me know, all right?'

[14/4/2018, Whatsapp]

Richard [10:47 p.m.]: Sorry I couldn't answer my phone earlier.

Richard [10:47 p.m.]: I'm in Leicester, actually, my dad's not well.

Richard [10:48 p.m.]: I think I'll be back tomorrow, though, so count me in for Tuesday.

Richard [10:48 p.m.]: I'm looking forward to finally meeting Sean.

Richard [10:49 p.m.]: And I actually made arrangements at work for Wednesday and won't have to leave for work before 10 a.m.

Richard [10:50 p.m.]: Happy to have you stay over!

Richard [10:50 p.m.]: I should be back from work around five Tuesday and be good to around around 5:30.

Richard [10:51 p.m.]: Would that work for you?
Richard [10:54 p.m.]: Sorry that this sounds a bit rushed

Richard [10:54 p.m.]: Am still at the hospital and it's been a long day

Orlando [11:00 p.m.]: Absolutely called for, apologizing for messaging style when talking to me

Orlando [11:00 p.m.]: ffs, Richard

Orlando [11:01 p.m.]: Leicester, though, not Leeds?

Orlando [11:01 p.m.]: Hospital, I mean

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: Tuesday - Sean wants people to be there around seven, we'd have to leave around half six, so there's no need to rush

Orlando [11:04 p.m.]: Wednesday - I got the morning off actually, my classes are on a field trip to Hadrian's Wall

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: Sorry.

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: Leicester, yes.

Richard [11:06 p.m.]: I'm waiting for my dad to get back from radiology.


Richard [11:08 p.m.]: Half six Tuesday sounds great, as does the prospect of being able to spend Wednesday morning in bed with you.

Orlando [11:09 p.m.]: Fyi, I think I just scared the fuck out of 1/4th of Wellesley

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: Sean's house. He's away for the weekend, I am doing last rounds rn

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: It's all peace and quiet and I bloody laughed out loud

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: Kidney stones - and then you talk about shagging in the next fucking message

Orlando [11:10 p.m.]: You're really nailing this phone sex thing tonight, mate

Richard [11:11 p.m.]: Bizarre change of topic, I'll give you that.

Richard [11:12 p.m.]: Also bizarre if kidney stones is what you're hoping for.
Orlando [11:12 p.m.]: Benign, aren't they

Orlando [11:13 p.m.]: Only logical to hope for that

Richard [11:14 p.m.]: Indeed.

Richard [11:14 p.m.]: Not knowing all the stuff I know about truly unpleasant conditions probably would make it a little easier to sit here and wait right now.

Orlando [11:15 p.m.]: Lack of knowledge doesn't reduce fear, it increases it

Orlando [11:17 p.m.]: Sorry. I'm not good at this

Orlando [11:17 p.m.]: I hope you get the results soon and they'll be good

Richard [11:18 p.m.]: Thanks.

Richard [11:18 p.m.]: Appreciate it.

Richard [11:18 p.m.]: Sorry got to go

Orlando [11:18 p.m.]: Sure

Orlando [11:18 p.m.]: See you Tuesday

[15/4/2018 - Whatsapp]

Richard [1:27 a.m.]: You're probably in bed already now?

Richard [1:27 a.m.]: It indeed turned out to be a kidney stone.

Richard [1:28 a.m.]: He has to stay the night, but will be just fine once he's passed it.

Richard [1:28 a.m.]: Quite relieved.

Richard [1:29 a.m.]: Now I just need to calm my mum.

Richard [1:30 a.m.]: I hope you had a good evening despite having to work.

Richard [1:30 a.m.]: I'm looking forward to seeing you Tuesday!
Richard [1:31 a.m.]: I'll text you when I'm leaving work, alright?

Orlando [1:53 a.m.]: You do that

Orlando [1:53 a.m.]: I'll stop by Argos on the way back from the auto shop anyway; tell me if you want anything

Orlando [1:53 a.m.]: Like a five pack of t-shirts for example

Orlando [1:53 a.m.]: Good night now

Richard [1:54 a.m.]: I'm laughing way too hard now.

Richard [1:54 a.m.]: Cheers.

Richard [1:55 a.m.]: Sleep tight.
Richard is not quite ready yet to part with Orlando after they get back from their trip to Glasgow and he drops him off at his place.

It’s 11:54 a.m. on Saturday morning when Richard pulls over the car a couple of hundred yards before they reach the turn to Jackson College and Orlando questioningly lifts one eyebrow.

“One moment, Orlando,” Richard says with a smile and turns off the engine. ‘You’re still going to be back home before the clock strikes.’

“We’re gonna see about that,” Orlando says, but without any heat behind his words, and slightly turns his head to get a better look at Richard.

A blue Subaru overtakes them, none of its three occupants paying them any mind.

“So?” Orlando asks.

“Two things,” Richard says, his smile widening.

“Firstly, I had a really good time.”

Orlando waits for him to move on to the second thing, and when Richard doesn’t, he says with a one-shouldered little shrug:

“Same. And secondly?”

Richard’s smile turns into a grin and then he leans over to Orlando, wraps his hand around his neck and pulls him into a kiss, tongue and everything.

“Secondly,” he says, when they finally pull apart, grin immediately back in place.

“Alright,” Orlando says, licking his lips. ‘Alright.’

Richard spots a small delivery van in the mirror and lets it pass before he restarts the engine and pulls back onto the road. They spend the better past of the last mile in silence and have almost reached the turn to the school gates when Orlando asks:

“Is this going to be a thing now?”

“What?”

Richard’s eyes flicker over to Orlando before he turns his attention back to the road.

“The kissing?”

Richard laughs.
‘Maybe. Do you object?’

Orlando hums.

‘Bit of a waste, really.’

Richard just raises his eyebrows and brings the car to a stop near the main building’s entrance.

‘I mean, if you’d thought of that at the hotel-’

‘- then we certainly wouldn’t be here now,’ Richard finishes his sentence.

‘Get out, before your students start staring at me again. Those girls over there look pretty judgmental.’

Orlando casts his students a fleeting look.

‘Yeah,’ he says, but doesn’t move, just keeps looking at Richard.

‘I’ll see you next week?’ Richard asks, amusement in his eyes.

‘Sure,’ Orlando says.

For a moment neither of them moves, but then Richard reaches over Orlando and pushes open the door.

‘Get out,’ he repeats, chuckling.

Orlando nods and reaches for his bag on the back seat.

‘Wednesday?’ he asks before he swings his legs out of the car.

‘Sure,’ Richard says.
Richard enters the pub behind Orlando, having held open the door for him, of course, and seems much more at ease than Cate has pictured him to be in this ‘meet the parent’ situation. He still looks relieved, though, when he spots her at the back of the room, but does not get a proper chance to answer her smile, because Orlando is already marching him over to Sean. The introduction is not the most eloquent one (‘Sean-Richard, Richard-Sean’) and comes as a bit of an ambush to the birthday boy, who somewhat hastily has to set down his glass to shake Richard’s hand, but he takes it in stride, as does Richard. Cate catches him ducking his head a little, like he always does when he is nervous, something that is very easy to miss if you don’t know him, and maybe his smile is a little bit more reserved than his usual one, if not less sincere, but that’s it, other than that he seems fine, really, composed. His clothes give him away, though. Predictably, he has made an effort, clearly has selected his outfit for the occasion very carefully, its low-key elegance more than anything else a telltale sign of how much thought he has given this evening beforehand. He looks fantastic, of course he does, even more so in direct comparison to Orlando, who has chosen to combine a washed out sweater with a wrinkly t-shirt and- to be frank- ill-fitting jeans. Not that she ever thought it likely that Richard’s fashion sense would rub off on Orlando, but a woman can dream, can’t she.

It seems as if Orlando’s cologne has rubbed off on Richard, though, she catches a whiff of it when he leans in to kiss her hello. Before she can start wondering, she receives an explanation as to how that might have happened, too, because Sean chooses this exact moment to ask what has kept them, and she can practically feel Richard blush against her cheek, even before she hears Orlando asking if Sean really wants him to go into detail, on his birthday. Sean groans and Cate hides a smile while she casts Ashley a warning glance to prevent her- just in time, it seems- to inquire what Orlando is talking about. Did they indeed, now. Well, but post-orgasmic relaxation would neatly explain why Richard doesn’t just turn on his heels and call it a night, but is the one who saves them all from further embarrassment by simply handing Sean the bottle of Bordeaux he has brought with him. It’s a bit more expensive than necessary, really, but it serves its purpose, paves the way for a conversation between him and Sean when they all sit back down.

The line of Richard’s shoulders relaxes gradually once they have placed their orders and she watches the lines on his forehead even out, relieved, she won’t deny that. The conversation doesn’t flow effortlessly, but it’s not strained, either, Richard really seems to have memorized everything she told him about Sean’s preferred conversation topics the week before, to a degree that makes her wonder if he has taken notes, after coming come. Which wouldn’t be all that surprising, would it, considering how nervous he was when talking to her.

Ashley and Sean tell them about their weekend in Stockholm, about Sean’s disappointment at finding the Royal Armory partly closed due to reconstruction work, about visiting the spectacular ‘Vasa-Museum’ instead and having a drink in some sort of Icebar. From there, Sean somehow manages to change the topic to tennis, and even though Cate would rather hear about every last item
in the Royal Armory Sean didn’t get to see last weekend, she smiles and doesn’t object, because tennis actually is something Richard is interested in, just like her dear husband, who lamentably is still stuck at work, he is going to be sorry to hear what he has missed- Wimbledon conversations galore. Thank God for wine. And Richard’s smile.

She has been wondering how they would be, together, of course she has, pretty much from the moment she found out it was Orlando Richard had started seeing, and it probably shouldn’t come as a surprise that they don’t really give the impression of being a couple, but it still does, somehow. Maybe because in direct comparison to Sean and Ashley it’s so very obvious that they don’t touch. Not that she has expected to see them holding hands, she is pretty sure that she has never seen Richard hold Lee’s hand in all those years they were together, suspects that it isn’t his thing, and Orlando would probably rather be hit in the face than hold hands with anybody, but no touching at all? That can’t be a good sign, or can it?

It’s only when their plates have been cleared that she sees it: Richard shifts slightly, stretches out his arm on the table, fingers curling around his glass, and his elbow comes to rest against Orlando’s. And Orlando doesn’t withdraw, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t frown, doesn’t even miss a beat. Subtle, maybe, but pretty remarkable, really.

Andrew arrives too late to witness this but just in time for dessert. Predictably, he tears up when John sings, as do Viggo and Sean. Richard looks a bit embarrassed, as if he is witnessing a very private moment and has no business being there, and he smiles at her gratefully when she halts the jiggling movement of his leg by nudging his knee with hers under the table.

After John’s recital Sean and Orlando disappear for a smoke and Richard excuses himself a moment later to go to the loo. When he still isn’t back after Andrew has checked in with the sitter- the kids have gone to bed without quarrelling- Cate asks him to get her a refill while she goes look for Richard. She finds him outside the Gents, where it’s a little quieter, in the process of wrapping up a call. When she asks him if everything is alright, he nods, but looks pensive for a moment, before he chooses to tell her that his dad has been in the hospital during the weekend.

They have been talking about this before, about their parents getting older and more frail, have been talking about how it’s going to be to say goodbye, about how neither of them is ready yet, and Richard squeezes her hand when she places hers on his arm, smiles when he confesses that he knows that he is fussing, that his dad will be just fine without him checking in, but that he is going to sleep much better after just having heard his voice.

As far as Sean's birthdays go, it's a civilized one, thanks to Ashley, probably, who made Sean pick a much nicer location than Orlando, Dom and Karl ever did. Viggo’s and Bernard’s speech is as touching as John’s song, if a bit rambly associative, Viggo saves the day by preventing Bernard from falling off the chair they have both been standing on, and Gerry keeps West in check (or vice versa, Cate can never tell with certainty).

When they settle back down at their table after Sean has opened his presents, somehow the conversation turns back to tennis (it’s mostly Sean’s fault, but Andrew and Richard really don’t do anything to discourage him). Cate is about to let it slide, her wine glass has just been refilled and Andrew has wrapped his arm around her shoulder- nice, he smells great tonight, no, wait, he always does- but Orlando isn’t.

‘Seriously, I’d rather listen to a conversation about contemporary novels than a moment more of Wimbledon. Richard, Sean prefers Ian McEwan over Julian Barnes. Surely you have something to say about that.’
Well, she might have phrased that a little differently, maybe. But it’s the first time this evening she wholeheartedly agrees with Orlando. Any other topic, really.

Andrew looks a little startled, like a deer caught in the headlights, but Sean and Richard are not as easily derailed, Sean, war-worn Orlando-veteran that he is, laughs and Richard merely lifts an eyebrow while finishing his sentence without any hesitation. They do take the hint, though, and subsequently change the topic, and even if Cate doesn’t care much about either author, it’s always been Doris Lessing for her, she has at least read them and can weigh in, as can Andrew.

She has never heard Orlando proclaim any interest in contemporary literature, but surprisingly, Richard’s rather passionate- and very articulate- defense of Barnes’ prose, of its wit and elegance that makes McEwan pale in comparison, he argues, somehow manages to capture Orlando’s attention, he looks up from his phone, his focus sharp, entirely on Richard, and does not take his eyes off him until he has finished making his case for Barnes, even lets them linger on him for another second or two. It’s impossible for Cate to place his expression, which she finds a bit unsettling, but the fact that Richard responds to it with a smile- soft, private, amused- reassures her.

She only notices Sean’s eyes on her when Andrew nudges her leg under the table. So she has been a lot less subtle in her observation than she has prided herself to be. Oh well. Sean certainly doesn’t seem to mind, if his grin is anything to go on, he now winks at her and raises his glass in a silent salute that she answers in kind, chuckling. She probably shouldn’t have more wine, though, she doesn’t need Orlando noticing. Or West, who has been staring at all of them for the past couple of minutes like the freak that he is, not moving a single facial muscle. But on the plus side that means that he hasn’t had the time to set anything on fire, so she is going to let it go and just consider it a win-win situation.

‘I think I know someone who is going to get laid tonight,’ Andrew says quietly, and when Cate follows his gaze, she has difficulties stifling her laughter. Oh yes, indeed.

Orlando is leaning against the bar, has apparently just ordered another round, and Richard is standing right next to him. They are not talking, just looking at each other when Cate’s eyes land on them, and even from where she is sitting she sees Orlando’s eyes darting back and forth between Richard’s eyes and lips. And then Richard leans in and says something, undoubtedly meant for Orlando’s ears only, it can be more than a couple of words, but they have an impressive effect- when the bartender places his order in front of Orlando, he takes the glasses, shoves one into Gerry’s hands, one into West’s- they are standing just two metres away- before turning back around and placing his hand onto the small of Richard’s back to steer him towards the pub’s exit, and that gesture, more than anything else, says it all. Orlando calls out a goodbye to Sean on their way out the door and Richard turns back over his shoulder and signals them that he will call them, and then they are gone.

‘You know, they already did that before they got here,’ Cate says when she turns back to her husband, causing him to snort a bit of ginger ale through his nose.

When he recovers, he props up his chin on his hand and looks at her thoughtfully for a moment. Then he shakes his head and asks with a small smile:

‘Who would have thought, hm?’

‘Sorry, love, thought what?’

‘That Richard and Orlando, of all people, would have anything in common.’
Cate laughs.

‘Who indeed. That knowledge might have saved us from years of Lee.’

Andrew shrugs and licks a trace of ginger ale from his lips.

‘Richard was in love with him.’

She sighs and takes another sip from her glass before she nods.

‘I know.’

Bloody Lee. They are never going to get rid of him, if he still manages to steal into their conversations, after more than a year.

Sean’s laughter carries over to them from the bar and they both look up, smiling, before they turn back towards each other.

‘Do you think-?’ Cate asks, thumb toying with the rim of her wineglass. She doesn’t finish her sentence, doesn’t have to, because his expression tells her that Andrew is already considering his answer.

After a moment, he nods.

‘Yes, I do.’

Cate hums.

‘So do I.’

‘I’m not sure that Richard knows, though,’ Andrew says.

‘I’m pretty sure he doesn’t,’ Cate replies. She is also pretty sure that her smile qualifies as ‘wistful’.

If she is being honest she isn’t fully convinced yet that Orlando is much of an improvement compared to Lee. That is not a thought she is going to share, though, neither with Richard, nor with her husband.

Well, or just not with Richard, because whom is she kidding, Andrew sees right through her, she hasn’t been able to keep anything important from him since 1998, 1999.

‘You disapprove,’ he says, raising one eyebrow.

She sighs.

‘It’s Orlando.’

Andrew nods.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘But when have you last seen Richard this much at ease?’
It’s not a question that requires an answer, and she couldn’t have given one either, had she wanted to, because Gerry flops down onto the chair across from them and noisily sets down a bottle of... clear liquor without a label.

‘We’re doing shots,’ he informs them, grinning from one ear to the other.
Chapter Summary

What is simply meant to be a booty call somehow turns more complicated when Richard can't quite seem to part with Orlando for the night.

Richard [8:48 a.m.]: I can still feel you.
Richard [8:48 a.m.]: Best way to start the day.

Orlando [8:49 a.m.]: Interesting
Orlando [8:49 a.m.]: Me telling you that I don't have class before half eleven
Orlando [8:49 a.m.]: Somehow translates to
Orlando [8:49 a.m.]: 'We should have phone sex'
Orlando [8:50 a.m.]: To you

Richard [8:50 a.m.]: I wish.
Richard [8:51 a.m.]: I'm in an ambulance, though.
Richard [8:51 a.m.]: Not a good place for phone sex.

Orlando [8:51 a.m.]: Rather relieving to read that
Orlando [8:51 a.m.]: Wouldn't want my doctor to think about getting fucked six ways to Sunday while he tends to my broken bones
Orlando [8:51 a.m.]: Somewhat distracting

Richard [8:52 a.m.]: You're not assuming I'm with a patient, are you?
Richard [8:52 a.m.]: Disconcerting idea.

Orlando [8:52 a.m.]: Just hypothetically speaking
Orlando [8:52 a.m.]: That WOULD be disconcerting, yes
Orlando [8:49 a.m.]: Anyhow,

[Copied Message: Richard [8:48 a.m.]: I can still feel you.]

Orlando [8:52 a.m.]: Way to start an innocent conversation there, mate

Richard [8:52 a.m.]: Thanks, I'm trying.

Richard [8:52 a.m.]: You got home fine, then?

Orlando [8:53 a.m.]: After you rudely kicked me out?

Orlando [8:53 a.m.]: Yeah, I did

Orlando [8:53 a.m.]: Stopped at the first petrol station I found because I was running on empty, got treated to a father involuntarily playing chase with his brat of a kid

Orlando [8:53 a.m.]: Not the best bit of my day so far

Orlando [8:53 a.m.]: You got stuck in traffic like you predicted?

Richard [8:54 a.m.]: Trust me, I'd much rather still be in bed with you right now.

Richard [8:54 a.m.]: Traffic was pretty bad, it always is when I leave late.

Richard [8:54 a.m.]: Absolutely worth it, though.

Richard [8:54 a.m.]: Shame you're away this weekend.

Orlando [8:55 a.m.]: I'd invite you to come with to Sheffield

Orlando [8:55 a.m.]: But first of all, I know for a fact that you wouldn't set a foot into the place we'll be staying at

Orlando [8:55 a.m.]: And second of, I am very bad at sex when stoned. Which I will be, considering it's a uni reunion and Dom is there

Richard [8:57 a.m.]: It's my work weekend, but cheers anyway.

Richard [8:57 a.m.]: And you know that I don't die if I'm not staying at a four star hotel, right?

Richard [8:58 a.m.]: What happens when you're stoned?

Richard [8:58 a.m.]: Do you start making penis jokes?

Orlando [8:58 a.m.]: Really?

Orlando [9:00 a.m.]: I rest my case

Richard [9:01 a.m.]: Really.

Richard [9:01 a.m.]: Doesn't mean I wouldn't be concerned about bed bugs, though.

Richard [9:01 a.m.]: And the sex would be bad because you'd have to blindfold me so that I wouldn't be facing Dom and up to three strangers?

Orlando [9:02 a.m.]: Dom yes, but no one else. Our mates claim they are too old to be sharing rooms

Orlando [9:02 a.m.]: The sex would be bad because past encounters show that I'm barely able to get it up and am prone to lose interest altogether half way through

Richard [9:04 a.m.]: We shouldn’t get high together, then, for me it's the other way round.

Orlando [9:04 a.m.]: You could light up and just hand me a bottle of Smirnoff

Orlando [9:04 a.m.]: But I prefer being sober when I'm with you

Richard [9:05 a.m.]: Smirnoff?

Richard [9:05 a.m.]: Can't I get you drunk on nice alcohol at least?

Richard [9:06 a.m.]: It's been ages since I've been high.

Richard [9:06 a.m.]: Not since I moved to York.

Richard [9:06 a.m.]: Difficult to find someone who sells you weed when you're working with babies.

Orlando [9:06 a.m.]: Just tell me what you want and I'll get it for you

Orlando [9:06 a.m.]: Not from Sheffield, obviously

Orlando [9:06 a.m.]: From Dom

Richard [9:07 a.m.]: Tempting...

Richard [9:07 a.m.]: But maybe not a good topic for a Whatsapp conversation?

Richard [9:08 a.m.]: I was meaning to say earlier- you'd have been welcome to stay even though I
had to leave for work.

Richard [9:08 a.m.]: You always are.

Richard [9:08 a.m.]: I don't want you to feel kicked out.

Orlando [9:09 a.m.]: Appreciated

Orlando [9:10 a.m.]: No, it's all right, I'm good with leaving with you

Orlando [9:10 a.m.]: As long as it's past six

Orlando [9:10 a.m.]: I really couldn't function with your horrible schedule of night shifts

Richard [9:11 a.m.]: Certainly not my favourite part of being in neonatology, but something you get used to.

Richard [9:12 a.m.]: I have a much harder time imagining to be combining home and work, like you do.

Orlando [9:24 a.m.]: I reckon the same thing applies that you just said

Orlando [9:24 a.m.]: All a question of what one is used to / brought up with

Orlando [9:25 a.m.]: Sorry for the delay btw, had to get instant coffee from the common kitchen, mine is out

Richard [9:25 a.m.]: No problem. I think we're almost at the hospital, though, so if I stop replying I'm working, nothing personal.

Richard [9:26 a.m.]: And instant coffee?!

Richard [9:26 a.m.]: Not even French press?

Orlando [9:29 a.m.]: Do I look like someone owning a French press?

Orlando [9:29 a.m.]: I had to google that

Orlando [9:29 a.m.]: You free on Tuesday?

Orlando [9:29 a.m.]: [https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/public-lectures/summer-18/sexual-selection/]

Orlando [9:29 a.m.]: That lecture I was talking about yesterday. You wanna come with?

Richard [9:31 a.m.]: I'd love to. Sounds interesting.
Richard [9:31 a.m.]: But I'm afraid I can't, I'm rehearsing with Lucy and Jonas on Tuesday.

Richard [9:31 a.m.]: Next time?

Orlando [9:33 a.m.]: Sure, never mind

Richard [6:34 p.m.]: Sorry.

Richard [6:34 p.m.]: The way back to Leeds was not a quaint stroll exactly.

Richard [6:36 p.m.]: Are you by any chance free during the weekend after, then?

Richard [6:36 p.m.]: Since I can't join you Tuesday.

Orlando [8:45 p.m.]: Depends

Orlando [8:45 p.m.]: Plans?

Richard [8:46 p.m.]: Do I need to up my game if I want to see you?

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: Sorry

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: I was in JC's theatre, watching what constitutes as a play these days

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: No, you don't need to up your game

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: We have half term holidays, starting next Monday

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: Why haven't we talked about all this last night?

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: Wait, don't answer

Orlando [9:09 p.m.]: I remember why

Richard [9:10 p.m.]: Food, cinema, sex, not necessarily in that order.

Richard [9:10 p.m.]: Not a very elaborate plan.

Richard [9:11 p.m.]: I'd just like to spend time with you.

Richard [9:11 p.m.]: What was the play about?

Orlando [9:22 p.m.]: Sorry, had to get back to my house
Orlando [9:22 p.m.]: The play was about drugs and how you should not do them

Orlando [9:23 p.m.]: I'm not kidding

Orlando [9:23 p.m.]: There was a talking Cannabis plant

Orlando [9:23 p.m.]: I don't have any plans for the holidays, by the way. About two thirds of my kids are away, so I'm baking on having time for hiking and reading

Orlando [9:23 p.m.]: *banking

Orlando [9:24 p.m.]: *biking

Orlando [9:24 p.m.]: What the fuck is wrong with my autocorrect?

Richard [9:25 p.m.]: The second one is a shame.

Richard [9:25 p.m.]: I was going to propose to join you for a hike.

Orlando [9:25 p.m.]: I am not going hiking with you

Orlando [9:25 p.m.]: Or join a baking class for that matter

Richard [9:26 p.m.]: I'm actually off work Thursday and Friday.

Richard [9:26 p.m.]: I was going to use the time to prepare a lecture that I'm giving Saturday in Leeds.

Richard [9:27 p.m.]: But maybe I can do the preparation this weekend.

Richard [9:27 p.m.]: So that we could do something together?

Richard [9:27 p.m.]: I'd like that.

Orlando [9:29 p.m.]: Sure

Orlando [9:30 p.m.]: Breakfast on Thursday, that place you like with the sandwiches?

Richard [9:31 p.m.]: The "Pig & Pastry"?

Richard [9:31 p.m.]: That sounds good.

Orlando [9:35 p.m.]: Friday evening, there's a band playing in a pub not too far from yours that I'd like to see. Come with if you want, they start at seven
Richard [9:37 p.m.]: Sure, count me in.

Richard [9:37 p.m.]: Any band I'd know?

Richard [9:37 p.m.]: I need to turn in early-ish that Friday, though, I need to be in Leeds around 8 on Saturday morning.

Richard [9:38 p.m.]: But you're welcome to stay over anyway, if you don't want to drive back home in the middle of the night.

Orlando [9:39 p.m.]: Cheers

Orlando [9:39 p.m.]: The guitarist is mate of mine from uni who is in the country for a couple of weeks

Orlando [9:39 p.m.]: I'm meeting up with him in York on Saturday morning for breakfast

Orlando [9:39 p.m.]: So that works out nicely

Richard [9:40 p.m.]: Intriguing.

Richard [9:40 p.m.]: And that sounds like a much better way to spend Saturday morning than what I have planned.

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: Dunno, you get paid for yours, don't you?

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: How about bouldering on Friday or Saturday afternoon?

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: Never mind if that's too stressful for you though

Orlando [9:41 p.m.]: It's not as if the rocks won't be there some other time

Richard [9:42 p.m.]: Paid?

Richard [9:42 p.m.]: No.

Richard [9:42 p.m.]: But there usually is coffee.

Richard [9:43 p.m.]: I'd love to go bouldering, I've been meaning to ask you for weeks.

Richard [9:43 p.m.]: I'd prefer Saturday, though.

Richard [9:44 p.m.]: I should be back in York around 3 p.m.

Orlando [9:44 p.m.]: Fine by me

Richard [9:44 p.m.]: Making plans with you is surprisingly easy.
Orlando [9:44 p.m.]: Luck of compatible duty rosters, yeah

Richard [9:44 p.m.]: That's not quite what I meant.
Richard [9:44 p.m.]: But yes, that, too.

Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: What did you mean then?

Richard [9:45 p.m.]: Agreeing on something to do together never seems to take much of an effort.
Richard [9:45 p.m.]: I like that.

Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: I agree with that assembly
Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: *as well
Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: Seems I need a new phone
Orlando [9:45 p.m.]: Or text less about school related issues

Richard [9:46 p.m.]: I'm not getting you a coffee maker AND a phone.
Richard [9:46 p.m.]: And we can circle back any time to 'I can still feel you'.
Richard [9:47 p.m.]: Or does your phone have weird suggestion to that, too?

Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: When I type sex, my phone suggests "Sean"
Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: I swear I am not making this up
Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: [media content in this message]
Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: A screen cap to prove my point
Orlando [9:47 p.m.]: Also?
Orlando [9:48 p.m.]: If you can STILL feel that, we might have to ease off a bit in the future

Richard [9:49 p.m.]: Under no circumstances.
Richard [9:49 p.m.]: I like it.
'Hi, Orlando.'

'Hiya. Tell me you're not in the back of an ambulance'

'I am not in the back of an ambulance.'

'Good. Neither am I.'

'And you're not anywhere near your students, either?'

'In my flat, clocked off.'

'Good.'

'Yeah. So, I enjoyed last night.'

'So did I. But I seem to have given you the impression somehow that you need to be more careful?'

'Not really, mate, not last night anyway. I just meant that 24 hours later, maybe a constant physical reminder of having gotten fucked is not what you were going for.'

'It's not constant, only when I get up from the couch,' Richard replies, chuckling. 'Or sit back down, actually. But it's fine, like I said, I sort of like it, weirdly enough.'

'If you like it, then it's not weird. Hot, that's what I would go with.'

'Cheers.'

'Good thing you're pretty fantastic doing the same to me, or I would be kinda opposed to switching.'

'Mmh. I would be opposed to that.'

'Yeah, I know.' Orlando's smile is audible when he adds: 'You like fucking me.'

Richard's reply comes with a moment's delay. 'I do.' He clears his throat. 'I really do.'

'Good.' Orlando remains silent for a second or two, then chuckles. 'I reckon we aren't as good at phone sex as we are at the actual thing. Mind, better than the other way round.'

Richard laughs. 'Indeed. I'm always a little too self-conscious about my choice of words. But let me get another glass of wine.'

'Dunno about that - choice of words, not beverage, I mean. You could just repeat what you said yesterday about leftist escapism. Pretty sure that would get me there.'

'You mean my little rant about how we got the gift that is Theresa May? That's doing it for you? I don't even have to find a non-embarrassing way to talk about my penis?'

'I meant what you said about 20th century French theatre, but I suppose slamming Tory politics will do just as nicely. As hot as you are, I prefer proof of your intellect over descriptions of your anatomy.
any day.'

'Smart is the new sexy?'

'Smart has always been fucking attractive, at least where I'm concerned.'

'Same for me. But looks aren't completely irrelevant, or are they, for you?'

'Fuck, Richard, have you looked into a mirror recently?'

'Have you?' Richard retorts, laughing.

'Actually, I'm usually not fully awake yet or anymore when I do. But cheers, I had an inkling you like what you see, but it's always nice to have it confirmed.'

'Are you kidding me? Like would be an understatement.'

'Well, at that rate, I suppose it's a wonder that we ever get around to having a conversation at all, isn't it?'

'This isn't a complaint, is it?' Richard asks, his voice full of amusement.

'Yeah, because I'd complain about something like that. I'd really appreciate it if you were a lot dumber, less good-looking and preferably subpar in bed. - Nah, I'm pretty happy with the way you are.'

'Cheers.' The line remains silent for a couple of seconds before Richard adds: 'We're either having phone sex now or I'm coming over.'

'Fuck, don't say something like that if you don't intend to follow through.'

'Oh, but I do!'

'Fuck, Richard.'

'Yes? Preferences?'

'You, here. Like that's even a question. But that's really - fuck.'

'Should I call a cab, then? Or do you want me to go into descriptions of my body now?' Richard lets his voice drop half a register. 'Do you have any idea how hard I am?'

'Fuck, don't fucking tell me.' There is rustling to be heard in the background, then Orlando huffs. 'No cab, you'd have to get one back as well and that's just - if you give me half an hour - I can't stay the night.'

'Fuck, Orlando.'

Orlando chuckles. 'That is the idea. I gotta be back here at twelve. That gives you an hour to fuck me. 's that work for you?'

'Do you even have to ask? I'd take ten minutes with you right now!'
Keys are jangling, a door is being pulled shut, while Orlando says: 'I'm ringing off now. Half an hour.'

Richard is up from the couch the moment the doorbell rings. He buzzes Orlando in and opens the door, and his heart beat picks up in anticipation even before Orlando rounds the corner.

He greets Orlando with nothing but a smile and steps aside to make room for him.

Just as wordlessly, Orlando reaches for him, even before he is fully inside his flat. His hand reaches for Richard's elbow, and he pulls him close.

Richard leans in readily, smile widening, and his hands seek the zipper of Orlando's jacket to pull it down.

Orlando's helmet, jacket, jumper, t-shirt land on the floor within twenty seconds. Richard has his hands on his skin immediately. He splays his fingers out against his chest, then runs one hand downwards to curl it around his hip, the other upwards to wrap it around his neck and pull him into a kiss.

Orlando feels Richard's dick against his through the denim, and the cold and the drive, the whole fucking stupidity of this whole endeavour don't mean anything. He just wants. Without interrupting the kiss - deepening it even - he starts walking Richard backwards, towards the bedroom.

Tugging at Richard's belt, Orlando growls into the kiss - Richard had a fucking half hour, why is he even still wearing clothes? Richard lets go of him and Orlando only doesn't object to that because between them, he feels the back of Richard's hands against his naked chest as he unbuttons his shirt somewhat hastily. He succeeds in getting the belt undone (fucking finally), hooks his fingers into Richard's trousers to reel him in again while his thoughts switch back and forth in rapid succession - as always, feeling Richard's hardness, even through layers of clothing, immediately makes him want to drop to his knees. On the other hand, sex. But also, Richard's dick on his tongue. Fuck. Someone needs to make a decision here and fast.

Richard's hand gets tangled up in the sleeve of his shirt and he impatiently yanks it free, but his impatience dissolves instantly when Orlando reels him back in and their chest touch, and he finally feels his skin against his own, his warmth. He wraps both his arms around Orlando's shoulders, pulling him as close as possible, then turns them around and nudges Orlando towards the bed, not allowing his lips to leave his own for even one second.

It's possibly a testament to how often exactly they have ended up here, like this, already, that Orlando doesn't even have to focus to know exactly how far away the bed is, that he only stops Richard from pushing him down onto it without further ado because of the annoying existence of trousers. Picking the quicker option here, he lets go of Richard's to tend to his own, briefly gets distracted because he needs to close one hand over Richard's dick, the other to grip the back of Richard's neck, so he doesn't get any idea about breaking the kiss.

Orlando's hand is still cold, Richard can feel it through the fabric of his boxer briefs when he slides his hand into his jeans, but he can't bring himself to care, not when Orlando grips his cock like this, fingers closing around him firmly and making him want to just shove him down onto the bed and push into him. But Orlando's cock is pressing against his hip, hard, insistent, he wants to, needs to get his hands on it, there really is nothing like that, like that feeling of closing his hand around...
Orlando’s cock for the first time a night and finding him as hard as he is now.

Orlando tightens his grip around Richard's neck but breaks the kiss, his forehead against Richard's, to exhale in a low groan. Richard's hold on him is just exactly right, just the right amount of pressure from the get-go and fuck, Orlando doesn't even want him to move his hand - this is just fucking perfect. For a second or so. Then he's back to wanting to blow him right now, wanting to be inside him right now, wanting to get fucked hard by him right now.

He lets go of Richard abruptly, squeezes his eyes shut for an instant before opening them again - enough focus regained to kick off his boots and push down his jeans and his boxers before he pulls Richard into another kiss.

It's hard and fast paced and wet and messy and just exactly right, and for a moment, two, Richard loses himself in it, Orlando is naked in his arms now and pressing against him, making it very evident that he still is wearing far too many clothes himself, so he remedies that, and then immediately wraps his hand back around Orlando's cock.

The second Richard is done getting out of his clothes, Orlando takes the half step back that still lies between him and the bed. He uses the momentary break of the kiss to breathe in suddenly much needed air, fucking misses full body contact for the second it takes him to lie down and Richard to follow, makes up for it by instantly hooking his left leg over Richard's to trap Richard on top of him.

Richard growls into Orlando's mouth when he feels his heel digging into his calf, pulling him in, closer, closer, closer, and he shifts his weight, presses against Orlando, finally, finally feels his cock against his own and is already blindly reaching out towards the nightstand, lube, condom, right now, he has been waiting too long already and Orlando is so fucking hard against him, how is that even possible, he wants to--

Richard's hand knocks against the nightstand, and really, Orlando should just let him look at what he's doing; fumbling about is just too fucking time consuming. What he does is shift under Richard, just that bit up and to the side, so it's easier to reach the nightstand for him without having to take his weight off of Orlando. As Richard pulls the drawer open, focus momentarily split, Orlando's zones in again on the feeling of Richard's dick against his stomach, and as always the desire to have it down his throat is almost overwhelming.

The little bottle of lube has rolled away, into a corner of the drawer, and Richard curses when he pushes himself up onto his knees to be able to reach it. Freed of Richard's weight, Orlando seizes the opportunity to shift and scoot down the bed, towards his cock.

Richard doesn't need to be told to lower himself down and turn around, he immediately does so, and, every muscle tensing in anticipation, watches Orlando push himself up onto his elbows and wrap his lips around his cock. Fuck, yes.

Richard curses under his breath, and Orlando can feel him tense up even more than before, all muscle and intent and control- Orlando’s thoughts stop making sense. It doesn't matter, he doesn't care, he tastes Richard, feels him heavy on his tongue, closes his lips tighter around him, so they can really feel how hard he is - and that's not even the good part yet.

Richard curses again and that goes straight to Orlando's own dick, but this is the one instance when he doesn't care about that either. He just wants this, wants more of this feeling, growls low in his throat when Richard doesn't accommodate him instantly, doesn't start pushing right away.
Richard can't breathe, can't think, can't move, for a moment, the wet warmth of Orlando's mouth almost overwhelming, the feeling of his tongue on his cock, that look in his eyes, pure arousal—Richard just wants to— but the lube is right there, he can feel it against his thigh, he could turn Orlando onto his stomach and— just a moment, though, this—

Orlando lets his jaw go slack in response to Richard's thrust, doesn't move away but into it. And it's so fucking good, the first push, the initial resistance his throat puts up, just for half a second, before it adjusts and lets Richard in.

Something else later— but now this.

With his throat working around Richard's length, he strokes up his leg, feels the tension under his palm, juxtaposed to his light touch. With his tongue he puts pressure on the underside of Richard's dick, moves his head an inch and back again, from deep to deeper.

It's so. Fucking. Good.

It always is. Orlando is ridiculously good at this, always gets the speed right, the pressure, does that thing with his tongue that—

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck.

And he likes it. No, more than that, even, he loves it, if he could reach his cock now, Richard would find him rock hard, no doubt about that, and that is so hot, that this isn't altruism, but gives him pleasure, enough pleasure to make him tremble with want.

Richard closes his eyes for a second, tries to get his breathing under control, his heart rate, his desire to just keep doing this, keep pushing, keep watching the slide of Orlando's lips along his cock and just come into his mouth.

Orlando scoots down a little more, just to adjust the angle, and pushes up against Richard with his next thrust. Deeper isn't possible and he swallows. His grip on Richard's leg tightens (just stay like this for a second, for two), and he lets his thoughts drown in the smell, the taste, the feeling of Richard like this.

He can breathe like this, of course he can, and like always part of his brain just locks in on this, wants him to stay like this and - yeah, just stay like this.

So deep. He is so deep in Orlando's throat, so deep that the tightness is almost impossible to bear, brilliant, overwhelming. Truly overwhelming, and although he doesn't want to, Richard needs to move before—

When he does move, Orlando is back and so is his impatience. Richard's hand is resting against the back of his head, neither pushing nor pulling, just a slightly jittery touch, and he swallows once more around Richard before he pulls back. He lets his dick slide out of his mouth entirely and looks up at Richard.

Richard just meets his eyes for a moment, his breathlessness testament to his arousal, then shifts without letting go of Orlando's neck and bends down to kiss him.

When he eventually pulls back, they are both short of breath.
Richard is not to be slowed down by that, though, but unceremoniously moves things along by wrapping his fingers around Orlando's shoulder and beckoning him to lie down down, on his side.

Richard's saliva is cool on his heated skin, and Orlando can still feel his fingers digging into his shoulder as he settles on his side. Richard's chest is pressed against his back and Orlando keeps himself from pushing his ass against him for yet more skin contact. Instead he closes his eyes for a second, a conscious effort to settle down, relax his muscles, and only opens them again when Richard clicks open the bottle of lube. Reaching behind his back, he takes a hold of Richard's wrist, and turns around to cast him a warning glance, there really is no need for endless prepping.

Richard raises an eyebrow when their eyes meet, but doesn't ask, doesn't have to, Orlando hates delays at this stage. And that's hot, seriously hot, that he doesn't want to wait, doesn't care one bit that he might need to give all of tomorrow's lessons standing up if Richard just shoves into him now, but Richard still isn't going to fuck him dry. But alright, no dawdling.

Orlando lets go of his wrist when Richard nods, and he bends down to bite Orlando's neck, for distraction, sucks a mark into his skin, between his shoulder blades, while he slides one finger between his cheeks, into him.

When he feels Orlando tense, ready to tell him to stop fucking around and fuck him, he moves his lips from his neck to his ear and pulls his earlobe between his teeth to distract him for yet another moment, long enough to be able to add a second finger.

Orlando growls and clenches his jaw shut. One of these days they are gonna have a conversation about this, about how much self-control it takes Orlando every fucking time to not start an argument right then and there about this fucking unnecessary insisting on that kind of prep. What the fuck is lube for, if not -

He swallows the curse, swallows the argument (and it's just that much easier when each time that he does actually swallow, he can still feel what Richard's dick did to his throat just moments before), and then Richard fucking finally gets the message and pulls his fingers out of him to reach behind himself for the box of condoms.

When he hears him curse, Orlando opens his eyes and turns his head to look at Richard, and he should be antsy about the delay, however short it is, but Richard's face? He looks so fucking annoyed himself, curses again, and that loss of composure, that lapse of his usual patience? If that isn't the hottest fucking thing.

He pushes himself up on one elbow, holds on to Richard's shoulder with the other and kisses him again.

Momentarily distracted, Richard briefly loses track of his search- it's nice, the kiss, the sudden change of pace- but then, it doesn't really get them anywhere, he wants-

Condom, now.

But he comes up empty again, curses quite loudly, again, and is about to pull back to turn around and search properly, when Orlando breaks the kiss by letting himself fall back onto the mattress, laughing.

Richard stares at him for a second, torn between annoyance and puzzlement, before he, too, starts to laugh, and bends down for another kiss.
That lasts for all of five seconds, until Orlando sinks his teeth into Richard's lips to get his attention. When Richard pulls back, licking his lip, Orlando merely shrugs, the hint of a smile playing around his lips and nudges Richard's side with his elbow, so that he makes room for him. He pushes himself up and reaches behind himself, closes his fingers around Richard's dick and guides it between his cheeks.

'Come on,' he murmurs.

That isn't anything Richard needs to be told twice, while a little growl he is already reaching for the bottle of lube and squeezing a liberal amount into his palm to slick himself up.

Again, Orlando consciously tells his muscles to relax, and lets his head rest against the pillow. This time he doesn't have to wait, Richard is already lining himself and pushing into him.

This. This is the reason why skipping stupid foreplay is - fuck. This. All of Orlando's thoughts zone in on relaxing, on that feeling, while all he wants is to lose himself in that feeling. The contrast is fantastic, and he's so fucking turned on, he has to bite down on his tongue to not just repeat Richard's name in an infinite loop.

It's among the best things Richard knows, this feeling, when he slides into Orlando for the first time and there is still this kind of resistance, even more so when he is able to feel him like this, without a condom between them, skin on skin, his warmth incredible, the slow, wet slide into him incredible, the fact that he lets him- fuck, yes.

For once (in that moment, always) Orlando doesn't mind the slow pace. He turns his head and the minute difference makes his muscles want to spasm. He looks up at Richard, at his mouth, back to his eyes. Licks his lips.

And that's the whole point of this position, really, to be able to kiss Orlando, so Richard does, let's go of his hip and cups his cheek, pulls him a little closer and holds him, there, right there, pressed against him, and kisses him while he slowly pushes all the way into him.

Their kiss is open-mouthed, allowing them to breathe and exhale in low groans. When Richard bottoms out, he keeps kissing Orlando but otherwise holds completely still. Just like Orlando did when he had him in his mouth, and Orlando gets it. For once there is no impatient urgency pacing in the back of his mind.

Orlando tilts his head and his hand mirrors Richard's touch on his face. He takes control of the kiss as his fingers move minutely against Richard's jaw, but other than that doesn't move.

It's too much and not enough, Richard needs to pull back, wants to push into Orlando at the same time, wants to keep kissing him and turn him onto his stomach, hold him down, watch him arch his back while he meets his thrusts.

But this is good, so good, Orlando's lips, his tongue, his low groans, the way his breath hitches when Richard just shifts a tiny bit, the way he surrounds him, the fact that he just drove through the night, the cold, just to be here, just for this, Richard's cock buried inside of him.

This is pretty much the opposite of a quickie. Orlando's lips quirk in automatic response to the thought and he huffs in quiet amusement but doesn't interrupt the kiss. Absurdly, the short time frame does fucking wonders to his patience; after all, he knows he's gonna come within the next half hour.
The smile still on his lips, he pulls back enough to look at Richard who holds his gaze while he pulls almost all the way, then stills, as if waiting for permission to continue.

Orlando narrows his eyes but instead of glowering at Richard until he accepts that as the most adequate response to his superfluous wordless question, he just closes the distance between them again. The force of that next kiss should be bloody answer enough.

Richard seems to hesitate for another split second, or maybe he is momentarily overwhelmed, but snaps out of it when Orlando sinks his teeth into his lip and finally just pushes forward, into him.

Orlando curses into Richard's mouth, for a moment resolved to keep kissing him. That lasts exactly until Richard thrusts into him for the second time. Orlando lets his head fall back onto the pillow, allows his eyes to fall shut. Richard's hand against his neck, Richard's thrusts rhythmical, instantly, and he just, just, just - there is just that.

He curses, monosyllabic, the word almost inaudible even to his own ears.

It's a bit too much, it always is, at first, and Richard grinds his teeth and closes his eyes, rests his forehead against Orlando's shoulder, for a moment while he tries to distract himself by listening to the soft sounds Orlando makes, by counting his little pants which are slightly unsteady, but almost in sync with his thrusts.

Orlando raises his hand to cup the back of Richard's head, to keep it where it is, but two more thrusts make him temporarily abandon that idea. He just drops his hand and his palm comes to rest against his own chest, he feels his own thumping heartbeat against it. Instead he bends his back, curves into Richard's next push into him, both their skin hot but not sweating yet, still that friction there.

Of course they can't keep kissing, they never can, not with the pace they prefer, both of them, their teeth get knocked together, sooner or later, their foreheads, they put a strain on the muscles in their necks, their shoulders, and still- Richard likes trying, because Orlando moaning around his tongue, panting against his lips, that's so hot. But for now he contents himself with pressing his lips to Orlando's shoulder, lets his fingers find Orlando's hand, wrap around his wrist, his forearm, and uses the leverage to pull Orlando into his next thrust.

The grunt that Richard drives out of him is louder than their moans before, and if they were at his place, Orlando would start watching himself now. But they are not, this is why they are here, why they usually end up at Richard's. So with the next thrust, Orlando curses quite vocally and pulls his wrist out of Richard's grasp, so he can use it to brace himself properly and push back the way he wants to.

Fuck, if that's not brilliant, Orlando meeting him halfway with that kind of force, Richard gladly lets him take control of the pace, the angle and lets go of his arm, trails his fingers down his abdomen and wraps them around his cock.

For two, three thrusts, Orlando allows it, allows himself to just wantwantwant this, to just come, as quick as possible. Then, though, he clasps Richard's wrist, tight enough for Richard to instantly loosen his grip, and he pulls it away from his dick, interlocks their fingers instead. This is too good to be over already, they have time. Orlando's not sure, can't really recollect how much of it has passed, but it can't be that much; they have some time before he needs to, needs to - something. For now, this.
Part of Richard wants to protest, he likes the feeling of Orlando's cock in his hand, likes the feeling of rocking him into his fist with every push of his hips. But then, this will last a little longer if he doesn't touch Orlando. And it's nice, to have his fingers laced through his own, that light pressure, but it's also- more intimate, somehow, more intimate than usually. Or maybe it's just this position or the absence of a condom, it doesn't really matter, this is nice, no need for overthinking this, not when Orlando sounds like this, moves like this, feels like this.

Orlando's fingers tighten around Richard's when another slight shift brings another sensation with it. He knows that it'll be not long until this isn't enough - no, too much - no, until he wants something else - fuck.

He tenses up, slows down, Richard pulls him in and fuck, fuck, Orlando leans back, arches his neck, is torn what to want next.

It's good, but it's not enough, Orlando does not have enough purchase on the bed, keeps sliding away a little, the tiny shifts disrupting their rhythm, and Richard wants--

He doesn't even have to say something, the light pressure he applies to the back of Orlando's hip is enough for him to take the hint, and he turns over, onto his stomach.

He grunts when the sudden pressure on his - his weight and Richard's, the smooth sheets under him - feels like a distraction. But he settles immediately, head pillowed on both his arms, and Richard straddles his thigh and pushes right back into him.

Orlando anticipates his first thrust, braces himself against the bed. It's good, the different kind of friction this position provides, even better when Richard wraps his hand around Orlando's shoulder and pulls him into his next thrust.

Yes.

Orlando tries using the grip on his shoulder as an anchor, but that doesn't work, doesn't make it easier to focus but harder. Richard pulls at him again, pushes forward at the same time and Orlando doesn't even want to move on his own accord. He just lets Richard do what he wants with him, closes his eyes and just feels, feels so fucking used, so fucking brilliant.

Yes.

This is it, this is brilliant, he does not want this to stop. Ever. Orlando is gorgeous like this, the curve of his back, his ass- under his hand Richard can feel his muscles working, even though Orlando has stopped moving altogether now, just lets him set the pace, just lets him take him- the thought makes Richard blush, it's so hot, this momentary submission, so fucking hot.

Sweat runs down Orlando's temple and he isn't even doing anything. He wipes it against his lower arm but really, it's to no avail; he feels way too hot, his skin feels like it's burning and Richard's hand on his shoulder seems to loosen its grip - Orlando reaches up to cover Richard's fingers with his own, to steady his grip in time with his next thrust.

It's not enough, though, not at the pace Richard has set, not with their skin getting sweatier with every second passing, and Richard lets go off his shoulder after a moment of trying to hold on to him properly and shifts onto his elbows, slides his arm under Orlando's chest instead to pull him close while he changes the pace, slower, deeper thrusts.
Orlando's breathing slows down instantly, like it is hardwired to the pace that Richard sets. He exhales in a low moan in response to Richard's lips finding his neck, and Richard in turn bites and sucks a little harder.

*Don't give me a fucking hickey*, the automatic silent alarm in his mind sounds. He can't be bothered to say it or anything else, really, just moans again and tilts his head to give Richard better access.

He shouldn't, not this high up his neck, but the way Orlando moans and tilts his head in invitation, fuck, that's-

Richard's next thrust comes with more force, the thought alone of leaving a mark, or *marks*, really, fuelling his arousal, and he really shouldn't, but can't- doesn't want to- wants to- Orlando moans again, and Richard thrusts and sucks, thrusts, thrusts, thrusts, sucks, and then it's too late to stop, too late to pull away, and he should be sorry, but isn't, the mark deep red against Orlando's skin, beautiful, so beautiful.

Orlando knows exactly what Richard has just done. He still fucking feels the burn of his teeth in his neck. He growls, and it's the most insincere reprimand, lets go of Richard's hand to touch the back of his neck, and it's not to check the extent of the damage but because touching his bruised skin sends another spike of pleasure down his spine.

Richard takes a trembling breath and closes his eyes for a second, tries to regain at least a little control over where this is going, but can't seem to- bends down again, another patch of skin, at the back of his neck, right next to the sixth, seventh vertebra, his teeth lightly scrape over the outline of the bone before he sucks Orlando's skin between his lips, bites.

Orlando curses violently and pushes up against Richard, enough force behind that for him to be able to pull his arm under himself despite Richard's weight on top of him. And of fucking course this makes Richard bite down even harder, like his teeth alone are enough to hold Orlando in place while he fucks into him. Orlando shifts again - yeah, because the responding pain is fucking brilliant, but also because he needs to get his hand on his dick right fucking now.

Orlando's little struggle messes up his rhythm, changes the angle, and this won't do, Richard needs- he pushes himself up onto his knees, needs to pull out of Orlando for a second- fuck- to rearrange his limbs, climb between Orlando's legs, then he tugs at Orlando's hips to get him up onto his knees as well. More leverage.

Orlando is about to comment on being rearranged like a fucking rag doll and besides, he *liked* the position he was in, but he's already on his knees and Richard pushes into him again without any sort of restraint. It's been less than five seconds but this still is like being breached for the first time again, and Orlando gasps breathlessly, any form of verbal objection so very much beyond his abilities right now. Richard is already thrusting into him for the second and third time, effortlessly finding his rhythm again, while Orlando is still trying to find enough purchase to fully push himself up, and the first solid thing he grabs hold of is not the headboard but the nightstand.

Something clatters to the ground, the nightstand is not made for this sort of action, but Richard can't bring himself to care, doesn't care either that he is loud, far too loud, probably, just focusses on the feeling of Orlando around his cock, still so tight, so good, focusses on the fast pace he has fallen back into, on the sound of his thighs meeting Orlando's, Orlando's breathless moans, while he wraps one hand around Orlando's hip, the other one around his shoulder to anchor them both.

He breathes his name and Orlando grunts in response. He trusts Richard to keep them balanced, at
least enough for Orlando to reposition his right hand and wrap it around his dick. He doesn't stroke himself, doesn't need to. With the force of Richard's shoves into him, all he wants is a tight grip around himself and for Richard to keep doing just what he is doing right now, just for a bit longer.

It's brilliant, Orlando's tightness, the way his thrusts ripple through his body, and that sight, his cock stretching him, disappearing inside of him, it's brilliant, and entirely too much, and he can't-

Half of the syllables are lost when he breathes his name, his voice is hoarse, and he swallows and repeats, a little louder this time, please, just-

- come, is what Richard doesn't say and doesn't have to say. And Orlando wants to. It's the five seconds before he does, though, that he loves most. Richard knows exactly how he likes it and doesn't mess around, just fucking delivers every fucking time. And just the thought of what is to come, why Richard wants him to come, just the thought that he's going to fuck Orlando through his orgasm before he -

Just three strikes, that's all it takes for him to come.

Orlando's shoulders tense and he stills completely before his hips jerk forward and he groans, resumes the movement of his hand, and that's- the sheets must be, his hand- and Richard wants to, needs to, his lips, Orlando's shoulder, neck, anywhere, but he can't, is too close to- but leans forward without breaking the pace, fastfastfaster, he can't reach, it doesn't- he-

Orlando feels the shift in balance and his left arm trembles with the sudden and additional weight it suddenly has to carry. He pushes himself up onto his knees, the muscles in his thighs trembling, his breath shuddering, and it's just Richard's hands on his hips that make him succeed and press his back against Richard's chest.

That's- Yes. Yesyesyesyes, Orlando, in his arms, sweaty, trembling, Richard presses his lips to his neck, his ear, hears himself murmur his name, again and again, words only separated by his pants, and he- yes---

Orlando cups the back of Richard's head with his left hand, breathes open mouthed and in sync with Richard's pants, lets his eyes fall shut to the repetition of his name, and his whole body shudders when finally Richard stills.

He tilts his head to lean it against Richard's and opens his eyes again, stares dumbly at the asymmetrical shape the light from the hallway forms against the ceiling.

Richard can't breathe properly, can't see properly, his heart is racing and there are still small aftershocks cursing through his body, the muscles in his lower abdomen, and he presses his lips against Orlando's neck and closes his eyes, lets his orgasm ebb away.

So good. So, so good.

The little things come back first. Orlando curls his fingers against Richard's skull, and the band of his watch not-quite catches in his hair. Richard's breathing calms down and it's not a breath / a second any longer. Richard's beard is scratchy against the back of his neck. His hand is sticky with his own come and still wrapped around his dick. His tongue feels numb. Still, he lets it wet his lips and turns his head, nudging Richard's, so he looks up and Orlando can kiss him again.

It's nice, the soft pressure of Orlando's lips, the slow pace. Of course, this won't last, can't, in this
position, Richard feels as if he's just run a marathon and a muscle in his calf is spasming but he wants this to last another moment, wants to hold Orlando for another moment before he gets restless.

Orlando's tongue is still numb and so are his lips, Richard's against them not exactly providing relief. He stops moving them altogether, just lets them rest against Richard's, slightly parted. He feels so fucked out. He's gonna feel that tomorrow.

Before he can get a cramp, he straightens his neck and releases Richard's hair as well. With Richard's arms still wrapped around him, he stretches his own over his head and slowly rolls his shoulders, exhaling in a quiet but drawn out groan.

Richard chuckles and presses a kiss between Orlando's shoulder blades while he waits for Orlando to stop stretching, then loosens his embrace, releases him.

Orlando hums, and with his clean hand he reaches behind himself to stroke Richard's thigh before he adjusts his knees' position, so Richard can pull out. The wide expanse of the bed looks very, very inviting, despite the mess his come made out of the sheets. But instead of collapsing onto it, he just sits back on his heels. When he notices Richard's gaze lingering on the part where his neck meets his shoulder, he tilts his head and grunts enquiringly.

There are three bruises on his back, one of them dark-red, almost purple, the other one fainter. There is a third, on his neck, too high up for a sweater to cover it.

'I know I should tell you I'm sorry,' Richard says. His voice is hoarse, and he swallows to chase away the lingering traces of his moans, groans, growls. 'But I really am not.'

Orlando narrows his brows and tries looking over his shoulder.

'What did you do, Richard?'

'The usual. Just very high up your neck, you might have to wear a scarf tomorrow.'

He pauses and shifts so that he can look at Orlando before he adds:

'And that I truly am sorry about.'

Orlando huffs, but the corners of his mouth quirk up. The usual. Yeah, that sounds about right. He knows he's gonna be pissed about that tomorrow (a scarf to class, honestly), but right now, with enough endorphins in his system to tranquilize a fucking rhino?

So he just shrugs, and the movement of his shoulders makes him feel the bruises on his skin and he flashes back to the moment Richard put them there. He rests his left hand on Richard's thigh, the twist of his wrist revealing the face of his watch. He spares it a half second glance as he pushes himself up to his knees again. He's pleasantly buzzed, his muscles sore and relaxed at the same time.

'Worth it,' he says peaceably.

In response, Richard bends down to drop a kiss onto Orlando's shoulder, glad that it's fine for now, even if it's probably not the last thing he will hear about it. The muscles in his thighs start to tremble and he really needs to get off his knees, stretch out his legs, so he nudges Orlando's cheek with his nose.
'Let's lie down for a second,’ he suggests quietly. 'Before we get cleaned up.'

Orlando scrunches up his face, but as Richard lies down, he does follow suit and that was definitely a good idea. Fuck. He groans as he stretches out his legs and is too lazy to punch Richard for chuckling. Fuck. As soon as he rests his head on the pillow, he knows this is a mistake. He is knackered.

Richard's whole body seems to protest when he stretches out on the bed next to Orlando. Fuck. He is going to feel that one tomorrow, too. But so is Orlando, probably. He briefly closes his eyes and takes a couple of deep breaths, mind pleasantly empty, before he blinks open his eyes again. Orlando is quiet, unusually so, most of the times he is up and on his way to the shower before Richard can even form coherent thoughts again. Richard turns his head to look at him. His eyes are closed, but he opens them when Richard's fingers brush over his arm.

'Don't fall asleep now. You can't stay.'

Orlando snorts at that. Not because the idea of having to leave and drive home is particularly hilarious (it isn't). But the notion that he would ever want to fall asleep covered in sweat and come, that is just ludicrous. He has twenty minutes max until he'll have to leave again, he can shower in five, get dressed in two. That adds up to a good ten minutes to just pretend he'll never have to move again; great plan, that, actually. Save for a shower and maybe something to drink, right now he's pretty much down with that idea to just lie here until his body is all right with another round.

He looks at Richard in the dim light of the bedroom, and right now even blinking feels exhausting, and yet his mind does already circle back to what they just did, is more annoyed by the fact that there is no chance for a second round tonight than by the come sticking between his fingers or the prospect of wet Yorkshire roads.

'What are we gonna do Thursday?’ he asks.

Richard tries to find a position in which he can better look at Orlando and ends up propping himself up on his elbow.

'I actually searched the web for what's on in York next week,’ he says with a smile. 'Not terribly much, really. But there is an exhibition at the Medical Museum in Leeds which sounds pretty interesting, it's about the rejuvenation hype in the 1920s. Maybe that could be something. We'd have to drive to Leeds, though.’

Richard looks at him expectantly, and Orlando blinks, then chuckles.

'What?’ Richard asks after a moment, amused.

Orlando shakes his head.

'Nothing, sorry,’ he says and when Richard still looks curious, he elaborates, 'My ideas hadn't gotten past this room, or more specifically this bed. But -' he adds before Richard can reply, 'That sounds interesting, so we're doing that.’

Richard laughs.

'I didn't mean to drag you to the museum at eight in the morning exactly. You don't really think I wouldn't want to repeat this-' he gestures to encompass the absolute mess they have made of the bed
and their sweaty, spent bodies, 'on Thursday?'

Orlando's eyes automatically follow the swiping of Richard's hand and stay on it as well, even as it comes to rest between them again.

'I didn't doubt that,' he says. 'I just didn't get past it myself.'

His gaze flicks up to meet Richard's once more.

'I really, really like having sex with you, that's all.'

'Same here,' Richard says without hesitation. It's an easy truth. He could tell him more, however, could tell him that he has never had better sex before, not with any other partner, never has had sex as often, but he doesn't, instead he leans over and kisses Orlando.

Orlando's lips readily part in response, and his fingers dip into the hollow of Richard's throat and travel a bit lower from there. The touch is light, but automatic, like at least a little more skin contact is always required, even when even thinking about sex seems pretty much impossible at this moment, and that's just fucking weird.

Orlando hums quietly when Richard's kiss becomes lighter, and against his lips he murmurs,

'I think I just smeared some of my come onto your chest.'

He says that as if he is making polite conversation about the weather or remarking on the quality of Richard's bed sheets but the images Richard's brain immediately provides are far less innocent and he groans softly. Not now, not when Orlando has to go home and a second round is out of question. Not that he feels as if he could go for a second round, physically, but still, those words- He pulls back and searches Orlando's eyes and then bends down and kisses his fingers.

'Oh, come on,' Orlando murmurs around a smile. He doesn't pull his hand away but scrunches up his nose.

'Urgh.'

Richard can't but laugh out loud.

'So, let me get this straight,' he says with a smile while he props his head back up onto his arm, 'it's okay if I come down your throat, more than okay, even, but this puts you off? Where do you draw the line?'

Orlando lifts a shoulder in a shrug.

'I'm not gonna try to reason here. But hey, if you like it? As long as you don't expect me to skip my shower.'

And speaking of. He sighs and turns his head into the pillow.

'I should get up and clean up.'

The both knew it would be like this, that there wouldn't be much time, that Orlando would have to leave again. That doesn't mean Richard likes it any better. He glances at his watch.
'Five more minutes. I've seen you shower in three and get dressed in one.'

Orlando laughs but attempts to sit up. He manages it with a groan and nudges Richard's shoulder.

'Shower with me, c'mon. You'll have to do it eventually anyway.'

Richard has showered three hours ago, after he got back from the gym and doesn't quite share Orlando's obsession with after-sex cleanliness, the sheets are already ruined anyway and his body surely is going to protest vehemently to getting up.

Five more minutes with Orlando definitely are worth getting up now, though.

'Sure,' he therefore says and pushes himself up, suppresses a groan when he feels that in every single muscle.

Orlando gingerly swings his legs out of the bed and for the moment ignores the heap of clothes on the floor. Richard does the same and as he doesn't quite manage to suppress another groan, Orlando is acutely aware of his own body's quiet protestations to moving. Still, he can't help but chuckle as he runs a hand through his hair and rolls his shoulders.

'One of these days, one of us I gonna break something. Good thing you're a doctor.'

Richard chuckles and steps over their clothes to get to where Orlando is standing.

'I'd have to disappoint you and tell you to rest and be more careful next time.'

He steps behind him and places his hands on Orlando's shoulders, presses his thumbs into his muscles, applies a bit of pressure.

'I don't really see either of us heeding that advice, though.'

'Ah fuck,' Orlando replies and like the strings of a puppet having been cut, his head sinks forward the moment Richard's fingers dig in.

Richard eases off a little, then presses back in, a little deeper this time, starts to move his thumbs in small circles.

Orlando's eyes blink shut and refuse to open again and he is grateful that he is standing up; otherwise he'd be dozing in thirty seconds.

'Richard,' he murmurs and his tongue is back to feeling numb again. Then, after a moment, he forces himself to add, 'Shower. Now.'

Richard hums again and releases his shoulders, moves one hand to the small of Orlando's back and steers him towards the door.

They pass another abandoned pile of clothing in the hallway, and like every time it quietly amuses Orlando how much of a mess they leave in their wake; such a stark contrast to the ultra-neatness of the rest of Richard's flat.

Orlando glances at his watch again as he steps into the shower to join Richard, and as always he
sighs happily when the warm water hits his shoulders.

Richard, in turn, exhales in a drawn-out, low groan and closes his eyes, focusses on the sound of the water, the warmth for a couple of moments, before he says:

'You know, if it wasn't so impractical and slippery, I'd propose to just have sex in the shower from now on. This is nice.'

Orlando hums.

'That would be pretty much perfect, if you ask me.'

He blinks water from his eyes as soon as he steps fully under the spray, places his hand on Richard's hip and pulls him closer.

'Five minutes,' he says, 'should be spent snogging, hm?'

Richard laughs when he lets Orlando pull him closer and against his body.

'Definitely,' he says and wraps his hand around the back of Orlando's head to reel him in and kiss him.

There is nothing of the force and urgency from before. Water runs over Orlando's back, warm and soothing and cleansing, and with the same kind of gentleness Richard kisses him. He licks into Orlando's mouth and Orlando lets him, just hums quietly again, really quite happy with life.

Orlando's lips are pliant and he hums contentedly, reminding Richard that he really likes those moments, those moments of post-coital physical contact without real purpose, haste. Probably also because they don't last forever, Orlando doesn't appreciate stifling closeness any more than he does himself. Which also is something that Richard really likes.

Orlando moves his hand up to Richard's side and grips it a little tighter. Richard is a fucking good kisser and he really wouldn't mind this for a little while longer. Without stopping the kiss he tilts his head to be able to look at his watch over Richard's shoulder. He’ll be cutting it really close. But fuck it; he closes his eyes again and pushes his tongue back into Richard's mouth.

With Orlando taking charge of the kiss Richard has stepped closer towards him and their chests are touching now, their thighs, arms, and Richard reaches up and curls his fingers around Orlando's forearm to anchor himself while he tries to only concentrate on the movement of Orlando's tongue in his mouth, the warm water, the feeling of Orlando's wet skin against his own, and just like that he can feel himself getting hard again, his cock obviously is not intimidated by Orlando's schedule.

Orlando feels the effect their kiss has on Richard, of course he does. He makes a sound against Richard's lips that is half growl, half whine, and slides his hand to the small of his back, water running over it in a steady stream.

'I really need to go,' he murmurs, his eyes still closed, his forehead against Richard's. 'Sorry.'

'I know,' Richard says quietly and tightens his grip around Orlando's neck, just a bit, just one more moment.

'That kind of sucks, though.'
Orlando hums.

'For several reasons,' he agrees and curls his hand in the small of Richard's back, pushes his other from his neck to the back of his head.

'For one, it's shitty weather outside.'

Richard lips curve into a smile.

'Of course. But then,' he nudges Orlando's nose with his, 'there is this also.'

He nips at Orlando's lips and presses against his thigh for a second to let him feel his arousal, but just for a second, then he reaches behind himself and turns off the water.

'But I don't want to sabotage you.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Orlando says with mild sarcasm. There is physical evidence right between them that belies Richard's words and they both know it.

He rubs water from his face with a flat palm and rather regretfully takes a step back from Richard to run his fingers through his short hair to at least get some of the water out right away. Richard isn't doing the same, he isn't doing anything much but watch him.

Orlando wants - no. He's late. He has to be off, and he knows it. The reminders of that he already got what he wanted may be soothed by the hot water momentarily faded to nothing but a pleasant buzz, but it'll have to do for the moment.

He rubs up Richard's arm, skin warm and wet, then steps out of the shower to get a towel for each of them.

Richard's eyes follow Orlando's movement and he shakes his head, to get rid of the thoughts chasing through his head as well as the water in his ears before he reaches for the towel Orlando holds out for him. He is probably going to be fast asleep within ten minutes, so it won't really make much of a difference if Orlando stays or leaves, but still, he wants-

He sighs and halfheartedly runs the towel over his head and chest. Orlando has been much faster, he is almost dry.

Showering and getting dressed in a limited time frame is so much like Orlando's usual morning routine, his frame of mind so similar to that right now as well (albeit for different reasons), that he functions pretty much on autopilot. His smile to Richard as he leaves the bathroom is autopilot as well, and he already put on his boxers and jeans again, fastening the belt, that he really consciously notices Richard watching him from the doorway.

'Fuck and run,' he sums up dryly. 'The opposite of good manners, hm?'

Richard has put on tracksuit bottoms and leans against the doorframe now. He shakes his head, smiling, while he wraps one arm around his waist, the hall is a bit chilly, there is a draft from under the door.

'That's not it,' he says as Orlando pulls on his shirt.
'It would just be nice if you could stay. But work's work.'

Orlando pulls on his boots and huffs as he recognizes his own usual verbatim response.

'I'd make an argument for a life without duties, but for one that's not really my school of thought, and for another -' he raises his left arm where the metal band of his watch rests heavily against his wrist, then pulls his jumper over his head.

Richard hums.

'Next time,' he says quietly and feels his smile widen when Orlando's elbow catches in his sweater and he hears him curse through the black fabric.

Orlando's head reappears and his hair is all tousled up and Richard suppresses the urge to run his fingers through his hair and straighten it out, reaches for his black scarf on the coat rack instead.

'Borrow this,' he says and, stepping up to Orlando, loops it around his neck once. 'For tomorrow.'

Orlando arches a brow at that but doesn’t pull back, for a moment very tempted to let himself be reeled in like that again. He resists and as Richard lets go of the ends, Orlando immediately winds it around his neck another time. He doesn't need it for tomorrow, owns plenty of scarves (two) himself, but it's been rather nippy outside earlier and that won't have improved. The wool is of course ridiculously soft, most probably cashmere. As he puts on his jacket and stuffs the loose ends of the scarfs into it, he regards Richard.

'That thing is by far the most expensive thing I am wearing right now, isn't it?'

Richard laughs.

'I think it might be, yes.'

He leans back a little and regards Orlando.

'It looks good on you. And it's the least I can do, if I make you drive through the cold twice on the same evening.'

He sighs.

'And give you the mother of all hickeys.'

Orlando chuckles once at Richard's tone of voice which is failing rather spectacularly at sounding convincingly contrite. In the fraction of a second he runs through all the things he came with, spots his helmet right next to the door, then for the last time turns his full attention to Richard again.

Richard backs up as Orlando moves in the general direction of the door but actually towards him and he ends up trapping him against the wall right next to it. With his boots in contrast to Richard's bare feet, they are at level height. Richard doesn't seem to want to move away, but Orlando still presses his open hand against his chest.

'Cheers,' he says, voice low. 'That was an hour well spent.'
Richard feels his gaze flicker back and forth between Orlando's eyes and lips.

'Very well spent,' he agrees, voice just as low as Orlando's. He tries not to focus on the hand on his chest, it makes him regret even more that Orlando has to leave, instead he wraps his hand around the back of Orlando's head and tilts his head, kisses him. It's not a gentle kiss, Richard wants him to remember it, tonight, tomorrow, in Sheffield, and he slides his tongue straight into Orlando's mouth.

He needs to be off, he needs to be off, he should've been gone ten minutes ago - short messages keep bleeping in Orlando's head like very persistent texts. Very much like those he is annoyed enough by them that he is very much inclined to just ignore them entirely. And damn, Richard knows how he likes to be kissed, and he can feel Richard's heartbeat picking up speed underneath his palm.

It's Richard, though, not Orlando who ends the kiss after a moment (way too long, you need to be gone, hurry up - fuck off, really). He withdraws and Orlando feels the light pressure of his hands, holding his head back from just closing the distance between them again. He licks his lips and pulls himself together. Home. Now. Right.

If Orlando is not going to remember this kiss during the weekend, Richard surely is, it has flared the lust right back on, he is hard again, and really, really wants to back Orlando against the door and-

No. He needs to let him leave, now, Orlando needs to work.

'Drive safely,' he therefore says, the only sensible thing he can think of right now, and places a kiss onto Orlando's cheek, at a safe distance from his lips. And still he is tempted to pull him right back into a proper kiss. Fuck.

'And have a good time in Sheffield.'

'Will do,' Orlando says in reaction to both parts of Richard's response.

And he will indeed - he always drives responsibly, especially during the night, and his behaviour when meeting up with old mates from uni always is pretty much the opposite, guaranteeing a good time. Still -

He steps back and instead of letting his hand slide down Richard's chest to his tracksuit bottoms, he takes his helmet from the shoe cabinet.

'See you next week then.'

Richard just hums while he silently berates his brain for pointing out that it's going to be one whole week indeed, seven days exactly.

Orlando reaches for the door handle and Richard steps out of the way, if reluctantly. He needs to leave, he reminds himself, when Orlando opens the door and he suppresses the urge to reach for his arm, hold him back.

Orlando steps out into the hallway, the motion sensor switches the lights on and Richard moves into the doorway, wrapping his fingers around the frame to prevent them from reaching out for Orlando.

'See ya, Richard,' Orlando says, his hand already on the handrail, and finally Richard moves, at the same time Orlando turns towards the stairs, he steps out onto the landing, Orlando’s name on his lips.
His fingers close around Orlando's arm and he can feel his muscles tense when Orlando turns back around, brows raised.

It's selfish and Orlando needs to go, needs already to be gone, he knows all that, but his other hand is already cupping Orlando's cheek and he is already pulling him into a kiss.

Fuck.

Orlando's thoughts, already mapping out the quickest way back to JC, grind to an abrupt halt. Richard is pressing his lips against his and they already did that, twice even and this is the same kind of kiss, the same kind that always causes Orlando's imagination to fast-forward to where this inevitability leads. And of course he kisses back, cups Richard's face with his one free hand.

Despite the weight of his helmet in the other, the constant reminder of where he needs to be, they stay like this until the hallway light switches itself off again.

Orlando pulls back then, looks at Richard, backlit by the light from his flat.

'What's up, mate?' he asks, barely above a whisper.

Richard closes his eyes, swallows, licks his lips. The pad of his thumb moves over Orlando's skin, follows the line of his jaw while he tries to recall how to breathe.

'I have no idea,' he says just as quietly as Orlando.

His thoughts are a mess, his heart is racing, his feet are getting cold on the wooden floor of the landing.

He licks his lips again.

'Go,' he then says after another moment. 'Thursday.'

Orlando doesn't move, despite Richard's response. Because of it. He's not entirely sure which it is.

Up until now this has been normal. Maybe not by someone else's standards, one could argue that driving across North Yorkshire in the middle of the night, during the week, for just an hour spent in bed isn't completely rational or normal either.

But the look on Richard's face, that doesn't belong into a hallway, that doesn't say "drive safe" and "see ya in a couple of days". That's a look whose close relatives Orlando has seen on his face before, momentarily, rarely, but it's familiar. It belongs into the bedroom, and Orlando associates it with Richard adamant to fuck him while Orlando lies on his back, Richard's arms framing his head.

It's not normal, it's confusing.

Orlando doesn't turn back around.

Richard is counting heartbeats and can't seem to move, even though he knows he has to, Orlando needs to leave, and now he has confused him, he can tell from the way his brows knit together, and he just keeps looking at him, apprehensively.

Alright.
He straightens up and slides his hand from Orlando's cheek down to his shoulder, squeezes it gently.

'Go home, Orlando, it's fine, I'm fine.'

He watches Orlando's brows draw together even further and laughs quietly.

'I mean it. I'm just not quite- finished yet with you tonight, it seems.'

Orlando glances down at the hand on his shoulder, then looks back up at his face. The smile on Richard's lips unknots a couple of tangled up questions in Orlando's mind without any effort at all.

He still doesn't get how and why the mood shifted so suddenly, but Richard said it was fine, and he trusts Richard.

So he nods.

Richard chuckles and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his tracksuit bottoms, then lightly nudges Orlando's boot with his toes.

'Come on, go, I'm standing half naked in the hallway. I'll see you Thursday.'

Orlando nods and as he reaches for the staircase's handrail again, the hallway light goes back on.

'Thursday,' he confirms.

Richard inclines his head and with that Orlando finally turns around and leaves.

Richard remains on the landing, hands firmly tucked into his pockets as he watches him descend the stairs. When he reaches the second flight of stairs Orlando looks back up at him one last time, and again, Richard inclines his head, smile still playing around his lips as he mouths 'Good night.'

[Whatsapp, 18/5/2018]

Orlando [0:25 a.m.]: Got back w/o issues, just 15' late

Richard [0:27 a.m.]: Excellent. Sleep well.

Orlando [0:27 a.m.]: Dito

Orlando [7:34 a.m.]: Fyi

Orlando [7:34 a.m.]: I can still feel you
Richard wakes up next to Orlando.

It’s quiet when Richard wakes up, real quiet. The window is closed, it was raining when they went to sleep, and the bird song that carries in through the open kitchen window is almost too faint to be heard. There are no cars on the street yet, the city is still asleep, it’s early.

Orlando is on his side, turned towards him, one hand tucked under the pillow, fast asleep. His breathing is regular, it barely makes any sound, and he looks relaxed, serene. The lines on his forehead, around his eyes are almost invisible like this and he looks younger, three, four years, more vulnerable, more private. There is something about this, this quietness, this vulnerability that is unsettling and comforting both, comforting and unsettling and comforting, Richard thinks, while he drifts back to sleep, comforting.

When he wakes up again, Orlando is facing away from him, but he is close, so close, close enough for Richard to brush his fingers over his naked back without moving much, the lines of his spine, his shoulders are beautiful, so beautiful, and before Richard is fully awake, he is already sliding across the bed and pressing his lips against Orlando’s neck, his body against his back. He likes his smell there, at the nape of his neck, where he always smells like himself, even after showering, and now, particularly, after eight hours in bed.

‘Are you serious?’ Orlando’s voice is still laced with sleep. ‘We literally just did that.’

In response, Richard simply slides his arm around him and presses against him, presses his erection against his ass, into the crease of his buttocks.

‘Fuck, Richard,’ Orlando growls, but moves into his touch, presses against him and tilts back his neck in invitation.

It’s slower, much slower than their usual pace, but not bad, not bad at all, on the contrary. They are in tune, perfectly, Orlando moves with him without any effort. His fingers are laced through Richard’s, the back of his head is resting against his shoulder, and Richard buries his face in his hair and closes his eyes, focusses on the feeling of Orlando’s body against his, around his, on the sounds he makes, they make. He doesn’t open them again, not for one second, not even when the speed increases, the depth, their momentum, volume, when Orlando spills into his hand and he follows within seconds, feeling him clench his muscles around his cock.

Unsettling and comforting, comforting and unsettling and everything he wants, right now.
It takes all his strength not to just give in, give up, collapse, surrender and be swept away. Orlando’s rhythm, fierce, is an onslaught on all his senses and Richard needs to press both hands against the headboard so that he doesn’t get knocked against it, Orlando’s fingers dig into his shoulder, his hip and Richard can hear, feel his skin slapping against the back of his thighs with every thrust.

It’s good, so good, better, even, but almost, almost too good, too much to handle, overwhelming. Orlando feels big inside of him, makes him feel full, and every single one of his thrusts hits his prostate with the same precision, makes him want to move away and push back and meet him at the same time. He ends up doing neither, just closes his eyes and lets Orlando move while he tries not to think, not to worry, not to analyze this, simply tries to hold on, hold on and feel.

His orgasm crashes into him like a huge wave and makes him topple over when his knees, arms give in, and he can hear Orlando swear, but then he just moves with him, lowers himself down onto one forearm, adjusts his grip around Richard’s hip and just keeps fucking him, fucking him, until the last of the convulsions has subsided and Richard’s breathing does not resemble sobs any longer.

It’s more instinct than conscious choice that makes Richard react when Orlando pulls him back up onto his knees for a better angle, it’s too much, he’s too sensitive already, makes him reach behind himself and press his palm against Orlando’s stomach, message clear.

Orlando growls, but doesn’t protest when Richard wraps his fingers around his cock, but simply closes his hand around Richard’s to adjust the strength of his grip and starts thrusting into his hand, fast, fast, faster. He holds his breath and his whole body stills for a second, two, before he comes, spills into Richard’s hand with a low, drawn out groan, it’s one of the most erotic sounds Richard knows and he wishes he could see Orlando’s face right now.

He pushes up onto his knees without releasing Orlando’s cock and feels his come trickling out between his fingers when he straightens up and pulls Orlando close with his left arm, hooking his hand behind his neck. Orlando slides his left arm around Richard’s chest to steady him and then just lets his forehead sink against his shoulder while he tries to catch his breath. Against his back, Richard can feel his body tremble with the aftershocks of his orgasm, can feel the quick rise and fall of his chest, even feel the beat of his heart, and he just holds him there, holds him and waits for the earth to start moving again, waits for his heart rate to slow back down and for his brain to take its work back up.

‘Fuck, Richard,’ Orlando murmurs against his skin but doesn't move otherwise, ‘fuck.’

Yeah, Richard thinks, that sounds about right.

Fuck, indeed.
23/6/2018 - Buridan's Ass

Chapter Summary

Orlando and Richard go to dinner and happen to run into Graham. Things could maybe go smoother.

Richard opens his eyes when he hears Orlando's steps in the hallway and lifts up his head to look at him when he appears in the doorway, hair still wet from his shower.

'Are you coming back to bed for a moment?' Richard asks and motions at the spot next to himself that Orlando has vacated only minutes ago. 'I don't think I'm quite ready yet to get up.'

Orlando runs a hand through his damp hair, combing it back, as he looks at the clothes scattered all over the floor. He huffs and steps over Richard's shirt and his own jeans to get back to the bed.

'That was the plan', he says and sits back down on the bed.

'Excellent,' Richard replies with a smile. 'Feeling better?'

Orlando chuckles and lies back down on his side, facing Richard. When he doesn't reply and Richard's smile deepens a little after a moment, he lifts a shoulder.

'We're having this conversation every time, you realize that?'

Richard chuckles.

'I know. It's because you always manage to get it together and get up before I manage to form complete sentences again.'

'Not sure that those two things really are causally connected, mate.'

Orlando hums in quiet satisfaction.

'Tell you something else familiar though. That just now? Was really quite brilliant.'

'It was,' Richard agrees, and, turning onto his side to mirror Orlando's posture, he curls the fingers of his left hand around Orlando's hip.

'And no marks above the neckline of your shirt this time,' he adds, his voice low, a small smile playing around his lips.

Orlando's gaze automatically goes from Richard's face to his chest, even though he knows what his eyes will find there, he saw the extent of the damage in the bathroom mirror.

'Yeah, cheers for that,' he says dryly. 'Given that it's summer, wearing a fucking scarf would be extremely stupid.'

He looks at Richard's chest - no blemishes this time around, but really nice to look at anyway. After a moment, he catches himself staring and locks eyes with Richard again.
'You're fit,' he says. They just finished fucking five minutes ago, and this is not even a come on. Well. Yet.

Richard's smile stretches into a grin.

'This-' he gestures with his hand to encompass the bed and the both of them in it, 'really is the best reason there is for not allowing myself to slack in the gym.'

Orlando looks confused for a second.

'No, I meant -' he starts, but then shakes his head. 'Never mind. And I'm not talking about gym sessions with you. Just thinking of JC's gym gives me depression.'

Richard's brows lift up questioningly.

'What did you mean?'

'I wasn't commenting on your physical fitness. You proved that sufficiently just now; remarking on that would be incredibly superfluous,' Orlando replies easily. 'I meant you're good-looking.'

Richard's brows stay raised while he regards Orlando with astonishment, and when Orlando doesn't add anything to his words, his eyes dart away, only to return a moment later.

'Thanks,' he says quietly, the hint of a blush colouring his cheeks.

Orlando tilts his head and now he is silent for a moment, just looks at Richard.

'Your reactions confuse me sometimes,' he then admits in a voice that is matching Richard's in volume. 'I don't - you laugh when we talk about sex but you're -' He stops - undecided, uncertain - then he cautiously goes with, 'uncomfortable - right now?'

The lines on Richard's forehead deepen before he relaxes visibly and chuckles softly while he shakes his head.

'No.'

He covers Orlando's hand with his, the one that is resting on the mattress between them, and entwines their fingers.

'A little surprised, a little embarrassed. But not uncomfortable.'

His next words only come after another moment of hesitation and with his blush deepening one shade.

'I've yet to find a way to gracefully deal with compliments.'

He pauses and makes sure to meet Orlando's gaze for a couple of heartbeats before he adds in a voice that barely carries:

'Still nice to hear, though. Thank you.'

Orlando hums.

'I'd argue that it's not a compliment but stating a simple fact. But that would lead to a lecture on aesthetics and subjectivity of judgment, so I'd rather not.'

Richard just smiles in response to that and tightens his fingers around Orlando's.
'Feel free,' he then says. There is not a trace of mockery in his voice. 'The whole evening still is ahead of us.'

Orlando laughs.

'You are not wrong about that. But fair warning, once I get started, I won't stop for a while. Maybe you wanna get to the restaurant first? Or just get dressed or something.'

Richard's lips twitch and he tilts his head to the side a little, eyebrows raised suggestively.

'Or something,' he says softly, leans in and kisses Orlando.

Orlando doesn't protest but pushes himself up on one arm as he returns the kiss.

'Not a bad alternative,' he murmurs against Richard's lips.

Richard hums without pulling back and lets the kiss drag on for another moment.

'Doesn't mean I don't want to hear what you have to say,' he then says. 'Just getting the important stuff out of the way first.'

Orlando chuckles low in his throat and pushes his hand against Richard's chest.

'Sod off,' he chides without any heat. 'Nietzsche's view on aesthetics is important.'

Before Richard can reply, Orlando slides his hand up to grasp his upper arm.

'But yeah, all right. Sex with you might rank higher on my list of priorities as well. 's that a result of chemicals fucking with my brain, hm?'

Richard laughs quietly.

'I'd prefer it if it were a conscious choice.' He shifts his hand and wraps it around Orlando's neck to pull him in, keep him close. 'But sure, if you'd rather be slave to your neurochemical transmitters, there's a lot of data to back you up.'

Orlando pulls back, laughing out loud.

'So much for -' he changes his voice to imitate Richard's, "'I can barely form sentences'." Back in his own voice and looking at Richard again he adds, 'seriously, that's such a turn on. Tell me more about that, so I can fiercely disagree with you.'

Richard pulls back a little so that he can look at Orlando better, hand still curled around his neck.

'Alright,' he says, 'but maybe we should just order something to eat then.'

When Orlando raises a brow, he adds: 'Because we're probably not going anywhere if I tell you that I think that attraction is conscious choice to a huge degree. Sure, chemicals, pheromones and all that. But those make you end up with your pants around your ankles in a toilet stall. Whereas coming back for more? That's a choice.'

A smirk finds its way onto Orlando's lips as he contemplates in silence what Richard said.

'I agree,' he then says very simply. And after a beat he adds, 'With your reasoning regarding attraction. Not necessarily with what you said about food.'
Richard chuckles and leans a little closer towards Orlando again.

'That was surprisingly easy, I didn't even make a proper case there. Where's the catch?'

Orlando pushes against his chest, following Richard when he takes the hint and lowers himself down onto his back.

'No catch,' he growls quietly. 'You should know me better than that.'

He leans in, one hand loosely gripping Richard's hair, and speaks against his lips.

'I agree cause you're right.' He briefly presses his mouth against Richard's, then adds, 'And cause I'm at my most peaceable when recently shagged.'

'You are indeed,' Richard murmurs, grinning. He slides one hand between Orlando's shoulder blades, the other around his neck, but doesn't pull him into a proper kiss straight away, just a little closer.

'But that's not why I like to make sure that you're always pretty recently shagged when we're together.'

Orlando hums and readjusts his grip on Richard's hair a little, fingers more stroking than holding really.

'No, I know,' he says. 'It's also because our sex is not bad.'

Richard huffs.

'Fuck off,' he says, but his smile and the tone of his voice betray his words. "'Not bad" is an outrageous understatement.'

A grin flashes over Orlando's face and he puts a little more of his weight on Richard as he shuffles a bit closer yet.

'It's hot when you curse;' he says, voice dark.

In response to Orlando's movement, Richard subconsciously tightens his hold on him.

'Ditto,' he simply says, his tone of voice perfectly matching Orlando's, and lifts his head off the mattress a little, just far enough for his lips to almost touch Orlando's.

'Especially when I fuck you.'

Orlando closes the distance between them now, however small, with an open mouthed kiss. It's slower but otherwise pretty much the same as the one they shared while Richard was indeed fucking him.

When he pulls back again, though, neither of them is breathing nearly as heavily.

Orlando licks his lips, satisfied.

'You are welcome to do that any time,' he says, voice caught between conversational and aroused. 'Happy to bottom for you.'

Richard groans and closes his eyes, then takes a deep breath.

'Fuck, Orlando, don't say stuff like that if you want us to have decent chance of making it to that
restaurant while it's actually still open.'

Accommodating, Orlando rolls off Richard and settles down next to him once more.

'I'm starving,' he says and rubs his stomach. 'The offer stands, though.'

Richard groans.

'Enough, now. If you want to get something to eat you have to stop putting ideas into my head.' He sits up and rubs his hands over his face. 'Let's get going. You're staying the night, though, aren't you?'

Swinging his feet out of the bed already, Orlando nods.

'Sure, I'm not planning on driving back in the middle of the night.'

Standing next to the bed, he looks at the array of clothes on the floor, then bends down to pick up his boxers.

'What are we having for dinner?'

'Italian?' Richard suggests while he watches Orlando put on his boxers. 'I think I'm in the mood for pizza. If you're up for a little stroll, there's a place on Fossgate.'

'Yeah fine,' Orlando agrees easily. 'Whatever you want. Where the fuck is my shirt?'

Richard chuckles.

'Check on the hallway cupboard. I think I might have tossed it into that direction.'

Orlando shakes his head, but does as suggested and steps out into the hallway while Richard gets up with a little sigh and follows him, absentmindedly rubbing at a kink in his neck.

'Do you mind if I clean up quickly first?'

Orlando shakes his head again, locating his shirt exactly where Richard suggested. It is rather ridiculous that this is pretty much always how they do it. At least they usually make it to the bedroom. Mostly. He reckons blow jobs in the hallway or Richard's living room don't really count.

When he has shrugged on his shirt, he turns around to find Richard still looking at him. After getting momentarily side-tracked by the fact that he is still naked, he plays back what he just said.

They really could just order in.

'No, I don't mind,' he says, half on autopilot. 'Not like we're on a schedule. Or did you book a table?'

Richard shakes his head. 'Not after we didn't make it to the restaurant last week. And the week before.'

With a smile he adds a little belatedly: 'Not that that's a complaint.'

Orlando snorts and fastens the buttons on his jeans.

'Last week was entirely your fault. I'm willing to share the blame for the one before that.'

Richard manages to look scandalized for not even two seconds before he has to laugh. Orlando just shrugs. It's the truth.
'At least we didn't have sex there. Like, ever. Which shows restraint on our part, I guess.'

'I really don't think that that's something to write home about,' he says, grinning, and steps up to where Orlando is standing. Wrapping his hand around his hips, he pulls Orlando towards himself, against his body.

'You reckon we're safe today?' he asks in a low voice when their hips touch.

Orlando rests his arms on Richard's shoulders.

'No.'

When he doesn't immediately elaborate, Richard chuckles and again, Orlando shrugs lightly.

'Well, you asked. And I want to talk about aesthetics and free will. Both of which are topics that really interest me,' he pauses, lets the inflection of his voice sink in - there is nothing like a good debate to get him going.

When Richard doesn't argue with that and just adjusts his hold on his hips, Orlando adds,

'Besides, only because it's been, like, eleven months or something since we last did that doesn't mean we won't again.'

Richard's expression turns thoughtful while he contemplates Orlando's words.

'It's really been that long, hasn't it?' he eventually asks and sounds as if he doesn't quite trust his own calculation.

Orlando was about to pull back to continue getting dressed, but stops himself now. His arms still on Richard's shoulders, he tilts his head a little bit and regards Richard.

Karl's birthday is on June, 7th. He met Richard at The Riddermark when they were celebrating Karl's 45th. So yeah, a year.

'Yeah,' he says, a little slowly because he isn't sure where Richard is going with this.

For a moment, Richard just looks at him looks at him, then he chuckles softly.

'When you kissed me, at that weird bar, I never would have thought-'

He doesn't finish his sentence, just shakes his head, smiling.

Orlando waits again, Richard's hands warm on his skin. He is not good filling in gaps, not ones like this anyway.

When Richard doesn't continue, he tries a joke.

'That I'd give that good head? Yeah, I believe that.'

Richard's smile widens, and again, he shakes his head.

'That I'd still want more, after a year,' he replies and leans in closer towards Orlando until their lips are almost touching.

'That you're mind-blowingly smart.'

Orlando tilts his head a little, like he does in anticipation of a kiss, licks his lips.
'I thought we wanted to go out for dinner,' he says quietly. 'You're not headed that way right now, mate.'

Richard hums.

'I know.'

He doesn't pull back or lean in all the way, doesn't tip the scales either way.

'I really, really want to discuss free will and neurochemical processes with you. So I guess we'd better go.'

Orlando growls low in his throat.

'Thus he presents me with a classic dilemma,' he says and the fingers of his right hand find Richard's neck, touch his hairline. 'Which is pretty dickish of you. I trust you know what happened to Buridan's ass. And yeah, I am the donkey in that comparison.'

'Cheers,' Richard says dryly. 'I've never so far been compared to a haystack.'

Orlando laughs out loud and pulls back a little in order to run his hand over his face.

'I was thinking in more abstract terms, such as food and intelligent conversation on one side, sex on the other.'

He places his hand on Richard's chest, fingers tapping lightly.

'You were the decisive factor in both situations. So if you're being literal, you're not "a" stack of hay, but two.'

'It's a good thing my physique got a positive review earlier, though, or I might be a little hurt,' Richard says, grin widening.

Orlando uses the hand on Richard's chest to push him back, laughing again.

'Fuck you,' he says, the chuckle still in his voice. 'I'm not here to stroke your ego.' He vaguely points in the direction of the bathroom. 'Go get cleaned up. I want food.'

'I actually want food, too,' Richard agrees. 'And a quick shower, too. But first- he wraps his hand around Orlando's wrist and pulls him close again, 'first this.'

He leans in and lightly nips at Orlando's lip before he threads the fingers of both hands into his hair and kisses him, the kiss open-mouthed from the start, demanding.

Orlando growls again but lets himself be kissed for a moment, attempts to take over after that. Richard lets him but his hold on Orlando tightens and Orlando knows perfectly well that he is being humoured and baited both.

'Fucker,' he grunts into Richard's mouth, then uses the weight of his body to walk him backwards, two steps, until his back is against the nearest wall.

Pushing his thigh between Richard's naked legs, he lightly shoves his chest in reprimand.

'I'm hungry, for fuck's sake,' he says before he leans in and resumes the kiss.

Richard does not put up any resistance, just lets himself be kissed for a good long moment. When he
finally chooses to tighten his grip on Orlando's hair and pull him away, they are both a little short of breath and half-hard again.

'Dinner, Orlando. Now,' Richard pants. 'Before this gets out of hand completely.'

Orlando growls and raises his hands demonstratively, though his thigh remains exactly where it is.

'Hey, that's what I said minutes ago,' he says, voice low. He pulls back, half a step, and runs his hand over his mouth, shaking his head slightly as he looks at Richard.

'You're so fucking hot. Fuck.' He draws a breath and shakes his head again. 'C'mon, go shower.'

'Yeah,' Richard says, but doesn't move, just looks at Orlando.

'Fuck,' he then sighs and lets his head sink back against the wall for a moment before he pushes himself away from it, and takes a step towards the bathroom.

'Let's do this. I don't want to be cheap date.'

He already has taken a step towards the bathroom when he adds with a quiet chuckle: 'You better don't come with.'

Orlando snorts.

'Yeah,' he agrees. 'You shower and I'll search for my socks.'

'Honestly,' he mutters to himself as he makes his way back to the bedroom, decidedly not looking at Richard again.

Richard refrains from asking what 'honestly' is referring to in favour of rinsing himself off quickly, also because he can take an educated guess there- just kissing is something that doesn't really exist in Orlando's playbook.

When he steps into the bedroom three minutes later, one towel wrapped around his waist, another one in his hand that he uses to dry his hair, Orlando looks up from his phone in astonishment.

'Pretty fast,' he remarks and pockets his phone.

'Well, I figured it's a little safer once we're out of here. And dressed,' Richard replies, smirking.

'Yeah, you're not dressed yet, though,' Orlando says peaceably. He raises his hand that is holding his phone.

'Tell you what though,' he says. 'While you put some clothes on, I'll give Karl a quick ring.'

Before Richard can ask, Orlando shakes his head.

'He wants cooking advice. And yes, he calls me for that. That is how shitty a cook he is.'

'You do that,' Richard says with a smile and opens the door to his wardrobe.

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The restaurant is tasteful, as expected from something Richard chose, and there is a smell in the air that reminds Orlando how starved he really is. They are shown to a table near the bar and Richard, with one of those polite little smiles that still seem genuine, orders a glass of red wine, Orlando a beer.
'Do they do an edible steak here or what do you recommend?' Orlando asks after they have both studied a menu for a moment.

Richard looks up at him, smiling, then closes his menu and puts it back down on the table.

'They make a great Calzone, if that's something to like. And the pasta is made freshly, too. Lucy had the Ravioli last time we were here, they were delicious. I had the salmon, which also was really good.'

When he watches Orlando brow furrow at the endless number of options he is presented with, Richard interrupts himself and laughs.

'I guess I'm not really helpful, hm?'

Orlando looks at Richard without a muscle in his face moving for a moment.

'No, you're not,' he says deadpan. Then the right corner of his mouth quirks up. 'Good to know, though. What are you having? All of the above?'

Richard chuckles and lightly knocks his knee against Orlando's under the table.

'Yes, and then dessert,' he replies. 'No, I thought I'd have the goat cheese with the caramelised onions as a starter and the pizza Marzano. Or we could share the antipasti, if you want?'

Orlando nods easily.

'Sure.'

He closes his menu and rests his hands on it, then just regards Richard. When Richard arches his brows inquisitively, he huffs in a quiet chuckle.

'I just realized something,' he then says. 'There is a very strong correlation between my desire to discuss aesthetics and wanting to have sex with you within the next ten minutes.'

Richard looks surprised for a second, before his expression changes to amusement. He does not get to reply, however, because their drinks arrive.

They place their orders and then Richard waits for the waiter to be out of earshot, eyes firmly fixed on Orlando's, before he says dryly:

'Well, but at least we actually made it to the restaurant this time.'

Orlando chuckles and takes a sip from his beer.

'Shocker, I know. But seriously, I always enjoy talking about Kant and hating on Hume and I can guarantee you that I will get derailed once I even come into the proximity of Page and his notion of aesthetic education and peace education.' He slightly raises his hand to stop any possible, however warranted interruptions. 'Which, I am perfectly aware, has nothing at all to do with the original topic.'

He shakes his head over himself, only continues after another sip of beer.

'But my point is that the urge to do that is directly connected to wanting to fuck you. Which is both somewhat interesting and inconvenient.'

Richard lifts up his glass and gently swirls its contents around before he takes a sip.
'Pretty interesting, I'd say. Maybe it's your brain's way of telling you to simply stack one of the hayst racks on top of the other?'

Orlando laughs.

'You might be right about that, mate.'

He regards Richard for a long moment, the busy restaurant buzzing around them.

'Mind,' he adds then. 'It's a nice theory, but considering you tend to reduce me to monosyllabic words, I don't really see us putting that into practice.'

Richard hums.

'I don't know, maybe we should try.'

When Orlando's grin widens, he raises one hand.

'Not now, though.' He laughs. 'But with a little preparation, I could probably whisper Nietzsche quotes into your ear in bed.'

Orlando uses the hand that was about to reach for his beer again to give Richard a two fingered salute.

'You're hilarious,' he says deadpan. 'And I guarantee you that you would regret that. But you were arguing for free will earlier, so I don't think I have to tell you how very much that'd be your own responsibility then.'

Richard smirks at him.

'Well, it's a good thing, then, that I quite enjoy reducing you to monosyllabic answers and thus lack the incentive for trying to dig up the most erotic Nietzsche quotes.'

'I guessed as much,' Orlando replies and his gaze goes, rather pointedly, to the doors in the back corner of the restaurant.

'If you'd like to return and rather not get banned for indecent activities on the Gents, I suggest we change the topic right about now.'

Richard laughs and Orlando raises his hand to tick off four subjects.

'As somewhat safer dinner conversation I propose the World Cup which I doubt you're interested in, your suggestion to prepare food together which I find peculiar, the centenage of female suffrage that's being celebrated now, or the fact that Warner Bros is being accused of acting like Voldemort according to the Daily Mail.'

He bites back his smile and shrugs.

'Your choice.'

Richard rubs his forehead, feigning deep concentration, while he contemplates Orlando's suggestions.

'I'll ask why you find a peculiar idea to cook together, then. You reckon I wouldn't be able to handle you bossing me around in my own kitchen?'
'No, it's not that,' Orlando replies without hesitation. 'But I consider cooking a necessity, not something that is fun or pleasurable or an activity particularly good for socializing or whatever. And my guess based on your suggestion is that you see that differently?'

Richard nods.

'I like cooking. And I think it's quite good for socializing, actually. But given the fact that we really don't need any help in that department and I'm perfectly fine with having you sit at my kitchen table and keep me company while I cook, it doesn't really matter.'

Orlando regards him silently for a moment. He's not entirely sure what to make of that summary - or the fact that anyone thinks preparing food anything but a necessity really - but as his voice doesn't seem to indicate upset of any kind, he shrugs a moment later.

'Yeah, all right, if you say so,' he says easily.

Richard leans back in his chair and squints at Orlando thoughtfully.

'You disagree, though, don't you? On the inside.'

It's an observation rather than a question and his expression is curious, free of any trace of reproach.

Orlando draws his brows together at the same time that his lips curve up. Both last for a second, maybe, then he shakes his head.

'No, I don't disagree. I don't get it, there's a difference.'

When Richard just looks at him, waiting for him to elaborate, Orlando lifts his shoulders.

'The socializing bit. Cooking is necessary to get somewhat edible food, I get that. But other than that, to me there is no point to it. So, it's like -' he tries to come up with a comparison. 'If you want to cook together, then that to me is like coming up to me at the gym, getting on the treadmill next to mine and suggesting to run together. I don't see how that would change anything or make the experience nicer or whatever. I just don't really get it.'

'You and me both,' Richard replies with a smile, expression still curious.

'I think the difference is that I enjoy cooking. So, it'd be the logical thing to do, to combine it with something else I enjoy- talking to you. But yeah, I wouldn't try to solicit your company for doing the laundry, for example. So if that's how you feel about cooking, I get it.'

He looks at Orlando for a moment, then asks:

'So going out for a run together is off the table, too, then?'

Orlando pulls a face.

'Come on, you're not trying to tell me you enjoy that, too?' He raises his hand in a placating manner, though. 'Each to their own. I like football more and I actually only go to the gym because it's either supervising that or, I dunno, choir or something.' He sips from his beer again and continues after licking foam from his lips. 'Kidding aside, I understand what you mean but I disagree. Combining any two things to me dilutes both. How am I supposed to prove to you that, say, Hume is a dickhead, save maybe for his views of aesthetics, when at the same time I have to pay attention to not hack off a finger while I'm cutting carrots?'

Richard chuckles.
'I think that's grossly underestimating your coordination skills, Orlando. But actually, that's something I appreciate, your focus. That you don't do things halfway, that you're present when you're with me.'

Under the table, Orlando leans his knee against Richard's.

'Appreciated. Especially since it apparently gets me out of cooking.' He takes a cursory look around the restaurant; people eating and chatting merrily, staff quickly and efficiently moving between the tables.

'I reckon that once again comes down to what one grew up with, hm? Socializing to me is football and plays in the main house no one ever really wants to see and the like, later pubs and darts and, well, still footie, I reckon. Other stuff as well, but Wellesley's kitchen never was the place for it.'

He tilts his head and regards Richard curiously.

'How far does that go? Cooking classes, too?'

Richard's eyes have followed Orlando's on their sweep of the room, and his expression is about to change to unadulterated horror at the suggestion of cooking classes, when his attention is diverted by something, or someone, at the other side of the room.

'What?' Orlando asks. 'Is someone holding their cutlery wrong?'

Richard huffs.

'Fuck off,' he replies, but without heat. 'I might be a bit of a food snob, but not that kind of snob. No, actually, that's a Graham over there, by the window.'

Orlando watches Richard's expression for a second, two. After the initial surprise, there is a definite confirmation there - not just someone looking like his friend, but the friend himself. Nothing else, aside from maybe the vestige of a smile maybe, and Orlando finds himself automatically turning his head towards the window. Not that he would know who he is looking for. The only table he can take out of the equation is the one closest to the entrance because there are three women sitting there. Which narrows it down to three - a man with a much younger woman and a child; two men, about ten years between them; a man with a book in one, a forgotten fork in his other hand.

The survey takes him maybe another second or two, then he looks back at Richard, once more nudging his knee.

'You are surprised,' he states as that look has not completely disappeared from Richard's face. And stating the obvious is somewhat his forte, apparently.

'Yes,' Richard says, eyes returning to meet Orlando's. 'He is the last person I'd expect to run into here. Or anywhere in York, really, he lives in Leeds with his family.'

His eyes flicker back over to Graham, then to Orlando again. Absent-mindedly, his finger taps on the table while a slight frown steals onto his face.

'He's here alone, I think. Would you mind if I-' he gestures towards his friend, 'go say hi?'

Orlando very slowly and very deliberately arches one eyebrow. As if he was raised by wolves, seriously.

'Why would I mind that?' he asks, humour in his voice. 'Invite him over if you want.'
Richard ducks his head a little, clear sign of embarrassment and is about to apologize, but checks himself in time. Instead, he smiles at Orlando and reaches across the table to give his hand the briefest squeeze.

'Cheers,' he then says simply and gets up.

Orlando nods and turns in his chair a bit as Richard gets up and makes his way across the room towards the window.

The man with the book - about ten years Richard's senior, Orlando would guess, balding and with quite the impressive beard - is so engrossed in his reading material that he only notices that he is being approached when Richard stops at his table. Again, a second of surprise, only that with him it is followed not by a small smile but a huge grin, that rather reminds Orlando of Gerry, and a hug that looks bone-crushing.

For the moment, Orlando remains seated but he lifts his glass and the corners of his mouth when Graham, one hand still on Richard's shoulder looks towards him.

Then there is that kind of short charade that polite people engage in - do you want to, I wouldn't want to intrude, oh you aren't, if you're sure and so on. It lasts not as long as Orlando would have it expected to with a mate of Richard's, and he gets up when Richard, accompanied by Graham, comes back to their table.

It always surprises Richard a little when Orlando exhibits the kind of politeness he shows towards Graham now, by getting up, even more so when it's paired with one of those smiles that don't reach his eyes, because he doesn't really seem to be himself in those moment, but some weird alternative version. Well, but then, it's a bit of an ambush, he has to give him that. And Graham is Graham.

'It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Orlando,' Graham says, his smile almost blinding in direct comparison, and shakes Orlando's hand.

Ridiculous expression, that. Orlando doesn't say that, of course. He nods and keeps smiling and shakes Graham's hand, matching the other man's grip for strength exactly.

'The pleasure is all mine,' he says (which is usually true - people rarely find it a pleasure once they get to know him) and looks back and forth between him and Richard once.

'Feel free to join us, if you like,' he says when he can't deduce from Richard's expression whether or not he already offered.

'Thanks,' Graham says. 'I certainly wouldn't mind company. And I won't be terribly long, I still have to get back home to Leeds.'

When Orlando expression stays neutral, Graham cocks his head to the side a little and elaborates:

'So there's no danger of me hogging your whole evening.'

'Please, sit down,' Richard says and gestures at the chair next to himself.

Orlando keeps himself from frowning as he, too, sits down again. It's not because of Graham whose expression still very closely resembles Gerry's for reasons that Orlando yet has to pinpoint. Well, apart from the accent.

He wants to frown because of Richard. Who is - polite.
Not that he has anything against that per se; it's kinda hot at times, though who is he kidding, he finds Richard attractive, manners or not.

But politeness is something you do with strangers, with parents of pupils, with people you don't feel comfortable enough for rudeness.

But he doesn't frown. He is a stranger, it's okay (required) for him to be polite.

So, just as Graham is done pulling his chair a little closer to the table, Orlando looks at him, smiles.

'So, what brings you to York? Work?'

Graham nods and reaches past Richard to pull over his glass of beer that he has brought over with him.

'Sort of,' he then says and looks back up at Orlando. 'I attended a course on respiratory management.' Turning towards Richard he adds: 'Remind me to drop by some time next week and take a look at your NAVA protocols.'

'Sure,' Richard says with a small nod. 'Just give me a call.'

Graham takes a sip from his beer.

'Do the two of you come here often?'

He is looking at Orlando who shakes his head.

'First time. Well, for me,' he corrects himself, looks at Richard, smiles again. 'Richard knows the waiting staff by name, I think?'

Richard chuckles.

'Some of them, yes. But I haven't been here for quite some time, either.'

'How comes?' Graham asks. 'The pizza I had was really good.'

A blush has crept onto Richard's face at Graham's innocent question, and he casts a quick glance at Orlando before he replies, aiming for a neutral expression both in voice and face:

'We've been eating at home a lot.'

That certainly is one way of putting it. Orlando's eyes dart back and forth between Richard and Graham; somewhat puzzled. Richard obviously aimed for vagueness, but not only does Graham look like he knows exactly what Richard is not saying, that kind of answer also begs for elaboration.

Graham looks amused. Richard looks slightly embarrassed. Orlando keeps himself from rolling his eyes.

'We've just been talking about that;' he says and finds both of their - very different gazes - on him now. He is gonna get muscle sores from all that smiling, honestly.

'Preparing food together and the generally accepted hypotheses that it strengthens social bonds.'

Richard inhales a bit of his wine and starts to cough and Graham slaps his back with enough force to almost make him spill the contents of his glass. It does the trick, though, Richard can breathe freely again, and Graham turns to Orlando to ask:
'You've- what?'

Richard breaks into laughter, proper belly laughter, and startles the waiter who arrives with their antipasti. Without losing a beat, Graham thanks the waiter for food he didn't order.

'Cooking,' Orlando repeats when he is gone, because fuck it, it's not like he actually said anything funny. 'Richard enjoys it. I don't. We talked about that before he spotted you.'

Graham runs his fingers through his beard and then leans forward a bit, rests his elbows on the table and smiles at Orlando.

'Aye,' he says, accent thick. 'Richard likes to cook. So do I. And I tell you what: We sometimes even cook together.'

Before Orlando can reply, Richard places a hand on Graham's arm and shakes his head.

'Enough,' he says, still laughing. 'No more talk about cooking.'

'Why,' Graham says, a grin curling around his lips when he turns to Richard. 'that's a shame, Orlando was just going to tell me how about it strengthens social bonds. Or how it doesn't, rather.'

Orlando waits for a moment, and maybe a second or two more. Richard is grinning again. Graham is still leaning forward.

'It maybe does,' he then says levelly. 'Seems like you two are the experts. I'd rather order in and have more time for other things.' He lifts his shoulders, and fuck it feels nice to not bother with smiling anymore. 'But hey, each to their own.'

Richard has closed his eyes and groans quietly and Graham laughs.

'Those other things that Richard failed so spectacularly not to hint at earlier?' he asks and regards his friend from the side.

Richard pinches the bridge of his nose.

'I'm going to need more alcohol to survive this,' he mutters under his breath, then shakes his head, takes a deep breath and sits back up.

'Go ahead, ask, then, if you can't help yourself. Knowing Orlando he might even answer.'

Orlando again looks back and forth between Richard - switching from slightly uncontrolled laughter to the beginnings of a headache - and Graham whose apparent composure belies the effect he has on his mate and this conversation.

'What exactly is respiratory management?' he asks as he leans back in his chair and regards Graham.

Graham doesn't miss a beat, as if their choice of conversation topics is really nothing to bat an eyelid at.

'Basically, that's the art of making sure that patients who can't breathe on their own or can't breathe adequately on their own stay alive. But the course I attended focused on new, well, or newer modes of mechanical ventilation, breathing with the help of a respirator, and their benefits for certain groups of patients. Really quite interesting.'

He pauses and smiles at Orlando.
'Probably only if one is interested in intensive care, though. I don't mean to bore you.'

Orlando shakes his head, automatically reaching for some of the antipasti.

'You don't. Certain groups, does that mean age groups? I gather that makes a difference especially during operations?'

Graham nods.

'Yes, certain age groups, for example. Richard and I do very different things despite both working with respirators all day. And then patients with different diseases need different strategies: someone who has burned their lungs in an explosion or fire needs different settings and maybe even a different mode of ventilation altogether than someone your age who's fractured a bone and needs a surgical procedure.'

He smiles at Richard who's just lifting a tomato onto his fork but is listening attentively.

'It's fascinating. And a lot of fun, once you get the hang of it.'

Orlando nods, processing the information.

'And what's new about the - what was it called that you discussed today? What's new about that? I take it involves small kids, too?'

'You take that one?' Graham says to Richard, 'it's your forte, after all.'

Richard shakes his head.

'It's not my forte, I've only tried in on a couple of patients, but alright.'

Graham huffs and winks at Orlando.

'What he conveniently forgot to tell you is that he's more expertise than anyone else in both York and Leeds.'

'Shit up or I'll watch you explain it,' Richard says agreeably.

When Graham just smirks at him, he turns towards Orlando.

'It's a fairly recent form of ventilatory support called NAVA, neurally adjusted ventilatory assist. And what's different is that it- contrary to every other mode of ventilation where you adjust the flow and the volume and pressure manually to what you estimate the patient needs-'

He pauses to make sure that Orlando is still with him and continues when Orlando confirms that with a little half nod:

'Contrary to that NAVA works with the electrical activity from the diaphragm that you register with a thin tube you place into the oesophagus. And that signal is thought to be the best available signal for estimating the respiratory drive of a patient. With its help you can adjust the respiratory cycle that the respirator provides much better to the need of the patient and apply the exact amount of gas the patient needs, not more and no less. And the best thing is that the patient stays in control- or their diaphragm anyway- and the respirator doesn't work against them. Which is particularly interesting for me as a neonatologist because my patients often are awake whereas Graham just can put his to sleep when he wants to hook them up to a respirator.'

When Richard falls silent, Orlando waits for Graham to object to that statement at the end. But his
only reaction to that friendly quip is a grin as he seems far more interested in Orlando's response than objections.

'Got it,' he says with a nod to Richard. 'And I suppose while better albeit possibly met with some skepticism, it's fairly expensive, hence a relatively slow process of installing it around the country?'

Richard shakes his head.

'Better only for some patients. Sorry, I didn't mention that. It's not something you can use on every patient, not in the theatre for example, after you've administered a muscle relaxant. And that's why the implementation is a bit slow, too, and of course, yes, people are skeptical because it's new, and the equipment is expensive.'

He looks at Orlando as if trying to gauge if he really wants to know all these details or if this for him is turning into the most boring evening they've ever spent together. He seems fine, though, the frown he's displaying is one of his concentrated ones. Their eyes rest on each other for a moment and Richard feels a smile tugging at his lips, when he remembers that they are not alone and turns back to Graham who mostly looks pleasantly surprised by the turn the conversation has taken.

'It probably tells you everything you need to know that Richard has the only machine there is at LG1 on his ward,' he says with a quiet chuckle.

Richard is not looking for praise or admiration, never did so far. His way of explaining aspects of his work as per usual doesn't fail to capture Orlando's interest. It's the calm professionalism that does it, Orlando knows that by now - he is required (allowed) to just listen and learn.

Graham however is wearing that kind of smile - not quite pride, but something like it, like parents of an overachieving pupil (not quite like it).

Orlando hums, not quite non-committal, but still careful.

'It probably does,' he answers, mirroring the beginning of Graham's statement.

Graham considers Orlando's words for a moment, his expression, then nods slowly.

'You haven't told him, have you?' he says, turning towards Richard.

Richard brows draw together minimally and for a second the lines on his forehead stand out, but they disappear when he shakes his head.

'Graham,' he begins, but Graham shakes his head.

'No,' Graham says, 'don't. It's just that your modesty can be truly humbling at times.'

"Humbling" wouldn't be the word Orlando would use. "Attractive" maybe, though that is possibly due to only having gotten off once tonight as of right now. "Pleasant", then.

Graham is still smiling at Richard and Richard looks a different kind of - is that embarrassed? Not quite, Orlando thinks, before, abruptly, he loses interest in the whole reading-expressions-game in which he is a mediocre player at best.

He doesn't ask "told me what". He doesn't agree "yes, so modest". He doesn't change the subject; he already tried that once, and look where that got him.

Instead he tells his mouth to curve into a smile that should pass as polite and nice - he practiced it
long enough after all - and keeps himself from looking away to search for the waiter or any other
distraction.

Graham and Richard look at each other for another moment, before Richard shrugs and picks up
another tomato with his fork, pushes it into his mouth before his eyes seek Orlando's. That's another
one of his professional smiles now, it doesn't reach his eyes, his focus has shifted.

Under the table, Richard shifts his leg a little, so that it comes to rest against Orlando's, wordlessly
asking for patience - humour me, humour us, when Graham asks:

'You're not in medicine, Orlando, though, or are you?'

Orlando shakes his head.

'No, I'm a teacher,' he says. After a beat - come on, you muppet, be nice; it's not that hard, it's small
talk, and the guy is Richard's friend; for fuck's sake, be nice - he adds, 'No sane person would let me
near someone needing medical attention.' He keeps his smile (it's not that hard; the guy is trying;
come on) and with a glance to Richard, his knee not jittering as it rests against Richard's, he adds, 'I
broke a CPR dummy last year.'

'That's quite impressive,' Graham says with a chuckle, 'I've cracked quite a few ribs in my career, but
never managed to break a dummy.'

He shakes his head.

'What subject do you teach? And what ages?'

Before Orlando can reply, Graham casts both him and Richard an apologetic look, and adds,
addressed at Richard:

'I'm sorry, maybe you've told me already, but it's been a while ago, then, I don't remember.'

When Richard just gives Graham a smile but doesn't otherwise react, Orlando supplies,

'I teach philosophy, everything from first form to A-levels. Habermas, Kant, Seneca and so on,
though,' he pauses, tilts his head, 'considering what the latter says about anger management, I'm not
necessarily leading by example, if you ask that dummy.'

Graham chuckles again, though technically Orlando did just tell the same joke twice. Putting his fork
down, he reaches for his beer and leans back again.

'Richard said you've been working in Africa for a while?' he prompts.

For a moment Graham seems to want to object the new change of subject, but then simply nods.

'Yes,' he says, smile gone from his face all of a sudden. 'I was in Yemen for four months last year.'

Orlando frowns, can't keep himself from doing so this time. Graham's emotions are loud; like all the
time his entire being is shouting them. Happiness, Pride, Amusement, and now Devastation. All
genuine, as far as Orlando can tell. All so loud.

All of this conversation is fucking confusing. He is bad at small talk but not usually this bad. He
doesn't sigh, doesn't try to save that one either.

'I apologize,' he says instead. He hears it's stiff. He still means it. He looks at Graham and gives a
single shake of his head. 'Wasn't my intention to bring back bad memories. Sorry.'
Graham looks at him in confusion.

'No, it's fine, what-

He interrupts himself and his brows draw together.

'You're whole face fell, Gra,' Richard says quietly.

Graham looks at him, looks at Orlando, looks at his beer, blinks, then chuckles tonelessly.

'Maybe it did.'

Looking back up at Orlando he says:

'There's absolutely no need to apologize. And I'm happy to talk about it, if you're interested. It's probably going to be whole different conversation then, though. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing.'

Orlando casts a quick look at Richard for confirmation, and even though he once again fails to decipher precisely what Richard's expression is saying about what he is thinking, there are no alarm bells going off.

'No, I'm interested,' he therefore says with a nod. 'Four months, you said?'

Graham hums.

'With Doctors Without Borders, yes. Last year, from June to October. I've been abroad with them a couple of times before, on longer missions in Asia and South America, but this was the first time in the Middle East.'

'And the first time since you've become a father,' Richard adds.

'Yes,' Graham agrees with a small smile. 'All new, this time around.'

'Is it different?' Orlando asks and instantly adds for clarification, 'Working in Asia, South America or the Middle East in this field? Excuse my ignorance, I'd just assume a doctor's work would be very similar, never mind the continent. Specific ailments brought on by, say, the climate notwithstanding.'

They get interrupted by the waiter offering to bring fresh drinks, and Orlando orders another beer, pretty much without looking away from Graham.

'It's very different,' Graham replies, after he, too, has ordered another beer and Richard has asked for another glass of wine.

'First of all the countries are different- diseases, languages, mentality, politics, climate, but what makes for the biggest difference is the type of mission. The work you do when you're on a mission where you train local doctors and nurses doesn't compare to the work you do when you're providing emergency aid, after an earthquake, for example. In Yemen, I worked in a clinic that mainly treated refugees, people who fled from the violent conflict, many of them malnourished, in bad shape. The problems you face on location are different every time, even if you bring the same set of skills with you.'

Orlando nods.

'I understand,' he says, but then asks, 'Is that due to a shortage of participants?'

When Graham doesn't immediately reply, Orlando elaborates, 'Countries such as ours have highly
qualified but also very specialized doctors, don't they? But the places you worked at required - and excuse me for putting that flippantly - a Jack of all trades? Someone able to set broken bones, deliver a child, treat PTSD? And possibly speak the language as well?'

Graham laughs.

'Some kind of uber-doctor who's been a translator in a former life? That's not required, thankfully, or I wouldn't have been able to go, I can neither set bones, or well, not surgically anyway, nor would I trust myself to deliver a child. No MSF, Doctors without Borders, actually recruits specialists, surgeons and anaesthesiologists mostly, and gynecologists, paediatricians, that then work together in a team for however short or long their missions last. And they work with translators.'

Orlando contemplates that for a moment, and though he isn't entirely sure he fully understands, he doesn't ask again.

'What do they speak in Yemen?' he asks instead. 'Arabic, right? Did you get by with English or do you speak Arabic?'

'I don't, so I always needed an interpreter at my side when talking to a patient was required. Which hardly is ideal, but it's something you get used to pretty quickly. And it's not as if that isn't a challenge we aren't facing here, too, with the world's population constantly on the move.'

Richard hums.

'At the moment I have three sets of parents that I only can communicate with by using gestures if we don't find an interpreter.'

'I have three of those as well,' Orlando offers. 'Plus two that get the special treatment of my questionable German skills. And one in Hebrew, which is rather challenging. Six out of forty-eight isn't too bad, though, and it's not like it's life or death with my kids.'

'Maybe not, no,' Richard says with a smile. 'But it's still an undisputable advantage if you understand each other.'

'Particularly given the fact that you're teaching philosophy,' Graham agrees and takes a sip from his beer.

'Or have you found a way to teach about the categorical imperative without words?'

Orlando shakes his head.

'The kids all speak perfect English. Their parents don't. Not so uncommon at my school, but unlike some of my colleagues I don't like using the kids as interpreters. Bad enough when you have to use Skype on parent-teacher-night.'

'While trying to speak German and Hebrew,' Graham says, chuckling.

'Let Richard teach you how to deliver a baby and send in an application to MSF, they'd be thrilled.'

Richard pulls a face.

'Yes, brilliant,' he says dryly. 'Let me teach you my approach to delivering a baby which consists of standing at a safe distance with my eyes covered and verbally encourage both woman and uterus to speedily part with the baby so that we can all go back to what we'd rather do.'
Graham is chuckling but Orlando isn't looking at him but at Richard.

'I know about ten thousand things I'd rather do,' he says in exactly the same tone that Richard used, matching his responding half-smile as well.

Turning back to Graham he says,

'I can barely tolerate being in the same room with a child under the age of ten. I'd say that lowers my chances of getting that job significantly; complete lack of medical expertise aside.'

Richard's smile widens but he chooses not to share his momentary thoughts, lets his gaze stray to his fingers on the table for a moment instead.

'Interesting,' Graham says and cocks his head to the side a little. 'For a teacher.'

Orlando meets Graham's gaze, smile gone.

'My kids are between ten and eighteen. I'm no more required to work with younger children than a lawyer or a lumberjack.'

Graham looks startled for a moment, Richard confused as Graham's last words have escaped him.

'I'm sorry,' Graham says quietly, seeking Orlando's eyes. 'Did I manage to insult you somehow?'

'No,' Orlando replies. 'I just disagree with you.'

When that doesn't change Graham's or Richard's expression, he rephrases his earlier response, his tone back to its usual neutral timbre.

'I teach in a secondary school. We don't have kids under ten. So, no, I don't think it's all that interesting that I'd rather leave younger children to someone else.'

'Alright,' Graham says slowly, eyes still firmly fixed on Orlando's. 'What's different? Between the ages of eight and ten? What makes you want to work with older children?'

Richard remains silent, but both facial expression and posture telegraph discomfort.

Orlando's gaze flickers to Richard, then back to Graham. Back to Richard. And back to Graham.

He picks up his beer, his other hand resting in his lap.

'Do you really want to hear me talk about Piaget and Erikson and stages of moral development and the ability for abstract thinking now,' he asks, pauses, sips from his beer while his eyes remain on Graham. 'Or can we just drop the subject and talk about football or something? Cooking, even, if you like.'

Graham remains silent for a moment but keeps looking at Orlando.

Then he sighs and rubs his beard.

'I-' he begins, when his mobile starts ringing. He retrieves it from his pocket and Richard watches his expression soften when he glances at the caller-ID.

'I need to take this,' he says with an apologetic smile.

'Say hi from me,' Richard says and Graham nods, before he gets up to take the call outside.
Orlando doesn't venture to talk once Graham has left and Richard can't really read his expression. Talk to me, he thinks. When Orlando doesn't, he finally asks:

'You'd rather not be here right now? Or would want Graham to be somewhere else?'

Orlando remains quiet for another moment, just looks back at Richard.

Then he puts his glass down.

'I am genuinely sorry, I'm really not trying to pick a fight.'

'I didn't think you were,' Richard says quietly. His fingers tap onto the table cloth and for a moment they seem to want to reach for Orlando's, but then the waiter arrives with their food and he pulls back his hand when he turns to smile at him.

'That looks really good,' Richard offers by way of changing the subject when he has left again.

'It does,' Orlando agrees, glancing at Richard's plate before focusing on his own. He chuckles suddenly. When Richard looks at him, he says,

'I just remembered when I last had a calzone. Last time I was in Italy - trip with you over New Year's excluded. I was drunk the whole time, I think.'

Richard smiles.

'Well, we weren't sober the whole time, either. That New Year's Day hang-over was awful, I almost puked into a bush when I went for that run.'

He picks up his cutlery and starts cutting off a piece of pizza.

'With whom did you go, that other time?'

Orlando is still smirking in reaction to Richard's recollection of the start of the year when he replies.

'Can't recall, was too drunk.'

Richard chuckles and Orlando shakes his head.

'No, kidding. Friends from uni. You remember Josh, the singer of that band we saw?' When Richard nods, Orlando continues, 'It was his stag do, of sorts. Mind, he didn't end up marrying her after all, but I doubt that Rome had anything to do with it. It's all a bit fuzzy. Except for the calzones,' he picks up his cutlery and uses the fork to point at his plate. 'I remember those.'

Richard can only hum, as he has a bit of pizza in his mouth. He chews, swallows, then says:

'Probably a good way to cure a hang-over, lots of sugar, fat, salt. And tasty, most importantly.'

He cuts another slice of pizza, then looks back up at Orlando.

'I really had a good time, in Rome, with you.'

'Yeah, same,' Orlando agrees before falling silent for a moment to chew. He lets his gaze briefly rake over the other patrons, habitually, without thinking, but it lingers at the entrance to which Graham left.

'Which club does Graham support?' he asks when he has swallowed. 'Celtic?'
Everyone (well almost everyone) follows football. Reason why it comes right after the weather, where safe topics are concerned.

Richard's brow furrows while he tries to recall Graham's football preferences.

'I think he does,' he finally says with an apologetic half shrug. 'But you know that I'm a lost cause where football is concerned, he stopped trying to get me to watch football with him 15 years ago.'

He is silent for a moment before he suggests:

'Ask him, when he gets back. If you'd not rather- I can ask him to leave, if you'd rather not give this another try.'

Orlando stops chewing. He looks at Richard for a long moment, before he swallows his current bite.

'I don't understand,' he says, after another long moment.

'Which part?' Richard asks and lets his fork sink.

'Well not the bit about football,' Orlando replies, however, aiming for a lighter tone. It doesn't sit too well with him, though. Never has.

'I don't understand what you're asking. And why. And what the consequences are.' His frown deepens. 'I don't understand.'

'I'm not quite sure that I do, either,' Richard says after a moment.

'I'm asking if you'd rather spend the rest of the night just with me. And I'm asking that because I got the feeling that you had to force yourself somehow to have this conversation just now. I don't know, force maybe is a bit too strong. But Graham seems to have managed to strike a nerve, somehow, too. So if you'd rather not talk to him more, that's fine, you don't have to, not for me.'

He pauses.

'I don't know what you mean when you're asking after consequences, though.'

Orlando shakes his head and puts his cutlery down.

'I don't have to force myself to talk to him,' he says levelly. 'I was trying to be - I know that I antagonize most people I meet,' he adds in the same tone of voice. 'I don't mind that either. I wouldn't care if we didn't get along. But you do.' He pauses for a moment, hesitates, but then says, 'So I think it's not about whether I want him to leave or not.'

Richard puts his cutlery down, too, reaches for his napkin and wipes his lips before he pushes his plate away from himself a little and picks up his wine glass. He regards its contents for a moment, before he takes a sip and sets it back down.

His expression is calm when he turns back towards Orlando, as is his voice.

'I'd like for the two of you to get along, yes. And I'd not very much like having to ask my best friend to leave. But I'm not going to have a good evening, either, if neither of you is enjoying this.'

Orlando stares at him unblinking.

'And now what?' he asks.
'I don't know,' Richard says and scratches his brow. 'It never once occurred to me that the two of you might not get along.'

His eyes travel from Orlando to the door, then back again, while his fingernail worries the table cloth.

'Could you try again?'

Orlando's gaze hasn't followed Richard to the door but slipped from his face down to his hand and its small erratic motions on the table. He licks his lips, looks back up.

'Celtic, you guess?' he then says and picks up his cutlery again to divide his calzone in neat even pieces. 'They put a six million pound price tag on Armstrong and are about to lose Moussa Dembele to Dortmund if they're not careful.'

Richard's lips instantly quirk up, but he doesn't reply straight away, just regards Orlando.

'Thank you,' he then says quietly and picks up his cutlery again.

'Six million? That must be a lot, even in the world of football?'

Orlando doesn't look up from his task but lifts his shoulders slightly.

'You should not look up what Neymar cost Saint Germain, mate.'

Finished he looks back up, one piece of calzone on his fork.

'Sean likes to say that the transfer market reminds him of the tulip fever of the mid-1600s. I think he is setting the bar too low.'

Richard raises his brows.

'Tulip fever?'

Orlando responds with a quizzical hum but when Richard just continues to look curious, he says,

'Tulip mania, in the early 1600s? First speculative bubble in financial history?'

Richard merely shakes his head, and this time Orlando doesn't question it.

'Sorry. Sean is both a big fan of flowers as of historical tidbits. The tulip came from Persia, right, and as it was rare and exotic, it became massively fashionable and ridiculously expensive. Like, 12 acres of land for one single bulb. That kind of expensive.'

Richard shakes his head, amused.

'I've never heard of that. But it sounds even crazier than spending millions of pounds on the legs of a man, if you ask me.'

'I won't argue with that,' Orlando says easily. 'But then, I don't like flowers and watching Neymar play is brilliant.'

'Noted,' Richard says with an easy smile. 'Where's he from, then? Do I have the chance to see him play during the World Cup?'

He looks up when he sees the door open.
'Graham is coming back,' he says quietly.

Richard smiles at Graham when he approaches the table and is met with an equally unreserved smile.

'Sorry,' he says, hand briefly squeezing Richard's shoulder before he sits back down.

'My daughter refused to go to bed before having told me all about her day. I know hell of a lot about the intricate details of kindergarten life now, including who peed their pants today.'

'Well,' Richard says with a chuckle. 'I hope Annie wasn't among them. But- Orlando and I actually were just talking about football.'

He says that as if he's dangling a carrot in front of Graham's face and Graham laughs.

'Now that can't be true. I haven't heard you talking about football since you graduated med school.'

'Come on, I watched a game with you not so terribly long ago.'

Graham blinks.

'Do you recall where we watched that game, too?'

Richard shrugs.

'At yours. Elliot was there, too.'

'Exactly. And she was very pregnant. So, not so very long ago is a bit of stretch.'

Richard chuckles.

'Fair enough. But Orlando was just telling me about a pair of legs worth at least twice as much as the Netherland's tulip reserves, from the sound of it, and I've got to see those now. What was the name of that guy? Naydar?'

Orlando picks up another piece of his calzone, registering Graham's confused look.

'Richard doesn't know who Neymar is,' he then says to him, face and voice calm. 'Asked me whether he could watch him play during the World Cup.'

Graham looks only partly surprised and shakes his head at Richard in mock disappointment.

'I've been trying for years, but I think he's immune. Lost to tennis at a very young age,' he then says with a sigh.

'Hey,' Richard says and points his fork at Graham.

'Give me some credit, I'm trying to learn. Neymar. Which country is he playing for? Or do I have to get out my phone?'

'Brazil,' Graham and Orlando answer at exactly the same moment.

'Outside the World Cup he plays for Paris Saint Germain,' Orlando adds when Graham doesn't but just looks at him. 'They paid 220 Million Euros for him.'

He switches his gaze from Richard to Graham now.

'I was saying that Celtic tries to discourage clubs from buying Armstrong with their six million tag.'
That's what brought this on.'

'220 million? You're messing with me, right?' Richard asks, incredulous.

'Not at all,' Graham says. 'It was the most expensive transfer ever, I think.'

Orlando nods.

'Neymar, Coutinho, Dembele, Pogba, Bale, Ronaldo. Top six. Together they cost about the GDP of Samoa.'

Richard frowns.

Graham regards him for a moment, then says:

'You disapprove.'

Richard chuckles without mirth.

'Of course I fucking disapprove. It's why I stay away from all of this in the first place.'

Orlando licks his lips and needs a second to get his knee-jerk reaction to Richard cursing, no matter the cause, back in check.

Then he picks up his beer and says:

'I agree. "From all of this" should include tennis, though. Federer alone is worth way more than 100 Million.'

'Fuck off,' Richard says, laughing, 'you're ruining my anger.'

The corners of Orlando's mouth twitch and he sips from his beer before he replies,

'Wouldn't want that, mate. Ignore what I said.'

Richard meets Orlando's eyes for a moment longer than necessary while his smile widens and his knee seeks out Orlando's under the table again.

'Seriously,' he then says with emphasis, 'this is so damned cynical that it makes me nauseous, to make deals like this and feed this whole machinery that has no other purpose that dulling peoples' minds while the whole fucking world falls apart around us.'

Orlando tilts his head.

'The sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions; opium of the people?' he suggests.

'If you're inclined to call football a religion,' Graham says. 'But I don't know if it's wise to get Richard started on religion now, too.'

Richard shakes his head.

'You know perfectly well that that's never wise. And I disagree. Panem and circensis, rather, the overfed western population that only cares about consume and distraction, that chooses distraction above all else.'
'I think there is a flaw to that reasoning,' Orlando says, his leg still against Richard's. 'Either you argue for man's the ability to choose - which then has to include religion. God is something man made up and chooses to believe in, chooses to make others believe in. Or you say that we don't have free will but are driven by our desires and our need to satisfy them.'

Richard smiles, Orlando's interjection does not come as a surprise.

'Both are the product of choice to me, what I meant when I said I disagree was the notion of oppression. I refuse to let oppression count as an excuse for the choices people make in European countries today.'

Orlando contemplates that for a moment, finger tapping absently against the outside of his glass.

'Yeah, all right,' he says then, lifting a shoulder at the same time as he inclines his head in a small nod. 'A discussion about free will or not in general still pending, I agree that blaming it all on oppression and be done with it would be the lazy way out. But that of course means that you put a lot of faith in our democracy and our society in general, to put it mildly. Because yeah, that nonage is self-imposed because it doesn't lie in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage, to mangle Kant here, but he didn't have to take modern media into account, did he.' He pauses for a moment, thinking. 'Just because you won't get executed for making different choices doesn't mean you're actually able, equipped to and aren't actually in danger of drowning in information.'

Richard shakes his head.

'I think everybody is able to make that decision. And yes, maybe I completely overestimate people's capacities and abilities by doing so. But it's not rocket science. You can allow your focus to shrink to distractions- whether it's sports, games, telenovelas, possessions, appearance - and create a cozy little bubble for yourself or you can choose not to. And turn off the telly and talk about something else. People drowning in the Mediterranean, for example, and ports closing for ships that try and save them.'

'Or families being ripped apart when trying to cross the border between Mexico and the US, thousands of civilians dying in Yemen, bombs detonating in Afghanistan every day,' Graham adds. 'But yes, maybe you are, maybe you are overestimating people's capacities.'

Orlando looks back and forth between Richard and Graham, even a second after Graham ended.

'I am not gonna argue with you that it would be good if everyone did that,' he then says levelly. 'But I think it is absolutely unrealistic to expect it.'

'Granted,' Richard says with a little nod. 'But I'm not inclined to leave it at 'mankind consists of morons, so let's just have a party while it lasts'. I think the question should always be what we, as a society, want to be normal, want to be acceptable, want to be what we are measured by.'

Graham hums, not really seeming to either fully agree, nor disagree with him.

'And now you are going to argue that boycott is a brilliant way of influencing public opinion and creating discourse.'

Richard smiles at him and shrugs while he takes a sip of wine, then picks up a piece of pizza and takes a bite before he even remembers that he was given cutlery.

'You know me. Of course I am.'

'Normally I would not be opposed to a good protest or boycott,' Orlando says. 'But not where United is concerned. Sorry, mate.'
Richard meets his eyes.

'And how do you decide where to draw a line? What is worth your protest? And in extension, what is your protest worth?'

Orlando's brows draw together.

'What is it "worth"? he asks with a shake of his head. 'Don't know what to do with that.'

He doesn't wait for Richard to clarify, however.

'As to where I draw the line? Football actually. Yeah, some of the sums are ridiculous, no question. It's an industry, no question about that either, and like any industry it's not immune to abuse. But that's not it either. When my kids - any kids - play, they exercise and it's team building. And following a club, be in the stadium with your mates, that's a way for people to connect, to let off tension in a safe environment, safer than any nationalist group or religious cult in any case. Plenty of things I'd probably agree with you. Not football, though.'

'I'm with you there, on the exercise and the team building effects, and the joy,' Graham says. 'But this is in no way inseparably connected with the industry, or is it, you don't need the industry for any of this. Or very little of it, anyway. You simply need people who share the same interest.'

'All right, I'll bite,' Orlando says and takes his glass from the table before leaning back in his chair, settling. 'Tell me how you'd do it. Reform pro football.'

'Cut all the crap,' Graham says and curls his fingers around his glass. 'The transfer fees, the insane amount of money the public networks pay for the rights to broadcast, the gimmicks, scale it back down to a sport again that people actively engage in.'

'I'd try to get rid of the stale breath of nationalism while I'm at it,' Richard adds, before he picks up another slice of pizza.

Orlando looks back and forth between Richard and Graham.

'What do you want me to respond to first? Because how money is distributed in pro football - and by the way, not even 15 % of last year's transfers even involved a fee at all, even if we're not taking into consideration that the fees are there for a reason, and I doubt you want to go back to ye old retain-and-transfer pre 1963, do you?' He switches from looking at Graham to Richard. 'Anyway, the distribution of money in pro football has nothing to do with what you call "stale breath of nationalism". Which, honestly, is such a fucking simplification of how mass dynamics work, at a sporting event or elsewhere, that I really don't know how to respond to that at all.'

Richard grins at Orlando.

'Now, this is starting to be fun.'

Graham chuckles.

'I agree. If we want to continue this discussion you need to explain what you mean by retain-and-transfer pre 1963, please. I have no idea.'

'Predictably, neither have I,' Richard adds and wipes his fingers on his napkin. Orlando opens his mouth and closes it again. Once more his eyes dart back and forth between Richard and Graham, giving the latter a skeptical look that should telegraph that he doesn't quite believe him.
With Richard, that is probably a different matter indeed, though. So he shrugs and says,

'Basically it was meant the restriction of transfer to keep richer clubs from luring away all the good players. Once you registered with a club, you couldn't move to another, if the club didn't agree. If you didn't want to play for them anymore, bad luck. Quit playing altogether then. Transfer fees were a way around that, if you will. That was the system for 70 years, until a court ruling deemed the "retain" part of it unreasonable.'

He looks back at Graham.

'My point is, of course I agree that Neymar's transfer fee is ridiculous. I compared it to the fucking tulip fever, for fuck's sake, which is the stupidest financial bubble in history. But transfer fees are almost as old as pro football itself, and money has always played a role in big sport, dating back to Ancient Rome. That is how competition works.'

Richard shakes his head.

'I disagree. With your way of phrasing this. Maybe money did play a part in sports in ancient Rome, but that is not "how competition works".'

'You mean money is not an inherent part? Competition, in sports or not, does not need a monetary incentive?'

'Exactly,' Richard replies without losing a beat, 'I think it doesn't need one.'

'But it does,' Orlando says simply. 'It's not the only incentive, no, but a massive one. The other is fame which really is just another currency. That is just -' he stops, grows, shakes his head. 'That is just a fact.'

Richard shakes his head.

'It's not a universal truth. It's-

He gets interrupted by the waiter who, when Richard looks up at him with a polite, but still genuine smile, asks if everything was to their satisfaction and whether he can clear the plates.

Orlando just nods, eyes still fixed on Richard, waiting for him to continue, but Richard exchanges a couple of words with the waiter. When he picks up Richard's plate, the fork slides off it and knocks over his wine glass, still half full. The red stain spreads quickly on the white table cloth, but while the waiter freezes, Richard reaches out instinctively, and quickly uprights the glass again, before all its contents can spill and run onto his jeans. His sleeve has gotten a bit wet, though, and he reaches for his napkin to dry it.

The waiter is embarrassed and apologizes profusely, but Richard stays calm, stays polite, tells him that accidents happen, he isn't wet through, the wine won't leave a stain on his black shirt.

'Seriously, Richard,' Graham says when the waiter has left. 'How can you remain that calm? Half your sleeve is wet.'

Richard exhales audibly, then just shrugs and first rolls up the sleeve in question, then the other one.

'It's warm, it's going to dry quickly.'

For maybe a self-indulgent moment too long Orlando's gaze remains on Richard's now exposed lower arms before it slides over the shirt front, the collar up to Richard's face again.

'Is that the same shirt that got partially drenched in champagne on New Year's Eve?' he asks. 'In that
bar, with the French blokes?’

Orlando’s wandering gaze has not escaped Richard, nor Graham, for that matter, but while Graham has lowered his eyes to his glass, Richard has kept looking at Orlando and now smiles.

‘I think it is, yes,’ he says with a wink, eyes lingering on Orlando’s a bit longer than strictly necessary, before he turns towards Graham.

‘And that sounds more exciting than it was.’

Graham grins at him.

‘Why don’t I believe that,’ he says teasingly, then adds: ‘But speaking of Rome, is there anything you can recommend that we should see? We’re going there for a week at the end of August.’

Orlando waits for Richard to respond to that who just gives him a small ‘after you’ shrug.

‘The non-Catholic cemetery is great, and getting thrown out of the Vatican museum was a lark,’ Orlando says deadpan, but also immediately continues while looking at Graham, ‘Though maybe not entirely what you were asking for, I reckon.’

He shrugs and thinks for a moment, looks at Richard for help.

‘I don’t know,’ he then adds, ‘did we do anything family-friendly?’

Graham bursts into laughter and Richard looks pained.

‘Way to go and phrase that,’ he mutters in Orland’s direction but his tone betrays his amusement.

Graham nudges his arm.

‘Tell me about the museum.’

‘No,’ Richard says.

‘Yes,’ Graham replies.

‘Ask Orlando. It was his fault.’

‘Yeah, it was,’ Orlando says easily. ‘The wealth hoarded there makes Neymar’s transfer fee look like fucking pocket change in comparison. I got angry, Richard had a laughing fit, we were politely asked to vacate the premises.’

Richard again is grinning, and Orlando responds with the subdued version of it.

‘You lie without batting an eyelid,’ Richard says and shakes his head, still grinning.

‘To conclude this and as a fyi- kissing is frowned upon inside the Vatican Museum. Not that that was something you had planned now, was it?’

Graham’s grin gets so wide he almost pulls a muscle.

‘Well, you certainly make it sound like fun.’

‘Sod off,’ Richard grumbles good-naturedly.

‘I think I actually liked that cemetry best,’ he then says. ‘Oh, and the catacombes.’
'Bit too goth for me, that tour we did,' Orlando disagrees with a shrug. 'But yeah, it was all right, I guess.'

Graham scratches his eyebrow.

'Well, we'll have to see how much Annie can take. Sometimes museums are fine, if she finds something that interests her, sometimes she gets restless. But I think she'll love the Colosseum. Anyway,' he takes a sip from his beer, then looks first at Richard, then at Orlando, 'what do you two have planned for your holidays?'

There is something off about Richard's reaction. Orlando sees it but can't put words to it right away. He waits for Richard to reply to Graham's question for a moment, but when he doesn't and Graham quirks an eyebrow, Orlando chooses to answer.

'I'm going on a motorcycling trip, with a couple of mates, like every year.' He glances back to Richard. 'I'm not sure about you - did you say?'

Richard doesn't meet Orlando's eyes, his gaze flickers away, to his own fingers, thumb worrying the nail of the index finger.

'I haven't planned anything yet,' he says, voice a little hoarse.

He feels Graham's eyes on him, Orlando's, and reaches for his glass.

Consciously straightening his expression he then says:

'Portugal, maybe. Or Northern Spain.'

Orlando still doesn't get it. Graham is looking at Richard, and Orlando sees something there, understanding; but that still doesn't help him. Which is just fucking great, now he is supposed to guess two people's thoughts.

'Portugal must be nice,' he says because that seems like something no one could find offence in. 'At least according to Sean, he keeps going back there.'

He takes a sip from his drink, looks back and forth between Richard and Graham; still doesn't get it. And common places about Southern Europe don't seem to make a difference either. Well, to someone who doesn't have to wear motorcycling gear all day.

'He also said St Petersburg was great this time of the year,' he carries on. Sean's travelling information usually focusses on where he could buy British food, but he leaves that out. Mostly because St Petersburg does sound great.

He takes another sip of beer, looks at Richard; still doesn't get it. Fuck it, though.

'When you're back from Spain or Portugal and it's still summer break, we could go there for a bit, if you're interested?'

Richard's eyes widen and Graham's expression softens when looks at him.

'St. Petersburg is beautiful,' he says, both directed at Orlando and Richard, then gets up.

'Excuse me for a second, I'll be right back.'

Richard's eyes follow Graham on the way to the Gents, then he slowly turns back towards Orlando and looks at him, a smile slowly stealing onto his face.
'Or you could come with me to Portugal?' he asks quietly. 'I've been meaning to ask you for quite some time if you'd like to.'

Orlando pulls a face but shrugs.

'What are we gonna do in Portugal in the middle of summer? Lie on the beach and complain about the temperatures?'

The corners of Richard's mouth twitch.

'Well, I thought climb and surf. But maybe you're right, it's probably scorchingly hot.'

He pauses and just regards Orlando for a second, two.

'That means you want to, though? Do something together?'

'Yeah, course,' Orlando says easily. 'Why wouldn't I? If you can get off.'

Richard nods.

'I can. I asked for two weeks during the school holidays.'

He pauses.

'Back in January, actually.'

Orlando shakes his head a little, more confused than anything else.

'Why didn't you tell me? It's not the second and third week, though, is it? Cause I can't, then.'

Richard nods.

'I think it's either the fourth and fifth or fifth and sixth week. And it doesn't have to be Portugal.'

He needs a moment to find the right words to respond to the first part of Orlando's question.

'First I didn't ask because- it was January, we'd just gotten back from Rome basically, and-'

He takes a deep breath.

'It felt safer not to assume that- I don't know. My last relationship left me brain damaged.'

Orlando's brows knot together more tightly.

'I'd very much like to go somewhere with you.'

Orlando nods distractedly in response to the question.

'Sure, anywhere, whatever,' he agrees automatically, before starting to say something else, then closing his mouth again.

Only with a moment's delay he shakes his head and says,

'I reckon you don't mean it that way, but honestly, if this is you with brain damage? You're so fucking smart as it is; I'd get a complex if you were even -'

He stops. Shakes his head again.
'Sorry. Ignore that. That's not what you meant.' For a third time he shakes his head, irritated with himself now.

'Sorry. You were saying, what?'

Richard lets his voice drop.

'I want to take you home now.'

That tone, Orlando understands without difficulty.

'I would suggest the Gents, but your mate is in there. I think that might be awkward.'

Richard pulls a face, laughing.

'You think?'

He stretches out his leg and rests it against Orlando's.

'There he comes now.'

Orlando’s gaze automatically follow Richard's towards Graham who makes his way back to their table. He is smiling that smile again that Orlando can't place properly. And seriously, if they were with any of Orlando's mates, Orlando would just get up now, say bye and maybe 'cause we want to fuck now' in response to anyone asking why the haste.

But since reading Richard's friends is pretty much as difficult as reading Richard is from time to time, and since it's been Richard who invited him over, Orlando swallows down any remark on sudden retreats.

Instead he waits for Graham to sit down, prepared to ask him about St Petersburg and actually listen to whatever he has to say about that city to in his estimation looks like Disney turned into an malevolent architect. But whatever.

'You don't mind if I take the train that leaves a quarter past, do you? I'm knackered,' Graham says, smiling at both Richard and Orlando. 'And Annie's going to wake up with the first birds, I fear.'

'Not at all,' Richard replies and manages to keep the grin from his face, but presses his knee a little more firmly against Orlando's. 'We'll call it a night, too, we just talked about it.'

From the corner of his eyes he sees Orlando's lips twitch.

'We can walk together to the bridge, if you want.'

He signals the waiter to bring the check and before Graham or Orlando can reach for their wallets, he adds:

'Dinner is on me.'

'Cheers, mate,' Orlando says simply, and Graham, too, thanks Richard for the invitation, albeit after a little token protest, delivered with a smile, which Richard deflects with the same kind of softness.

While Richard pays and tips generously as usual and Graham picks up his jacket from where he left it next to the door, Orlando briefly checks his phone.

Nothing from JC, so all quiet on the Western front. There are seven messages from Karl, though, all
with such a content that Orlando deems it warranted to reply: 'Order in, you fucking idiot' before switching his phone off again.

He looks up as he gets up and already finds Richard standing next to the table and Graham by the door.

'Soz,' he says as they cross the restaurant. 'Karl. Idiot. 20 quid that Beth is not gonna fuck him tonight.'

Richard chuckles.

'Well, it's a good thing that I can cook, then,' he says quietly when he lets Orlando step past him.

They have already put a good 50 metres between themselves and the restaurant, when Graham freezes, pats his pockets, then sighs.

'I left my glasses on the table,' he says. 'Sorry. Continue without me, it's fine.'

'Don't be ridiculous, we'll wait,' Richard says, and Graham apologizes again before he turns around and hurries back.

With a smile, Richard turns fully towards Orlando, then reaches out and wraps his fingers around his wrist.

'Come here,' he says, voice soft, and tugs at his arm.

Orlando doesn't really put up any resistance when Richard tugs again. He even pulls one hand out of the pocket of his jeans and lets it rest loosely on Richard's hip as Richard pulls him in.

'Mate,' he says, however, when the smile on Richard's lips changes to something very tale-telling. And his voice is low and mocking both when he continues, 'I'm not gonna have a snog with you here. Not when your fucking flat is, like, twenty minutes away.'

He grips Richard's hip a little more firmly and doesn't pull away, but he shakes his head and chuckles.

Richard doesn't miss a beat.

'This really can't wait 20 minutes, though,' he replies, eyes fixed on Orlando's while he slides one hand into the small of Orlando's back and wraps the other around his neck to pull him closer.

'I've been hard half the fucking time.'

Orlando's brows draw even further together.

'Richard,' he growls and doesn't pull away, doesn't lean in. 'Don't fucking tell me that. I mean it. I will drag you back into that restaurant.'

'No, you won't,' Richard says, tightening his grip while he leans in, eyes bright.

'I'm going to kiss you now, because I'm gonna fucking lose it if I don't. And then we're going to walk to that bridge with Graham and while I'm making small talk, you can think about all the things you want to do to me or want to have done to you once we're back at mine.'

Orlando turns his head a bit to laugh, still not pulling away and shakes his head. Then he puts his free hand against Richard's chest and looks back at him.
'Fuck you, Richard,' he says, voice gravelly.

Richard hums, then quickly moves his hand from Orlando's hip to his jaw, cups his cheek in his palm and pulls him into a kiss, the fingers of his other hand taking a steady grip on his hair.

Orlando grunts but parts his lips, lets Richard feel his teeth for an instant before he allows him to deepen the kiss. His hand on Richard's chest grips his shirt, and he fucking wants to push against him because he knows Richard wasn't kidding; he will find him at least half-hard.

A soft moan escapes Richard's throat, the sound almost lost between them. Orlando is not fighting him for the upper hand, allows him to lick into his mouth, and Richard does, and does again when he tightens his grip on Orlando's neck and takes another half step forwards, presses against him.

Fuck. Orlando's brain reacts half a second too late, pointing out rather insistently that this is indeed a really bad idea. Too late, though. His hand trapped between their chests, Richard's heartbeat, Richard's hips against his, and Orlando can feel that he is hard, and fuck, fuck, fuck.

Orlando goes still in his arms, really still, fingers still gripping his shirt, and Richard stills, too, then pulls back a little, just a little, their lips still touch, but they simply share a breath now.

Against his hip he can feel him, can feel his cock pressing against him, hard as well.

'Orlando,' he whispers, before kissing him again.

Orlando growls, for an instant just yields and again lets Richard in and then it's not an instant anymore because yeah, that was it for his reserve and reason and whatever. He tightens his hold on Richard's chest and he doesn't grind against him, but that's about it. Instead he tilts his head, shifts his weight so he can make up for the height difference between them - and that's enough of Richard controlling the pace of that kiss now.

Orlando kisses him back with enough force to knock their teeth together and the breath out of him and he can all but just hold on, just cling to him and let himself be kissed dizzy.

Orlando's thoughts zone in on this as he closes his eyes, tastes Richard, hears his heavy breathing, feels his hands, his body against his own, feels his low, almost pained moan on his tongue -

He breaks the kiss abruptly, pulls his head back enough to draw in a sharp breath. And while his left hand remains on Richard's hip, his right pushes against his chest, and quite hard, too.

'You fucking bastard,' he growls and again pushes against Richard's chest as he looks back at him with narrowed eyes and somewhat breathless. 'I told you this was a stupid idea.'

Richard looks surprised while he still is busy trying to get enough oxygen into his lungs, and brain, then breaks into laughter.

Behind him, Graham clears his throat.

Richard shakes his head and runs the back of his hand over his mouth before he disentangles himself from Orlando and turns around to Graham.

'Let's just not talk about this,' Graham says and ruins Richard's attempt at reigning his laughter in.

Orlando, too, runs his hand over his lips, still rather wet from Richard's spit.

'Oh, no, we're not gonna talk about this,' he says, though, with the driest of humour and gestures at
Richard. 'His plan is to make small talk with you now. Have fun with that.'

It's Graham's turn to laugh.

'Alright,' he says.

'So, I'm reading this book about immigration to Europe-

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