A Bowl Full of Oyster Crackers

by heelbruiser

Summary

A series of short, 100-word stories that follow Stan and Kyle through the years.

Notes

This was a bit of a challenge for myself; I wanted to try my hand at 100-word stories and see what kind of depth or poignancy I could convey in such a stringent limit. It was difficult, but some of these I'm pretty happy with.

Anyway, I plan to publish the first five all at once, then one more every day (or every other day, depending) until I reach the last. I hope you enjoy! xx
Glitter

They make construction paper turkeys in pre-school near Thanksgiving. Stan’s come out wonky; he can’t seem to cut directly on the line. Kyle offers to do it for him.

Stan watches him, careful and slow. Kyle sticks his tongue out to concentrate.

When he returns the turkey, its edges are neatly cut—even the feathers. Stan stares for a minute before he asks, somewhat shyly, “I’m your best friend, right?”

“Only if I’m yours,” Kyle says.

They agree they’re best friends and share red glitter; it’s the same shade as Kyle’s hair.

Stan returns home with a new favorite color.
At seven, Stan is a natural ice skater, and Kyle is not. He wants to join his friends on the frozen pond, but wobbles helplessly on his skates. He clings to a tree and watches instead.

Stan asks why he won’t skate; Kyle admits that he doesn’t know how. Taking his gloved hand, Stan leads him to the ice.

They stay hours after most of their friends have left. Kyle still falls, but Stan picks him up each time to try again, promising not to let go.

A whole year later, Kyle can’t skate if Stan doesn’t hold his hand.
The Toy Aisle

Stan realizes he can’t remember meeting Kyle, which becomes mildly upsetting; he asks his mother if she knows.

She thinks for a minute before frowning, eyes growing wide. “You just turned three,” she says.

According to her, Stan wandered off in the grocery store. When she ran to the service desk, crying about him being missing, Sheila was already there—Kyle was lost too. That’s how the two of them met, apparently.

“Where was I?” he asks.

“With Kyle, of course,” his mother says, smiling. “Playing with cars in the toy aisle.”

Stan decides that he wasn’t really lost, then.
Funny

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stan broods in the basement, nibbling on a stale pretzel. He watches Dougie, Pip, and Butters play Charades. Through the concrete walls, he can hear the reverb of party music and the laughter of their parents, sipping champagne and basking in child-free reverie. He wonders what Kyle’s doing—if he’s having fun without him. He hopes not.

He remembers what his father said: “You can’t just hang out with your buddy Kyle all the time. People will think you guys are…y’know. Funny.”

But Kyle is funny; Stan questions why his father said this as if it was a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired from Seas. 3, Ep. 8: "Two Guys Naked in a Hot Tub."
Older Siblings

Shelly babysits the two when their parents go downtown one night; they have Easy Mac for dinner and only get to watch boring, reality TV. When Stan leaves the room, Kyle asks why Shelly’s so mean to him.

“Because he’s a stupid turd,” she sneers.

They have one thing in common—he thinks of Ike. “You’re his older sister,” he says, feeling brazen. “You need to be nicer and look out for him.”

Her face softens before she glares, telling Kyle to shut up.

Kyle grins when Stan can’t retrieve a glass from the cupboard, and Shelly begrudgingly helps him.
Sign of the Cross

Sunday mornings are spent waiting on Stan’s porch.

Stan returns from church one morning in a blue button-up and slacks, strangely quiet when they walk around the block, gaze glued to his scuffed dress shoes. Kyle asks if something’s wrong. Stan recaps Father Maxi’s ominous sermon and crosses himself—something Kyle has never seen him do. He mumbles with certainty that he’ll end up in Hell.

He shirks away from Kyle’s hand when he gently touches his shoulder.

Kyle is comforted by his disbelief in such things; if even Stan could end up there, Heaven seems an unjust, empty place.
Sitting on the bed, Stan gently touches the short, auburn bristles of hair on Kyle’s scalp.

“It’ll grow back.”

“I know, asshole.”

Stan frowns. “I’ll shave my head if you want me to,” he says.

Kyle ignores him and broods his public humiliation, his indignation simmering to dull annoyance. After some time, he sits up to ask, “Would you really shave your head for me?”

“Of course, dude.”

Kyle nods and doesn’t say anything. *Of course*, he thinks. *Of course.*

Fifteen minutes later, Stan leaves for the bathroom, and Kyle scrambles from his bed when he hears hair clippers vibrating.

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**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Inspired by Seas. 17, Ep. 6: "Ginger Cow."
“Fuck you, Kyle!”

The whirr of being knocked from the lunch table obscures all else—all Kyle knows is he’s now on the ground, their classmates surreal cheering, the unadulterated strangeness of seeing his own blood on Stan’s knuckles and struggling to defend himself from the only other sane person in town. Or, so he thought. Kyle swings at his head with minor reservation.

Outside Mr. Mackey’s office, Stan swears he’ll never speak to him again.

Stan spends the night at his house nine days later; neither of them mentions the fight, and they sleep in the same bed.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by Seas. 19, Ep. 8: "Truth and Advertising."
Stan wants to weep when he looks in the mirror; at twelve, long after the Wendyl-Erica debacle, the pink and blue gender lines are still blurred. He’s not sure he’s a boy; he doesn’t feel like a girl. A discreet excursion into Shelly’s closet for a dress should’ve induced some baptismal tide of catharsis, but it doesn’t.

He turns to see Kyle’s eyebrows arched, arms folded. Stan mumbles, “You probably think this is weird,” while pinching the lacy hem.

“It’s fine if you wanna wear a dress, Stan,” Kyle says. “I just don’t think yellow is your color, is all.”

Inspired by Seas. 19, Ep. 3; "The Cissy", though set years after the original time of the episode.
“I guess this means you’re a man now?”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but I don’t think so.”

“You don’t feel any different?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well, I think you already look older.”

“You’re just saying that. I mean, you’re older than I am.”

“Just barely.”

“I wouldn’t call seven months ‘barely’, Stan.”

“Okay. So?”

“So, if anything, you’re the man, not me.”

“Are you saying you’re still the baby?”

“I’m not the baby!”

“You are the youngest.”

“I mean, yeah, but—whatever. I’m not a baby. I’m a man now, apparently.”

“Yeah, but you’re always gonna be the baby to me.”
Alaska

Two weeks before summer ends, Stan is stuck pretending to fish in Jimbo’s canoe, wishing he was with Kyle in Connecticut. He shrugs when Jimbo asks if something is wrong.

“You miss your buddy Kyle, don’tcha?”

Stan glowers; Jimbo laughs, patting his back. He offers a sip of his beer if Stan promises to keep it secret, and tells him about the two years he lived in Alaska with Ned after Vietnam in a tiny cabin in the woods.

“Just me and him,” Jimbo says wistfully. “That was all we needed.”

Stan wonders if Kyle would ever move to Alaska.
The first thing Kyle says when Stan answers the phone at two in the morning is, “Am I a good person?”

Kyle doesn’t hear Stan’s reassurances over his own neurotic rambling—or chooses not to—because he’s hysterical with the idea that he’s vindictive and selfish, a spiteful brat, and how could he, or anyone, be a good person if right and wrong are morally relative, anyway?

Stan endures Kyle’s existential babbling until he passes out around four. Never one to despair over his own virtue, he figures only a person as good as Kyle could worry that he isn’t.
When Stan comes over, Kyle slouches on his bed, lamenting his three days suspension for fighting. He still hasn’t cleaned himself up. Stan licks his sleeve and wipes the dried blood from his nose. “Ugh, Kyle,” he huffs. “C’mon.”

“I’m not gonna let anyone call me a kike, Stan.”

“Dude, I get it, but—”

“No. You don’t.”

Stan seethes, then softens. Kyle criticizes his passivity; Stan wishes he understood Kyle’s visceral command for justice. He admires and fears it.

“You’re right,” he concedes. “I don’t.”

Kyle sighs and relaxes into Stan's palm, allowing him to rub away the errant blood.
Kyle realizes he’s gay in eighth grade.

They read *A Separate Peace* in Honors English; his teacher explains it was recently removed from the list of banned books for its homoerotic subtext.

Kyle resents his kinship with Gene, the uncanny parallels between Stan and Finny, both charming and athletic. In class, they debate why Gene jounces the tree branch; Kyle only listens for once, quiet. He’s devastated when Finny dies.

After school, when Stan suddenly races him to the bus, Kyle concludes that like Finny is part of Gene, Stan is part of him.

And Kyle realizes he loves Stan.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve ever read *A Separate Peace*: I think there are a lot of really interesting similarities with regards to Stan and Kyle’s relationship in that it’s two sets of boys—one of them an athlete, the other more a scholar—who are constantly trying to basically be the other through their shared competitiveness and their immediate affinity for the other. I hope this wasn't an obscure enough reference that it voids the meaning in this story if you aren't familiar, but I felt such a striking resemblance in their relationships that I wanted to involve it somehow.
Cold Showers

Masturbation finds its way into Stan’s morning routine rather easily, replacing the long stretch of shower time he reserved for simply spacing out. Normally, he doesn’t imagine anything—just focuses on the feeling, eyes shut, his tongue pinched between his teeth.

One morning he thinks of Kyle. Stan fantasizes about his short, clean fingernails, soft lips always coated with Chapstick, Kyle’s uneven eyelashes, distressed when he can’t seem to stop. He comes in his hand with equal parts guilt and relief.

He can’t look Kyle in the eye for two days; it doesn’t stop Stan from thinking about him, though.
They flicker through the evening news; the police are still looking for that missing Denver boy. The two of them are not much older.

Sharon frowns and tsks when she hears this, gently laying her hand on Stan’s head. She strokes his hair and tells Stan she loves him. He responds with a grunt of vague reciprocation.

Kyle is appalled. When Sharon patters toward the kitchen, he slaps Stan’s arm and demands he tell his mother he loves her.

Stan’s defense is simply, “She knows that I do.”

Kyle wonders if Stan won’t say it to him for this reason.
Kyle oversees Stan pouring out the Jameson, arms folded. It’s infuriating and despairing all the same. Stan mourns the whiskey when it’s gone, gripping tightly at the bottle. He’s still dazed and glossy-eyed, tense when Kyle palms his jaw. “You don’t need that shit,” he says.

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Stan, you—”

“I said ‘okay.’”

Kyle forces Stan to bed, studying his parents when he ventures downstairs for water: Sharon, in all her kindness, oblivious. Randy, just plain oblivious.

Kyle sleeps at the foot of Stan’s bed. Even if Stan hates him, he refuses to ever again let go.
The Night Before the Fourth of July

The night before the Fourth of July is spent in the woods with a crate of illegal fireworks. No one listens to Kyle when he insists it’s a bad idea, and Stan holds him close when the first round startles him.

Kenny lights a short fuse with a long pause, and it ignites in his hand with a flurry of blue and white sparks, the red of his blood supplementing the festive triad as it spirals through the trees.

Their fingers touch as they hold Kenny’s disabled hand together. Stan smiles at him while Kenny curses for Eric to drive faster.
In September, Stan’s football practice and Kyle’s student council meetings coincide: after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They’ll walk to Stan’s house together and discuss their plans for the weekend.

Stan is always sore, and as a gesture of kindness, Kyle will offer to rub his back. He lies on his stomach while Kyle massages his fatigued muscles.

When Kyle grazes his shoulders, Stan moans low in his throat; Kyle feels a dreaded twitch in his boxer-briefs. Disgusted with himself, he thinks of dead kittens and frigid nuns.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are the best, and worst, days of the week.
In danger of failing chemistry, Stan hardly needs to beg for Kyle’s help. He remains horribly lost during a two-hour lesson on covalent bonds and stoichiometry. Kyle, exasperated, throws himself to the desk; Stan apologizes for being so stupid.

“You’re not stupid!” Kyle hisses into the textbook. “Quit saying that!”

Stan apologizes again.

He feels criminally inept during the test, overwhelmingly doubtful in many of his answers. Stan is surprised to pass with an eighty-three.

At lunch, Kyle beams with pride over the graded paper. “See?” he says. “You’re not stupid.”

Stan smiles. Kyle is right about everything, as always.
February

That February is freezing and blustery. Kyle contains his quiet shivering, too stubborn to admit he’s cold, so Stan gives him his jacket. With a sigh of defeat, Kyle sinks into the collar and nudges his arm in reluctant thanks.

And something feels very right about Kyle wearing his clothes.

He snatches Kyle’s wrist hidden in the sleeve, blinking unassumingly at Stan as they stop walking.

A terrible rush of anxiety barrels through his chest when Stan kisses him. It’s eased when Kyle’s fingers fall against his hip.

Kyle laughs and scoffs, “Dude, sick!” when he vomits in the snow.
This chapter takes place immediately after the previous one.

Alone in the bathroom with Stan during third period, Kyle demands, somewhat impatiently, “Are you my boyfriend?”

“Do, uh…do you want me to be?”

“Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t put the onus of deciding on me. You kissed me.”

Kyle swallows his sudden temper; he’s still wearing Stan’s jacket. After a quiet minute, Stan bows his head. “I want to be,” he mumbles. “If you do, I mean.”

It sounds so gentle Kyle almost laughs. “Of course I do, dumbass.”

They leave together and dare to hold hands down the art hallway, even if only for a second.
Storms

Stan is adorably chaste and chivalrous; he doesn’t even try to kiss Kyle with his tongue for two months, despite how much Kyle wishes he would.

When he does, they’re watching the spring flurries in his room. It’s the fourth day in a row it storms, typical for April, but Kyle enjoys it. The weather has a calming effect on Stan. He’s sleepy, cuddly and warm.

He seems nervous when their tongues touch, and Kyle moans to ensure Stan knows how desperately he wants it. Stan tastes like cinnamon and stale gas station coffee.

Kyle hopes it rains forever.
Kyle is newly seventeen the first time he touches Stan. His parents are out of town and they babysit Ike, who’s enthralled by senate hearings on the living room floor.

Kyle grazes between his legs under the blanket, frigid fingers creeping under the elastic band of Stan’s boxers. He freezes; Kyle’s face borders on expressionless in the low light from the television. Ike kicks his legs with interest only in discretionary spending, and Kyle's hand curling around him, gentle and slow, removing his hand when Stan moans involuntarily.

Kyle amusingly bats him away when Stan tries to return the gesture.
Kyle is furious when Stan reveals he got a stick and poke tattoo, courtesy of Craig. After berating Stan about how unsafe for his body it is—not to mention they always look fucking terrible—Kyle reluctantly agrees to see it.

Stan beams when he unbuckles his jeans and hikes up his boxers. On the inside of his left thigh is Kyle’s zodiac sign, Gemini, hardly bigger than the size of a quarter. Kyle hates that he smiles.

“You like it?”

“Unfortunately.”

“You better,” Stan says, grinning. “I paid forty bucks for it.”

Kyle punches him, and Stan only laughs.
Empty Closets

Coming out is easier than Stan thought.

The hole in his right ear never healed when Henrietta pierced it with a sewing needle in fourth grade, so he decides to wear an earring again.

Kyle is indignant on his behalf when Eric mocks him at lunch, winning snickers out of Butters and Clyde. “You look like a total fuckin’ fag, dude,” he laughs.

It just slips out, really. “That’s ‘cos I am.”

All the guys stop eating; Stan only nods, and the subject quickly falls elsewhere, but that’s all it takes.

He gently touches Kyle’s tense knee beneath the table.
An SAT score of 1860 sounds like the opposite of a problem to Stan, so he’s dumbfounded when Kyle is so upset. He can go wherever he wants; he can go the places Stan can’t. When he offers this reassurance, Kyle flops onto his bed and mumbles about wanting to die.

“No, you don’t,” Stan says, a little irritated. “You’re being dramatic.”

“Let me be dramatic, then.”

So, he does. Stan sits at Kyle’s side, quietly brooding an impending future without him.

Kyle’s theatrics are comforting, however, when he asks Stan to run away with him and join the circus.
Songbird

His mother makes them leave the door open now, so sex always happens at Stan’s house.

Stan plays Fleetwood Mac on his stereo with the door locked; it’s cloying to light a candle, but Kyle smiles when he does, so it burns on the windowsill. He moans in the crook of Stan’s neck, burying himself there, demanding he go deeper. Stan kisses Kyle’s temple and stirs his hips, slow and fluid.

Stan plays with his hair and makes Kyle promise, should they ever break up, they’ll always be friends—even if it’s bad.

The very thought only makes him laugh.
They agree prom is stupid; they camp in the woods instead, talking and kissing between sips of cheap wine. Stan points out every rabbit or bird and Kyle marvels at his fascination.

Around midnight, Stan plays some indie music on his phone and asks Kyle for a dance.

“This is pretty gay, dude,” he smirks, forehead resting against Stan’s shoulder.


“Me too.”

They sleep in the trunk of Randy’s old Station Wagon, and when Stan kisses him goodnight, Kyle thanks God for whatever miracle placed them together in this shitty, little town.

The song I imagined playing was "Australia" by Attic Abasement.
Yeah

The last of summer is spent high in Eric’s basement. Kyle begrudgingly accepts one of Kenny’s pot brownies, and Eric forbids Stan from playing any ‘sixties hippie garbage’ on the stereo. He does anyway.

For once, they all enjoy each other’s company.

They laugh at bad horror movies on a pile of musty quilts, everything slow and warm in the dark. Kyle, slightly paranoid, whispers near Stan’s ear, “Is this forever?”

He toys with the hem of Kyle’s shirt, unsure what to do when it’s no longer right at his fingertips.

“Yeah,” Stan says, tugging him close. “Yeah, it is.”
Stan’s dorm has no AC and his roommate is an asshole. Bearable, but just barely.

When Stan arrives back from his evening class, he’s surprised—and relieved—that Kyle actually answers his Facetime, though not without the caveat of it not being for long.

“I miss you,” he says in apt misery. “Everyone sucks here.”

Kyle grins, looking oddly elated. “Everyone sucks here, too.”

He feels guilty that Kyle forgoes his homework in lieu of Facetiming for six hours, but when Stan wakes in the morning to find the call still going, Kyle sound asleep on his end, it’s bearable.
Kyle tops for the first time at Clyde’s annual Halloween party Stan convinced him to fly down for. He borrows Ike’s leather jacket and gels his hair in a pompadour—a greaser, if asked.

“You look awesome,” Stan says, pawing at Kyle’s clothes. “So butch.”

Stan is obviously pleased by the attention he receives as a candy striper: knee-length pinafore, white Keds, hairy legs and all. Kyle is transfixed, and deeply aroused, by his unabashed comfort in effeminacy.

Stan comes on his dress, moaning, pinker than the pinstripes.

Kyle decides to keep the jacket just before Stan begs him to.
Two years of intermittent separation forces a tentative agreement: only sex and nothing more.

Stan doesn’t act on this until a girl eyes him at some party; the moment her hand touches his thigh in the dark, he gets cold feet. The thought of Kyle doing this with someone—anyone—else is viscerally upsetting.

On the way from the airport, Stan pulls into a CVS parking lot. He clicks off the radio and tells Kyle about the girl. He’s quiet when Stan says, mumbling, “I don’t think I want an open relationship.”

“Oh, thank God,” Kyle sighs. “Neither do I.”
They see even less of each other due to poor wi-fi and interfering time-zones when Stan spends six months studying abroad in Spain, not to return until January.

Stan sounds so happy for a change, and Kyle makes him parrot phrases in flustered Spanish on the phone just to keep him talking a little while longer.

Two days before Christmas, he receives a package from Stan: Spanish leather boots.

Stan calls around midnight. He tells Kyle how much he misses him, and can’t wait to see him soon; Kyle fondly touches the boots—a decent substitute for the time being.

Surprise, surprise: I was listening to "Boots of Spanish Leather" by Bob Dylan when I wrote this.
Want and Need

“What, and that’s my fault?”

“Did I say that?”

“In a roundabout way, yeah, that’s what it sounds like.”

“This is what I mean, Stan. Goddamn, it’s like you’re deliberately misunderstanding—”

“No, it’s that you’d rather be all passive aggressive instead of—”

“Will you quit interrupting me? And I am not!”

“Look, Kyle, I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? I’m tired, and I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Do what?”

“I just – I feel like we’re gonna fight.”

“…We are.”

“And I don’t wanna do that.”

“Neither do I.”

“So…let’s not.”

“Yeah. But I think we need to.”
August is muggy and slow; after an extra-long afternoon run, Stan prepares a cool bath, painfully aware of his tender muscles when he sinks into the water.

The empty space between his legs makes him think of Kyle. Stan imagines his tongue on Kyle’s chest, the salt of his skin fresh and new.

Four months in, one e-mail a week is still all he gets.

Stan falls asleep in the tub and wakes with a panic. The water is freezing, colder in the dark.

But it’s kind of nice, he thinks—sleeping away the day. They’re all so long now.
Kyle only lets himself think of Stan on Sunday. The routine helps him focus, and it’s the most productive he’s been all year.

This routine is disrupted on Tuesday by a German Shepherd puppy wearing a pink bandana in the park. He thinks of Sparky nestling his way between Stan and Kyle during sleepovers, remembers the little moans Stan makes in his sleep.

Kyle uses a public bathroom—which is disgusting—to cry in private, which is embarrassing.

Not ready to admit such debilitating dependency on another human being, Kyle stops himself from calling Stan.

Kyle fears he won’t answer.
“Don’t freak out,” is the first thing Kyle rasps on the phone. It’s immediately followed by, “but I’m in the hospital right now.”

Stan freaks out, naturally; he overdraws his bank account buying the next flight to Pennsylvania.

Enfeebled with pneumonia, Stan spends every day at Kyle’s bedside, giving him little sips of water, holding his hand. In the middle of the night, Kyle is suddenly crying when he asks Stan to move up there with him.

Stan kisses him on the mouth despite Kyle’s grievous objections to getting him sick. So long as they’re sick together, he doesn’t care.
After graduation, Stan’s parents treat him to dinner—fancy steakhouse, expensive champagne.

He decides to give them the news; it necessitates explaining that no, a break is not the same as breaking up, and yes, they’re still together, and yes, he’s thought this through.

They advise him to be careful.

Stan glances occasionally at his belongings in the backseat, ignoring any uncertainty. He says goodnight to Kyle when he stops in St. Louis and promises to call again tomorrow once driving.

“Just be careful,” Kyle pleads. “Drive safe.”

Stan imagines Kyle’s bed, unable to wait until it’s his, too. Theirs.
Just after midnight, Stan arrives. Kyle shakes and weeps when he’s lifted into a hug.

Stan leaves his things in the car until tomorrow. Tired and hungry, they eat sugar-free ice cream on the kitchen floor; he laughs at Stan’s stories of the drive—a businesswoman who accidentally groped his ass at a Kansas gas station, motel cockroaches in Missouri. They have slow, clumsy sex on the couch, Stan’s lips still cold and sweet.

It takes nothing for Kyle to fall asleep while Stan traces circles on his back, breath warm against his ear; everything finally feels as it should.
Kyle starts law school in the fall; Stan takes him to campus on the condition he’s allowed to teach Kyle how to drive.

Stan has him practice in an empty high school parking lot. He chuckles when Kyle brakes, heavy-footed, the whole car jolting to a halt. It delivers a small, gnawing wound to his pride.

After two hours, Stan drives them home. He apologizes for laughing, and when Kyle insists that it’s nothing, he promises not to again.

He’s secretly relieved Stan keeps his word—the next time, he just pats Kyle’s thigh and tells him he’s doing fine.
Comfort Food

Living with Stan means someone is cooking now, and Kyle’s diet of small, sporadic snacking goes out the window—as does his favorite pair of pants when he gains sixteen pounds.

In the shower, Stan cossets the tiny pouch of his stomach, undeterred by Kyle smacking away his hands and assigning him mirthless blame.

“I think you’re actually trying to make me fat.”

“Maybe I am,” Stan says, nipping at his shoulder. “You're so underfed, dude.”

Stan’s hands wander, slick from the bar soap; Kyle suddenly doesn’t mind the weight when he notices his hips meld seamlessly to Stan’s grip.
Valentine’s Day is spent out on the balcony. Stan is amused when Kyle, a lightweight, is tipsy off two glasses of wine.

He runs inside and returns with a battered shoe-box. It’s placed in Stan’s lap, Kyle urging him to sift through it: ticket stubs from movies they saw together, yellowed notes they passed in school.

Stan fondly touches the invitation to his seventh birthday party, Kyle’s name written in green marker.

Kyle apologizes for not being more romantic; Stan carries him to bed.

Eyes wet, Stan sits alone with the box, wondering what he might’ve wished for at seven.
Catholic Guilt

Vaguely curious, Kyle attends Mass with Stan one Sunday.

He kneels when he’s supposed to stand—stands when he’s supposed to kneel. Stan is quietly amused, closing his eyes when he sings, prays, and Kyle isn’t quite sure why he finds it so shamefully beautiful.

A strange wave of arousal overcomes him when Stan places a communion wafer on his tongue; the priest eyes Kyle suspiciously after noticing how the cracker he receives stays hidden in his palm instead.

Kyle isn’t eager to revisit the experience, but feels a renewed gratification that night when Stan moans, “Oh God, oh God.”
Teamwork

It takes a burst faucet for Stan and Kyle to realize neither is as handy as they think they are; both, however, refuse to call a plumber.

Stan crawls beneath the sink and tinkers with the pipes. Kyle sits beside him on his phone, pausing and rewinding instructional YouTube videos whenever he’s told to.

Several hours of trial and error fixes the problem. Kyle fetches an armful of towels—for the floor and themselves.

Kyle dries Stan’s hair while gloating about their shared ingenuity, remarking, “We always make a good team.”

“Yes,” Stan says, smiling beneath the cloth. “We do.”
The Tough One

Stan ignores the belligerent man that calls them faggots on New Years, too drunk and too comfortable laying against Kyle’s arm, not wanting to further the other passengers’ obvious discomfort.

Ten minutes later, the man lunges at him; Stan doesn’t even processes fear before Kyle is clawing at his shirt, beating him backwards. They make a hurried exit as the bus halts.

Kyle fumes while inspecting Stan for nonexistent injuries. “Are you sure you’re all right?” he asks.

Stan wilts into his shoulder, oddly elated.

They wait patiently for the next bus; Kyle refuses to let go of his hand.
Kyle loves Christmas only because Stan loves Christmas. Oddly enough, it seems the singular time of year where not even the encumbrance of clinical depression or past familial dysfunction can touch him.

Around midnight on December twenty-second, he finds Stan disassembling their fake tree, bulbs and string lights scattering the floor. “I want a real one,” he says.

The burden befalls Kyle while Stan is at work. With everything good already gone, he blows a hundred dollars on a measly Blue Spruce, dreading Stan’s imminent disappointment.

When he gets home, Stan christens it with a star and deems it perfect.
Honey Nut Cheerios

A lifetime of knowing each other, nine years of dating, three years of living together, and Kyle only just realizes on an ordinary Thursday morning that Stan pours the milk before his cereal.

“Have you always done it that way?!”

“…Yeah?”

Kyle stares in slack-jawed bewilderment, and Stan cowers over his bowl like a carpet-wetting dog. “Don’t you?”

“No, no one does!”

“Is that weird?”

“Uh, Kind of – yeah!”

He relentlessly pries into the history of this habit when Stan asks, cautious, if Kyle is genuinely upset; he erupts in laughter.

He’s just glad that Stan can still surprise him.
Stan thinks it’s cute, the way Kyle still tells him what he wants at coffee shops so he can order for them both. It was born of Kyle’s embarrassment—or, general aversion to requesting Stevia instead of sugar.

His heart is strangely heavy with disappointment when Kyle orders for himself, made evident once they’re served.

“I thought you hated that.”

“No – what? I like doing things for you.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to.”

Stan shrugs. “It makes me happy, though.”

Kyle nods thoughtfully, a grin hidden behind his tea when he allows Stan to open the door for him.
"Everyone Becomes Their Parents"

When Stan declares Kyle to be just like Sheila, it means exactly that—self-righteous, vindictive, imperious. Kyle responds by smashing a decorative plate.

Stan slams the door on his way out as Kyle shouts that he’s a selfish drunk, just like his father.

He returns after midnight. Kyle is sprawled across the bed, face hidden in a pillow. Stan apologizes while kissing his ankle.

“You’re not like him,” Kyle says, hesitant. “We’re not like them.”

“No, we’re not.”

Kyle swallows a whimper, pulling him close; Stan kisses Kyle’s wounded fingers and laughs when he mumbles, “I hated that plate, anyway.”
All of Kyle’s friends are like him: they all know how smart they are. Political science, economics, engineering—information volunteered freely, and often.

After being asked what he does, Stan details the near complete process of receiving his social work licensure. They share a derisive laugh about bureaucracy. How sweet, they agree. How naïve.

Kyle’s glare is firm. “So, it’s naïve to care about helping people?”

They coolly back-peddle. Kyle remains tense, defending Stan’s work as noble. Important.

Stan doesn’t need the reassurance, but enjoys listening to how highly Kyle thinks of him. The feeling is, always has been, mutual.
In the days leading to Kyle’s twenty-seventh birthday, he can’t shake a terrible premonition: any day now, Stan is going to leave.

His grating, neurotic allure must’ve worn off by now. Everyone loves Stan. He could have anyone.

The dread is so encapsulating that he doesn’t notice the massive wreck unfolding before them until Stan slams on the brakes, throwing his free arm across Kyle.

Stan’s fingers tremor as they clutch Kyle’s sweater; his voice shakes when he pulls Kyle close, whispering, “Are you okay?”

Kyle nods, unable to swallow.

Perhaps he was just anticipating a different kind of crash.
They find themselves back in South Park for Kenny’s wedding. Bebe is noticeably pregnant, which only makes the whole thing more charming, Stan thinks.

Kenny is ecstatic to see them. The night is spent drinking, laughing, reminiscing.

Home no longer feels like home to Stan. It feels like just another place—a rest stop off the highway, an empty parking lot.

South Park is some recurring fever dream he must’ve had, because home is when he presses his forehead to Kyle’s back, and without really waking, Kyle tugs Stan’s arm tighter across him, mingling their feet together beneath the blanket.
The Question

Stan is more quiet than usual. Kyle eyes him while drying dishes, trying to figure out why.

It takes him by surprise when Stan says, “Would you marry me if I asked?”

“Are you?”

Stan forcefully scrubs a pot, not looking up. “I don’t have a ring.”

“I’ll marry you anyway,” he says, quiet. “If you’re asking.”

Kyle snorts when Stan gets on one knee; his skin is soft, soap-laden. He kisses Kyle’s hand like when they were little—Stan a makeshift knight, loyal only to his king.

He wants to think Stan was promising it then, too.

Yes, yes.
Lucky Lady

By one, Kyle is writing his third will of the day. He nods attentively while Ms. Kelly dictates which tchotchke goes to which granddaughter—the crying puppy figurine to Jessica, porcelain rabbits to Elizabeth.

She pauses to comment on how polite he is. How handsome. How Elizabeth is around his age.

Kyle is excited to finally say, “Actually, I’m engaged.”

“She’s a lucky lady, then.”

Kyle chuckles while remembering a younger Stan trying on his sister’s clothes, imagining him in a wedding dress. He doesn’t bother correcting her out of self-preservation.

He does, however, insist that he’s the lucky one.
More Than

After a shower, Kyle peeks out to order Stan back inside from the balcony. He’ll catch a cold.

It’s not much snow, but still pretty. He reminisces of red sleds, snowmen—when they were little.

Stan occasionally suspects he loves Kyle more than Kyle loves him. And that might be okay, he thinks.

Kyle returns with a warm cup of tea. He places it in Stan’s hand, gently kissing his ear.

“I love you,” he says. “And you need to shave.”

Stan pulls Kyle in his lap; the breathy hums against his neck make him happy to be proven wrong.
There’s a giddy excitement in Stan’s stomach when he gets the text from Kyle: *Bar, 9:00.*

Last time, he pretended to be a marine biologist from Oregon. Kyle was a scuba diver playing hard to get. Stan hopes he will again—it’s the most fun.

Kyle is seated near the back in a houndstooth sweater. Flashing his nicest smile, Stan props an elbow on the bar. He decided in the car: professional hockey player.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“I don’t know,” Kyle says, haughty and disinterested. “*Can you?*”

Stan sighs happily.

"*May I?*"

Kyle smirks. "You may."
To the chagrin of their parents, Stan and Kyle eschew a formal wedding.

The county clerk’s office is cold and clean. Kyle cries when Stan slips the ring on his finger; he can feel his own eyes glossing over.

“I don’t know why I’m crying right now,” Kyle laughs, wiping his wet face.

“I do,” Stan says. And he says it again another minute later—*I do.*

At home, Stan orders pizza—half cheese for Kyle, half pepperoni and jalapeno for himself. They spend the night coming up with funnier dialogue over the muted television, lazily kissing between commercial breaks.
Morning

Everything feels different but nothing has changed.

Their routine remains the same: busy during the week with Sundays spent sleeping in.

Rain dribbles against the window, the dawning sky muddled and dreary, and Kyle wakes up first for once. He huddles against Stan’s back, lips pressed between his shoulder blades.

“Morning,” Stan mumbles. He leisurely pats Kyle’s thigh, the minute weight of his ring felt even above the blanket.

Kyle hums and hugs Stan’s chest, breathing in the warm, delicate sent of his skin.

“Good morning.”

They debate what to have for breakfast before deciding just to stay in bed.
Acceptance

Stan tries to reserve fighting for the important things—money, work. Other days have other plans.

It starts when he steals a sip of orange juice directly from the carton. Kyle doesn’t even drink it, but that won’t stop him from nagging Stan about what a disgusting habit it is, how inconsiderate.

Stan endures five minutes of uninterrupted berating only to say, “It’s not like you don’t know where my mouth has been,” with a cheeky grin.

Kyle scoffs and Stan pulls his folded arms apart. He promises not to do it again; Kyle, reluctantly smiling, accepts that he will.
The dizziness and jitters begin to subside after Stan feeds him a tablespoon of honey. He reminds Kyle for the third time that he can’t go all day without eating, which is endearing and annoying.

Hypoglycemic or not, Kyle is an adult—he doesn’t need Stan coddling him.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you,” Stan says, mildly hurt.

Kyle caves and allows Stan to give him the second spoonful.

When he goes to wipe a smidge of honey from Kyle’s mouth, he smirks and holds Stan’s hand in place, tenderly licking the sweet morsel from his thumb.
A House is a House

It’s nothing big, but it’s nice: three bedrooms, two stories, an open backyard. The realtor steps outside to let them wander on their own.

Stan likes the bay window in the kitchen, the hardwood. He loses Kyle briefly and finds him in the bathroom’s garden tub. “Get in,” he says, clutching for Stan’s hand, pulling him down.

They agree this is the one. Kyle dozes against Stan’s shoulder, declaring them finally like everyone else.

Normalcy is all Kyle wants, so Stan agrees—even if it could never be true.

They lie in the bathtub until the realtor calls their names.
Acknowledgement of October nineteenth remains forbidden. No gift, no special dinner. Not even a cake.

Stan gets home late and heads straight for bed; the musk of whiskey trails close behind.

Holding off on the lecture, Kyle gently soothes his hair. It depresses him how unwilling Stan is to celebrate his own birth.

He reminds Stan that he’s kind and thoughtful. He honors his word. And Kyle’s glad it’s his birthday, because this life wouldn’t be his without Stan in it.

Stan nestles closer. His mumbling is warm and unintelligible, the reverberation of his voice resonating deep in Kyle’s chest.
“It’s like one big dollhouse,” Kyle says while wandering Ikea. It excites him to ogle prefab kitchen sets and gaudy chandeliers, so Stan doesn’t mind following at his heels.

At the end of the showroom is a model nursery. Stan feels a pointed ache in his heart when he touches an off-white crib, the mobile hung from above.

They’ve talked about it before in the abstract, but it’s only that—ifs. Maybes. Somedays.

“What’re you looking at?” Kyle asks, heading toward the elevator.

Stan shakes his head and says, “Nothing,” when jogging to Kyle’s side; he only looks back once.
Kyle is out of his office by six most days. Around nine-thirty, between absently scanning his unread emails, he realizes he isn’t leaving until well after midnight. Again.

He texts Stan: *Not sure when I’ll be home. Sorry.*

Allowing himself a break from the tiring glow of his computer, Kyle stares out at the wet street, overcast sky. He thinks of how warm Stan’s hands always are.

He receives a text back shortly after.

*Ordered u the noodles u like from that thai place, should b there in 30 mins*

Kyle feels oddly like he might cry, but not quite.
Stan gently wraps his legs across Kyle’s lower back; he can never be close enough. There’s something so safe in being smothered by him, the essence of salt and sweat and hot breath, a locomotive fluidity to his hips.

He ponders all the ways his life could be different. Words he never said, things he never did.

Kyle slows and kisses him, absorbing Stan’s wanton moans into his mouth. His lips twitch in familiar desperation to say, “I love you,” first.

Stan cradles his arms around Kyle’s neck with the reassurance that, somehow, he would always end up right here.
Lisa is only fourteen but packs quite a punch.

In the cool-down room, Stan broaches the topic of room search again, the water bottle filled with vodka. Level drops no longer faze her. She warbles, vicious, “Why do you care?”

Of every kid in the group home, Lisa reminds Stan the most of himself.

He remembers Kyle—folded arms in the upstairs bathroom. Stan hated him then.

“Because I needed someone to care about me,” he says.

Voice breaking, Lisa apologizes for hitting him; Stan quietly sits with her another half-hour. He thinks of Kyle, empty bottles, the upstairs bathroom.
Blissfully unaware, Stan marches on toward the crest of the trail, engrossed by the cacophony of rushing water, crunching leaves. Kyle feigned enthusiasm when he proposed a hiking trip; he can’t feign his burning calves, winded breath.

Little by little, he notices Stan’s pace slowing; he offers Kyle his arm.

Kyle listens to wistful sighs about how pretty everything is, though his attention remains only to the hint of sunburn in Stan’s cheeks, dirt beneath his fingernails. He curls tighter around Stan’s arm and presses a firm kiss to his shoulder.

Yes, he agrees, everything is pretty. Very, very pretty.
Nyctophobia

Stan doesn’t ask the subject of Kyle’s nightmares because they’re always the same—visions of South Park. A home forged from the rib of violent death; a life of guilt and fear that returns at night.

He switches on the bathroom light and lets it flood through the cracked door. Kyle is folded over himself, hands gripping his elbows, clammy skin and quick breath.

“You’re safe,” he says softly. “I’m right here.”

Kyle nods with catatonic rigidity, obviously not believing so. Stan rubs his back, gentle and slow, whispering it until he does.

_You’re safe, I’m right here. I’m here._
BuzzFeed quizzes are Kyle’s guilty pleasure; worse yet, he loves forcing Stan to take them, curious which dog breed or Disney princess he would be.

A test perilously titled *What Percent in Love Are You?* is next. Stan groans, knowing the result will matter in some small way to Kyle.

Even if it’s stupid as all hell, he answers honestly and takes his time. Stan hands the phone back once he’s finished without looking.

He waits for a reaction; Kyle gently prods Stan’s hip with a socked foot and peeks from above the screen, a saccharine smile on his face.
When the Super Bowl is Broncos versus Steelers, Stan and Kyle are the only two in a crowded bar wearing orange.

They roar with obnoxious cheers as Denver scores, tenting out their jerseys. Stan childishly sticks his tongue out at a rowdy group who threaten to kick his ass; he sips his beer and throws an arm around Kyle’s shoulders. “It’s you and me against the world,” he says, winking.

His warm breath reminds Kyle of secret playground huddles during recess, sleepovers where they were the last two awake.

He wipes foam from Stan’s lip and smiles. “Always has been.”
Terrance and Phillip reruns are certainly less funny twenty years later, especially after the pair die within the same year of a massive stroke and a drug overdose, respectively. Stan is shocked when he hears Kyle, wrist pressed to his mouth, stifling laughter.

Kyle eats his cereal over the sink in the morning; Stan sneaks up behind him, wraps an arm around his waist, gives a sultry whisper of, “Hey, Kyle?” in his ear.

“Hmm?”

“Can you tell me how to get to the auto-garage?”

Milk flies from Kyle’s nose, dribbling through his fingers; Stan laughs, and laughs, and laughs.
Long Hair, Don't Care

Stan’s hair has always been a point of vanity for good reason: there’s a lot of it. More so when he grows it to his shoulders—clumped inside Kyle’s freshly-laundered sweaters, tangled in the drains.

Kyle dreams of hacking at Stan’s hair with gardening shears. He doesn’t hate it; he only wishes to wake up without a mouthful of black strands.

He changes his tune when he combs it through his fingers, feels the weight coiled in his palm. Stan’s dull moan when Kyle gently pulls.

“I think you’re right,” Stan sighs. “About me getting a haircut.”

“Don’t you dare.”
Yom Kippur is the one time of year Kyle steps foot in a synagogue.

In between services all day, Stan prepares a warm, filling feast. Kyle instead breaks his fast with an untoasted piece of rye bread while staring quietly into space. He confesses immense guilt. For nothing; for everything.

It’s Kyle’s worst habit—a compulsion to bear the world’s sins atop his own head, accepting punishment for nonexistent crimes.

“I don’t know why you’re so hard on yourself,” Stan says. “You don’t need to be.”

Kyle just keeps chewing, shrugs his shoulders. Stan butters him another slice of bread.
Fountain of Youth

Their neighbors going out of town has one benefit: a pool.

Stan floats with Kyle’s hands beneath his back, guiding him in circles the way he used to when it was only them at the pond.

The dusky air smells of chlorine and freshly-cut grass. Little waves gently lap against his ears. He kisses Kyle’s pruning fingers—something he always felt compelled to do during their summers spent swimming. And now he can.

Kyle slicks Stan’s wet hair from his forehead and smiles.

A car pulls into the driveway; they scramble to hop the fence, shirts inside out and backwards.
Kyle’s answer when Stan inquired where he developed a sudden appreciation for art was simply, “I just did.”

The museum is quiet, dim. Kyle reads the details of the painting in front of them—Matisse, 1914, oil.

Unlike what he was told would intrinsically happen, Stan feels nothing.

He sighs and turns to Kyle, but the way he stands catches Stan’s eye. Sober contemplation, relaxed shoulders, hands folded at his navel; he looks like the woman in the portrait.

Kyle seems happily surprised when Stan declares he likes that painting best; he asks why.

“I don’t know. I just do.”

Chapter End Notes

The painting, if you were curious, is "Portrait of Mademoiselle Yvonne Landsberg" by Henri Matisse.
Health-conscious

After Randy’s second heart attack, Kyle begins sleeping with an ear to Stan’s chest.

It won’t happen. But it could; it might.

A single palpitation panics him.

Kyle says nothing when Stan jolts awake, confused and mumbling after being shaken. An apology sits pinched in his throat.

“Christ, Kyle—you are gonna give me a heart attack.”

Kyle glares before he weeps. Stan sighs and guides his head back down, gently shushing him, telling him not to worry.

It’s exhausting to fear such fragility; Kyle tries trusting in it instead. Stan’s heart will stay beating, and he will stay listening.
Anniversary

“There’s a kid somewhere that was born when we started dating that’s, like, twenty now.”

“That’s fucking crazy.”

“Isn’t it? That blew my mind earlier.”

“How’ve you put up with me this long?”

“The only thing I ’put up’ with is you pissing with the door open.”

“Oh, not—”

“Stan, just admit it’s disgusting.”

“Actually, I take it back – I don’t know how I’ve put up with you this long.”

“You love me, asshole.”

“The only one who could.”

“Hey!”

“Oh relax, I’m kidding.”

“...Y’know what, though?”

“What?”

“I’m so glad no one else could ever stand either of us.”
Ike and his wife sleep through most of their visit to see his month-old daughter, which Kyle doesn't seem to mind. She happily babbles while he cradles her.

Stan’s throat snaps shut when Kyle asks if he’d like to hold her.

She’s so little. So sweet.

It knocks Stan over like a derailed train; he can’t oblige when Kyle asks if they can discuss it tomorrow, months from now, next year or in a few.

“I need to talk to you.”

Kyle nods, eyes glassy and half-lidded when he whispers, “I know,” and kisses the top of his niece’s head.
Headache

The agency’s lobby smells strangely of disinfectant; it reminds Kyle of a doctor’s office. A burgeoning headache flourishes in his temple, and he glances at Stan swiping aimlessly at his phone. He smiles and tells Kyle there’s no need to be nervous.

Kyle imagines a hypothetical child; an imminently real social worker. He worries his anxiety is more than that—evidence of some unearthed repulsion, noncommittal apathy that transfigures into fear, a defect hardwired in his blood. The headache worsens.

A receptionist calls and beckons them toward the hallway. Stan’s hand brushes his, and Kyle remembers to unclench his jaw.
12/13/17 -- Hi everyone! I wanted to apologize for there being such a long pause between this update and the last; I recently started a new job that's kept me very busy, and the stress of family and the holidays and whatnot has eaten into a lot of my writing time. Expect regular updates every day/every other day very soon!

After cleaning counters that aren’t dirty, straightening things already tidied, Stan double-checks the newly childproof cabinets in the kitchen and grins. All little locks in their place.

“It all feels like a lot,” Kyle sighs, nonchalantly fiddling with his sweater.

Oh. Okay. This is it.

Stan panics, cold static buzzing between his ears, heart now too small for his chest and—

“Hey, hey.”

Kyle locks a hand in his. “I just…don’t wanna fuck up him up. Or her – a kid, I mean.”

“You won’t,” Stan says, desperate, aching to be believed. “We won’t.”

Kyle nods, smiling; the doorbell rings.
Reunion

At their twenty-year reunion, the fire doors are where their old group slinks away from everyone else – as per high school gym class.

Eric remains fat as ever; Kenny proudly shows off pictures of his daughters, now eleven and eight.

“Ugh, I knew it,” Eric says, rolling his eyes when Stan announces their news. “You gay-wads took that stupid egg project way too seriously.”

“A self-fulfilling prophecy,” Kenny smiles.

Stan reminds them it was Wendy’s first; Kyle takes a lofty sip from his drink when he says, “She just decorated it,” with Stan’s hand resting comfortably on his lower back.
They meet at a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia; she’s four months pregnant, late twenties. Laura.

Kyle rests a hand on Stan’s to quell his eager finger-tapping. He lets Stan begin with pleasant small talk, the safe and expected questions. She’s polite, quiet and kind.

He worries about sounding impatient when asking why – specifically – she chose them.

“It’s obvious you two really love each other.”

Stan and Kyle say, “We do,” one after the other, slightly out of sync.

Everything goes smoothly; Laura gives them tight hugs when they leave.

Between red lights they list off names, too excited to settle.

3/2/18 -- again, apologies for the incredibly late updates. Have had a lot get in the way of my writing routine as of late but I haven't abandoned this fic and hope to realistically be able to finish it within the month. fingers crossed! xx
Thirty Days

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They receive the call at two in the afternoon; seven pounds, four ounces. A healthy baby boy.

Respectfully, they acquiesce to Laura’s wish to be alone with him for a day or two. She promises to call again once ready.

Before sloughing to bed around eleven, they stand in the doorway, both fixating on an empty crib.

“She has thirty days to change her mind, y’know,” Stan says, quiet.

“I know. She won’t, though.”

“How do you know?”

Truthfully, he doesn’t. He says it to ease Stan. He places a hand on Stan's lower back, stomach in a worrisome knot.

Chapter End Notes

5/7/19 -- wow, over a whole year since i last posted a chapter. damn, that's my bad! i really have no excuse other than that my life has become significantly more chaotic since it was when i first started posting. but i haven't abandoned this by any means; i won't make any promises this time as to when i'll get around to finishing, but i have it planned out for the most part, and god willing it will definitely be sooner rather than later
Three days is an unbearable wait.

Unexpectedly, Kyle is the first to cry. It's almost immediate -- a bassinet is gently wheeled in, his eyes fill with tears, knees now weak but the grip on Stan's hand strong. He haunches down to peer through the plastic bassinet.

So little. So sweet.

Stan holds him first. He watches tiny fingers unfurl, dazed eyes wander, pink cheeks and thick hair. He swallows a hot ache in his throat.

Kyle wipes his eyes and asks if Laura decided on a name.

"Jakob."

It's perfect, they think, because he's perfect -- oh, so wonderfully, perfectly perfect.
Stan isn’t sure whether Sheila is taken aback by being told she isn’t allowed to see the baby yet, or by a firm no from her son that wasn’t immediately rescinded. Perhaps both.

“Because,” Kyle sighs. “We’re *cocooning.*”

Jakob doesn't wake from Kyle's phone thudding against the counter, and he -- relieved -- slinks back to the couch. Stan lifts the blanket and Kyle eases in. They lay together, mumbling aimless praise while listening to Jakob breathe. Watching him sleep.

The books didn't mean it literally, he's sure. But Jakob is warm, and so is Kyle, and so is he.

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