Summary

Aging-Up Fic involving the Loser's Club. Mostly the core four (Bill, Stan, Richie, Eddie). Begins right after the end of the 2017 film, and is mostly based on that, with hints to the book and maybe the mini-series. Reddie and Stenbrough, basically, with some drama in-between but probably a happy ending that doesn't involve certain characters forgetting each other and/or dying because I can't deal. Warning: This will be Gay as Shit.
They are 12 years old.

Pennywise is gone.

But so is Beverly.

The void she leaves in her absence is felt by every other member of the group; a silent, dark shadow that follows them around and hangs heavy in the air when they’re together, mutually understood but never verbally acknowledged.

The first day feels like a day of mourning, hearts so heavy with the loss of her that it’s comparable to grieving a death. They barely speak to one another, especially not of Beverly, as though frightened of interrupting the respectful quiet that would usually accompany a funeral. Even Richie is subdued.

And still, the terrifying ghost of Pennywise looms over them, too.

Memories and feelings so terrible they may never recover.

They will never recover.

Every shadow in the dark corner of a lit room gives them pause, every creak of a floorboard, and every whisper of wind, every drop of water against porcelain or tile startles them into awareness. And instinctively, in these moments of fear-induced adrenaline, they frantically look to one another, finding their only solace in the knowledge that together they are safe.

They gather together in Bill’s bedroom the first night after Beverly’s departure.

They’re grasping for some kind of normalcy. At first, Richie keeps making jokes, doing voices, but the cadence of his voice is flat and unfeeling, and nobody laughs, not even Richie himself. A depressed sort of silence falls over the room and they all just sit there, still and quiet, unsure what to say or do.

After nearly an hour, Bill finally moves.

“I…I’ll g…get some snacks.”

His voice is more quiet than usual, which is something to be said for Bill, but there’s a certain authority in it that inspires the rest of them to try and pull themselves together.

As Bill leaves the room, Mike begins to explore it, the only member of the Loser’s club bar Beverly who hasn’t been there before. He admires a collection of drawings strewn atop the dresser, most of which seem to depict the people currently in the room. There is at least one of each of the Losers, all beautifully sketched and painted delicately in water colour. Atop the pile is most certainly a picture of Beverly, startlingly red curls of hair standing out starkly against the soft white paper. There are more beneath it, but he politely doesn’t touch them.

Stan heads for the bookcase in the corner, and absently begins to organise the books into alphabetical order. Richie and Eddie both glance up at him, but seem unconcerned, as though it’s a regular occurrence. Once he has organised the shelves thus, Stan ghosts a finger across the spines, seems frustrated with the unevenness of the way some jut out further than others, and begins to reorganise them, instead, in order of width.
Ben takes a folder stuffed with papers fit to bust from his backpack, along with a pencil case, and lays them down at Bill’s desk, getting to work on what appears to be a school project, though for long periods of time he just stares at it like he keeps forgetting what he was doing.

“Homework?!” Richie shouts, scandalised, “You’re doing homework?! Puh-lease tell me it hasn’t come to that!” He jumps up from the edge of Bill’s bed, where Eddie is still sitting with his arms around his knees, scratching at his wrist with a worried crease between his eyebrows.

“It makes me feel normal,” Ben replies with a calm shrug, “I’d rather be thinking about this.”

“Than what?! Than about Bev?! She’s…she’s gone, she’s not dead!” Richie looks around at the other Losers, as though he feels he’s making some lordly, inspirational speech. He can’t quite pull it off as naturally as Bill, but he’s certainly passionate. “But the clown is dead! And we killed it! We should be fucking celebrating!”

“How do we know for sure it’s dead?” Mike asks confidently, “Isn’t that what we’re all thinking?”

All four of them turn to look at him, now. Stan appears vaguely horrified. Eddie seems so shaken by it that he reaches for his inhaler, but Richie snatches it from his hand before he has even removed it fully from its pocket and holds it up out of his reach.

“NO! See what you’re doing to Eddie? To all of us? We killed it, it’s DEAD! And I don’t know about you guys, but I don’t EVER wanna think about that fuckin’ thing again! Summer is almost over, and then we have to go back to school! And this whole time I’ve had like…only a half an ice cream! I never found that rock I lost by the quarry that’s shaped like a dog turd! And I’m nowhere near my hundred hour goal on Street Fighter! I’ve only played like five hours, TOPS! I got punched by Bill! By BILL! Right in my FACE! I got covered in shitty water like ten times! This was the worst summer EVER!”

Richie is getting louder and more agitated, and so is Eddie, who is grasping at Richie’s arm for the inhaler and screaming at him to give it back.

“Richie I can’t fucking breathe right now GIVE IT BACK YOU STUPID DUMB IDIOT!”

Eddie’s voice is at an ear-splitting level of hysterical screechiness that rivals even some of his previous outbursts, and Richie shoves the inhaler towards his mouth with an exaggerated grimace.

“Geez, Eds, only dogs can hear you right now. Guess that’s why your mom can always understand what you’re saying-“

“Shut up, Richie!” Stan demands from behind him, sounding genuinely annoyed.

“What if Mike’s right what if it’s still alive and it’s just gonna keep coming back for us?!” Eddie is still hyperventilating, though he has already taken two deep breaths from his inhaler. He’s stammering and gesticulating madly as he talks. “I-I can’t go back there I can’t fight that thing again I can’t! I can’t breathe my chest hurts so bad and I have this-this rash all over me it’s like from the grey water the dirty…the dirty water and the…it stings it hurts,” he’s motioning to his arms in particular, “the skin is just all messed up I can feel like…the inflammation and all these little bumps I think there’s definitely something wrong-“

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Eds!” Richie grabs Eddie’s face between his hands, something he does on the rare occasions that Eddie is panicking so badly they know he’s going to make himself sick, or panic until he passes out. “Look at me! You’re fine! You’re okay, Eddie, you’re just scared! We all are! But we don’t have to be anymore! This is just fucking DUMB!”
“Stop it!”

Bill has re-entered the room.

He’s holding a plastic bowl filled with chips, but he has obviously prepared this more out of common courtesy than anything else, because none of them has much of an appetite. He sets the bowl down on the dresser, looking at each of them in turn. He looks emotionally drained.

“W…w…we can’t start fighting between ourselves n…now. Not after…not after…everything we’ve been through.”

Eddie stops mid-panic-attack when Bill starts talking, and Richie lowers his hands from his face, looking guilty. Bill always seems to be able to calm the group down, to reason with them, to encourage and inspire them. These things come easily to a boy so loving and pure and so thoroughly and absolutely good. But, in this instance, it’s the little crack in his voice, noticeably uncharacteristic from his usual stammer, which seems to stun them all into concerned silence. All of the Losers have taken this summer’s journey hard, but none more so than Bill, who has lost more than anyone, who has given more than anyone, who has suffered more than anyone. And although he is often quiet and reserved, those who know him best, know that Bill feels things so deeply and personally that it must cause him physical pain.

Richie remembers, with a horrible lurch of his stomach, that Georgie’s funeral is tomorrow, now that his body has finally been recovered. He wonders how on Earth he could have forgotten. He also wonders whether Bill has been able to think about anything else. Of course, he knows the answer.

“Please, just…”

“It’s okay, Billy.” Richie says softly, and something in his voice seems to alter the tone in the room entirely. It’s almost as though Richie’s gentle, ‘it’s okay’ is an admission aloud that, yes, something really, really terrible happened to us, and, yes, it’s okay to grieve…to relieve some of the agony.

And then Bill just starts crying. With a sudden, heart-breaking sob that they all feel so intimately it’s like being winded.

Bill’s hands immediately cover his face, his last, fruitless effort at composure before he begins to crumble. His fingers are shaking. Richie can see Eddie’s lip tremble from the corner of his eye, a sure sign he’s about to cry, too, and he does, but he gets to Bill before anyone else can move, arms wrapping tight around his waist, so that he can’t fall. Richie follows; throws his arms around both of them, pressed against Eddie from behind, taking more of Bill’s weight from Eddie’s smaller frame. Before he knows it, Richie can feel someone even taller beside them, and it’s Stan, who rubs his hand gently across Bill’s back between his shoulders, and joins the huddle from the side. Mike comes in behind Bill, strongest and sturdiest of all of them, bracing them in a firm grip, as Ben nuzzles his way in at Bill’s other side.

They stay like that for a long, long time, listening to Bill cry, holding him tightly throughout, until his sobs die down and he’s just sniffling. Even when the huddle starts to break, Eddie and Richie remain, until Stan eases them away, urges them to give Bill some space. They all sit for a while on Bill’s bed, chatting quietly about mundane things, as far removed as possible from any of the topics that are actually on their minds.

Eventually, gradually, the group starts to disperse. Mike leaves first, having much further to travel to get home. Ben goes next, with an assuring, “See you tomorrow, Bill.” Stan says his father will get mad if he stays out any later, and rises from the bed. He rests his hand against Bill’s shoulder, looks for a while as though he’s about to say something, but doesn’t know how to word it, and then leaves,
“C’mon, Eds, your mom’s gonna flip.” Richie says quietly as he gets to his feet. Eddie doesn’t look at him; he’s still staring at Bill worriedly, afraid to leave him, but Bill gives him a small, reassuring smile. Eddie hurries to the door, where Richie is waiting, shrugging his backpack up onto his shoulders. Bill hears them on the stairs, listens to the door open and close, and then lies back slowly on his bed, drained of all energy.

Every part of him feels heavy.

The following day, the Loser’s attend George’s funeral.

Bill arrives at the church with his parents, and the rest of the group watch him from a respectful distance as the family greet the other attendees, sombrely shaking hands and embracing one another. Bill’s mother cannot seem to stop sobbing, and she keeps clutching at his arm and holding him close to her, as though afraid she might lose him, too. Bill is pale and his eyes are bloodshot, and he looks utterly exhausted, like he has cried so much already that he simply lacks the energy to continue.

Then they bring the coffin forward, start carrying it into the church, and it’s so tiny that it looks like only a doll could fit inside. Eddie is crying loudly. Stan is crying quietly. Ben is crying with his head lowered and his hands clasped together at his front. Mike has thick tears trickling down his cheeks, but looks stoically forward without a sound. Richie thinks he has never felt worse in his entire life, and his eyes prickle, but he doesn’t cry. He links his pinkie finger with Eddie’s beside him, and gives it a little squeeze. He’s not sure whether it’s more for Eddie’s benefit or his own.

The crowd slowly begins to join the procession, with Bill and his parents at the front. Grimly, they march into the church hall, and file into the pews. The Losers take up a row right at the front, near the Denbrough’s and other relatives, determined to be as close to Bill as they can.

When the last few funeral-goers take their places, Bill breaks off from his family and joins the end of the row with his friends, seeming to find more comfort there than with his hysterical mother, whom he cannot console. The Losers closest to Bill reach across to rub his shoulder or squeeze his hand, and they all stare at him, as though scared he’s just going to collapse, until their gaze is broken by the beginning of the service.

Towards the end, Bill gets up and stands at the lectern to speak. He untucks a piece of paper from his trouser pocket; a handwritten speech. It tells lovely stories of Georgie and his little yellow raincoat, his obsession with animals, and his vast Lego collection. Of a tiny, warm heart, utterly devoid of negative feeling, and a smile so bright it could banish darkness. From a room…from a soul.

Bill stutters horribly throughout, hindered by nerves and grief that is all-consuming. His voice is hoarse, his lip is quivering, and his eyes are brimmed so fully with tears that he nearly cannot see. About half-way through, when Bill is stammering so tragically trying to say Georgie’s name, Richie starts to rise from his seat, as though determined to go up there and finish the speech himself, to save Bill the embarrassment, but Stan holds onto his shoulder and keeps him there. He whispers, almost viciously “He can do it.” Richie is clearly frustrated, but stays put. And Bill does finish his speech, to polite but enthusiastic applause. As he steps down from the lectern, his mother stands to embrace him, beaming with pride, but still helplessly weeping. She holds his face and kisses his cheek and his forehead and hugs him again, before encouraging him to return to his friends.

The service ends shortly after, and the curtains close around George’s coffin.

Bill has simultaneously never felt so close to his friends, nor so completely alone.
They are 13 years old.

It’s summer, and the Losers are playing at the quarry, one of their favourite haunts.

None of them has had the stomach to go back to the Barrens just yet, nor anywhere near the sewer at all, for that matter, though Bill has often passed it on his bike and stopped there for a long time on the side of the road, just to look. Just to think. Once, his mind was plagued with horrific visions of this place, post-traumatic flashbacks and hallucinations that were so real, so vivid, that he felt he might eventually go mad. But over time, just like nightmares, the memories began to blur, breaking apart like pieces of a puzzle falling away and leaving gaps in the picture. Bill sometimes remembers that some of those gaps were filled by a pretty young girl with curly red hair, who was fierce, and kind, and brave, and he feels an ache in his chest when he cannot remember her name.

None of the others talk about her either, so Bill starts to think that maybe he imagined her after all.

He goes on bike rides a lot. Sometimes on his own, when he really feels the need to get away, and sometimes with the other Losers, when he really feels need of the company. He is gradually recovering from the loss of his younger brother George, and it has been an incredibly difficult journey to get there, but Bill is feeling happier and stronger than he has in a long time. He knows he owes so much to his friends, owes them his very life. No matter how fragmented his memories of ‘It’ become, that feeling remains as strong as ever.

His bike skids to a halt next to a collection of others, all gathered around a large tree with words and pictures carved into the side. There are six names on the bark, chipped in in little messy, spindly lines, a tiny love heart, what might be a frog or a turtle, and a very crudely-drawn penis. Bill smiles to himself and shakes his head as he dismounts and props Silver up against the tree, patting the saddle affectionately, as though rewarding a loyal, living pet. He looks around at some of the other bikes, four in all.

There used to be six.

The girl with the red hair.

And then…five.

It has been four months to the day since they last saw Mike. His visits to the town became less and less frequent and then…he just stopped coming. Bill feels sad when he thinks about it, but he also feels proud. Proud to be friends with someone like Mike, burdened with responsibility the other losers have yet to encounter, and loss that even Bill cannot relate to. Yet in the face of danger, he is unwavering, powered by the need to protect others, loyal and loving, an inspiration. Though he misses him, Bill is glad that Mike has returned to his family on the farm, out of Derry. It is comforting to believe that Mike, at least, might be somewhat safe, that he might be able to forget.

Bill examines the bikes.

One of them, smallest of the lot, but fairly well looked-after, has a large bicycle bag situated above the rear wheel, and two water bottles attached to it, one strapped to the frame, and the other in a cup-holder addition on the handlebars. It’s a faded, salmon pink colour, and has so many reflectors and lights it must look like a UFO in the dark. Bill looks at it fondly, and straightens the kickstand. Another of the bikes is red, has a bell, and is astoundingly ‘ordinary’, compared to the others,
whatever ‘ordinary’ means, Bill wonders. The one next to that has a high saddle and thin tires. It looks the most expensive of them all, and impeccably cared for, as though it hasn’t ever even been ridden before. The last bike is discarded haphazardly on its side on the ground, and Bill rolls his eyes and sniggers as he steps over it. It is battered on all sides, as though often dumped, chips and scrapes and dents on every surface that isn’t covered by colourful and vaguely offensive stickers. A short way away, he hears shouting and laughter, and hurries down to the quarry.

Bill instantly recognises the four figures in the water, breaking into a run towards them. He scrapes his bare knee on the edge of the rock face, and almost trips over his laces as he tugs them loose on his way, hopping as he pulls off one of his tennis shoes.

“BILL!”

Eddie sees him first, voice high-pitched and excited. Bill waves as he reaches the edge of the water, chuckling and slipping his other shoe off by the heel. He sees Eddie turn and start swimming toward him, but Richie seems to take this as an uninvited challenge and starts racing him to the shoreline, splashing so much that Eddie ends up spluttering and blinded in the backsplash.

“RICHLIE YOU FUCKING TURD!”

Bill can’t help but laugh, sitting down on the gathering of stones where the rest of their clothes and bags are, pulling off his socks and balling them up. He drops them with his shoes beside a collection of neatly folded garments that can only belong to Stanley. They are organised so perfectly, folds so crisp they almost make a perfect square.

“R-R-Richie be careful!” Bill calls in a way that really reminds him of his mom, but when he thinks about it, that doesn’t bother him at all.

Richie is currently clamped against Eddie’s back while he’s still trying to swim, saluting to Bill and pointing in his general direction, and doing what Bill assumes is supposed to be a British accent. “Onward! Onward, my valiant steed! Sir William is waiting for us! Onward, I say!”

“GET OFF OF ME!”

“Woah, there! Methinks mine steed hath risen from the incorrect position in its sleeping quarters this morn! Fear not, my little stallion!” Richie strokes the side of Eddie’s face, poking him in the eye in the process, as Eddie tries to slap his hands away and push him off, still spluttering.

“IT’S NOT FUNNY!”

Richie ‘dismounts’ from Eddie’s back, holding his breath to swim underneath him and lifting him up instead, wrapping his arms around Eddie’s knees. Richie seems to be growing abnormally fast, has already passed Bill in height, and is now the tallest of the group besides Stan, so lifting Eddie, who doesn’t appear to have grown much at all, is no problem for him.

“RICHLIE PUT ME DOWN YOU IDIOT!”

Eddie continues to protest, coughing some water from his lungs, his voice a little raspy.

“My valiant steed sounds…a little horse!” Richie shouts confidently, his feet finally touching the ground as he carries Eddie out of the water.

Eddie tries not to laugh, he really does, but he can’t help it, and Bill laughs too as Eddie drops down from Richie’s back.
By now, Bill is undressed, too, and he makes an attempt at folding his clothes, but it’s clear he’s never folded anything in his life. He narrowly dodges Richie’s attempt to grab at his underwear as he speeds past him into the water. Eddie and Richie follow their fearless leader back into the lake.

“What’s wrong, Big Bill?!” Richie calls after him, “Afraid we’ll all see ‘Little Bill’?!”

Bill ignores him. The water is icy cold, and although his instinct is to withdraw, he wades further in, until the water is covering his chest. ‘Like ripping off a band aid’, he thinks, but his teeth are chattering. The sun is blazing above them, but it doesn’t seem to have reached the murky depths of the quarry. He feels a sudden jolt in the pit of his stomach, like the ghost of a memory of something horrible he can’t quite recall. All he knows is it rolls through his body like a sickening wave. Cold, black water. A foul smell that makes the inside of his throat sting. Darkness. Screaming.

“Bill?”

It’s Stan, with a slightly worried look on his face. Ben is beside him. They don’t have time to ponder Bill’s momentary blackout, because Eddie and Richie are already splashing over to the group loudly. Eddie has to tread water even in places where the others can stand, and this appears to frustrate him immensely.

“GODDAMNIT!” He screeches, his head barely breaking the surface of the water even though he’s on his tip-toes. “This is so UNFAIR!”

They all laugh, and eventually even Eddie can’t help but crack up. Bill moves back to a slightly shallower area of water, knowing the others will follow, and they do, and now Eddie can comfortably stand without the water lapping up over his chin and into his mouth.

“I have swallowed so much of this disgusting gross water I’m probably gonna get AIDS or something!”

“You can’t get AIDS like that.” Ben assures calmly.

“My tongue feels really weird.”

“Want me to take a look for you? I’m an expert.” Richie rubs his forefingers over the lenses of his glasses, wiping away the largest droplets of water. He hasn’t bothered removing them even to go swimming, which is testament to how little he cares about them, and how little he can see if he does take them off.

“You’re a tongue expert?”

“Exactly. I’m an expert at tonguing.”

“Gross!” Eddie splashes him.

“Are you okay, Bill?” Ben asks politely, as Richie and Eddie continue to bicker beside them.

Bill nods, “I was j-just visiting G…Georgie.”

Richie and Eddie instantly go silent, turning to look at Bill.

“I took some s…some sunflowers. Those were Georgie’s favourite.”

An uncomfortable silence follows, but it doesn’t last long. Not while Richie’s around.

“Do you guys think those rocks right up there look like a giant pair of boobs?”
They all stay silent for a while, looking around at one another as though gauging whether or not it’s okay to laugh right when Bill was reminiscing about his dead little brother, but then Bill cracks up, and the rest follow, until the whole group is in hysterics. Even Stan is laughing, and Bill and Richie in particular notice this, exchanging a glance and seeing relief in one another’s eyes.

Stan doesn’t laugh very much lately.

Seconds later they’re debating who is going to climb onto whose shoulders for their team underwater wrestling tournament, which has become such a serious competition that Richie has been keeping score in the back of one of his school textbooks for months. They play every time they’re at the quarry, and battle to push one another off the shoulders of a teammate and into the water. Each time, the losing team have to complete a forfeit task assigned by the winning team, and, as the teams switch frequently, the individual who makes it to the end of the summer with the most points overall is allowed to give every other Loser a forfeit that they have to do. So far, Richie is in the lead with forty-eight points, due in no small part to his aggressive play-style and his particular enthusiasm for winning, something the others don’t take anywhere near as seriously.

Since there are no longer an equal number of participants without Mike, Bill declares that they switch teams frequently, so everyone gets a fair turn, and Richie agrees, while announcing loudly that he’s going to win anyway, so it doesn’t matter.

Richie and Eddie team up first, against Bill and Ben, while Stan referees. They move to the edge of the rock-face, so that Bill can climb up and use it to get onto Ben’s shoulders; he’s clearly the lighter of the two, despite being taller, so it makes sense. Eddie complains bitterly about being teamed up with Richie.

“He’s too rough and he doesn’t care if I drown!”

“Relax, Eds, I fucking gotcha.” Richie swims down beneath the surface of the murky water, as he did last time, to get between his legs, standing with Eddie on his shoulders. Eddie screeches and continues to protest, clamping his arms around Richie’s face and knocking his glasses off into the water.

“If you drop me I swear to GOD.”

“Get your fuckin’ noodle arms outta my face, Eds!”

Eddie moves his arms, resting his hands in Richie’s hair instead. Stan recovers Richie’s glasses from the water and pushes them back onto his face while Richie jerks his head several times erratically, trying to throw messy wet curls of hair out of his eyes. They just stick to his face until Eddie wipes his hands up across Richie’s forehead and pushes his hair back. Bill just watches them with his hands on his hips, looking amused.

“Y-you guys ready or…or what? S-seems like you’re just stalling f-for time.”

“Can I just say that I don’t really think it’s fair to put me against Bill we all know he’s the strongest out of the five of us and also he’s not afraid of anything.”

“That’s not t-true Eddie. You’re s-strong too. It’s just a…a different k-kind of strength.”

Eddie’s expression instantly softens, and he stares at Bill, unblinking, mouth slightly gaping, as though he’s in the presence of some kind of deity. Bill uses this opportunity to grab him, very easily throwing Eddie off Richie’s shoulders and into the water. Richie staggers and falls with him, clearly not expecting Bill’s sudden attack. They’re both spluttering and coughing as they surface, and Richie
points at Bill accusingly.

“THAT'S CHEATING!”

Eddie’s eyes are wide; he looks utterly betrayed.

“BILL!”

Bill laughs, and so does Ben, who holds his hands up innocently.

“Can I just say I had nothing to do with that vicious and illegal manoeuvre.”

Bill continues to laugh, shaking his head, and reaching out towards Eddie.

“Eddie I’m sorry, I’m s-sorry. It won’t happen ag-again I promise.”

Eddie is still staring at him with this aghast look on his face, all tiny and wet and tragic.

“I swallowed it! I SWALLOWED SOME OF THE AIDS WATER!”

“Yo-y-you’re fine. Quarry water is…it’s clean.” Bill assures, but then adds, “I think.”

“LOOK AT IT!” Eddie shrieks, motioning around them. “IT LOOKS LIKE LOOGEY SOUP!”

“That’s ‘cuz of all the loogies we’ve spit into it over the years.” Richie teases, “You just swallowed all of our boogers, Eds.”

Eddie gags dramatically.

“Here, want some more?” Richie starts sniffing grossly, hawking up phlegm from the back of his throat, and Eddie screams, splashing over to Stan.

“GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!”

Stan looks contemptuously at Richie, as Eddie uses him as a shield.

“Knock it off, Richie.”

Richie holds his hands up melodramatically, his eyes wide and his eyebrows raised. He motions towards Bill.

“THEY CHEATED! As the referee I think it’s your responsibility to punish them accordingly!”

“Fine,” Stan sighs softly, “Eddie and Richie get a point.”

“Bill!” Ben exclaims accusingly, but they’re both laughing.

Eddie still doesn’t seem satisfied with just an extra point. “I don’t wanna be on top anymore! It’s the worst part! You have further to fall, you’re more likely to get injured, and it makes me nauseous!”

Richie sniggers, “And just who the fuck do you think you’re gonna lift?!”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe your MOM!”

“YOWZA!” Richie laughs loudly, clapping, though Eddie doesn’t look as though he thinks it’s funny at all.
“I’ll just be referee.”

“Okay, whatever!” Richie chuckles, “Stan, get over here!”

Stan looks just as reluctant to team up with Richie as Eddie was, if not more so, but he joins him anyway. This time, Richie insists on wrestling Bill himself. He is much taller and heavier than Eddie, so they have to wade over to the edge, and Richie climbs onto Stan’s shoulders from the rocks like Bill did. They now have a significant height advantage over the other team, since both of them are tall. Bill is, too, but Ben is about average height.

Bill still looks confident as they take their positions opposite each other again, and Eddie stands close by, looking from one pair to the other, before shouting ‘GO’. There’s an immediate clash as Richie and Bill start grappling each other, both competitive and not afraid to push boundaries for a win. Ben receives an accidental kick in the mouth from Richie, and Stan narrowly dodges Bill’s knee before it connects with his eye. Bill and Richie seem quite evenly matched in strength and skill, and neither seems to be able to unseat the other for several minutes.

Then Eddie screams, and they’re all so startled that Bill and Richie both fall at the same time. Ben is still holding tightly to Bill, and he goes under, too. Stan manages to untangle himself from Richie’s legs enough to stay upright, but his eyes are wide and terrified as he looks over at Eddie. There’s something floating next to him in the water, something that brushed against his arm. It’s pale and rounded and slightly greyed and distorted from time in the water, and as it floats by, something is clearly visible below the murky surface: an eye.

Eddie is still screaming, as he desperately tries to get away from it. Stan is frozen with fear as Eddie splashes towards him, but Eddie grabs his hand and starts dragging him towards the shore, crying at him to run. Richie, Bill and Ben surface then, spluttering, gasping and looking around frantically. In turn, they see the thing floating in the water, hear Eddie screaming, and break into a frantic sprint to the shore, water spraying and swirling in all directions as they trip and splash and all grasp madly for one another on their way to the shore.

Bill turns back at the edge of the lake, still knee deep, sopping wet from head-to-toe, breathless and scared and wearing nothing but his underwear, but clearly determined nonetheless, to fight whatever fresh horror might bring harm to his friends, with his bare hands. Richie, Eddie, Stan and Ben gather a few steps behind him, with Richie at the forefront, closest to Bill, shielding the other three.

Bill’s eyes dart to and fro across the stilling surface of the water, searching for a threat, expecting some gruesome, ghastly monster to burst through from the depths at any second. But nothing happens. And then he sees it, creepy indeed, but small and unthreatening; a doll, floating gently on the now placid lake. Flooded with relief, Bill starts laughing.

Richie doesn’t laugh, but he starts swearing profusely as he turns away from the water. Ben chuckles uncomfortably, and Eddie heaves a loud sigh of relief, holding his chest.

“I’m gonna have a heart-attack.” He breathes quietly, voice shaking as he stumbles over to their discarded possessions, retrieving his aspirator from his fanny pack and sitting down heavily to use it.

Stan stays where he is for a while, as the others trudge slowly back from the water and towards Eddie. His eyes are still slightly wide, and brimmed with tears, as he stares out over the lake, unblinking. He jumps when he feels Bill’s hand on his shoulder.

“S-Stan? Y-you okay?”

Stan nods without turning around, before following Bill back to the others.
They redress in near-silence, all still fairly shaken. Stan was the only one with the sense to bring a towel, and once he has dried himself and put his clothes back on, he gives it to Eddie, who wears it around himself like a shawl as they walk their bikes back up onto the road.

As they begin to split off in separate directions, Ben and Stan one way, Bill, Richie and Eddie the other, Bill watches them bicker childishly ahead of him with a small smile on his face. He ponders the incident at the quarry; the terror they felt. He knows the same thought must have crossed all of their minds.

*IT* is back.

But it isn’t.

And he almost laughs aloud, because he knows they have no need to be afraid anymore. And this has only cemented that fact. Now, they can just be afraid of stupid things that kids are *supposed* to be afraid of, like creepy dolls, and school bullies, and first kisses.

They reach an intersection ahead, and they each turn to go a different way, waving goodbye and wishing each other goodnight. And Bill looks back briefly to see Richie plant a chaste kiss on Eddie’s cheek as he cycles past him and around the corner out of sight. He feels a swell of elation in his chest as he mounts his bike.

“Hi-yo Silver, AWAY!”
They are 14 years old.

And closing in on Bill’s fifteenth Birthday.

He is the eldest of the Losers except for Stanley, who is a year older than the rest, nearly sixteen, and Richie, who has his birthday in April. Bill’s Birthday is at the very beginning of summer vacation, and since they have just graduated from Middle School, it’s now only a few days away.

Seeing as it’s their last day of school before they break up for summer, classes end early, and the rush of screaming children through the front doors after the bell rings is like a terrifying, roaring tsunami. The eighth-graders, in particular, are leaving the building in a hurry, in a state of liberated euphoria.

Bill, Richie, Eddie and Stan regroup outside the main entrance, as is their annual tradition at the beginning of the summer, to throw their now-redundant notebooks and text books, and especially anything homework-related, into the trash cans in front of the school. It’s almost like a cleansing ritual, as Richie often pointed out, sometimes dancing around the garbage and chanting in an incredibly racist and highly inaccurate West African accent, much to the embarrassment of his friends. The ‘ritual’ holds even more importance now that they are leaving Middle School behind, and Richie reflects this by dumping his entire backpack, not just its contents, into the trash.

“You can’t just throw your whole bag in the trash, Rich!” Eddie protests, as he tugs his own neatly back up onto his shoulders.

“Why? Everything in there has been molested by school stuff. It all has school germs, now. Besides, I took out all of the important things.” Richie stuffs a hand in his pocket and pulls out a rubber band, a crumpled Marlboro packet with two cigarettes left in the box, and a tootsie pop that looks as though it has been opened, half-eaten, and then stuffed back into the wrapper.

“That’s disgusting.”

“I was saving it for later.” Richie shrugs, tucking the tootsie pop and the cigarettes back into his pocket.

“What do you need a single rubber band for?”

Richie tugs it between his finger and thumb, and then flicks it hard at Eddie, snapping it against his bare thigh. Eddie shrieks, jumping away from him as Richie laughs and Stan rolls his eyes.

“That’s what you get for wearing slut shorts!”

“Oh, really?!” Richie yells, grinning, looking at Bill and Stan as though they should be backing him up, “How often do you go to the gym?! You don’t even do P.E, Eds; you run five steps and you can’t breathe!”

Eddie glares daggers at him.

And then suddenly he’s yanked backwards so hard by the strap of his backpack that he falls over, delicate palms scraped bloody on the gravel as he uses them to catch himself.
It’s Greta, who has taken the place of Henry Bowers and his gang as resident bully at Derry Middle School. She’s quite thickly-built, and nearly a foot taller than Eddie, who has almost given up on the idea of having a growth spurt at this point. Eddie remembers Greta for sure, remembers that horrible, nauseous, sinking feeling in his stomach that time at the drug store, when he thought for a second that someone other than his small group of friends might like and respect him enough to want to sign his cast. Only to realise, she thinks he’s a loser, just like everyone else does.

“Oh, my!” Greta exclaims, in mock surprise. She’s chewing gum loudly, and with her mouth wide open, so that the strands of saliva churning around her tongue are horribly visible and audible. Eddie resists the urge to retch.

Within seconds, Richie has squared up to her, so close that the others imagine flecks of her spit might be raining on the lenses of his glasses. Eddie may be shorter than Greta, but Richie certainly isn’t, and there’s fury in his eyes and his fingers keep clenching and unclenching as though he’s seriously considering whether or not it’s worth hitting a girl. Greta suddenly stops chewing, and she looks vaguely intimidated, until she’s flanked by a guy who clearly hasn’t been in Middle School for a good while. He’s huge, built like a footballer, with close-cropped hair and a misshapen nose that could have been broken several times and healed badly back together. He’s wearing a college jersey, and there’s a second-hand Cadillac car pulled up onto the side-walk, with its driver’s seat door left wide open.

Seconds later, and Richie is on the ground, too, with a solid punch to the face from a fist the size of a ham, his glasses skidding across the pavement several feet away. He’s holding his hand over his nose and mouth, and there’s blood pouring from between his fingers, and down his arm.

“I leave him alone!” Eddie screams, but it falls on deaf ears, and it doesn’t matter anyway, because now Bill has stepped between Richie and Greta’s college boyfriend, looking weak and skinny in comparison, but with an enraged expression, completely devoid of fear.

Stan is frozen in place to the side of it all, pleading with Bill, begging him not to do anything.

But it’s too late; Bill throws a punch, as well, and it connects with a satisfying crack. The older boy stumbles backwards, and Greta backs off, too, holding onto his sleeve. There’s no blood, not like Richie, whose yellow, flowered shirt is now soaked red all around the collar, like hideous, motel-room curtains at the site of a murder scene, but the guy’s nose is swollen and will definitely bruise.

And then there’s just a flurry of movement as Bill and this beast of a boy collide again, punching, kicking, and tearing at each other’s hair. Richie thinks that fighting is never cool like in the movies. It’s not precise and fluid and fun to watch, it’s a scary combination of pure, raw aggression and an animal desperation for self-preservation. The awful, cracking sound of bone against bone, the frantic scuffling of shoes on concrete, skin and clothes littered with flecks of fresh, red blood without knowing who or where it’s coming from.

Bill is clearly overpowered, and before long he’s thrown backwards into the trash cans, stumbling and tripping over them as he tries to get back to his feet, but he’s already on the ground and vulnerable, and he’s being kicked in the stomach and back by Greta and her hulking boyfriend.

Stan is screaming at them to stop, but he knows it’s fruitless, and suddenly, savagely, he grabs Greta by her ponytail and yanks her back away from Bill. She shrieks horribly, turning and hitting him hard across the face, digging her fingernails into his skin, determined to inflict as much damage as possible. Stan’s cheek is bleeding, but he doesn’t back down from her, until the boy rounds on him, too, grabbing him by the neck and shoving him face-first into the dirt. Bill is already pushing himself to his feet, but he’s winded and battered and his lip and his brow are swollen and bleeding.
They’ve drawn so much attention at this point, that Greta and her boyfriend share a look that says ‘let’s get outta here’. Thankfully, they leave before they can inflict much more damage on Stan, though as a last, fleeting attack, Greta spits her gum into his hair, and rubs it in with the heel of her shoe across the side of his head. The Losers, slightly stunned, gather themselves up as they hear the screech of tires on asphalt, moving away from the school.

Bill hefts Richie up from the ground, wincing at the pain it causes in his own bruised ribs, and Richie instantly grabs at Bill’s shirt, bloodied palms leaving horrifying handprints on the white fabric. His nose is swollen and still pouring with blood, and it’s just everywhere; all over his shirt, all over his hands and arms and the bottom half of his face, and there are even splatters of it on his legs, and Eddie and Stan hurry over to them, both slightly wide-eyed and pale at the gory sight of him. Eddie looks as though he might faint as he retrieves Richie’s battered glasses, folds the arms and tucks them into his pocket. He clearly can’t wear them right now.

“O-okay h-hold here.” Bill pinches the bridge of Richie’s nose lightly with his thumb and forefinger.

“OW!”

Eddie actually jumps at Richie’s scream, but then he hastily pulls a packet of tissues from his fanny pack, tearing a large wad from the plastic and holding it under Richie’s nose.

“H-here you go Rich hold this.”

Richie does as he’s told and grabs at the mess of tissues with one hand, and Bill guides his other to the point at the bridge of his nose where he has to pinch to stop the bleeding. Eddie starts pulling a packet of wet wipes from his backpack, but Bill stops him.

“Th-there’s no time for that now. M-my house.” Bill commands as he retrieves Silver from the bike rack. Stan doesn’t have to be told twice, grabbing his bike, too, as does Eddie. Richie follows them slowly.

“Oh, sure, I’ll just fucking walk there!” He yells sarcastically, “Don’t worry about me, boys, I’ll see you at Bill’s house in about an hour after I’ve dragged my bike there with NO free hands! I guess I’ll just kick it there with my feet! In fact, maybe you should just tie it to me with rope, and I’ll drag it there like Jesus carrying the cross!”

The other three exchange silent looks, before cracking up, the utter un-funniness of the situation somehow making it all the more hilarious. Richie looks at them all over the top of the collection of bloodied Kleenex stuffed against his face, his voice muffled.

“Oh, it’s suddenly so funny when I’m hurt! But last week when Eddie tripped over that kerb, or that time Stan got his hair caught in the zipper on his jacket, it’s all, ‘That’s not funny, Richie! You’re a horrible person, Richie!’ You guys suck!”

Bill helps Richie onto the back of Silver as Eddie and Stan mount their own bicycles, then climbs onto the saddle in front of him.

“What about your bike, Richie?” Eddie looks over at the bike rack, where Richie’s battered old ride stands alone, its handlebars almost as wonky as the arms of his glasses.

“I’ll get it tomorrow. Or not. If someone steals it they’re fucking welcome to it, it’s a piece of shit anyways.”

Richie has to release the bridge of his nose to grip Bill’s waist as he starts peddling, and soon the four of them are speeding through Derry towards Bill’s house, all bloody and beaten and covered in dirt.
and gravel, but no less cheerful as long as they’re together.

Then they’re in Bill’s kitchen, Stan and Eddie cleaning Richie’s face and his arms and hands as Bill disappears to get him a clean shirt. His nose has finally stopped bleeding, and Stan drags him over to the kitchen sink by the wrists like an unruly child, holding Richie’s hands under the running water and squeezing about seven pumps of liquid hand soap into his palms. Eddie starts fussily cleaning Richie’s glasses with supplies he takes from his backpack, first the wet wipes, then some kind of alcohol-based disinfectant spray that’s meant for wounds, with which he polishes the lenses. He also replaces the tape that’s holding one of the arms together, binding it *perfectly* as he holds them so close to his eyes he’s going to end up needing glasses himself.

Bill returns with one of his own plaid shirts as Richie is drying off his hands, and Stan is cleaning the sink, wearing a pair of rubber gloves that must belong to Bill’s mom.

“S-s-sorry I didn’t really h-have one ugly enough.” Bill chuckles, as Richie changes into it, exploding into peals of loud, sarcastic laughter.

Eddie comes over and settles Richie’s glasses back onto his face gently, trying not to agitate his nose too much.

“You think it’s broken?” He asks, not sounding too worried about it, more curious, examining the inflamed bridge of Richie’s nose closely.

“Nah,” Richie shrugs, completely blasé about it, “But if people keep punching me in the nose…” he gives Bill a *look*, “…it might eventually go all fucking weird and deformed.”

“Might be an improvement.” Eddie chuckles, dodging Richie’s fist as he goes to punch him playfully in the stomach.

“Your *mom* might be an improvement!”

“That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“You’re right, I’m clearly delirious with blood loss.” Richie starts snooping through the cupboards in Bill’s kitchen. “You got anything good in here, Bill? Any beer? Some Xanax? My mom usually has those.”

Bill ignores him, approaching Stan by the sink, where the latter is currently trying to pull the sticky clump of chewing gum from his hair. He moves Stan’s hands away, and starts pulling it apart himself, but it’s matted in with a mixture of dirt and saliva, and along with the curliness of Stan’s hair, it seems impossible to get out. Eddie tries to help, too, coating the gooey mess with hand sanitizing gel, but that just makes it slippery. Stan keeps telling them just to cut it out, and Bill gets a pair of scissors from the drawer, but finds he can’t bear to do it.

Stan’s hair is just too…beautiful. The perfect, brunette curls are flecked with shimmering blonde, which highlights the curves of each coil like waves of molten gold, sitting soft and elegant around the frame of his handsome face. It’s like sunlight and starlight and smooth, luxurious silk have combined to create each angelic ringlet, and Bill thinks it would be a mortal offense to damage even a single strand of it. Many, many times he has tried to capture the essence of Stan’s hair in a drawing, a painting, or in writing, but he can never do it justice. Nothing Bill can create even comes close to the exquisite reality.

He drops the scissors against the countertop decidedly.

“H-hey Rich, pass me th-the butter from the fridge.”
Stan’s nose wrinkles slightly. He doesn’t seem to like the idea of having food rubbed into his hair, but at this point they can hardly put anything worse into it than somebody’s half-chewed gum. That, and, Bill is touching his hair so gently and making so much fuss over him, that Stan feels surprisingly enraptured, even though it’s something far less significant than being punched in the nose or kicked in the ribs.

Richie brings the butter, and Bill scoops some of it out with his fingers, applying it to the small section of Stan’s hair that’s stuck together. Within a couple of minutes, the gum starts sliding out, and Stan’s hair is relatively gunk-free.

“Th-there.” Bill says triumphantly, wiping his hands on his shorts and smiling.

Stan thanks him, and their eyes meet for a short while, in which time they just smile at one another and sort of laugh bashfully.

Richie’s eyebrows rise a little.

“Wow,” He looks Bill up and down, “Hey, Bill, you need to change your shirt. You look like the shower scene from Psycho.”

Bill looks down as he tugs his shirt away from his body; he’s covered in dirt and there are two large, bloody handprints right on the front of his chest. Eddie and Stan both seem to grimace simultaneously, but Richie thinks it’s hilarious.

Once Bill has changed, they huddle together on the sofa in his living room and watch Psycho on VHS. Eddie screams at every jump-scare, Stan half-covers his eyes with his hand whenever he sees something nasty coming, and Richie just laughs all the way through it, making a loud, running commentary and pointing out every stupid flaw. At one point, Richie’s loud, “Oh my GOD, you dumb bitch!” has them all in stitches.

Bill looks around, at Stan on his left, so graceful and captivating and who cares so much, at Eddie on his right, knees up to his chest and a pillow over his face, so adorable and feisty and so full of energy and love, and finally, at Richie on the floor in front of him, so brave and clever, and willing to die for his friends, not to mention the funniest person Bill has ever met, though he’d never admit it.

And he thinks, with a smile he cannot suppress, that he has never loved three people so much in his life, and he knows he never will again.
They are 15 years old.

High school, so far, has been far kinder to the Losers’ Club than middle school ever was. Most importantly, by far, because they are joined once more by their old friend, Mike Hanlon, now much taller and broader than any of them remember him.

Years of working on the farm outside Derry with his family have made Mike stronger and more hardened than ever; his hands are rough and calloused, his muscles are thick and well-defined, and his already exquisite, dark skin is glowing with a healthy sheen like the surface shimmer on velvet. He’s also stunningly handsome, with dazzlingly white teeth, a well-defined jaw, and full, symmetrical features.

Bill notices, very gladly, that Mike is not just fitter and healthier, but seems happier than ever, too. He has such a bright, infectious smile, and his personality is so warm and positive, that the other Losers cannot help but feel happy, too, in his presence. Their reunion even seems to have cheered Stan up, somewhat.

Speaking of which, Bill is sure he isn’t the only one who has noticed that Stan hasn’t been himself for a long time, now. For years, even. And they wouldn’t have to think very hard to pinpoint the moment it happened, though none of them can ever bear to bring it up. Stan has always been uptight and obsessive, but he has a wicked sense of humour, rivalling Richie, even, and sometimes they can still see it, in brief glimpses, but nowadays it’s usually hidden behind a thick barrier of solemn silence. Bill sees a heaviness in Stan’s brown eyes that he knows wasn’t there before, a darkness, and it worries him a lot. Sometimes he feels afraid of it. Afraid that Stan will become lost inside that darkness, and it will be too late for them to save him. Sometimes Bill wants to talk to Stan about it, to let him know they’re there for him, but it’s a difficult subject to broach, and for once, this isn’t something Bill can power through with sheer, dumb bravery, so he just watches, and waits, ready to catch him when he eventually falls off the edge of that horrible precipice.

At least high school has been good to them.

Mike is so popular, that the rest of the Losers, by association, are surprisingly popular, too. He’s Quarterback on the Derry football team, elected Representative of the Student Council, and Head Volunteer at the local soup kitchen. He helps organise fundraising events for local charities, and pioneered the ‘Derry Good Deeds’, a club that recruits other students and young people to worthy causes in the community. He has such a large group of friends and followers, now, not to mention the fact that he still works on the farm with his Grandfather on weekends, that Bill and the others are surprised he has any time to spend with them at all. Yet, somehow, the Losers Club are closer and more unified than ever with Mike there.

Bill is well-liked, too; not quite as well-liked as Mike, but people just seem to like Bill instinctively, despite his quiet, reserved nature. He’s on the Baseball Team, and has a natural athleticism that means he’s really good. Richie tried out for it, too; he has a mean swing, but he quickly lost interest when he realised it wasn’t all just hitting things with a bat. Bill also started Derry’s first Creative Writing Club, which doesn’t have very many members, and one of them is Eddie, but is becoming surprisingly more and more popular, mostly with the female demographic in the school. Bill would like to believe it’s because they are enthusiastic about the infinite creative possibilities of being a writer, but Richie insists it’s because half of the school is in love with him, which causes Bill to stammer terribly at club meetings from sheer embarrassment.
Richie is, naturally, the Class Clown. The majority of the school thinks he’s hilarious, and actively encourage his antics, the other 20-30 percent just think he’s really annoying. He doesn’t take part in any sports, clubs or after school activities, but has gathered popularity purely based on being an asshole, as Eddie points out almost daily, whenever people high-five Richie in the corridor or outside school. The only people who do not find Richie even remotely funny are the teachers. He spends so much time in detention that Bill suggests he just turn that into a club, and knowing this makes it all the more confusing every time Richie comes out with top marks in nearly all of his classes. Eddie says that Richie is the definition of ‘Smartass’, because he is really smart, but also really an ass.

Eddie is probably the least notorious of the Losers at Derry High School, because he’s so small and unassuming. He has finally reached a solid 5’3”, a personal goal, ignoring the fact that he’s still vastly shorter than any of his friends, especially Richie, who just doesn’t seem to stop growing. In fact, Eddie is still shorter than the majority of the kids at school, girls included, but it really doesn’t seem to bother him unless Richie tries to make a joke out of it. Aside from that, Eddie excels at Science and Mathematics, and is the favourite student of most of the teachers, probably due to the fact that he always stays after class to help clean up the lab, and has often been seen wiping down tables in the school Cafeteria, too. In fact, Eddie is quite good at everything. Everything that isn’t related to physical fitness, that is. The Gym teachers have nicknamed him ‘Unsteady Eddie’, and tend to keep a close eye on him, though they all like having him around during matches and practices, as a sort of adorable mascot. At the very least, he’s incredibly enthusiastic, especially when it comes to cheering for Bill and Mike, and it doesn’t hurt that he looks cute beside the rest of the cheerleaders, who are all completely in love with him.

Stan is not particularly popular, since he keeps to himself so much, and doesn’t show any interest in making new friends, but those who’ve had the rare honour of speaking more than a few words to him do seem to like him. How much Stan likes them, is a different matter entirely. He spends most of his time in the library, quietly reading. He’s a prominent member of the Book Club, something Ben is basically Chair of, and Bill sometimes comes along, as well. Bill much prefers writing stories than reading them, though, so he only joins them when he’s feeling tired or uninspired, just to sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room and lose himself in a Fantasy Novel. Stan, personally, prefers Non-Fiction, especially books about Flora and Fauna. And, as usual, Stan is just naturally and effortlessly good at everything, especially books about Flora and Fauna. And, as usual, Stan is just naturally and effortlessly good at everything, and unlike Eddie, this includes physical activities, because he is tall and lean and surprisingly light on his feet. He doesn’t participate much, though, and doesn’t seem to have much enthusiasm for anything, lately, so he is just drifting through High School in relative, but comfortable, mediocrity.

And last, but certainly not least, is Ben, who spends most of his time in the library, too, and enjoys a wide range of genres where books are concerned. From old, dusty history books, to romantic poetry, to sci-fi and fantasy epics, Ben will almost certainly read anything and everything the Derry High School library has to offer. He gets immensely excited whenever one of the other Losers wants to join him in a reading session, or just talk to him and share ideas about a book they’ve read. He and Stan talk a lot about poetry, and classic literature, discussing complex metaphors and symbolism. With Mike, he shares a passion for history, and they both love sharing interesting facts they’ve discovered about Derry and the surrounding area. Bill invites Ben over to his house for late night readings of horror novels. So far, they’ve finished Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’, Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein’, and ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, by Oscar Wilde. They take it in turns to read aloud, by the light of a torch, for atmospheric purposes, of course, and Ben is incredibly patient when it comes to Bill’s stutter, never interrupting him or giving him any reason to feel embarrassed. Ben says it provides a certain eerie ambience to the stories that makes them even more intense, and the more he reads out loud, the more Bill’s stutter begins to improve, too. As for Eddie, Ben likes to help settle his hypochondria by showing him passages from Medical Journals and other factual health-related resources, dispelling common myths and old-wives’ tales, and patiently helping Eddie look
up symptoms he believes he’s got, reading and re-reading the sections that assure him there’s nothing wrong, and helping to educate him on the proper uses of medicines and traditional remedies. Although, sometimes they’ll just sit and read cheesy romance novels, while Ben explains the importance of having strong female protagonists, and Eddie cries whenever a fictional character dies. Even Richie, who has probably never touched a book in his life, excitedly rambles to Ben about comic books for hours at a time, and Ben is absolutely ecstatic that they have something they can share, too.

Ben has also started running, something that terrified him to the core at the beginning of their freshman year, but he is headstrong, and has a powerful determination once he has set his mind to something. At first it was more like sweaty, exhausting stumbling that made him vomit a couple of times, then it became jogging that was just as sweaty but didn’t make him ill, and by the end of their final term, he can now run 100 metres quite comfortably. If he pushes himself, he can even lap the track a few times, but he still struggles with distance. He has been losing weight rapidly, and combined with his growth in height, he’s now much closer to Mike’s build, though not nearly as muscular. Ben knows he’ll never be *that* strong. He knows he will never be as tall and skinny as Richie, as unfairly handsome as Bill or Stan, or as dainty and pretty as Eddie, but he has never felt better about himself. He is growing up to be an attractive young man indeed.

Of course, the Losers have been supporting him one hundred and ten percent, every step of the way. Mike and Bill will usually run alongside him, so he doesn’t feel like he’s doing it on his own, keeping pace with him and all encouraging one another, never making it feel as though they are any better than him. Richie and Eddie cheer him on from the side-lines, shouting encouragements and applauding, and making up chants that aren’t always ‘PG’, thanks to Richie, but that always cheer Ben up when he’s feeling discouraged and make him laugh. Stan is always waiting at the end with towels and water, and he times the runs with his watch, recording all of Ben’s progress neatly in a notebook, that Ben can look back on for motivation, to see how far he has come since the beginning. Sometimes Richie gets hold of it, and so it’s filled with rude jokes in the margins, and equally crude little doodles. Stan finds this very aggravating. Bill sometimes takes the notebook, too, and draws cute little sketches of the Losers running, of Ben with a gold medal around his neck, of the trees on the day Ben ran his first 100 metres without stopping. Stan doesn’t mind this nearly as much.

They reach summer again, and it’s Bill’s sixteenth Birthday.

His parents are characteristically unenthused about it, and don’t plan a big celebration or anything, which is fine with Bill, because he knows there are only five people he really wants there anyway. His mom agrees to let the other Losers stay over; they stay over at Bill’s house a lot anyway, so it isn’t really an exceptional circumstance. She makes up a decent party spread of pizza, chips, hot dogs, French fries, popcorn. There’s a large Birthday cake in the middle, too, and it’s a really nice-looking cake, but Bill can’t help but notice that it’s store-bought. He clearly remembers his mom spending days before all of Georgie’s Birthdays, making his Birthday cake by hand, and he feels this horrible emptiness when he first sees it. Then he smiles and thanks her and gives her a hug, and feels pathetic and guilty and ungrateful.

From his mom and dad, he receives a beautiful, vintage typewriter, which he gives complete pride of place right in the centre of his desk, where there used to just be a boring old notepad and a pot of pens. It’s glossy black, with white keys, slightly yellowed with age, and he *adores* it. The way it feels and sounds when he types a sentence, the satisfying *clicks*, the emphasis of each inky letter thudding softly against the paper in turn, makes writing seem all the more gratifying.

From Richie, he gets a tiny, rectangular package that’s wrapped untidily with newspaper. A mix tape, with his name scrawled across the front in large, messy letters. The cassette contains all of Bill’s favourite songs, and some of Richie’s, that he thinks Bill will like. There’s a piece of folded note
paper with it, where Richie has written a list of the songs, and each one has a little annotation, explaining why he chose it: ‘Because you’re a faggot who likes ‘Wham’’, ‘Because this was playing on the radio that time I puked in your dad’s car’, ‘Because I had to make sure you had at least some decent music on here.’ Bill’s smile widens further and further as he reads through the list.

From Stan, an expensive set of water colour pencils, and a collection of hard-back notebooks in varying sizes, each with his name embossed on the front in pretty silver letters. They’re wrapped up so immaculately that he almost doesn’t want to ruin the paper by tearing it, but Richie helps him out by doing it instead. It’s all perfectly matched, too, blue wrapping paper with blue ribbons, blue card and envelope, blue notebooks, even Stan is wearing a blue shirt the exact same colour, surely a conscious decision.

Eddie gets him a shiny new bell for Silver, and a large tub of high-gloss bike wax. He also insists on being there to help Bill polish the bike, and he seems so enthusiastic about it that they actually take a break from the present-unwrapping to go into the garage and do it then and there. Bill, Eddie and Richie all end up with a cloth each, and with three of them it only takes about a minute before Silver is gleaming as though brand new. Bill is positively thrilled. He knows one day he will outgrow his old bike, but for now, Silver is just as much a member of the Losers’ club as everyone else.

Ben gets Bill a book of Classic Horror Stories, by H. P. Lovecraft, and they flip through it excitedly, choosing the order in which they’re going to read them, and who’s going to be the one to read each one aloud. They, of course, invite the others along, too, but Eddie shakes his head rather violently, and Richie yawns and says something insulting about books and Eddie’s mom that Bill doesn’t listen to. He hears Eddie snapping at Richie as Mike gives Bill his gift.

It’s wrapped nicely in brown paper, with curly ribbons stuck to the top that almost look and feel as though they’re made from straw. “It’s not much,” Mike says bashfully, as Bill unwraps a large box of homemade walnut cookies; Bill’s favourite kind. He briefly remembers Mike talking about how much he likes baking, and enjoys mixing ingredients with his own hands. “You put your heart and soul into the food you make for somebody,” Mike had said, then. Bill places the box on the table and flings his arms around Mike’s neck, holding him in a tight hug, while Richie pipes up behind him about favouritism. Bill makes sure he gives the rest of them a hug each, too, to shut him up, and they all end up giddy and laughing while they fill themselves with so much food that they have to sit in silence for a long while, after.

Later on, in Bill’s room, sleeping bags, pillows and blankets spread out all over the floor so that there’s no space to walk between them, they sit in the dark, with a torch, and tell scary stories until Eddie cries and they have to stop.

“You’re such a wuss, Eds!”

“I’m not a wuss! I’m just allergic to things that are fucking scary!” Eddie squeals as they all collapse into fits of laughter again.

“Oh, let’s play Truth or Dare.”

*Of course* it would be Richie to suggest this.

“That’s not fair.” Eddie butts in.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a fucking weirdo and you’ll do or say anything.”
“Or anyone.” Richie adds, clicking the torch on and off over and over again until Stan snatches it from his hand and puts it out of his reach.

“You’re disgusting. Like, I am actually physically nauseated by how fucking gross you are.”

“That’s not what your mom was saying last night.”

“Beep beep, Richie!” Bill interrupts, looking exasperated. “Let’s just play the game.”

“SIR, YES, SIR!” Richie shouts, saluting towards Bill, and then holding his hand over his heart, doing his best, Southern Yokel voice, “We shall follow you to the ends of this here Earth, Sergeant Billy, ain’t no doubt about that.”

“Shut up, Richie!” Eddie growls, “Why do you always have to ruin everything?!”

“Okay, geez, don’t get your fucking panties in a knot.” Richie straightens his glasses, “You go first, Bill.”

“O-okay. Umm…Ben, Truth or Dare?”

Ben looks nervous.

“…Truth?”

“Um…” Bill thinks for a while, “Are th-there any girls you l-like at school?”


“I…I think Nancy Brixton is pretty.” Ben says quietly, shrugging non-committedly.

“Nancy Brixton?!” Richie questions, looking outraged, “But she’s so fucking boring!”

“I said she was pretty, I didn’t say she was interesting.” Says Ben, and they all laugh.

“Oh, n-now it’s y-your turn, Ben.”

“Okay…” Ben looks at Stan. “Stanley.”

Stan doesn’t look nervous at all.

“Truth.” He says confidently.

“Uh…are there any girls at school you like?”

Richie starts snorting loudly with laughter, and they all look at him. He receives a glare from Stan so intense that he quickly shuts up, holding his hands up defensively.

“No.” Stan says firmly, and everyone is silent for a moment, “Richie, Truth or Dare?”

Richie looks at Stan challengingly, with a blasé, “Pfft. Dare.”

“I dare you to drink the water from Bill’s retainer.” Stan says quickly.

There’s a glass of water on Bill’s nightstand, with a retainer in it for his top teeth, since he had braces as a child. Eddie gags, and Bill looks caught between not wanting Richie’s mouth anywhere near his
retainer, and wanting Richie to have to do something disgusting as pay-back for being such an asshole. He clearly settles on the latter, as he reaches over to pass the glass to Richie, picking his retainer out on the way and holding it between his fingers.

Richie drinks all of the water without a second thought, and Stan watches him with a slightly irritated look on his face. Eddie pulls the collar of his pyjama top up over his face so he doesn’t have to watch it, muttering, “Oh my god, oh my god,” under his breath over and over. Mike just laughs, holding his hand over his mouth. Richie passes the glass back to Bill, who drops his retainer into it with a mixture of amusement and disgust on his face.

“Okay, Stanley, Truth or Dare.” Richie smirks, as the other Losers watch the battle unfold in front of them.

“Dare.” Stan says this time, not breaking eye contact with Richie.

“I dare you to get naked.” Richie grins, leaning back on his arms and crossing one leg over the other in a ‘checkmate’, kind of way.

Stan looks as though he’s just swallowed something really unpleasant. They all just stare at him, waiting to see what he’ll do, and Richie has such a smug look on his face that’s driving Stan crazy.

“What’ll it be, Stanley?” Richie raises his eyebrows, “You wanna forfeit? ’Cuz I got a good one for that.”

Stan glances at Bill, who’s sitting on his left, then he looks back at Richie with a scowl, gets up and lifts his shirt off over his head. Richie looks fiendishly delighted.

“Oho ho!”

Eddie looks away, shielding his eyes with his hand, and Ben hides his head under a blanket, with a soft, “I can’t watch.” Stan has always been lean, but Bill notices, from the corner of his eye as he politely turns away, that he’s skinnier than normal; almost unhealthy. And the only person who continues to look is Richie, but they can tell from his loud, irritating whistle that Stan definitely completes his dare. They finally look again when they know Stan has re-dressed.

“Fair fucking play to you, Stan the Man.” Richie chuckles, “And Stan is a man for sure, in case any of you weenies were wondering.”

“Mike.” Stan says as he sits back down next to Bill, interrupting Richie again, “Truth or Dare.”

“Dare.” Mike answers boldly, “But I ain’t getting naked, just so y’all know.”

They all laugh.

“I dare you to…lift as many people as you can at once. And if it’s more than three you pass.”

Mike looks excited by this, and gets to his feet, flexing his arms.

“No problem.”

He lifts Richie, first, over one shoulder, and then Bill climbs off the bed onto his other. Ben somehow clings to his back between them, and despite all of this, Mike still manages to get Eddie on his front, too, even while Richie is flailing his gangly legs around and kicking people. Stan applauds him, and watches as they all collapse into a cackling, tangled heap of limbs on Bill’s bed.
Next, Mike dares Bill to eat a raw egg. The Losers all hurry back down into the kitchen to watch him do it, trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb Bill’s parents, but with all six of them galloping down the staircase at the same time, it still resembles the noise a stampede of gazelles might make. This dare takes two attempts, because the first time, Bill cracks the egg on the edge of the kitchen counter, and it falls out of the shell and slides onto the floor. Richie tries to encourage him to get on his hands and knees and eat it anyway, but Mike assures Bill that he doesn’t have to to win his dare. Bill cleans it up and cracks a second egg over a glass this time, swallowing the contents with a grimace on his face. Eddie squeals into Stan’s shoulder, while the others clap, impressed.

Then Bill dares Richie to go outside and climb back up into the bedroom through the window, so they all thunder back upstairs and hurry to Bill’s bedroom window to watch, as Richie goes outside, barefoot and wearing Spider-Man pyjamas. Bill slides the window open and five heads pop up over the sill to see Richie standing on the lawn below.

“Watch and learn, fucktards!” He yells, as he gets his first foothold on the living room window ledge, lucky he’s so tall.

And then he starts to climb, and Mike notes that with his dark, unruly mop of hair and his long, thin limbs, Richie is rather spider-like, at which Eddie wrinkles his nose.

When he’s close enough to the top, Mike and Bill grab one of Richie’s arms each and haul him the rest of the way and in through the window. Richie bows breathlessly, blowing kisses and waving like royalty as the other Losers cheer and congratulate him. Richie is elated.

“Oh, my turn.” Richie says resolutely as they all sit back down, and something in his voice makes the others wary. “Eddie.”

Eddie instantly starts shaking his head.

“Nu-uh. No fucking way.”

“I didn’t even ask you yet!”

“You don’t have to! I already know if it’s something you come up with I don’t wanna fucking do it.”

“Aw, c’mon, Eds! Don’t be such a whiny little spoilsport! You’re gonna ruin the whole fucking game!”

“Can you g-guys stop c-cursing so loud! My mom and dad are g-g-gonna hear you!”

“Sorry Bill.” Eddie looks guilty, but then he looks back at Richie, and his expression hardens again, “Okay, fine! Truth!”

“How many times do you touch yourself?”

“DARE!”

Richie laughs, “You can’t just change your mind half way through the Truth!”

“Well I just fucking did so don’t even finish that question!”

“Okay! Okay! Since I’m feeling generous, I will give you one pass.” Richie holds up a single finger, “I dare you…” He lowers his finger slowly to his lips, as though in thought, “…to kiss me.”

The room is silent for a couple of tense seconds, until Eddie pipes up, as though just realising what
he heard.

“What? NO!”

“Why not?” Richie snickers, looking mortally offended and glancing around the room for support, “You guys would kiss me, right?!”

There’s a definitive shaking of heads and disbelieving laughter and ‘No, definitely not’s, and Richie looks scandalised.

“I’m not fucking kissing you, Richie, you’re disgusting.”

“Why? Because I drank Bill’s spit? Maybe that’ll help; you can just pretend you’re kissing Bill!”

“OH MY GOD!”

Bill looks as though he doesn’t know whether to laugh or not.

“R-Rich that’s g-gross even for you.”

“Yeah, I think this game is officially over.” Stan drawls as he gets up from the bed and pulls a neat bag of organised toiletries from his backpack, retreating into the family bathroom next door to brush his teeth.

Eddie gets up, too, looking at Richie and shaking his head disapprovingly.

“Fuckin’ disgusting.” He mutters as he retrieves his own, less organised, but much fuller, toiletry bag, and follows Stan.

Bill clips his retainer onto his top teeth; it gives him a tiny bit of a lisp that doesn’t improve the sound of his stammer at all.

“Y-you c-can’t make people kiss you for a dare, R-Rich. That’s like…s-sexual harassment or something.”

“What? Don’t be fucking ridiculous, Bill!”

“I feel sexually harassed just by being in the same room as you.” Mike says to Richie, as he slides into his sleeping bag in the corner.

“Wow. You too, Mike? I thought we had something special.”

Mike chuckles to himself.

Richie gets up and heads towards the bathroom. He can hear Eddie and Stan arguing about whether or not you should use mouthwash after you brush your teeth.

“It completely defeats the object of brushing your teeth,” Stan states firmly, “You’re just washing all of the fluoride away, and that’s what protects your teeth.”

“Yeah but this one’s a special mouthwash; it’s medicated. It kills all of the germs and all the bad bacteria in your mouth.”

“Brushing your teeth does that well enough if you do it properly.”

“Yeah but-”
They both turn around and stop talking as Richie appears in the doorway. Stan zips up his wash bag resolutely and leaves past him, with a parting quip.

“You’re actually going to brush your teeth, Richie? Wow, I bet that’s a first.”

Richie fake laughs after him, before rounding on Eddie. As he enters the room, he pulls the door closed softly behind him. Eddie hears it click shut as he’s screwing the lid back on his mouthwash; he glances at him in the mirror, and then turns around.

“Rich, what are you doing?” He asks mistrustfully. He doesn’t seem scared, just quizzical.

“Will you kiss me if I brush my teeth?”

“What?”

Richie sits down on the edge of the bathtub, and folds his arms on the rounded corner of the sink, resting his chin atop them, pouting childishly.

“If I brush my teeth and make sure my mouth is clean, will you kiss me then?”

Eddie looks at him for a while, his expression softening. Then he looks worried.

“D…do you know how many germs there are in the human mouth? Even people who brush their teeth all the time can have up to 100,000 bacteria on the surface of each tooth, and that’s not even considering—”

Richie reaches out to take the mouthwash from Eddie’s hand, silencing him mid-ramble, and unscrewing the cap as he reads the label on the front, “Okay, so…this says it kills up to 99% of mouth bacteria and plaque, so if you think about it…” He takes a large mouthful from the bottle, rinsing it around in his mouth as Eddie snatches it back and starts cleaning the lip where Richie had his mouth. Richie spits into the sink, “…now that’s only, like, 1000 bacteria per tooth, which isn’t really a lot. And if I use it twice, that’s only 10 per tooth. Three times and we’re down to 1.” At this point, Eddie has cracked a smile, as Richie holds up his finger, “Right? One tiny little bacteria per tooth is really nothing when you think about it.”

“Okay.”

“What? Are you serious?” Richie perks up like an excited puppy, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

“Yeah, okay.” Eddie says again, “But on one condition.”

“What?”

Eddie holds the bottle back out to Richie.

“Drink it.”

Richie takes the bottle from Eddie’s hand without a second thought, “What, all of it?” He peers into the neck of the bottle.

“…Yeah.”

Richie looks back up at Eddie, and shrugs his shoulders, “Bottoms up,” he lifts the bottle to his lips and makes to upend it and Eddie panics and grabs it just in time, so that it spills out across Richie’s face and soaks into his t-shirt, but he doesn’t actually swallow any of it. Eddie looks horror-stricken.
“RICHIE YOU CAN’T FUCKING DRINK MOUTHWASH!”

“BUT YOU JUST FUCKING TOLD ME TO!”

“I DIDN’T THINK YOU’D ACTUALLY BE DUMB ENOUGH TO DO IT!”

“But I just wanted you to kiss me!”

Eddie’s heart leaps into his throat and before he knows what he’s doing he has Richie’s face between his hands and he’s kissing him on the mouth. His cheeks and his lips are wet, but they’re warm, and Eddie can taste that slightly chemical, antibacterial flavour he’s familiar with, and beneath it is the smell of Richie that is even more familiar. And his senses are all fucked up at this point because it’s so overwhelming, but there’s another thing that is definitely not familiar, and it must be the taste of Richie’s mouth, which Eddie is surprised to find is not unpleasant and doesn’t taste like actual garbage. Eddie breaks the kiss first, and they’re looking into each other’s eyes so close and for so long, but it doesn’t feel awkward at all.

“You were gonna drink mouthwash just so I would kiss you?” Eddie whispers, before he even realises he’s whispering. Why is he whispering? Eddie has no fucking clue.

“I think so. I can’t really remember anything that happened before you kissed me just now.”

“Y-you were gonna drink mouthwash just so I would kiss you?” Eddie whispers, before he even realises he’s whispering. Why is he whispering? Eddie has no fucking clue.

“‘You dumb fuck—’ is all Eddie manages to get out before Richie kisses him again, and this time there’s a little lip movement and Eddie’s hands are still on Richie’s face, and he feels Richie’s hands on his waist, and Richie’s tongue against the part of his lips and Eddie knows he has to stop this now before Richie gets carried away, because Richie gets carried away with absolutely everything, and Eddie isn’t sure if he’d even want to stop him, so he has to stop him right now. He slides his hand between their lips, palm covering Richie’s mouth, their foreheads still resting together, and Eddie can feel the bridge of Richie’s glasses pressing into the middle of his forehead, but it fits there comfortably, as though it was always meant to be there. Richie doesn’t protest, he just kisses Eddie’s palm softly, and when Eddie lets go, they both start laughing at the stupidity of it all.

Sitting in Bill Denbrough’s bathroom covered in medicated mouthwash and kissing each other like the two dumbest fucks anyone’s ever seen.
They are 16 years old.

Bill answers the phone in the hallway of his house, and it’s Stan.

“Bill?”

His voice is quiet, and there’s a gentle quiver to it, as though Stan is trying too hard to keep it steady, and the strain it creates only draws attention to the fact that his voice isn’t steady at all.

Bill feels sick. His stomach lurches grimly and he feels a wave of adrenaline rush through his body, triggered by a threat he doesn’t even know yet.

‘This is it,’ he thinks tensely, ‘I’ve been waiting for this; dreading it. And now it’s happening’.

“Where are you?” Bill answers instinctively, though if he thought about it, he’d realise that’s a strange and disconnected response. Bill’s voice is steady, and he doesn’t stutter. His voice is steady because Stan’s isn’t and Bill knows his has to be.

“What?”

“Where are you? I-I’m coming, Stan, just t-tell me where you are. I’m coming.”

Stan is silent for a while, and Bill can hear his laboured breath at the other end of the phone, as though he’s fighting for speech through tears.

“P-please, Stan-”

“I’m in my…my dad’s office.” Bill hears Stan sniff, and the distant sound of someone knocking on a wooden door.

“J-j-just stay there.”

Bill starts running before he has even ended the conversation or hung up the phone. He practically throws it at the wall, and it slips back out of the receiver and bounces and swings for a while on the end of its bungee-like cord. He throws himself through the door to the garage so hard he nearly knocks it off his hinges; it smacks roughly against the connecting wall and Bill is sure there’ll at least be a welt left from the handle, but he doesn’t even look back to see it. He grabs Silver by the handlebars and, not willing to wait through the process of handling the huge garage door, he returns the way he came in, dragging his bike through the house instead. If his parents saw him do this, there’d be Hell to pay, but it’s another three days before they’re back from their cruise, and he’ll worry about tire scuffs later.

He’s barely out of the front door before he mounts Silver, leaving just enough time before he starts peddling to pull it closed. He doesn’t even lock it; Bill thinks that someone could break into his house and steal the whole thing, just uproot it from its foundations and lift the entire building away, and he still wouldn’t care, because all that matters right now is Stan.

And Bill is peddling so fast and so hard that his ankles and his calves and his thighs are burning, and the dull pain is spreading right up into his back, too, but ‘this is nothing’, he thinks bitterly, as he powers on through it, ‘this is nothing compared to what Stan is feeling. Nothing compared to what Stan has been feeling for a long, long time, being eaten from the inside out by this horrible, invisible
monster.’ And Bill feels so guilty. *So fucking guilty.* Because he saw it and he knew it, but he just watched it happen from the side lines, scared because he didn’t know what to do, in denial because he didn’t want to have to confront it. And all this time, Stan has been fighting alone, not wanting to burden his friends, knowing they have suffered, too. And now the monster is winning.

Bill feels his eyes sting, and it’s not just the wind whipping at his face as he speeds through Derry, moving so quickly that he can see nothing but blurred shapes at either side. It’s cold, and he’s numb, but none of that matters when he rounds the corner and sees the dark outline of the Synagogue against the white sky.

He feels another terrible pang of guilt as he realises, that he’s seen this building a thousand times, but he’s never even been inside. Bill knows *nothing* about Stan’s religion, except tiny fragments, bits and pieces he’s picked up over the years when they’ve been making jokes about it, and he’s sure *those* cannot possibly be accurate. He wonders, were the roles reversed, and one of them was Jewish, and Stan was not, would Stan have bothered to learn? Yes, of course he would. He would have done his research, he would be meticulous about learning important dates and restrictions and customs, and he would *never* make a joke about it. And Bill feels physically sick with shame as he pulls the brakes on his bike so hard his weather-beaten fingers sting, and the back wheel skids in a half-semi-circle, gouging a muddy wound into the immaculate lawn.

He hasn’t even begun to dismount when he sees the tall, slim figure of Stanley climbing out of a window towards the back of the building and hurrying towards him, and Bill is almost thrown from his bike when Stan basically falls into him, arms tight around Bill’s neck and face buried into the crook of it. Bill braces his feet against the ground, balances Silver with his legs as he wraps his arms around Stan’s chest, holding him with a firmness he hopes reflects the warmth and understanding and protection he wants desperately to convey.

Stan is shaking as he cries into Bill’s shoulder, and his heart is beating so fast that Bill can feel it against his chest. Or is that his own? And Bill presses his cheek tighter into the softness of Stan’s curly head, and he smells so clean and warm and good, like fragrant laundry fresh out of the drier. ‘I would kill someone if they hurt him,’ Bill thinks possessively, his fingertips tightening in the crisp material of Stan’s shirt, ‘I would *kill* them, with my bare hands if I had to.’

But he cannot fight something he cannot see or touch.

“Bill, let’s go. I want to get away from here.” Stan glances back at the Synagogue, at the silver Star of David standing prominent atop the brick building. Just then, his Father appears through the large front doors, and Stan takes his arms away from Bill like he’s been burned.

“Stanley!” His Father calls sternly, but before he can say anything else, Stan yanks the kippah from the back of his head and throws it onto the ground at his Father’s feet, crying fiercely. Bill looks away, embarrassed to be an onlooker in such a situation, but then he feels Stan climb onto the back of the bike behind him, and hands tight in the material of his shirt either side of his waist, and he doesn’t have to be given any more instruction than that, kicking away from the kerb and cycling away. He doesn’t know where, just *away* is enough, because that’s where Stan wants to be.

Bill keeps peddling, and peddling, and peddling, for hours, just riding around Derry, and even further beyond, following winding bike trails he’s never even seen before, and not worrying where they end up, because all he feels right now is that he has to keep riding, to give Stan space and time to breathe without having to think about anything else, or talk to anyone, or look anyone in the eye. And not once do either of them speak, though Stan’s sniffling eventually dies down and Bill hopes to whatever higher power Stan believes in, because Bill himself does not have faith, that Stan is not crying silently behind him, because he doesn’t think he can physically stand knowing Stan is in pain.
any longer.

It’s nightfall by the time Bill begins to slow down; he’s exhausted, and the muscles in his legs are gradually weakening. He knows Stan must be drained, too. Silver comes to a gentle stop by the side of the road, back on familiar streets, and Bill turns his head slightly. Stan looks empty; his face is pale and his eyes are red and puffy. He won’t meet Bill’s eye.

“D-do you… want to stay at m-my house?”

Stan swallows hard, and his shoulders tense.

“I don’t want to be a burden. After everything you’ve done for me already, it’s-”

“You can use mine.” Bill says quickly. He doesn’t even know what the end to Stan’s sentence was going to be, but he doesn’t care. It’s true no matter what it was.

Stan’s head is still lowered in shame and weariness, and Bill wishes more than anything he had someone real to blame, someone he could beat the ever-loving crap out of to take out his frustration, because it’s killing him that he can’t do anything. Only Stan can fight the demons in his own brain, and Stan has never been much of a fighter.

“I-I c-could invite Richie and Eddie.” Bill ventures, hoping that including them will make it less personal; take away some of the tension.

After a while, Stan nods lightly, and holds Bill’s shirt again as he kicks away from the pavement. They pull up outside Eddie’s house, and Bill rings the bell on his bike, the one Eddie bought him. It’s loud and shrill and Bill sees Eddie’s mother’s round, red face twitch through the net curtains. Not long after, Eddie appears at the door.

“Hey guys, what’s wrong? What are you doing here so late? Did something happen?”

Eddie’s expression turns anxious, and Bill just looks at him, and their eyes meet for a while, and then Eddie looks at Stan on the back of Bill’s bike, at his lowered head and the air of utter anguish about him, and Eddie nods quickly to Bill and runs back into the house. They can hear him and his mother shouting at one another. He returns seconds later with his backpack on his shoulders, and brings his bike around from the back yard. Walking it over to them on the road, Eddie stops beside Stan and rests his free arm around his shoulders softly, leaning his head in and catching him an awkward half-hug. Stan looks as though it’s taking every ounce of strength he has left not to break down again, and he nods gratefully.

They stop at Richie’s house, next; it’s closer to Bill’s.

When they get there, Richie is already outside, sitting on the doorstep and smoking a cigarette. His hair is thicker, messier and curlier than ever, and he’s nearing six feet tall, now. With his burnt orange, palm-tree patterned shirt, the laces of his boots undone and trailing along the ground, and his oversized, tortoise-shell frame glasses, he looks a really odd sight sitting in the middle of a fairly
ordinary suburban neighbourhood. Bill would have laughed at him under different circumstances, and they'd have some good back-and-forth banter, some good 'chucks', as Richie might say, but Bill has never felt less like laughing in his life.

Richie stands when he sees them, and puts out his cigarette on the doorframe of his house. All it takes is a look at Stan, and Bill can tell that Richie understands. A few long strides later and Richie has grabbed Stan in a hard, enveloping hug, rubbing his back tenderly, and Stan is crying again and gripping the edges of Richie’s shirt in his fists, looking distinctly as though he might collapse if he wasn’t sitting on Bill’s bike and being held by Richie so steadily.

“Hey hey hey,” Richie coos softly, “No blubbering all over the merchandise. Where’s Stan the Man to tell me I look like a rejected idea for a cartoon character, huh?”

Stan lifts his head and manages a weak smile, as Richie wipes the tears from Stan’s face with the edge of his sleeve, and Stan agitatedly swats him away.

Richie moves around Bill and Stan to get to Eddie, kissing the corner of his mouth as he climbs onto the back of Eddie’s bike. Stan and Bill are not surprised at all; Richie and Eddie have been unofficially dating for a while. They tried to hide it, at first, but when they eventually came out to the group, no one could even pretend to be shocked. Bill, in particular, has known about Richie and Eddie since long before Richie and Eddie even knew themselves.

When they get to Bill’s house, Stan takes a shower. Bill prepares some pyjamas for him, the newest, cleanest and nicest ones he owns, and some underwear, too. It feels a little weird allowing one of your friends to borrow your underwear, but Bill can’t imagine that Stan is the kind of person to go without, nor the kind of person to put clothing that has already been worn back on again. He leaves them folded neatly outside the bathroom door, and retreats downstairs to give him some privacy.

Bill tries to ignore the little nervous flutter he gets in his chest when he sees Stan wearing his clothes, later on that evening. They all sit on the floor in Bill’s room, and chat for a while. Stan doesn’t participate much in the conversation, if at all, but when there’s a brief moment of silence, he finally speaks.

“I…I still see it.”

They all stare at him, smiles falling, hearts sinking, understanding without explanation.

“I see it…everywhere.”

Stan’s bottom lip trembles a little, and he tugs it between his teeth.

“It’s like…it’s inside me.”

His eyes brim with tears again, but he looks so weak from crying already.

“And it won’t let me go…because it knows…I’m the weakest.”

“No.” Bill says firmly, shaking his head in defiance, and Stan looks at him wearily, “Y-you’re n-not weak. You’re just…struggling. And w-we should have been there for you.”

Richie and Eddie both nod in agreement, and Eddie reaches out to squeeze Stan’s hand briefly.

“But S-Stan…your dad…” Bill questions quietly, hoping he’s not crossing a line.

If Stan’s expression could look any more depressed, it would have just fallen even further. He rubs
his knees briefly, looking away at the window, and then back at his friends.

“I…I told my dad…” His lip quivers again, and he sniffs, rubbing his palm across the side of his face and then clenching his hands together until his knuckles are white, “I told my dad I’m gay.”

The three faces around him soften, in pity…in compassion…in understanding, but Stan stares at the bedroom floor, as though in shame.

“Wh…what did he say?” Eddie asks softly.

“He didn’t say anything.” Stan answers firmly, emboldened slightly now that he feels the worst of the admission is over, and none of them reacted badly. He didn’t really believe they would, but it was such a huge deal in Stan’s mind, that he wasn’t sure what to expect.

He’s still wringing his hands together and scratching at them absently. They’ve all seen him do this before when he’s really agitated, “He looked like he was going to vomit,” Stan still looks on the verge of another meltdown at any given moment, “So I just…left.”

“Maybe he was just…in shock or something.” Eddie offers reassuringly.

“He’s a Rabbi!” Stan snaps suddenly, his voice cracking, “And I know exactly what he was thinking!” The side of his thumb is red and raised, now, where he’s been scratching it, “In the Torah it says that homosexuality is a sin punishable by death! That it’s abhorrent!”

Eddie looks hurt, and he goes silent. Bill lowers his head. Richie just shrugs his shoulders.

“So? Don’t most religions say that? My mom’s a Christian and she doesn’t care that I’m going out with Eddie. I mean…she doesn’t care about anything I do, so it’s kind of a moot point, but…”

“But your mom’s not a priest, is she?”

“So?”

“So it’s not the same!”

“I’m just saying, not all Christians think the same way, just like not all Jews think the same way, just like not all Atheists think the same way.”

Stan sniffs, and looks at the floor again.

“You’re overthinking this way too much.”

“You…you didn’t see his face.”

“Well, maybe he’ll come round.”

“He won’t.” Stan shakes his head, and there’s so much pain in his eyes, that they all feel it, too, “…I just want to go to bed.”

So they do, in awful, heavy silence.

Bill rolls onto his side, facing the window, and finds he just cannot sleep. He can hear the clock ticking the seconds by on the bedside table, and it sounds so loud in the cold expanse of stillness and darkness.

And he can hear Stan crying again, just barely, in the opposite corner of the room, and he wishes he
could just cover his head with a pillow and block it out, but that would feel too cruel, so he just lies there, listening, hoping more than anything that Stan will just cry himself to sleep because he cannot bear it any more.

From the corner of his eye, he sees the faint outline of Richie, sitting up in his sleeping bag, and from the direction he’s facing, Bill assumes he must be watching Stan, thinking, as Bill is, that Stan probably wants to be left alone, but physically unable to sleep while Stan is awake and suffering.

Eventually, after what feels like several agonizing hours, the room is silent again, and Bill hears Richie shifting and lying back down next to Eddie.

Finally, Bill, too, drifts off to sleep.

It’s Eddie, who is awoken to the sound of a voice in the middle of the night. It’s faint, but something about it makes his insides twist uncomfortably. At first, squinting to see anything in the dark, he starts to believe he imagined it, or that maybe he heard the voice in a dream and his brain is confusing it with reality. Then he sees a soft stream of artificial light through the crack in the door, and he hears the voice a bit louder, and it sounds vaguely distressing and strange and he sits bolt upright, watching the door and listening. Richie is still sleeping heavily beside him; nothing wakes Richie up, he’d probably sleep through his own cremation, and Eddie gives his shoulder a rough shake, seeing the mess of black hair stir somewhere inside the sleeping bag.

“Rich!” He hisses, shaking him again until Richie rolls over and rubs his hands over his face.

“What the fuck, Eddie?”

“Something’s wrong!”

“What the shit are you talkin’ about?” Richie yawns and pushes his glasses onto his face.

And then they both jump when they hear Bill’s voice, clear as day.

“HELP ME! R-RICHIE!”

They leap to their feet so fast they collide with one another on their way out of the bedroom, and they can see that the light is coming from the bathroom. Richie pushes Eddie behind him instinctively as they approach the open door.

And there’s Bill, crouching on the bathroom floor next to Stan.

There’s something wrong with him; Stan’s eyes are slightly open, but they’re unfocused, like he’s not really there, and he looks so pale and sickly and there’s a noticeable sheen of sweat all over his skin like a rash. Bill is shaking his shoulders and tapping his cheek, frantically trying to get a response from him, but to no avail. He doesn’t even turn around when Eddie and Richie enter the room.

Eddie drops to his knees next to Bill, his eyes wide with shock and panic.

“Wh-what’s wrong with him Bill what happened what’s wrong with him?”

“I d-d-d-” Bill seems to choke on his words, his eyes watering, “FUCK! W-we n-need to c-call-”

“Oh, fuck…” Richie almost whimpers behind them; he’s the first to notice the pill bottle on the edge of the sink, and when he snatches it up he can feel that it’s empty without even opening it to look. He feels sick when he thinks about Stan replacing the cap on the little plastic tub, wonders which dark
recess of Stan’s mind made him feel that neatly screwing the lid back in place was still so important in this scenario.

Eddie wrenches the bottle from Richie’s hand, eyes frantically scanning the label.

“Aspirin. Th-this is mine these are mine!” And he starts sobbing, now, instantly feeling the unwarranted weight of responsibility.

“Eddie, no!” Richie crouches behind him, tearing the pill bottle from his hand again and throwing it away, they hear the sharp snap of hollow plastic clattering against the tiles “Don’t you FUCKING dare!”

“S-SOMEONE GO AND C-CALL AN AMBULANCE! WE NEED TO C-C-CALL A FUCKING AMBULANCE!”

Eddie hears the terror in Bill’s voice and instantly stops crying, sniffing hard and grabbing at the front of Stan’s shirt, pulling him forward.

“Help me sit him up get him up! Quickly!”

Bill looks panicked but acts immediately, looping his arm around Stan’s back and lifting the top half of his body up, holding him while Eddie grips Stan’s jaw with a shaking hand, pushing two fingers between his lips to the back of his throat. He feels the muscles react and he presses harder, and they hear a choking noise as Stan gags, and then he vomits hard as Eddie pulls his hand back, all over the floor, down Bill’s left arm, and on Eddie’s bare legs. And clearly Stan hasn’t eaten in a while, because it’s mostly bile, and the distinctive, part-digested shapes of an entire bottle of aspirin. Eddie looks horrified at being vomited on, and his eyes are so wide they seem as though they might burst out of his head, but he’s still relieved to see that most of the pills are whole and therefore unabsorbed.

Bill holds onto the back of Stan’s neck and quickly guides his head over the toilet bowl as he continues to vomit, while Richie tears off great handfuls of toilet roll and starts cleaning a hysterical Eddie, who is now crying again. Richie has to stop in his attempt, though, because Eddie is far too focused on Stan, and shuffles closer to push his dishevelled curls back from his sticky face while Bill rubs at his back. Richie manages to wipe up the floor, at least.

And then Stan drops back from the toilet, one hand still on the seat and his head sinking low beneath it weakly, and starts wailing. That’s the only way to describe it, because Eddie has never seen someone cry so hard in his entire life. Great, wracking sobs that shake his whole body, completely and utterly inconsolable.

And Eddie just holds his shaking fingers to his own face, covering his nose and mouth as he cries, too, watching Bill pull a heartbroken Stan against his chest tightly, leaning back against the bathroom wall. Bill has tears streaming down his face, too, but his expression is firm and determined. He slides his fingers into Stan’s hair and rubs at his scalp, and whispers gentle reassurances against the top of his head as Stan continues to cry, and cry, and cry.

Eddie crawls closer to snuggle into him against Bill’s firm chest, holding Stan’s hand between them, linking their fingers and squeezing, stroking his arm and his wrist and making comforting circles on his palm with his fingertips. Then he feels Richie next to him, too, and Richie rubs Stan’s back up and down his spine and leans in to plant a kiss on his shoulder.

And Richie tells cute, funny little stories in a gentle voice until Stan eventually stops crying, but they all stay where they are, not moving or talking, just listening to Richie’s surprisingly comforting voice for hours, until they see the beginnings of the sunrise through the small, frosted window.
When morning finally breaks, they finally move.

Stan takes another shower, and Bill insists the door remain unlocked, and he sits in the hallway with his back against it until Stan comes out, clean, but damp, with heavy, dark circles beneath his bloodshot eyes. Bill gets to his feet quickly, and stops him when he tries to nervously apologise.

“Y-you know w-we would never l-let anything happen to you.”

Stan nods feebly, and a small, but genuine smile twitches at the edges of his mouth. Bill knows Stan is in no fit state to say anything more, so he smiles back reassuringly.

“Uh…I b-better take a shower.” Bill motions to his pyjama sleeve, which is still stained with the contents of Stan’s stomach, “Y-you kinda…barfed all over me.”

Stan looks guilty, and rather disgusted, but Bill just laughs, and Stan can’t help but chuckle, too. When Bill disappears into the bathroom, Stan heads down into the kitchen to find Eddie sitting on the countertop by the sink, and Richie is cleaning his legs with a dish cloth. Eddie is being really picky about it, and keeps telling him he’s doing it wrong and trying to snatch the cloth from his hand, but they’re both laughing, and Stan feels a little of the weight in his heart lighten as he sits at the kitchen table and listens to them bicker.

Bill joins them only a few minutes later, clearly not one for long showers, and they have breakfast. Eddie makes pancakes, and insists Stan help him, since they’re the only two who know anything at all about cooking. Richie sits on the kitchen table next to Bill, and they watch Eddie and Stan, in matching aprons, work around each other neatly and efficiently, Eddie chattering away to Stan the way Eddie always chatters, without breaks between his sentences and without taking a breath, and when they’re finished and breakfast is ready, there isn’t a speck of flour on any surface. Bill imagines it would be a very different story, had he and Richie been ‘cooking’.

Then, when breakfast is over, and they’ve made sure Stan has eaten and had plenty of water, all three of them travel with him back to the Synagogue, where Stan has decided to talk to his Father, after some gentle persuasion. When they arrive, Stan’s Father is already outside, hanging up a small poster on the wall beside the main doors.

The Star of David, painted by hand in rainbow colours.

It’s a small gesture, but they all know what it means, and the three of them are practically beaming as Stan climbs off the back of Bill’s bike and approaches his Father with fresh tears in his eyes. And Bill hopes to GOD it’s the last time Stan will cry for a long while, as they watch his Father embrace him and comfort him, and kiss his temple and the top of his head while Stan breaks down again in his arms.

They cycle away quietly, winter sunshine beaming down in a clear sky. Bill hears Eddie giggling behind him, and wonders what Richie is doing to provoke such a playful response, but he doesn’t turn around, because he’s just happy knowing that they are happy, and that’s all that matters.

And Bill wishes, as they round a smooth corner, and he can release his feet from the peddles a little, drifting calmly, that he could make Stan laugh the way Richie makes Eddie laugh.

And when he thinks about Stan, he feels butterflies in his stomach, and realises that he misses him already.

Realises that he loves him.

Realises that he is in love.
They are 17 years old.

Stan has been improving in leaps and bounds since the ‘incident’ last year.

None of them ever talk about it; it’s sort of this dark, unspoken secret, shared only between Bill, Stan, Richie and Eddie. Even Mike and Ben aren’t fully aware of the severity of Stan’s depression, though they know he hadn’t been himself, they were never aware of how close he was to the very limit of what he could cope with.

And, now that he’s recovering, through the unmovable love and dedication of himself and his closest friends, they can barely even remember that Stan was unhappy at all. The other Losers have never seen him so motivated, so contented, so generally enthused about things. So enthused about life. And Stan, though he never talks about it himself, because he’s rarely open and honest about his feelings, is constantly reminding them in small, implicit ways, how very grateful he is to the three people who saved his life.

He frequently brings Richie the brightest and most garish shirts he finds, at the charity events which Stan attends with Mike, and those organised at his Father’s Synagogue, and even buys Richie a new pair of glasses, when he breaks them for the third time in a month. He’s also usually the first to pander to Richie’s insatiable need for retaliation when he makes an offensive joke or comment, bantering back and forth with him using sharp, witty comebacks and hilarious insults that seem to come all too easily. And Stan is so savagely sarcastic and has such a dark, dry sense of humour, that he balances out Richie’s incessant childishness perfectly. And Richie LOVES it! He fucking loves bantering with Stan, because Stan is right there on Richie’s level of intelligence, and, even more importantly, general sassiness, and Stan never gets upset or offended by Richie’s mockery, because they just know one another so well. And Stan almost never laughs at Richie’s jokes, nor his own; he’s the kind of person who can say something absurdly hilarious with a completely straight face, but Richie sees that mischievous glint in Stan’s dark eyes, and he knows that Stan loves it, too.

Stan and Eddie are closer than ever, due, in no small part, to their ability to completely relate to one another in ways the other Losers couldn’t possibly understand. Although Stan’s OCD, and Eddie’s germ phobia and hypochondria are rather different conditions, they frequently overlap, and share certain symptoms. Symptoms such as excessive hand-washing, dislike of dirt and untidiness, and the likelihood of becoming agitated in the face of uncleanliness or disorder. This is one of the many reasons Eddie and Stan sit together at lunch, because Stan will always clean the table before they sit down, will wipe Eddie’s cutlery for him before he uses it, and will usually protect him from Richie’s habit of flicking food at people, something that almost always ends in Bill stepping in and having a condiment battle with Richie, to spare Eddie and Stan from being targeted.

And Stan is taking anti-depressants, something they all know about, but which he has only ever spoken about with Eddie, because Eddie knows a lot about medicine, hypochondriac or not. Not to mention, Eddie takes similar medication, for his anxiety; Stan thinks it’s the only medication Eddie takes that he actually needs, but he’d never say so, because as far as Stan is concerned, anything that eases the awful effects of mental illness, even slightly, is a blessing, placebo or not. They often share their fears and concerns, and coping mechanisms, too.

Eddie says he owes a lot of his ideas to Richie, who, with a serious case of undiagnosed ADHD, gets easily carried away and needs constant distraction from his mile-a-minute brain. Some of his favourites include elastic bands, rings, and gum, things Eddie never carries with him, but which
Richie has in abundance. He wears so many colourful elastic bands and bracelets around his wrists that he can barely wear shirts with long sleeves, as well as a myriad of rings on his skinny fingers, and always has more than one flavour of gum. Usually, it’s one pack of strawberry, because that’s Richie’s favourite, and one mint, because that’s the one Eddie likes. Plus, sometimes Eddie won’t kiss him unless his mouth at least tastes clean, especially if Richie has been smoking.

Eddie likes to play with Richie’s bracelets when he’s feeling nervous. If they’re at school or in public, Richie will take some of them off and give them to him, and Eddie will braid the thin bracelets together neatly or count the beads on the others. If they’re in private, or just with the other Losers, Eddie will hold Richie’s hand in his own and play with his jewellery while he’s still wearing it, arranging the elastic bands into colour combinations and making sure they’re all neat. Richie, himself, prefers taking the elastic bands off and stretching them, or snapping them repeatedly against a desk or a wall, or a person, if he’s feeling particularly agitated and in need of a fight. And Richie gets into fights a lot. Eddie will chastise him afterwards, but he’ll always clean up his cuts, and tidy his hair, and place gentle kisses on his bruises. Unfortunately, this makes Richie want to get into fights even more.

As for Bill, to whom Stan feels most indebted, Stan leaves a flower with its stem tied neatly around the padlock of Bill’s locker, every – single – day, without fail, and has done so for the past thirty-nine days, to be exact. The reason Bill knows this, is because every day, he unties the flower carefully, presses it between the pages of his journal, secures it with a small piece of tape, and draws a sketch. Every day, the flower is different, and every day, there is a small, white card slid through the bottom of the metal door, upon which the name of the flower is written, along with its meaning. Bill wasn’t aware that flowers had meanings before he met Stan. Alstroemeria – Friendship, Amaryllis – Worth beyond Beauty, Aster – Patience, and so on and so forth, given in alphabetical order throughout the school year, one of the reasons Bill knows it can only be Stan. That, and, the elegant, cursive writing on the card that Bill would recognise anywhere. They’re currently at Lilac, a beautiful, delicate and intricate purple flower. Bill opens his locker and the card reads, ‘Lilac – First Love’, and his heart leaps into his throat so fast he almost chokes. His mind races. This cannot just be friendship, it can’t, because Bill knows that Stan is thoughtful and generous to his friends, but this is something entirely different, something more. It has to be. And they never talk about this; they never talk about the flowers, but when they look at each other, Bill feels so overwhelmed by Stan’s beautiful eyes, feels such an ache deep in the heart of him, and he thinks that if he feels this much, Stan must feel something, too. But then Stan is always the first to look away, and Bill’s heart sinks down into his shoes, this time, and he thinks that maybe this is just a powerful, one-sided crush, and he doesn’t know how he will cope if that turns out to be true, because it hurts.

And the other Losers are so damn frustrated by Stan and Bill, so tired of watching their endless, timid flirting that never seems to amount to anything. So tired of watching them stare at each other yearningly, and neither of them ever making a move. So tired of their constant, lovesick pining that is so obvious to everyone else, but to which Stan and Bill are somehow oblivious. And they’re all rooting for Bill, because they’re positive that when it happens, it will be Bill who acts upon it first, but he seems so afraid of upsetting Stan’s new balance, or of jeopardising the close friendship they already have, that even Bill doesn’t budge. Richie, of course, is desperate to interfere, but after several stern talks from Eddie and Mike, agrees that it is best to leave them to figure it out by themselves.

So they continue to wait.

Mike and Ben, though not quite as close to Stan as the other three, and although unaware of his thwarted attempt at ending his own life, still help him in their own, personal ways.

Ben is still an avid runner; the other Losers continue to support him, but now play much less of an
active role, since they have branched out to focus more on their own pursuits. Stan, however, has
taken to running with Ben, in his quest to follow a more healthy and pro-active lifestyle. Stan doesn’t
really have much of an interest in sport in general, though he will still show support at Bill’s baseball
games and Mike’s football matches, but running is a nice alternative, and something he can do
without anyone else to bother him. He enjoys running with Ben, though, and they walk to school
together, every morning, extra early, so that they can run for an hour and then shower before classes
start. Stan is surprisingly fast; he’s light on his feet, and has long legs, and even Ben sometimes
struggles to keep up with him.

On the way to school, they talk a lot, and Ben shares his worries with Stan. About his struggle to
find his self-confidence amongst a group of people who are all so talented and have so many
amazing qualities. And how physically inadequate he feels, still trapped in the mind of a chubby little
boy who was bullied for being fat, next to his unfairly attractive friends. Even Richie, he says,
dismayed, the skinny, annoying kid with jam-jar glasses and large front teeth, has grown up to be as
tall, dark, and unusually handsome as you can get! And Ben notes that he feels particularly
unappealing next to Stan, who is, frankly, stunning.

Ben says that sometimes he feels ugly.

Stan assures him that beauty is a subjective concept, that lots of things can be considered beautiful
without having an obviously attractive outward appearance, and that physical attractiveness is far less
important than having a beautiful mind or a beautiful soul.

Ben tells Stan that, while he does agree, and thanks for the philosophical pep-talk, all he really
wanted to hear was whether or not Stan thinks he’s good-looking.

Stan can’t help but chuckle as he tells Ben he personally thinks he’s very handsome.

Stan also can’t help himself, as they’re walking towards the school, and a surly member of the
football team is already leaning on the gates, from saying:

“I take back what I said about inner beauty being more important. That guy should wear a fucking
bag over his head.”

They have to stifle their laughter as they pass him onto the school grounds.

“That’s mean.” Ben says, when they’re finally out of earshot.

“It’s fine,” Stan assures, straightening his shirt collar, “last week he called me a faggot.”

Ironically, Stan probably doesn’t care anymore if people call him a ‘faggot’, or a ‘flamer’, or any
other homophobic slurs they can come up with, because he’s finally comfortable and accepting of his
own sexuality. He and his parents set up a Jewish LGBTQ+ society within the Synagogue, to help
other young Jews, who might be struggling, to find a comfortable relationship between their
sexuality and their faith. Stan himself has never been prouder to be gay AND Jewish, and he even
starts a Jewish club at school. The other Losers ALL attend, of course, and Stan teaches them about
Judaism and gives them little Hebrew lessons and brings in samples of Jewish food made by himself
and his mother. Last time it was latkes, little crispy, shredded potato pancakes that Ben ate so many
of, he got in trouble with his mother for not being able to eat his dinner that evening. Stan now brings
latkes for Ben to eat with his lunch almost every week.

And Stan is now second-in-command of Mike’s ‘Derry Good Deeds’ charity organisation, and
sometimes plays an even more active role in its functions than Mike, since Mike has so many other
responsibilities to attend to. It helps that Stan is ultra-organised, makes lists upon lists of everything,
and is really, really good with numbers; he helps keep everything budgeted and running smoothly. And Stan and Mike attend so many of these events together outside of school, and the other Losers usually come along, too, but Stan and Mike are always together at the forefront, that Bill can’t help but feel slightly jealous, because Stan and Mike look good standing next to each other. Mike is handsome, and muscular, and dark, and Stan is beautiful, and lean, and pale, and the contrast between them is undeniably appealing. More than once, Bill has seen Stan eye Mike’s broad shoulders in a way that made him feel numb.

Bill feels thankful, therefore, that Stan has literally zero interest in football, because they ALL attend Mike’s matches, of course, and sit together in the bleachers and cheer him on. He can’t stop the swelling feeling of smugness he gets when he sees that Stan looks bored half-way through a match. He gets a similar feeling, when he’s playing baseball, and he sneaks looks at Stan in the crowd, and Stan looks enthralled.

Bill is their star player. He’s fast and agile and has a surprising amount of upper body strength that means he can really swing. After the Derry team won their last match against a rival school, the Losers’ Club presented Bill with his own personalised bat they’d had specially made, with the words, ‘BIG BILL’, painted down the side in fancy red lettering. Even the other players on the team have all started calling him ‘Big Bill’, too. And Bill takes this bat with him everywhere. Even on days he doesn’t have practise, he keeps it tucked through the straps on his backpack, though Richie frequently steals it, likely for nefarious purposes. Mostly, he uses it to threaten people away from Eddie, which has only really become ‘necessary’, since Eddie became a cheerleader.

It’s not unheard of, for boys to be cheerleaders in Maine, but it’s still rather unusual, and a small minority of the other students, mostly other boys, use this as an excuse to try and terrorise him. Thankfully, though, Eddie really could not care less, because he is good. He’s so petite and lithe and energetic that it’s like it was made for him, and, at about 5’3”, which seems to be as tall as Eddie is ever going to get, he’s one of the shortest on the squad, and they can lift him rather easily. He does have to keep reminding people, though, mostly Richie and Bill, who both found it hilarious at first, that he’s not running around in a skirt waving pom-poms; this is a serious sport, which takes a lot of energy and athleticism, and, the skill Richie seems to take an interest in, flexibility.

“So does that mean you can spread your legs really wide?”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU DEGENERATE PERV!”

Even the rest of the Losers have to admit that Eddie looks cute in his uniform, though; a crimson-red, short-sleeved top and shorts combo, with white edging and the words ‘DERRY’ emblazoned front and back in large, bejewelled letters. The shorts barely cover any of his thigh, but this is no surprise to anyone; they’d be shocked if they ever saw Eddie wearing pants. And no matter how many people tell Eddie that he’s getting too old to be wearing things like that, or that some of his clothes are ‘girly’, he’s not going to stop. It only makes him spiral into an incensed rant about gendered clothing being ‘so fucking dumb’, and if anything, makes him more determined to keep wearing whatever the hell he wants. If nothing else, cheerleading seems to have expanded his lung capacity enough that he doesn’t have an asthma attack every time he runs up or down a flight of stairs.

And if anyone decided to try making fun of Eddie at school, they’d have to be either really brave, or really, really stupid, because no matter where Eddie is, Richie is always right behind him; six feet tall with rips in his jeans and a heavy wooden baseball bat slung over his shoulders. And all the other kids at school are well aware that Richie Tozier would gladly get suspended for breaking the kneecaps of any sorry sucker who looks at Eddie Kaspbrak the wrong way.

Richie walks Eddie home from school every day. If Eddie is cycling, he’ll either hitch a ride on the
back of his bike or weave around him on a skateboard, since Richie lost his bike a long time ago, and skateboarding is his new ‘thing’. Richie has had a lot of ‘things’ in the past, which are usually random activities or objects he becomes briefly obsessed with, and then gets bored of within a couple of weeks. Last time, it was a pink Frisbee with holographic detailing, which they could only assume he stole from the backyard of a ten-year-old girl. But he tossed it around school and into people’s heads one too many times, so it was confiscated.

They’re on foot, this time, and Richie crouches low behind the neighbour’s hedgerow as they approach Eddie’s house, knowing all too well that Mrs. Kaspbrak hates him more than anyone else, which is saying something, because she pretty much hates everyone.

It’s the same routine every day: Richie hides while Eddie enters the house, and then once Eddie has his mom distracted, Richie dodges down the side of the house and vaults the garden gate, using the shed as a starting point to climb the wall into Eddie’s bedroom window. Eddie says that his mom doesn’t ever do any gardening; the shed contains a coupon-related stockpile of cleaning products.

“Hi mom! I’m going to do my homework!” Eddie calls through to the living room, on his way up the stairs, lucky that his mother is too engrossed in her evening soap operas to bother him. He hears a brief, ‘Okay!’, and knows he’s in the clear. Once he gets to his room, he closes and locks the door with a bolt he attached himself, and then hurries to unlock and slide up the window, just as Richie hoists himself up onto the ledge.

Eddie’s bedroom is rather small, but superbly tidy. There are pale pink sheets on his bed, a desk that looks as though it almost never gets used, and several pictures of the Losers in a neat collage on his closet door. And there’s literally nothing else distinctive about Eddie’s room, because he doesn’t like too much clutter; he says clutter collects dust, and dust contains parasites and skin flakes and lots of other nasty things that make Eddie gag when he thinks about it.

Eddie toes his pristinely white sneakers off as Richie clambers through the window, tucking the laces inside and placing them by the desk side-by-side.

“Shoes!” He orders, as he sits down on the bed.

Richie sighs heavily, dragging his legs in last like some gangly, clumsy giraffe.

“Geez, at least let me get into the fucking room first, Eds,” He finally straightens himself up and closes the window quietly, before making a bee-line for Eddie.

“I said take your shoes off! What are you, a fucking animal, you’re gonna bring all the germs from the street into my room, all over the rug!” He motions to the white rug around the bed; the rest of the floor is wood.

Richie groans, dropping dramatically to the floor on his back and sticking his feet up in the air towards Eddie, who rolls his eyes, crosses his legs on the bed, and starts unfastening the laces of Richie’s boots, leaning away from the soles with a slight grimace. When he’s finished, Richie sits up, and Eddie thrusts the boots into his face, turning away, “Okay take them they fucking stink.”

Richie chuckles and drops them half-heartedly onto the wooden floor, they land with a distinctive thud, and they both freeze up for a few tense seconds, listening. But they can still hear the distinctive murmur of voices coming from a crappy television set, and they relax again. Richie climbs onto the bed and he’s all over Eddie like a rash, which is ironic, because Eddie thinks he has a rash a least once a week. He’s forced onto his back while Richie settles between his thighs and tries to go straight in for his mouth, but Eddie places both palms over the bottom half of Richie’s face.
“Okay, your breath,” Richie groans again into Eddie’s hand, “fucking stinks of tobacco. And shit.” He adds after a while, “Seriously what the fuck did you eat for lunch, a homeless person?”

“Yeah but he was pretty into it.” Richie counters, his voice muffled.

“Oh my GOD.” Eddie laughs, but he looks repulsed, “You’re such a fucking sicko!” He lifts his hands away and then they’re kissing, long and slow and hard, and Richie’s mouth does taste like nicotine; Eddie hates that, insists it burns his tongue. He also tastes slightly…onion-y. Eddie remembers that Richie had two packets of cheetos for lunch, and he pulls away.

“Okay you seriously need a fucking mint or something!”

“Why do you hate having fun?” Richie reaches down into the pocket of his jeans anyway, pulls out a piece of minty gum and waves it in front of Eddie’s face before putting it in his mouth, “Anything else you’d like me to do first? Maybe, douse myself in bleach and then set myself on fire?”

“I’d like you to shut the fuck up, smartass,” Eddie quips as he tangles both hands into Richie’s hair and pulls him down for another kiss.

It tastes far less disgusting this time; there are no more background notes of onion, and he can still vaguely sense the ghost of Richie’s last cigarette, but mostly it’s just minty. And Richie’s gum only seems to increase the amount of saliva in his mouth; Richie’s a wet, messy kisser anyway, but now the sounds coming from between their lips are almost vulgar. Richie quickly gets sick of the gum, though, because it’s interfering with how much he can use his tongue, so he retreats to spit it into his palm, sticking it to the side of Eddie’s bedside cabinet. Eddie’s brow furrows the way it does when he’s about to flip out about something, and he opens his mouth to start yelling, so Richie shuts him up with his tongue, dipping it into Eddie’s open lips, and he can hardly believe it actually worked, but Eddie is instantly subdued, lost in the taste and smell and feel of Richie. And Eddie would never, ever admit it, but Richie is really fucking good at kissing; everything about the way Richie kisses is hot and wet and dirty. And Eddie loathes being dirty, like, really, really fucking loathes it. But sometimes, thinking about Richie making him dirty makes his head swim with an animal lust he’s never experienced before.

Eddie’s first sexual experience was with Richie, and by that, he doesn’t just mean his first sexual experience with another person, he means his first sexual experience ever, even with himself. At least, his first proper one. And that’s because Eddie has never been comfortable exploring his own body. He remembers the number of times his mom told him that sex is repulsive, and that touching yourself is wrong, and dirty, too. He remembers her telling him explicitly about how many diseases you can catch, how many infections you can get, how generally unclean the human body is. And so Eddie felt ashamed when he first started to feel those urges, like he was doing something nasty just by experiencing sexual arousal.

And he never knew any differently until it happened to come up in a conversation with his friends; a conversation almost definitely brought up by Richie, who thinks masturbation jokes are a fucking riot. And Eddie just sat there silently and awkwardly while they all laughed, feeling that icky itch under his skin, like he needed to take a shower. And when Richie rounded on him, noticing his unusual aversion to the conversation, Eddie couldn’t help himself. “It’s wrong,” he said plainly, “You can get infections and diseases and…and do you know how many germs there are on that part of your body?” And he’ll never forget the way they all looked at him; shock, confusion…pity. “I—it’s not d-dirty, Ed,” Bill had stammered, with a slightly embarrassed flush to his cheeks, “E-everyone does it.” And finally, about three or four years too late, he’d had The Conversation, with his five closest friends, some of whom seemed embarrassed, Bill and Ben in particular, but who were determined to make sure Eddie knew that sex wasn’t dirty and disgusting, and neither was he.
A few days later, after a heavy make-out session with Richie in his room, Richie left and Eddie felt the same way he always felt after spending time like that with Richie, aroused and confused. And he tried to touch himself, he really tried, but every time it started to feel good, he thought about the germs, and the feeling slipped away. And he was so frustrated, he cried into his pillow until he fell asleep.

The next evening, he was with Richie again, and Richie, who could clearly sense the tension in Eddie’s stance, encouraged him to spill, and oh boy, did he. He sobbed into Richie’s chest and told him everything, and Richie rubbed his back and ran his long fingers through his hair and kissed the top of his head until Eddie didn’t feel like crying anymore. And then Richie’s kisses moved to his temples, to his tear-stained cheeks, to the sun-kissed freckles across his nose, and then to his lips, kissing him over and over and over until Eddie practically melted against him. And then Eddie felt Richie’s hand slip between them and settle into the gap between his thighs, and he groped and rubbed and stroked until Eddie could barely breathe. And for once in his asthmatic life it felt so fucking good to be breathless. And the good feeling didn’t go away this time, because he didn’t have the capacity to think of anything else but Richie, and how warm he was, and how the musty smell of cigarettes suddenly didn’t seem so bad, and how amazing Richie’s hand felt. And Eddie had the first proper orgasm he’d ever experienced in his life; he figured a few wet dreams and accidents didn’t count for shit, especially not compared to this.

Eddie remembers this moment while he’s kissing Richie; how understanding Richie is and how patient and kind and…and…and he can’t really remember what else he was about to think about Richie, because Richie’s mouth is doing wicked things to his neck just under his ear that are making Eddie gasp in the best way possible. And Richie’s body is so big and broad and hot, weighing him down into the mattress, and his stupid, big hands are on Eddie’s small waist; Eddie can feel the damp heat from his sweaty palms through the material of his cheerleading uniform, and it’s driving him fucking crazy.

And speaking of hot, Richie is, he’s fucking hot. Eddie has never told him he thinks so, because he doesn’t think he could stand seeing that smug look on Richie’s dumb, hot face, but he definitely thinks it a lot. He tightens his hands in Richie’s ridiculous, sexy hair and loves the way his fingers get lost in the untidy curls, and he gives it a little tug, because he knows Richie likes that, and Richie groans into his mouth, and Eddie feels heat rush to his groin. He pulls a knee up against Richie’s waist, digs it into his ribs, knowing Richie will understand what he wants without having to be told, and he does, tucks his own leg up, grips Eddie’s hips in his hands and pulls him into the right place, rocks down in just the right way.

Fuck.

And then Eddie can’t think at all any more, hooks his ankles together against Richie’s back as he just keeps grinding into him over and over and over, and Eddie’s hands loosen from Richie’s hair of their own free will, because Eddie doesn’t even notice he has let go, vaguely feels his arms tighten about Richie’s neck and his shoulders, and their lips must have parted at some point, too, because Eddie can hear his own panting breath, and high-pitched whining that can only be him because Richie’s voice is deep. Jumbled up sentences that don’t really make sense to either of them just keep tumbling out of Eddie’s mouth before he can stop them. He recognises Richie’s name in a few of them…the word please, over and over again. And Richie is so hard against him and his body is so heavy and warm and so fucking good and Eddie can feel pleasure building beneath his navel faster than he can even enjoy it.

He feels thick, slightly wiry hair on his forehead that isn’t his own, and a line of smooth plastic from the top of Richie’s glasses, and Richie’s eyes come into view behind the heavy lenses, dark and mischievous and full of desire.
“You gonna come already? I think that’s a new record even for you, Eds.”

“What? N-no.” Eddie growls, but the strain in his voice betrays him.

“You sure?” Richie drawls, slipping his hand into the leg of Eddie’s shorts, gripping his thigh and drawing a slightly calloused thumb up the line of taut muscle where it meets his groin. The skin there is hot and slightly sticky.

“F-F-Fuck!”

“Is that an impression of Bill? Kinda ruining the mood.”

“STOP! Do you really have to be such a fucking asshole right now?!” Eddie feels his orgasm start to wane and it makes him so fucking pissed, because Richie does this all the damn time, starts cracking jokes or purposely leaves him hanging when Eddie is getting close; the worst kind of tease.

“Relax, Eds,” Richie chuckles at the frustration drawn between Eddie’s eyebrows, “I fucking got you.” And he angles his hips again and bears them down slow and hard against Eddie’s.

Eddie’s hand hits the pillow and he feels his back arch involuntarily as that fucking amazing heat returns with a vengeance in his groin. Richie watches Eddie’s eyes squeeze closed, and the furrow between his brow softening from frustration to pleasure, and he does it again, nice and slow, and Eddie’s lips part in a silent ‘O’, a movement Richie’s own lips mimic of their own accord as he admires him without blinking, afraid to miss a second. And while Eddie is lost in momentary rapture, Richie tucks his hand between their hips, daringly slips it into the waistband of Eddie’s shorts; he’s never touched him under his clothes before, and he’s just hoping that Eddie will be receptive to it in his current state of euphoria.

Eddie’s hand shoots straight to Richie’s wrist, gripping it so hard Richie thinks it might bruise; for someone so small, Eddie has a grip like a fucking vice. But Eddie doesn’t wrench his hand away, or shout or scream or throw him off the bed like Richie is expecting, there’s a short pause and then he pushes, guides, until Richie’s hand is inside Eddie’s damp underwear, long, slender fingers enveloping hard, hot, sticky flesh. And then Eddie’s knuckles are white against the pillow behind his head, while Richie works his hand like a fucking pro, watching Eddie in lustful fascination as he shudders and squirms and whimpers under him like he’s being fucking tortured and enjoying it. And Eddie’s usually perfectly coiffed, slightly bouncy hair is a mess against the pastel coloured pillow, dark waves striking a sharp contrast, and thick, full lashes fluttering against the tops of his tanned cheeks, which are darkened by a red flush that accentuates the freckles there. Richie thinks he’s never seen anything more exquisite in his entire fucking life.

Then Eddie jolts and tenses up, and it’s over.

And Richie withdraws his hand, which Eddie hastily cleans off with a wet wipe (he has like five packs of them in his bedside drawer), before he’ll let Richie touch him. And then they’re both laughing and rolling around on the bed and kissing messily until Eddie is on top, straddling his waist, and Richie is on his back. And Eddie looks invigorated, if a little messy and flustered.

“How you wanna finish?”

“How I what?” Richie asks, with a small smirk on his face.

“How you wanna…you know…” Eddie raises his eyebrows a little, and makes a slightly crude gesture with his hand, “…finish.”

Richie laughs, “Eds, you curse more than me, but you seriously can’t say the word ‘come’?”
“No I don’t like it it sounds disgusting.”

“What about ‘ejaculate’?”

“That’s even worse!”

“Spunk?”

“Gross!”

“Nut?”

“Oh my GOD, STOP!”

Eddie clasps a hand over Richie’s mouth, and then they’re both laughing again, and Eddie takes Richie’s glasses off his face, untangling one of the arms from his hair, and puts them on himself. All he can see now is the very distorted, blurry outline of Richie, and he wonders if this is what Richie sees without them. He feels Richie’s hands on his thighs, and looks down at them under the edge of the lenses, the only part he can see clearly. Eddie thinks, almost irritably, that Richie’s hands nearly cover half of his thighs. It’s not fair. This is why everyone thinks Eddie is weaker, but he’s not! If they could only see who was really in charge, they wouldn’t laugh at him.

Eddie feels the solid bulge in Richie’s jeans beneath him; he’s still painfully hard, and Eddie considers just fucking leaving him like that, to drag his stupid blue-balls home with him because Richie is always such an asshole; he definitely deserves it. But then he feels the way Richie’s fingertips are twitching against Eddie’s bare legs, minutely clenching and unclenching, and he feels a swell of affection and possessiveness in his chest.

Dumbass Richie Tozier.

His dumbass Richie Tozier.

Eddie shuffles a bit, until he feels the line of Richie’s erection fit comfortably against his ass, and Richie’s fidgeting hands freeze still against Eddie’s thighs as he starts to grind slowly. Eddie imagines what Richie’s expression might look like, and he’s almost glad he can’t see it through the thick lenses of Richie’s glasses, because he’s not sure even he knows whether he’s comfortable with what he’s doing. But then he hears Richie hiss as he speeds up, hears him curse and his voice is so heavy and gritty with want that Eddie’s heart nearly stops. He just keeps going faster, spurred on by Richie’s low, dirty encouragements, and the harder he presses down, the more he can feel how hard Richie is between the cheeks of his ass and his body aches with the sudden desire to feel Richie inside him. But that thought is also terrifying and foreign and he knows he’s not nearly ready to consider that, so he pushes it to the back of his mind and just enjoys this current feeling for what it is. And he pushes Richie’s glasses up onto the top of his head just long enough to see the ecstasy on Richie’s face as he ‘finishes’, marvelling at the way his eyes are closed so tightly and the way his bottom lip is swollen from being bitten in the midst of his pleasure.

And once they’re both cleaned up and Richie finally has his glasses back, Eddie hears his mother calling him for dinner and Richie has to make a swift exit through the window, pecking Eddie’s cheek and his nose and his lips as they lean through the open frame at either side.

“See you later, Juliet.” Richie chuckles as he climbs down the wall, and Eddie rolls his eyes with a smile on his face, watching him all the way to the end of the street.

Richie tucks his hands into his pockets and walks home in the dark, the roads empty, but his heart so full.
They are 17 years old.

It’s October, and Fall in Derry this year is unusually cold.

The sky is a clear, pearly white, the kind where it’s completely covered by clouds, but you can’t see their soft, fluffy edges. It’s just flat, and absent of colour, and there’s a sharp, clear chill in the air, enough to sting the ends of noses and the tips of ears, and cause lips to numb to the point of rendering speech slightly difficult.

The cool, white sky and wintery cold cast a sharp contrast against the warm, rich colours that paint Derry’s roads; piles of crisp, full leaves gathered thick against the kerbs like sea foam at the edges of a still ocean. Deep, burnt orange and rich, summer yellow, warm, chocolate brown and intense, coppery red, intermingled with a myriad of green hues, in various stages of decay, fading like the ghosts of a lush summer just passed. A fitting metaphor for the arrival of Halloween.

Halloween is Richie’s favourite holiday.

And it’s no real mystery why; it comprises all of his favourite things: candy, mischief, and bizarre fashion choices.

Which is why, one afternoon in late October, in the canteen of Derry High School, Richie is attempting, desperately, to convince the other Losers to skip school with him on October 31st, and dedicate the entire day to Halloween.

“No.” Stan says firmly, without even looking up as he cleans the table between himself and Eddie.

While the rest of them have a proper packed-lunch, or a full meal from the canteen, all Richie seems to have brought is a packet of Funyuns and three strawberry Twizzlers. He stuffs a handful of the onion-flavoured rings into his mouth as he looks at Stan.

“Why the fuck not?”

As Richie speaks, little flecks of soggy corn chip spray onto the table around him. Eddie slides his tray further away from Richie and grimaces, muttering something along the lines of ‘fucking disgusting’, as Stan shoots Richie a dirty look.

“We’re not missing school just so you can throw eggs at people’s houses.”

Richie swallows, glances at Eddie and wipes the table with his sleeve, “Who said anything about
eggs? We could do all sorts of stuff if we had all day, and then go trick-or-treating. Halloween is amazing, it deserves an entire day.”

“I’ll come.” Mike says confidently, half-way through a huge pile of what just seems to be scrambled eggs. “I love Halloween. You guys should come see the farm; we got tonnes of pumpkins and we get the barn all lit up. It’s awesome. Plus, it’s just one day of school, how much can we really miss in one day?”

“A lot.” Stan argues, as he neatly lays out a napkin and opens the lid of his lunchbox, in which everything is divided into tidy sections. He usually has a lunch he has to construct, because he says he doesn’t like the separate components to ‘contaminate’ one another during the day. “What if we miss something important? We’re nearly seniors, and I don’t wanna jeopardise my chances of getting into a good college.”

“For one day?” Richie scoffs, chewing on a Twizzler, “One day isn’t gonna change anything. Especially not for you, Stanley, you’re a fucking prodigy.”

“Except that I’m already a year behind everyone else to begin with.” Stan perfectly slices a seeded bagel in half.

“Ugh. This again?! Back me up here, Bill! You fucking love Halloween, right?!”

Bill’s eyes widen slightly innocently in a ‘don’t involve me in this argument’ kind of way as he takes a mouthful of orange juice. “W-well…y-you both make valid p-points.”

“BULLSHIT.” Richie says loudly, turning some heads on other tables, “You’re only saying that because you-” He pauses mid-sentence, glancing at Stan, “What happened to our fearless leader, huh?! Step the fuck up, Bill!”

“W-why does e-everything have to be my decision?”

“Fine! Guess this is a democracy, now. Let’s put it to a vote. All those in favour of doing something FUN on Halloween and not being a bunch of weenies.” Richie’s hand shoots up into the air. “What happened to our fearless leader, huh?! Step the fuck up, Bill!”

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into it? You might as well just make out with the floor of a public bathroom. And all the hyperactive children running around like tiny, sticky, infectious-

“Okay, geez, we get it!” Richie chuckles, flipping his leg over the bench so that he’s straddling it and shifting closer to Eddie, wrapping his arms around his waist, “You won’t even do it for me?” He pouts and rests his chin on Eddie’s shoulder, as Eddie leans away, holding his food at arms’ length.

“Not right now, Rich, I’m fucking eating.”

“C’mon, Eds! It’ll be so much fun! We can go to that little coffee shop you really like on Columbus Street. We could go to the quarry and have a Halloween picnic with hot cocoa. It’ll be cute!”

“So are the rest of us still invited i-in this scenario, or…?” Bill chuckles, and so do Ben and Mike.

“I don’t like picnics.” Eddie says sternly, still trying to shrug Richie off his side, “If I wanted to sit on the dirty ground and have bugs in my food I’d just come eat my lunch in your bedroom.”

“Yowza!” Richie laughs loudly, watching Eddie with the happiest, most excited glint in his eyes, “That’s One-Nil to Eddie Spaghetti!” He cups his hand over his mouth, doing his best impression of a sports commentator. Unfortunately, Richie’s best impression of anything still isn’t good. “You nailed me good, Eds! And hopefully it won’t be the last time, am I right?!”

Thankfully, Stan manages to distract Richie by forcing half a cream-cheese bagel into his hand, and Richie starts eating it without further comment, as Stan prepares the second slice for himself. Eddie hides the angry, flustered redness on his cheeks by promptly drinking his entire cup of water in one go.

After finishing the bagel in no more than three bites, Richie eats another Twizzler, and goes silent for a while, looking contemplatively at the table. No one speaks for a while, and it seems briefly as though the Halloween idea has been effectively beaten down; everyone knows full-well that Richie won’t go without Eddie.

Eddie notices his silence at once, sees the disappointment in the slope of Richie’s shoulders, and sighs.

“I guess it would be…kinda fun…for us all to spend the whole day together.”

Richie perks up again instantly, and grabs Eddie to kiss the side of his head and his cheek, but Eddie stops him before he can get to his lips, pushing a handful of grapes from his own lunchbox into Richie’s hand; it’s commonplace for the other Losers to share their food with Richie, since he almost never brings any himself, and when he does, it’s…well, the Funyuns and Twizzlers suggest all that really needs to be said on the matter. Richie seems adequately appeased by the grapes, and sits back to eat them, looking finally at Bill and Stan.

“So? Are you two coming or not?

“I dunno, Rich.” Bill offers hesitantly, glancing at Stan, as though awaiting his reaction, first.

Stan notices Bill looking at him and sighs softly.

“Well, if you’re all going…”

“We d-don’t have to. If you don’t want t-to skip school, we c-can just meet up with them later.”

Stan turns his head and looks at Bill properly, now.
“Don’t you want to go with them?”

“W-well, yeah, but…n-not if we’re not all going.” Bill smiles slightly timidly, and at the other side of the table, Richie is barely concealing a smirk behind his hand. Eddie nudges him in the ribs with his elbow.

Stan wipes his fingers on a napkin, glances around the table at all of the other Losers, who are staring at him in anticipation, and then nods slightly.

“Okay, I’ll go. But don’t you think we’re a little old for trick-or-treating?”

“No such thing, Stanley!” Richie chuckles, beaming now that he knows he has his way, “first order of business!” He slams his palms down onto the surface of the table, causing Eddie to jump beside him and throw him a glare, “We need a plan. I say we meet up outside school just before it starts, call in sick; I’ll voice Eddie’s mom, obviously, and then take it from there. And once we-”

Richie goes silent as a boy approaches the table, and all six heads turn to stare at the intruder at once. The Losers are (almost) all popular in school, but no one ever sits with them at lunch, or sits near them in class where there’s more than one of them present, or meets up with them outside of Derry High, because they are literally inseparable from one another. Everyone knows that the ‘Losers’ Club’ is the only club that is exclusive to only six, special people, and anyone who tried to muscle their way into it would be a fool to even try.

The boy is about the same age as the Losers, rather ordinary-looking, though neat, with no discernible features. He’s about average height, average weight, averagely attractive, though his hair is very tidy and his fashionable clothes have clearly been pressed. He seems understandably nervous, with the sudden, intense gaze of six other people blatantly fixed upon him, but he’s only looking at Stan.

“Hi, Stanley,” the boy clears his throat, after a mildly shaky start, “Um, this is a little awkward, but…” he pauses, and for a second looks as though he might change his mind and walk away. Richie appears thoroughly entertained. “I was wondering, if you want, if we could…go see a movie sometime or something? If…if you want to.”

Eddie looks away, an uncomfortable expression on his face, like he’s secondhandedly embarrassed just by being in the same vicinity as this situation. Bill looks away, too, and stares at his plate. Mike clears his throat and starts talking quietly to Ben about some history homework they have due next Friday, clearly trying to divert some attention away from the awkward scene and make the boy feel less uncomfortable. Richie, however, is still staring at the poor guy with a huge grin on his face, like he’s watching the best scene from his favourite fucking movie.

Stan looks a little blind-sided, but surprisingly composed.

“Oh. Um…that sounds…nice.”

“Really? Okay, uh…” the boy smiles, and sounds relieved, “Well, I’ll…I guess I’ll see you in class and we can plan something?”

“Mh-hm.” Stan smiles, and nods, but he doesn’t appear very committed to either.

“Okay, well…I’ll see you later, then.”

“See you later.”

The boy waves slightly as he walks away, and Stan turns to see all eyes fixed firmly on him, now.
“Who was that?” Richie is practically giddy.

Stan puts the lid back on his lunchbox slowly.

“His name’s Jeremy. He’s from my calculus class.”

“Wow.” Richie snorts, looking around the table as though expecting to see everyone as diverted by this as he is, “Anyone else think Jeremy is really fucking reaching?"  

“D-don’t be such a d-dick, Richie.”

“Oh, c’mon!” Richie laughs, holding his hands up in exasperation, “let’s look at this seriously.”

“I really can’t imagine that’s what you’re about to do.” Mike chuckles, but he’s watching him anyway, as though waiting for him to say something funny.

“So, let’s say Stanley is this Twizzler.” Richie holds up the remaining strawberry treat, and places it on the table in front of him, “This tall, juicy, delicious piece of candy that you just wanna put in your mouth.”

“B-beep beep, R-Richie.”

Richie ignores Bill’s protest, and the glares he’s receiving from both Stan and Eddie.

“And Jeremy…” Richie looks around the table, and then uses his index finger to scoop up a tiny fleck of soggy bagel, “…is this little whole-wheat crumb.”

Mike laughs, but he looks as though he knows he shouldn’t, Ben shakes his head disapprovingly, and Bill seems distinctly uncomfortable.

Eddie clears his throat loudly, and Richie looks at him.

“Aw, Eds, you know I still like you the best!” He kisses Eddie’s cheek and pokes him in the side playfully until Eddie can’t help but giggle, “You’re like a whole pack of strawberry Twizzlers! So delicious I just wanna open up the packet and stick my-”

“R-RICHIE!”

Bill quickly slides his dinner plate over to Richie; he has left some of his fries, and Richie was un成功sucessfully trying to steal some of Ben’s, earlier on.

“Here, d-do you want these?”

Eddie is holding a napkin over his face as Richie happily accepts Bill’s leftover fries. He points one at Stan.

“So, Stanley, are you gonna go on a date with our new friend Jeremy? Jeremy Bagel?”

“His name is Jeremy Weaver, and, no, probably not.”

“What?” Richie’s eyebrows disappear up into his messy hair, “You literally just said ‘yes’ to him.”

“No, I didn’t. I said ‘that sounds nice’.” Stan wipes some crumbs off the table in front of him, “And I was lying, because it doesn’t.”

“And people say I’m a dick?!” Richie laughs.
“I wasn’t being a dick, I was letting him down easy, without embarrassing him by saying ‘no’ to his face while you were all staring at him.”

“Why won’t you go on a date with Jeremy, Stanley?! He’s one of us, now! He’s as much a part of this group as anyone else!” Richie shouts dramatically, and Eddie shushes him by kicking him in the shin.

“He’s not my type.”

“Oh, really?” Richie chuckles, licking some salt from the tips of his fingers, “Enlighten us, Stanley,” his eyes flicker briefly over to Bill, “What is your type?”

Stan’s shoulders tense ever so slightly.

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Stan, what about ol’ bagel crumb Jeremy is just not doin’ it for ya?”

“Jeremy is boring,” Stan says suddenly and rather confidently, as though he’s thought about it before.

“Like, his personality, or…face-wise?”

“Both.”

Richie snorts at Stan’s bluntness.

“So you’d prefer someone more interesting, maybe someone who’s brave and unpredictable; someone who often throws caution to the wind? Maybe somebody more artistic? You know, someone who could draw you Titanic style and then fuck you in the back of a vintage car.”

“Oh my fucking god!” Eddie hits him hard in the shoulder, and Richie laughs, but rubs at the mark like it actually hurt.

Stan stares at Richie, unyielding.

“I’d prefer someone with a bit more…character.”

“Oh, I see,” Richie nods understandingly, “So, like…some facial scars, or, some weird hobbies, or, I don’t know, like…” He dramatically fakes consideration, “…a speech impediment.”

Eddie grabs Richie’s arm, quickly distracting from the conversation.

“Hey, Rich, could you go grab my chem textbooks from my locker?” He asks loudly. Richie looks unconvincing, until Eddie hastily adds, “They’re kinda heavy.” And Richie suddenly seems much more keen on the idea.

“They’re heavy, huh?” He raises his eyebrows, but he looks playful, “What am I, your butler?”

“More like my slave.” Eddie looks serious and almost a little irritated, and not like he’s being flirtatious at all, but Richie clearly doesn’t receive that signal. He looks excited.

“What are you gonna do if I don’t get your books for you?”

“I’m not gonna do anything.”
“Are you gonna spank me?”

“Ew, No! I might punch you in the fucking face, though!”

“Nice.”

Richie finally gets up and leaves, after kissing Eddie on the lips for so long that Eddie practically has to fight him off.

“In the middle of the fucking canteen?!” Eddie hisses under his breath, wiping Richie’s spit off his mouth with the back of his hand.

He looks flustered and angry, but he still collapses into fits of laughter along with the other Losers seconds later.

October 31st comes around quickly after that, and, as agreed, the six Losers meet up outside the front of the school about twenty minutes before lessons are about to begin. Hidden amongst the throng of other students, they find it easy to sneak away from the grounds and into Derry without being spotted. And, as promised, Richie is the one to call the school from the nearest pay-phone, pretending to be Eddie’s mom, first, then Bill’s, Ben’s, Stan’s, and finally, Mike’s grandfather, tying the story together with an imaginary sickness bug that could believably have spread quickly between six boys who spend so much time within close proximity of one another. His impressions aren’t great, which doesn’t come as a surprise to anyone, but they’re more than sufficient to fool the receptionist at Derry High School, and she barely seems suspicious at all. Perhaps, though, that’s less attributable to Richie’s impersonations, and more to the other five of his friends being such nice, intelligent, hard-working students, that the staff can’t countenance the idea of any of them skipping school.

Richie doesn’t bother impersonating his own mother to call in sick for himself.

“She won’t care,” he shrugs, slightly distantly.

Then, they take a long, slow, surprisingly pleasant walk to the quarry. They’ve only ever really ridden there before by bike, so it takes almost an hour on foot. At the front, Richie and Eddie hold hands as they walk, and Eddie frequently switches which side of Richie he’s walking on, so that he can alternately warm Richie’s hands. Naturally, Richie forgot to wear gloves, and, of course, Eddie did not. Bill notices the way their hands tighten every time they pass someone on the street, and Eddie lowers his head. They’re all aware how afraid he is of his mother finding out about him and Richie, and if anyone could dig up that sort of information purely based on gossip stemming from a few passing glances on the sidewalk, it would be Mrs Kaspbrak. Bill sees Richie lean down to kiss the top of Eddie’s head and whisper something gently into his ear on more than one occasion. He smiles every time.

When they reach the quarry, and approach its frozen banks, the air is so quiet and still it’s as though the rest of Derry doesn’t even exist. They unpack their heavy bags and lay blankets on the flat surfaces of a patch of icy boulders, along with tubs of food, packets of chips and snacks and candy, and Mike unloads two large thermos flasks filled with hot cocoa made with fresh cow’s milk from the farm. And they sit, and eat, and drink, and talk, and skip rocks on the thinly frozen surface of the water, watching little stone-sized cracks appear in the smooth ice like black polka-dots.

Their laughter echoes around the sunken quarry all morning and well into the afternoon.

Dazzling streams of sunlight start to break through the clouds, as Richie entertains them all with his re-enactment of Jeremy Weaver awkwardly asking Stan on a date. He calls this new addition to his
repertoire of impressions, *Jeremy Bagel*. Even Stan begrudgingly cracks a smile a few times, while Richie is down on one knee in front of him, dramatically proclaiming his love.

And then they hear the snap of twigs, and the crunch of leaves underfoot, as someone makes their way down the bank towards them. Stan briefly panics that it might *actually* be Jeremy Weaver, but when the figure appears around the edge of the rock face, it’s a girl, about their age, tall, and slim, and *very* pretty.

Her brown, oddly-laced boots are scuffed and battered from activity and over-wear, and topped with thick, dark-coloured socks that highlight the paleness of her skin.

Her legs are bare below a thigh-length dress, revealing slightly scabbed knees, and a few blossoming bruises scattered about her shins.

Her clothing is made up of warm, but faded tones, layered, and decorated with such a collection of jewels, and beads, and bangles, that her every movement creates light, and colour, and *music*.

Her porcelain, freckled cheeks are flushed pleasantly by the cold, while plump, chapped lips curve into a smile so warm and pure, it could melt the coldest winter into spring.

And her hair…

Her hair is *winter fire*. 
They are 17 years old.

“B-B-Bev.”

It isn’t a question. It’s a statement. Said quietly, and with such intense emotion that time itself appears to freeze in its wake. Disbelief, longing, sudden realisation, and a deep, heartfelt sadness that is echoed in the wide eyes of all six boys standing shell-shocked in the clearing. And Bill hardly registers that the words are coming from his own, slightly numb lips, because his mind is so full of conflicting thoughts and feelings, all entangled furiously into one messy thunderstorm of confusion, yet, at the same time, his head feels empty, as though his brain has been momentarily switched off. He vaguely hears her name, and when it is said softly, and with a distinctive stutter, he thinks, hazily, “that’s my voice. I said that.”

And then it’s as though he has been hit by a sudden, cascading tidal-wave of memories, thoughts and emotions so vivid that he feels physically sick, so dizzy that reality is currently an incomprehensible mess. He almost feels as though he has just plummeted over the edge of a cliff-face, and suffered the horrible, jarring experience of the fall, without ever landing. Based on the stunned, silent faces of the other five boys, they’re all enduring a similarly complicated and perplexing emotional journey.

Bill takes a small step forward, begins to move towards Beverly, when his legs finally obey, when he can finally connect conscious thought to intentional movement, and he sees her speed up. She breaks into a run toward them, thick, fiery curls bouncing about her head and reflecting the Fall sun like her hair is threaded with strings of pure copper and gold, and the thick tears running down her flustered cheeks are glistening, too.

Bill considers running to her, and he’s about to, but Richie gets there first, and she flings herself at him in a fierce embrace, literally leaping at him, arms tight around his neck and bejewelled fingers clutching the shoulders of his shirt, as her legs clamp to his waist. Richie spins her around and they’re both laughing, though Bev is still crying, and the combination produces an odd but startlingly beautiful sound. Bill swears he can see tears in Richie’s eyes, too, behind the slightly fogged-up lenses of his glasses. And Richie holds her weight effortlessly while Beverly moves her hands up into his hair, feeling through the thick, unruly curls that are messy and loose compared to her own, and stares into his eyes with such a look of complete and utter adoration and warmth, that Bill can feel himself smiling involuntarily at the sight of them. Beverly plants a brief, bruising kiss against Richie’s lips as he lowers her back to the ground, and her affectionate gaze is only broken from his when she notices Eddie standing right by them, looking awestruck.

She confronts Eddie, next, staring at the much smaller boy as though she has suddenly forgotten Richie entirely. Cupping her delicate, cold hands against Eddie’s soft cheeks, she leans in to plant a firm, slow kiss to his forehead, much like a doting mother, and when he begins to cry, she wipes her thumbs gently beneath his eyes and chuckles as she scoops him into a hug. Still taller than Eddie, Bev’s enthusiastic embrace almost lifts him off the ground, but Eddie seems so enraptured by her, clutching his hands into the comfortable material of her cardigan, that it seems he wouldn’t have cared at all if it had, despite his usual aversion to being ‘babied’. Beverly is like the big sister he never had.

Mike is next in line, has his arms wide open and a beaming smile on his face as Beverly finally releases Eddie. She slides her hands up around Mike’s muscular shoulders, eyes scanning his body from head to toe like she cannot believe this is still the same anxious, timid boy she left five years
ago. When her arms are comfortably around his neck, heels turned up in a tiptoe to reach, Mike bends, puts an arm behind her knees, and lifts her like she weighs no more than a child, swaying her lovingly as they both laugh like giddy children. Her luscious red hair compliments Mike’s glorious dark skin like raspberry and chocolate, as she nuzzles her face into the firm heat of his neck and plants a light kiss there. When he gently returns her feet to the ground, there are more fresh tears in her eyes, and cascading down her rosy cheeks, though these are clearly tears of happiness, not of grief, and when she looks from Mike to Stan, she rests her fingers against her lips, and only seems to cry more.

Stan’s soft eyes glisten with melancholy emotion as he holds out a hand to her, and their fingers meet gracefully, intertwine with one another, both so slender and pale and beautiful that Bill is breathless at the sight of them. When they embrace, cheek-to-cheek, their curls intermingle delicately, glistening strikingly in the sunlight like fine, precious metals. Bill feels his fingers twitch with the instinctive desire to capture the divine essence of this moment in a painting, but he is so captivated that he feels he could not have moved if he wanted to. And when they release one another, and Beverly places her hands gently either side of Stan’s sculpted jaw, they smile at one another with such pure, angelic affection, lighting already devastatingly beautiful faces with joy, that Bill actually feels faint. He wonders if any other human being on Earth has ever felt love this furious.

It takes him a couple of seconds to realise that Beverly is now approaching him, and there is something else in her eyes, now, something different. It is love, of course. But Bill knows that Beverly loves all of them equally, so why does this love feel so distinct? She reaches him and rests her hands against his neck and stares into his eyes with such passion and fervour, and Bill feels his own hands go to her waist without conscious instruction. And they kiss, on the lips, slow and firm and meaningful, nothing like the way she kissed Richie. Yet, when Bev pulls away, and their blue eyes meet again, there is something else there, too, a silent conversation only Bill can understand. He unravels the story in her expression, and it tells of a missed opportunity, of a happy ending that could have been, of a love that is passionate, powerful and relentless, but is not the end to their adventure. And it should feel sad, but it doesn’t. Bill sees Stan behind Beverly, from the corner of his eye, and she glances over his shoulder, too, where Bill knows Ben is, and they share a knowing, contented laugh. Bill admires the way her nose crinkles and the freckles on her cheeks dance.

Bill watches her go to Ben, releases her slowly, as though savouring his last taste of her heart before she passes it on to someone else.

And Ben is frozen on the spot, struck dumb with an awe they’ve never seen in him before, staring unblinking at Beverly as though he is looking into the face of a Goddess. As though he is gazing into the very heart of the universe itself, and has drawn meaning for his very life from within it. Once again, he feels like the tiny, chubby, nervous little boy he was when he first ever laid eyes on her, wholly unworthy of her attention. Unworthy of even being near her.

But he isn’t that boy anymore.

Now he’s tall, as tall as Bill, about 5’9”. Ben’s chest and stomach are firm, his shoulders and arms are amply robust, and he is strong. His skin is tanned from hours upon hours of running outside, freckled with tiny sunspots and there’s a healthy, glowing redness to his cheeks that is no longer caused by breathlessness or strain, but by youthful vitality. His hair is thick and shiny, a beautiful golden brown, like warm honey, his teeth are white and straight, his eyes are soft, but deep, like pools of liquid amber. And at his core, is a wholesome, benevolent soul, made rich with boundless knowledge, respectfulness, loyalty, and above all, a compassion for others that rivals even the kindest of humanity.

And despite all of this, Ben still feels inadequate, still recoils slightly when Beverly comes close to
him, as though frightened of tainting her perfection with his undeserving touch.

But Beverly does not concede.

Her sharp, pale blue eyes meet Ben’s soft, deep brown ones, and Ben has never felt safer, nor more adored in someone’s gaze. She cups her hands against his face, traces the defined hollows of his cheeks, and the sloped bridge of his nose, and the gentle curve of his lips with her dainty fingertips, as though committing to memory a work of art. And Ben thinks that the glittering tears that cling to her bottom lashes are like stardust, as he watches her face in silent fascination.

“I…I guess I look…weird…” He begins to say, his voice quiet and slightly croaky.

Beverly’s lips curve into a smile as she brushes a little of Ben’s hair from his face and tucks it gently behind his ear.

“You look just as beautiful as I remember you.” She replies tenderly, and kisses his lips so lightly that he doesn’t even have the time to react.

Ben is certain he’d be horrendously embarrassed at being kissed by Beverly in front of all of his friends, but he is so absorbed in the moment, so caught up in her, that he has completely forgotten they’re there.

Which is lucky, because she kisses him again, and this time it’s much firmer and more resolute, and she guides his shaking hands around her waist, and he holds her tightly against him and melts into the kiss like it is where he has always wanted to be.

Behind him, Bill hears Richie whistle, and it sounds joyful. He sees Stan turn away as Bev and Ben continue to kiss, but there’s a definite smile on his face, too. Bill chuckles to himself, and feels happiness swell in his chest such as he hasn’t experienced in a long time.

The Losers’ Club is finally whole again.

A complete circle, where once there was a gap they didn’t even realise was there, but could feel like there was a piece missing from the Losers themselves.

It turns out that piece was shaped like Beverly Marsh.

And then they sit in the clearing of the quarry, by the slowly defrosting water, and talk, and talk, and talk, for hours. Beverly leans against Richie’s chest, with his long arm around her shoulders, and Eddie is at her other side, holding one of Beverly’s hands between both of his own, linking their fingers and fiddling with her rings and bracelets, as he so often does with Richie. Occasionally, he lifts her cupped hand towards his lips, breathing hot air into the gap between his own palms, warming her cold fingers with his breath.

“So, I convinced my Aunt to move back to Derry. She used to live here, too, when she was a kid.” Beverly says softly; she has been telling the story of her reappearance, and the six boys watch her and lean in, like children listening to a bedtime story, “I just…I felt like…something was missing.” She looks around at each of them in turn, “I didn’t know what it was, I just knew I needed to be here. It was like I was homesick. But worse. Because I knew I wasn’t homesick for a place.”

Bill smiles softly in understanding, “W-w-we all felt th-the same. We missed you, too. Even i-if we didn’t realise it at the time.”

“Eddie’s my boyfriend.” Richie says suddenly, completely out of the blue, and Beverly looks up at him with a huge, amused grin on her face. Eddie gives Richie a look that clearly says, ‘why the fuck
would you say that out of nowhere?

“Well, no shit.” Beverly replies with a laugh. Richie looks very pleased with himself.

“So you could tell because Eddie has always been crushing on me so bad?”

“YOU ASKED ME OUT, DIPSHIT!”

Beverly starts laughing, and they all soon follow, and happiness fills the quarry once more, as the sun begins to set.

Richie tells Bev all about his ‘Halloween Day’ idea, and doesn’t seem to need to do any convincing whatsoever to encourage Bev to come trick-or-treating with them that evening. As they all walk back up the bank together onto the road, and head back into Derry, Richie and Bev chat excitedly at the back about what they’re all going to dress up as.

“Well, I could definitely throw something together.” She muses, “My Aunt got me a sewing machine for my last Birthday so I would stop using hers so much. I have to say, I’ve gotten pretty good at it.” She seems proud of herself.

“At sewing?” Richie asks incredulously, as though he cannot believe anyone could possibly find that interesting or fun.

“Yes.” Beverly responds firmly, looking him right in the eye, “I’m good at sewing, and I could still hand you your ass, thank you very much.”

Richie laughs excitedly and slings his arm around her, managing to catch Eddie in his other before he has time to dodge.

“Maybe you could teach Eddie and then he can fix my favourite jacket. There’s a hole in the shoulder.”

“Yeah, because you fucking set it on fire to see what would happen.” Eddie pushes him in the side, “Also, learn your fucking self, I’m not fixing your shit.”

“I can probably fix that for you.” Beverly chuckles, watching them.

“While you’re there, can you take the hems up on all of Eddie’s shorts? I think they’re way too long.”

Eddie rolls his eyes, but can’t help the little smirk on his face as he slides his arm around Richie’s waist while they walk.

They’re all so absorbed in their laughter and conversation, that they fail to notice the outline of Mrs. Kaspbrak in the distance as they cross the street towards Eddie’s house, standing at the very end of her lawn, face flustered, eyes bulging, looking distinctly as though she has been standing there for a long, long time, waiting for Eddie to reappear.

Eddie looks up and sees her first, and he moves away from Richie faster than he’s probably ever moved in his life, his face instantly paling.

“Oh fuck oh god…oh god no no no…”

As soon as they’re close enough, Mrs. Kaspbrak marches over as quickly as a woman her size can move, and grabs Eddie’s wrist, tearing him away from the other Losers and towards the house. She
doesn’t say a word, though the look on her face is frantic, and wild, and her grip on Eddie’s wrist is so tight it hurts.

Eddie’s eyes are wide, his expression panicked, as he tries to pull his hand from her grip, tries to push her away, but she’s strong, and forceful, and Eddie would never hurt his mother, so he has to allow himself to be dragged, for the most part, heels digging into the grass as he screams at her.

“MOM, NO! PLEASE MOM! Mommy…”

His voice is so terrified and helpless and desperate that Richie instantly starts after them without thinking about the consequences, while the rest of the Losers are just frozen in place, completely at a loss, struggling not to interfere. Richie goes to grab for Eddie but Mrs. Kaspbrak turns on him so fast Eddie trips briefly and scuffs his knees on the grass before she tugs him back to his feet, tears streaming down his face, now.

“Richie please no…please…”

“YOU.” Mrs. Kaspbrak confronts Richie head on, looking so menacing and impassioned that Richie thinks for a second she might actually hit him, and he backs away. “You filthy, disgusting, degenerate thing.” Her voice is low and threatening, now, “If you ever come anywhere near my son again, I will make you wish your dirty, low-life, alcoholic mother never spawned you.” Richie is stunned into silence and stillness, “She might not care about her son, but I care about mine.”

Richie looks angry, but his bottom lip trembles ever so slightly.

Eddie sees the anguish in Richie’s face and seems to find a new-found strength in it, wrenching his arm from his mother’s grip with such force he almost pulls her over. He moves away from her before she can catch him again, and stands steadfast between her and Richie, facing her down.

“SHUT UP!” He screams, making sure he is much closer to Richie than to her, that he is almost pressed against him. He is visibly agitated, unable to keep still, as though ready for a fight.

The scene oddly but charmingly resembles a tiny Chihuahua trying to protect a great, black wolf, but it’s not nearly as funny.

In fact, it isn’t funny at all.

Eddie is still crying, but there is ferocity in his eyes, now, and his mother looks shaken to her very core.

“Eddie-bear,” She says shakily, in a low, but sickeningly sweet voice, “Baby, you’re sick. You’re very, very sick.”

“I’m NOT SICK!” He shrieks, “THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!”

Richie looks speechless for the first time in his life.

“You have a disease, honey,” She pushes, in the same nauseating, but menacing tone, “That’s what happens when you hang around with these people.” She says the word ‘people’ as though she doesn’t believe it to be true at all, and her beady eyes scan Eddie’s other friends, settling briefly on Stan. She makes a point of looking him up and down, a rotten look on her face, like she might have spat at his feet if he’d been closer, “Oh, yes, I know all about them.”

Stan does not react.
But Eddie…

Eddie looks utterly devastated.

There’s a heart-wrenching, choking noise in the back of his throat, before he speaks, no longer shouting.

“You’re the one who’s sick.”

“Cupcake…”

“NO!” Eddie’s voice rapidly returns to infuriated, “You won’t keep me away from my friends EVER AGAIN!”

Mrs. Kaspbrak looks as though she might vomit.

“And you DEFINITELY won’t keep me away from RICHIE!”

His mother looks as though she’s about to speak, but he cuts over her quickly.

“BECAUSE I LOVE HIM!”

Now, she looks as though she might faint.

So does Richie.

“I LOVE HIM!” Eddie shouts again, as though making damn sure everyone who can hear him knows he meant it, “And if you EVER try to hurt him, I’ll…” He pauses, “I’ll LEAVE AND YOU’LL NEVER FUCKING SEE ME AGAIN!”

Then Eddie storms into the house, and returns seconds later with his backpack on his shoulders, while the other seven figures just stand fixed in place on the lawn, stunned. When he returns from the house, he doesn’t even look at his mother, just walks straight past her, grabbing Richie’s hand firmly on the way and dragging him down the street, the other Losers trailing behind quickly.

All the way to Bill’s house, Eddie cries, but he doesn’t stop moving, still marching furiously ahead of them and pulling on Richie’s hand. They can hear his frustrated sobs echoing through the cool streets of Derry, as the first children are starting to appear in Halloween costume. Bill imagines that a group of seven teenagers, all frantic, with one of them bawling angrily at the front, must be far more frightening than anything else those kids will see this Halloween.

Several times, Richie tries to stop him, to halt his reckless advance, but Eddie ignores him; he’s a little powerhouse, and once Eddie has his mind set on something, he’s impossible to deter. Eventually, when they’re nearing Bill’s front garden, Richie has to run in front of him and grab his face to block him.

“Eddie…Eds…”

Eddie’s eyes are puffy and red with crying, but his tears are relentless, and he continues to cry as Richie kisses his face and tells him he loves him, too, over, and over, and over, until Eddie is weeping loudly into Richie’s chest and Richie is holding him so tightly that Bill thinks Richie might actually attack one of the other Losers if they go anywhere near him.

“I love you, Eds,” Richie continues to whisper against the top of his head, “I love you so, so much.”

Bill eventually manages to wrangle them all into his house, when they’re starting to draw too much
attention from trick-or-treaters, and he sits Eddie on the end of his bed while Richie paces irritably back and forth across the room.

“What do we do now? You can’t go back there, Eds, you can’t.”

“E-Eddie can stay with m-me.” Bill assures softly as he sits down beside him on the bed, wrapping his arm around Eddie’s small shoulders, “My m-mom and dad won’t mind.” Eddie leans into him and forces a weak, grateful smile, as Bev kneels in front of him on the bedroom floor, folding her arms against his knees.

Stan eventually holds Richie’s shoulders to stop him from pacing, since they can see he’s getting far too agitated.

“Rich.” Stan’s voice is calm and steady, and Richie looks at him and holds onto Stan’s arms. “It’s okay. Deep breath.” Stan makes a point of drawing in a heavy breath, holding it for a couple of seconds, and then letting it out slowly, as Richie copies him, seems to calm down a little, and then leans against him. Stan strokes Richie’s shoulders for a while and rubs and pats at his back.

Bev uses the corner of the sleeve of her cardigan to wipe Eddie’s face gently, and kisses the tip of his nose as she stands. She looks around the room at the rest of them, at their solemn, still faintly stunned faces, and sighs.

“C’mon, boys, we can’t mope around all night when there’s trick-or-treating to be done!”

This seems to perk Richie up more than anything else, and he nods, taking her previous place in front of Eddie on the floor and holding his hands.

“Bev’s right. We’re gonna be okay, right Eds? We’re gonna have fun tonight.”

Eddie sniffs a little and shrugs his shoulders.

“We are gonna have fun!” Richie persists, linking their fingers; his hands swamp Eddie’s, “And hey, you get to stay with Bill, which is cool, right?” Richie looks at Bill, “Well, cool-ish.”

“F-fuck you.” Bill chuckles, and Eddie does, too.

“So, we’re gonna all go get ready, and meet back here in like an hour, ‘kay?” Richie assures, leaning up to plant a slow kiss to Eddie’s lips. Bill slides his arm away from Eddie’s shoulders slightly awkwardly and leans away while they’re kissing, to the amusement of the other four. Mike’s warm, rich laughter in particular, seems to lift the mood in the room.

“Okay!” Richie jumps to his feet again, rejuvenated, “I just had the best fuckin’ idea ever!”

Ben groans slightly.

Richie ignores it.

“How about, for our costumes, we all dress as each other?!”

“Like…wear each other’s clothes?” Mike asks dubiously, “I don’t know if you’re aware, but we’re not all the same size.” He quirks his eyebrows and nods slightly comically towards Eddie, who seems to find his renewed vigour almost the second someone’s making fun of him.

“Fucking bite me.”

They all laugh, and the events of the past half an hour seem almost forgotten.
“I’m sure we can figure something out.” Beverly chuckles, looking around at the others, as though weighing up whose style she likes the best. “I think it’s a great idea.”

Bev and Richie share a high five.

“O-okay.” Bill nods, “M-meet back at my house at s-six.”

Richie gives Eddie a last, sloppy kiss as they all file out of Bill’s room.

“You okay, E-Ed? You want a d-drink or something?”

“I’m fine.” Eddie says quietly, but he clearly isn’t. He lies back on Bill’s bed on his side and pulls his knees up, “I’m tired.”

Bill watches him for a while, and then lies down beside him, so that they’re face-to-face.

“Do you w-wanna talk about it?”

Eddie shakes his head quickly.

Bill doesn’t say anything more, he shifts a little closer and rests his hand over Eddie’s between them, and they lie on Bill’s bed in silence for a long time. Bill watches Eddie’s face, and thinks about the pretty shade that gets cast over it as evening falls through the window behind him. Eddie watches their hands, and finds comfort in the fact that Bill’s are almost as delicate as his own, though larger and littered with little cuts and ink stains. ‘If someone like Bill can have hands like mine, they can’t possibly be weak,’ he thinks.

“Who are you g-gonna dress up as?” Bill says eventually, his voice softer, even, than usual.

Eddie shrugs his shoulders.

“W-well, I know who I’m gonna be.” Bill chuckles.

“Who?” Eddie’s interest seems piqued.

“Well I thought about it, and I w-wanna dress like someone I look up to. S-so I thought I’d go as E-Eddie Kaspbrak, since he’s the b-bravest person I know.”

Eddie stares at him for a while, before chuckling and covering his face with his hands.

“You’re such a dumbass.”

Bill chuckles, “H-hey I’m l-looking up to you a little less, now.”

Eddie laughs, a sweet, high-pitched laugh, and Bill watches him fondly.

“D-do you wanna be B-Bill Denbrough the dumbass?”

Eddie uncovers his face, and nods enthusiastically. There’s a slight flush to his cheeks, now.

“Yes. Yes, I do I wanna be Bill Denbrough the dumbass.”

“Well y-you gotta work on the stutter. I kn-know I make it look s-super easy, but it’s really a l-l-lotta work.”

Eddie laughs again, and Bill gets up.
“Okay, s-so we’re gonna h-have to switch clothes.”

Eddie sits upright, looks down at the grass and mud stains on his clothing, and seems unhappy. Bill notices as he’s already half-way through unbuttoning his shirt. He pauses, looks around the room, and his eyes settle on Eddie’s school bag, which he grabs and places onto the bed. He looks at Eddie and raises his eyebrows, and Eddie, understanding, shakes his head a little in disbelief.

“Are you serious?”

“Definitely.” Bill chuckles, unzipping Eddie’s bag and withdrawing the neatly folded cheerleading uniform.

“Bill, I seriously don’t think that’s gonna fit you.” Eddie chuckles, but he sits up straighter, as though he’s curious to find out for sure.

“A-as long as it’s o-okay with you.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Bill finishes unbuttoning his shirt and shrugs it off his shoulders onto the bedroom floor, pulling Eddie’s cheerleading shirt on over his head instead and tugging it down his torso. Thankfully, though Bill is much taller and slightly more well-built, he is still slender, and it does fit him. It’s almost too tight, though, and a sliver of his midriff is visible that definitely isn’t on Eddie when he’s wearing it. Eddie cups his hands over his mouth in amusement as Bill changes into the shorts, too, and they also fit, but they’re just ridiculous on him.

“Oh my god, Bill, you cannot go outside like that.”

Bill looks down, and then heads over to the mirror, examining his reflection, and he breaks down into fits of laughter, while Eddie does the same behind him. Neither of them can stop laughing for a long time, especially not every time Eddie sees Bill, or Bill sees his own reflection again.

“You look like one of the fucking village people.”

Eddie says this and they both start laughing again, but Bill seems adamant that he’s going to dress as Eddie for Halloween, so Eddie gets up to add his fanny-pack to the ensemble, gives him a pair of white, calf-length socks, and uses a comb and some pomade to smooth Bill’s bangs back into an Eddie-esque quiff. Bill slips on some white sneakers, and the outfit is complete. It’s actually a fairly solid impression; if Eddie grew six or seven inches, that might be how he’d look.

Next, Bill opens the doors to his closet to allow Eddie to pick his own outfit. Eddie notes that it’s nothing but plaid, denim, and baseball-tees, and about fifty pairs of tennis shoes and sneakers that Eddie swears all look the same. He pulls out a red, plaid button-up, and a pair of denim shorts he remembers Bill wearing a lot when they were younger, and changes into them behind the closet door. The shorts are a decent fit, since they’re old, but the shirt is clearly too big, and Bill helps him roll up the sleeves to a comfortable length. A pair of striped socks and some white, converse shoes later, and there’s a mini, much angrier Bill Denbrough sitting on his bed. Eddie does his best to flatten out his hair with his hands, and adjusts the part so he can replicate some semblance of Bill’s bangs.

They both keep looking at one another and laughing so much and so often that they hardly notice the rap of knuckles on the bedroom door, before Richie and Bev come in, and they have literally just swapped clothes.

Bev is dressed as Richie.
And Richie is dressed as Bev.

Bev is wearing the same horrible, green-coloured, long-sleeved shirt Richie was wearing before, with its nauseating, wavy pattern that resembles some kind of 3D, optical illusion. It swamps her so much she’s had to roll up the sleeves about six times just to uncover her hands. She’s also wearing his jeans, which are similarly too large, and have had to be turned up at the hems and held at her hips with a belt. Richie’s glasses are perched on the end of her nose, so that she can see over the rim, and as far as dedication goes, the two of them have even swapped jewellery, down to Richie’s elastic bands and Bev’s many necklaces.

As for Richie, who Bill and Eddie are currently in utter hysterics over, he’s wearing Bev’s dress, though on Richie, it’s far shorter, and barely comes to his thigh, and her cardigan, which ruched at Bev’s wrists, but on Richie, barely makes it to halfway down his forearms. He’s wearing her socks, too, pulled up nearly to his knees, though they are wearing their own boots, since they clearly couldn’t be swapped. Without his glasses, Richie seems to be squinting slightly at everything, and obviously can’t see, but his determination to do this properly outweighs his need for clear sight. When he sees Eddie and Bill, though, he holds out his hand.

“What the shit? Bev gimme my glasses.”

She pushes them back onto his face, and she is laughing, too, as they both look at Bill.

“Eds, you look fucking adorable, but what the fuck, Bill?” Richie screeches and sniggers as he pulls Bill to his feet.

“I-I-I could ask y-you the same thing.” Bill snorts, batting at the hem of Bev’s dress on Richie’s thighs.

Richie doesn’t even react, though, he just keeps eyeing Bill up and down in a way that makes Bill push him away and hold his arms around his waist uncomfortably.

“F-fuck off, Richie!”

“Wh…you put it on!” Richie laughs, “I know all about those ‘sexy’ Halloween costumes, but I didn’t realise there was a fucking ‘sexy Eddie’ option.”

Eddie glares at him.

“What the fuck are you trying to say, Richie?! What it’s only sexy when Bill fucking wears it?!”

“Oh my GOD! That is clearly NOT:”

They all turn to the door when someone else comes through it, and this time it’s Ben, and he’s also dressed as Richie, wearing a pair of scuffed jeans, an ugly brown shirt with what look like pigeons patterned all over it, and a large pair of glasses, that are round, not square, but still get the image across. They all laugh when they see him, Richie and Eddie’s bickering quickly forgotten.

“Is that supposed to be me?!” Richie shouts, sounding offended, “C’mon, Haystack, gimme a little fucking credit…”

He barely gets to finish before Mike and Stan come into the room, and they’re both already laughing. It’s soon clear why, because they are both dressed as Richie, too.

Mike is wearing a vibrant, pink button-up, with large, ugly red and yellow flowers all over it. He has rubber bands all over his wrists and up his arms, though they’re all brown, and a pair of glasses that
seem very familiar, like a pair of Richie’s old ones, because there’s tape around the bridge.

Stan has a pale blue shirt on, and it’s patterned with Mario-style mushrooms. He’s also wearing about three watches, since Stan doesn’t own any bracelets, and a pair of glasses that are definitely Richie’s. He has his shirt tucked in at one side, like he started to neaten it, as he normally would, and stopped himself.

For almost five whole minutes, all seven of them are in stitches, especially at Richie’s utter exasperation.

“‘I mean, I’m flattered, and I definitely have a boner, but what the fuck?!”

Stan stops laughing, first, and he’s looking at Bill.

“Uh…Bill?” His eyes are fixed on Bill’s face almost too hard, like he’s forcing himself not to look anywhere else, “Aren’t you going to be cold?”

They all look at Bill for a while, and he sees their eyes on him, and definitely sees Richie about to make a joke, so he strides past them confidently through the door before anything more can be said. Stan watches him pass over the rim of Richie’s glasses.

“Shit, Stanley, his eyes are up there.” Richie gestures with his hand, laughing and dodging the back of Stan’s hand as he follows Bill. He shouts on his way down the stairs, “Hey, Billy, if we just send you up to people’s doors, we might get cash instead of candy! Feel like doing a few favours?!”

They end up trick-or-treating until well into the evening, running around the streets like a group of hyperactive, rowdy children, which is true at least for Richie, Bill, Mike and Bev, who between them eat enough candy to put them on a sugar high for the next two days. At the very least, it gives Bill enough of a rush that he forgets that he’s literally freezing. Stan stays at the back of the group, acting like an older brother escorting his kid siblings around, but Richie insists it’s so he can check out Bill’s legs, and gets smacked around by Stan on more than one occasion. Richie also keeps lifting his dress, and flashes his underwear to several passers-by, which prompts Bill to suggest they call it a night.

While the rest of them go home, Richie insists on crashing at Bill’s house with Eddie, after reluctantly giving Beverly her clothes back; he clearly didn’t think he’d enjoy wearing a dress as much as he did.

And that’s how Bill ended up sharing his single bed with not only Eddie, but Richie, too, trapped between them and almost unable to move, but surprisingly comfortable in spite of this.

He feels Richie’s long arm over both of them, and the soft, occasionally wheezing tickle of Eddie’s breath against his collarbone on the other side, and he thinks about all of the other Losers, and Bev in particular, the final piece that connects them all together.

And he thinks that he cannot bear for those pieces to be parted again, perhaps for the rest of his life.

Because this is not just the Losers’ Club.

This is not just a group of friends.

This is a family.
They are 18 years old.

And Bill is just starting to learn to drive.

So far, out of all seven of the Losers’ Club’s members, Mike is the only one who can drive, and has his own car. It’s a huge, decades old, white pick-up truck, donated to him from his family farm, rusted heavily around its enormous wheels, and around the edges of its doors, and all around its wide edges. Well, basically, it’s rusted everywhere, covered in great, flaky scabs that Eddie balks at sometimes because they remind him of infected skin, but this doesn’t seem to matter at all to the Losers, because they all love it. Because it’s theirs. Right down to its thick, filthy tires, caked with years and years of mud and grass and animal debris, as Eddie calls it, because he can’t stand to think that there’s actually that much excrement all over it. And they love its dirty windows, cracked in the corners and hazy with a fine layer of muck that its broken wipers can’t remedy. And they love its wide, open back, that’s littered with bits of straw, and rusty old nails, and yet more dung, but that all seven of them can sit comfortably inside, if they wanted to. So far Eddie and Stan haven’t even touched the back, but the seats in the front are wide enough that two people can sit next to the driver, and Mike has cleaned it out to a standard that even the two of them can approve of.

And the Losers go everywhere in this truck, now; to the quarry, to school, to the movies, to and from the farm. It has become the new ‘Silver’, much to Bill’s dismay. Now, his trusty, old bike rarely gets ridden, and stands dormant in the garage of his family home right next to the slightly rusted carcass of Georgie’s old red one, that they haven’t had the heart to throw away, yet. Every time Bill sees the two bicycles, side-by-side, he feels the melancholy loss of his childhood, feels a sadness in his chest, because he knows he is no longer the same stumbling little boy, whose socks always slid down because his legs were too skinny to hold them up, who had braces for his top teeth, who was always covered in bruises and cuts and had knobbly elbows and knees that were constantly scuffed with dirt. Though still fairly clumsy, and nervous around certain tall, curly-haired Jewish boys, and with his same old, trademark stutter, Bill Denbrough is now a man. And he just hopes, somewhere, in a plane or universe he cannot comprehend, that little Billy and Georgie Denbrough are together, playing for eternity in the rain in the front street of their house, safe and happy and loved.

Mike has been letting Bill practise driving at the farm, ever since he got his Learner’s Permit, and it’s out of the way and not on any roads. Bill has already taken a few professional lessons, but they make him really nervous and flustered, until his stutter is so bad he physically can’t converse with the instructor, and then he gets frustrated and has to pull over. On the farm, though, with Mike in the passenger’s seat, and often with the other Losers there, shouting encouragements and making him feel happier and more relaxed, Bill finds driving much easier. And Mike is so patient and softly-spoken and calm that Bill really likes having him in the car while he’s practising, gently giving him tips, and praising him even when Bill doesn’t feel he deserves it, and occasionally providing music, since the radio doesn’t work. And Mike is a brilliant singer, and has such a lovely, warm voice, and sings hearty old folk songs and traditional work songs he says have been passed down through his family for generations. Bill can’t sing at all, but sometimes he can’t help himself, like when Mike starts enthusiastically belting out ‘Eye of the Tiger’ and drumming on the dashboard, and before long it’s a very loud, animated duet, until gradually the other Losers surround the truck, and Richie and Bev are standing on the bonnet, performing and doing air guitar, and then it becomes a hysterical chorus.
However, while Mike’s old pick-up truck is their new favourite mode of transport, and their new favourite hang-out spot, Eddie and Stan still complain about it regularly, about how filthy it is, and how they can’t sit in the back with everyone else, and how Richie sometimes insists on sitting in the front, and they either end up crushed together, or Eddie ends up in Richie’s lap so they’ll fit. And Eddie hates that, because Richie is really fucking handsy and twitchy, and he’s loud and irritating and gross, and Richie and Eddie end up shouting at each other a lot, and Richie and Stan end up shouting at each other a lot, which generally ruins the fun for everyone involved. More than once, Mike has had to pull the truck over to the side of the road so that Eddie can get out and away from Richie, but this almost always involves Eddie sitting on Bill, instead, in the back, so that he doesn’t have to touch the filthy metal basin, and although that’s preferable, because Bill is calm and quiet and usually clean, Eddie is still always uncomfortable.

So, that’s why they have decided to clean up the truck properly. So that everyone can enjoy it equally, so that Eddie won’t get upset and angry every time he’s in it, so that Stan won’t grimace every time he has to touch the rusty door handle, and so that Mike doesn’t have to feel embarrassed every time he drives it around.

It’s early Spring, and they plan to meet up on the farm, which involves all of them co-ordinating their busy weekend schedules, and, of course, involves Mike having to make several stops around Derry to pick them all up. Thankfully, Mike is far too kind and good-natured to complain about fitting all of this in around his own hectic timetable.

Straight after finishing all of his chores on the farm for the day, just after noon, Mike drives into Derry. He stops at the Synagogue, first, to get Stan.

Stan is outside, helping his father polish the grand wooden doors that stand proud at the entrance. He turns around when he hears the familiar, deep but croaky rumble of Mike’s truck’s engine, and passes the folded cloth into his father’s hand. Then he straightens his shirt, and heads down the path and around to the other side of the truck, as Mike leans over into the passengers’ side to pop the door open. When Mike straightens up again in his seat, Stan’s father is approaching the rolled-down window.

“Michael.” He holds out a hand, and Mike shakes it politely through the window, though he looks anxious. Stan’s head snaps around as he’s fastening his seatbelt.

“It’s nice to see you, Mr. Uris, Sir.”

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“What are you boys up to today?”

“Just going over to the farm, Sir.” Mike responds slightly nervously, like he’s being interrogated.

“Dad, I already told you-“

“Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight, Michael? We would love to get to know you properly.” Stan’s father interrupts.

Stan’s eyes widen a little.

“Dad.” He hisses.

“What’s the problem, Stanley?” His father asks pleasantly, as Mike’s brow furrows, like he doesn’t quite know how to respond.
“Um, that sounds nice, Sir, but-”

“Mike is not my…” Stan is glaring at his Father from the passengers’ side, “We’re friends, dad, okay?!”

Stan’s father smiles and holds up his hands, conceding.

“Understood. But you know you’re always welcome at our house, Michael.” Mike thanks him timidly, “You two boys have fun, now.”

Stan folds his arms tensely and looks away out of the other window as Mike politely smiles and says ‘Goodbye’ to his father. While they’re driving away, Mike starts sniggering.

“Your dad thinks I’m your boyfriend?”

“He thinks everyone is my boyfriend, and it isn’t funny.”

“It’s a little funny. I thought for sure I was gonna get beat up by a Rabbi.” Mike chuckles.

“Well, don’t take it personally. He did the same thing to Ben the other day when we were walking to school together. And he’s done it to Bill, too.”

“Wait…Bill’s not your boyfriend?”

Stan looks at him, and he’s doing his best to look irritated, but can’t help the smile that tugs at the corner of his lips.

“Shut up.”

Mike laughs heartily as they pull up outside the library.

“I’m just kidding.”

Ben is waiting at the entrance to the library, carrying a backpack, the very distinctive square, bulky shape of which suggests it’s filled with books. He slings it into the back of the truck, before climbing into the remaining seat next to Stan.

“Hey guys.”

“Benjamin.” Mike nods, as he pulls away again.

“Hi.” Stan looks at his watch, briefly, “Bill doesn’t finish work for another half hour, do you guys wanna go get a coffee?”

“Well, that’s really fortunate.” Mike chuckles.

“I meant somewhere else.” Stan says firmly.

“Why would we get coffee somewhere else, when Bill literally works in a coffee shop?”

“Because…he probably doesn’t want us bothering him while he’s at work.”

“It’s Bill.”

Mike parks the truck outside a small, very quaint and aesthetically pleasing café. It’s all white on the outside, with large, ornate windows, and a red, polka-dot patterned awning that’s rimmed with tiny
lights. All of its chairs and tables are made of painted white metal, decoratively curved in cute, spiral designs like lace, and there are flowers and plants adorning every surface and corner, and hanging from the walls of the shop front. Written on the main window, in fancy, calligraphic letters, are the words, ‘Derry Delights. Café and Patisserie.’

Bill started working there several months back, almost as soon as he started learning to drive, since he really wants to save up for his own car. The owners of the café, and all of its patrons, love him, and business has improved rather dramatically since they hired Bill. Not only is he outstandingly charming, hard-working, and polite, but their demographic of regular clientele has now branched out rapidly to include most of the women in Derry, particularly those between the ages of eleven and eighteen. The older women adore him, and spend a lot of time pinching his cheeks and telling him how handsome he is, and the younger women are utterly infatuated with him, and spend most of their time staring, blushing and giggling. Of course, Bill doesn’t mind, but finds it overwhelming sometimes, gets easily embarrassed, and becomes even more clumsy and stutter-y than usual. Thankfully, the customers and staff alike only seem to think this adds to his adorable charm.

Mike, Stan and Ben are greeted by the rich, warm aroma of fresh coffee beans as they enter the café, and the little silver bell above the door pleasantly announces their arrival. They sit at a table in the corner, Mike and Ben craning their necks to look for Bill.

“There he is, he’s behind the counter.” Mike announces, waving.

Bill is at the register, ringing up the order of a tiny old woman, about sixty-years-old and a foot shorter than him, who keeps holding his hand and patting his cheek and asking him if he has a girlfriend. He doesn’t seem to notice Mike waving.

“Is everyone in Derry in love with Bill?” Ben laughs, “I thought it was a joke at first, but I’m starting to believe it.”

“I’m not in love with Bill, but I would probably still date him if he asked me.” Mike chuckles, and Stan rolls his eyes.

“Well, I can’t date him, because of Bev,” Ben sniggers, “But if he tried to kiss me, I wouldn’t stop him.”

Ben and Mike both seem to find this really funny, but Stan does not.

They glance at him, see how uncomfortable he looks, and then Mike awkwardly changes the subject.

Stan doesn’t listen to whatever else they start talking about, because he feels a familiar, distracting tightness in his chest as he lingers on their last few remarks. It is true. Everyone likes Bill. Stan knows that not everyone is really in love with him, but it’s practically impossible not to like him. He glances over to see a throng of junior high girls gathered by the counter, around the glass case where all of the cakes and other fancy, baked desserts are displayed. And they’re pretending to peruse the display, but Stan sees how often their amorous eyes flicker over to Bill, how long they linger, how their giddy cheeks are all flustered with passion, and how they whisper and giggle in their huddle like they are incapable of containing their delight.

Bill seems intent on pretending he hasn’t noticed, though there is a discernible increase in the number of times he makes little clumsy mistakes, like fumbling with the change at the register, and bashing his elbows on the protruding handles of the coffee machine, and his stutter definitely gets worse, too. Stan hears him struggling through the next customer’s order as he repeats it back to her, and the worse he stutters, the more embarrassed and anxious he becomes, the more he stutters; a vicious cycle they’ve all seen hundreds of times before. And his smooth, sun-kissed cheeks are flushed by
shame, but he manages to power through it and recover with a nervous laugh. And while Bill’s voice has become deeper with age, it is always smooth, and soothing, the kind of voice that calmly commands authority without ever having to be raised, and his laugh, in particular, is so soft and gentle it’s like medicine for a wounded heart. Stan thinks it is the most beautiful sound he will ever hear.

He thinks Bill is the most beautiful thing he will ever see.

Because Stan has always loved Bill. Since long before he even knew what love was, he has loved Bill. And he knows he will continue to love Bill for as long as he lives, and perhaps even longer, still.

In fact, Stan wonders, despite his jealous loathing of the many girls who fawn over him, how any sentient being on Earth could not love Bill. Bill is the fierce, blue flame at the centre of a fire, Bill is the raw, pure energy in the core of the Earth, Bill is the draw and release of the Moon, the blinding light of the Sun, the restless, radiant spirit of life itself. Bill is everything.

Stan wonders how many nights of sleep he has lost to those divine, piercing blue eyes, to those full, heavenly lips, nervously bitten to redness, to those perfect hands. Hands that have the delicate, nimble fingers of an artist, so dextrous and gentle, but which are strong, and firm, know the grip of bars on a bike, the solid handle of a bat, the twist of a metal chain, and the curve of a fist in battle. How many times he has imagined those hands against his own, fingers intertwined, in his hair, against his face, on his body, anywhere and everywhere. How many times he has wanted so viciously and completely that he has nearly cried in frustration, that he has felt he might actually die if he can’t have him.

Bill approaches their table, now, and Stan’s shoulders tense.

“H-h-hey guys. I still have t-twenty minutes left on my shift, s-so I brought you some drinks. O-on the house.”

Stan sees Bill’s gentle smile, and feels himself relax.

“I’ll pay for those, Bill.” He says quickly, as Bill places a cup of coffee in front of each of them; a cappuccino for Stan, a mocha for Mike, and a latte for Ben.

“Don’t be r-ridiculous.” Bill chuckles, wiping his hands on his white apron, which is slightly muddied with dusty coffee stains, “I’ll s-see you guys in a bit, okay?”

As Bill heads back to the counter, Stan notices the elegant shape of a rose drawn into the foam on the top of his coffee; Bill has always been very good at those, and customers often make requests, but usually, Bill will just use his natural creativity to gauge what he thinks they might like, based on their appearance and personality. The drinks he makes are therefore completely personal and thoughtful, another of the many reasons people make an effort to be served by Bill.

The top of Mike’s mocha has a cute, cartoon lamb drawn into it, and Ben’s latte is topped with an owl; they spend a lot of time laughing over them, as Stan ponders the rose. It’s a beautiful depiction, each thin, milky line that splits the foam is perfect; the kind of image that might take a professional artist hours to complete to such flawless accuracy, but he knows how quickly Bill must have worked. And it’s testament to how Stan sees Bill himself: effortlessly perfect.

Stan stopped leaving flowers on Bill’s locker a while ago.

He’s not sure why he stopped, but he knows it was his heart that was telling him to continue, and his
logical mind that said, ‘Stop. He doesn’t feel that way about you.’ When Bill didn’t mention it, the first day he approached his locker, and the metal door was bare, Stan knew he had made the right decision to stop. He was driving himself mad, anyway.

The rose in his coffee cup melts away as he gently tips it towards his lips, and only then does he notice that his napkin is folded at the edge of the table, into the shape of a small bird. The folds are neat, and precise, and Stan can’t help the smile that tugs at his lips when he imagines the effort Bill must have gone to, to learn how to do it so skilfully, only to use it for nothing but napkins. He vaguely recalls a brief conversation he had with Bill about origami, one day at the library. About how Stan admires it as an art form, because it is so precise and disciplined, and he commends its intricacy. His eyes scan the table for any others, but the napkins beside Ben and Mike are flat and untouched, and as they are deep in distracted conversation, Stan slightly flattens and tucks the tiny origami bird into his trouser pocket, his heart fluttering like its miniature wings.

As they finish their drinks, Bill returns to the table, no longer wearing an apron, and with his trademark red flannel button-up over the top of his white t-shirt. He shucks his backpack onto his shoulders.

“You guys all r-ready?”

Bill holds the door open for the three of them on the way out of the building, and then they clamber awkwardly into the truck, with Mike still in the driver’s seat, of course, and Stan, Ben, and Bill now all squashed tightly into the passenger’s side. Bill is almost in Ben’s lap, but neither of them seem to care. Stan doesn’t particularly like being crushed against other people like this, but if it means that Bill doesn’t have to sit in the back on his own, he can persevere with it.

Next, they pull up to the flower shop, where Eddie works. It’s tiny and pretty, but brimming with life; a lot like Eddie himself.

Although Eddie insists he has allergies, which has never been proven, he’s more than willing to make an exception here, popping a few antihistamines before he comes to work and keeping several packets of Kleenex on his person throughout the day. Because Eddie loves the flower shop; it’s remarkably clean, and light, and airy, and the majority of its clientele are adorable little old ladies, and neat young couples who have the money to spare for bespoke flowers. And the lovely old couple who own it have all but adopted him at this point, inviting him over for dinner in their dainty, upstairs apartment almost every Sunday, giving him gifts at Christmas, and enthusiastically trying to set him up with their youngest granddaughter, who lives in Portland. Eddie hasn’t had the courage to tell them that the enormous, scruffy, slightly deranged-looking boy with the messy black hair and stupid glasses who comes to walk him home sometimes is actually his boyfriend.

However, the old couple who own the flower shop on Maple Lane are not the only family Eddie has been unofficially adopted into, because much to his mother’s dismay, Eddie still lives with the Denbroughs.

He visits his mother regularly, but has been brave enough to decide it’s best for both of them if they don’t continue to live under the same roof. Mrs. Kaspbrak fought against them tooth-and-nail to begin with, sending scathing letters to Mrs. Denbrough, calling their house all hours of the day and night, and even threatening legal action, but Eddie was determined not to allow her to intimidate the family who had so graciously taken him in. Every time a letter was posted, he would write one back. Every time she called the Denbrough’s landline, Eddie would be the first to answer. And when she insisted that she would call the police and tell them her son had been kidnapped, Eddie stormed straight to his old house and warned her that he would never speak to her again if she didn’t leave the Denbroughs alone. She was only appeased when he agreed to visit her twice a week, though she
often still tries to push for more.

The Denbroughs, on the other hand, welcomed Eddie with open arms.

Sometimes, Bill thinks his mother likes Eddie more than she likes him, but he doesn’t mind, as long as it means Eddie is being properly cared for.

It’s likely because Eddie reminds Mrs. Denbrough a little of Georgie, sometimes. He’s small, and feisty, and he and Bill get along so well, she often finds herself watching them with tears welling up in her eyes, lamenting the perfect family she believes she lost. She even insisted that Eddie have Georgie’s old room, which he politely refused for a while, until she kept pushing and assuring him that it would be better for everyone if they finally cleared it out. So, one melancholy day, at the beginning of the year, Bill, Eddie, Mrs. Denbrough, and Richie, who Georgie adored the most of Bill’s friends, cleared out Georgie’s old things and boxed them up to be stored in the attic. They repapered the walls with pure, clean white, replaced all of the furniture, and it became Eddie’s room.

Mrs. Denbrough finds it difficult to get rid of Richie, too, now, with both Bill and Eddie living there. She is accepting of his relationship with Eddie, despite frequently telling them off for bickering and cursing, and allows Richie to stay over almost whenever he wants to. Although she is sometimes exasperated by him, and his messiness, and his constant cursing, and the incessant, rude jokes, she still makes extra food most dinner times in case Richie is coming, and sometimes neatens his unruly hair with her fingers as she walks past him, and takes him to get new glasses when she realises that his prescription has changed and he can’t see properly.

Now that his mother is happier, Bill notices that she has become more affectionate towards him, too, sometimes kissing him goodnight and seeming to take much more of an interest in his life than she has since before Georgie died.

The Denbrough house is always lively and full of love, nowadays.

Eddie appears through the door of the flower shop, waving behind him to the owners as he hurries over to the truck. Bill and Ben climb out of the front seat, and into the back, so that Eddie can sit next to Stan. Stan definitely doesn’t mind sitting next to Eddie; he’s always perfectly clean, he respects personal space, and when he’s just come from work, he usually smells divine, filling the tight, claustrophobic cabin with a fresh, floral aroma. Sometimes he can be really loud, and he curses even more than Richie, but if you don’t rile him, Eddie is pleasant to share the front seats with.

Last, but certainly not least, Mike stops the truck beside a musty old record shop, right on the rough edges of Derry. Richie works there, sometimes. They often debate how much actual work Richie is likely to be doing, but the other staff must really, really like him, because despite his constant tardiness, and his ability to sometimes just not show up at all without any warning or excuse, he hasn’t been fired.

He’s outside the front, now, and Bev is with him, and they’re sharing a cigarette, passing it between them every couple of drags. As soon as they notice the truck pulling up, Bev excitedly stubs it out on the wall beside her, and runs to the side of the road. Bill and Ben stand to grip one of her hands each, lifting her into the back of the truck between them. She presses her lips to Ben’s cheek, and then his lips, and he lifts her playfully as they share a kiss.

“G-g-get a room.” Bill chuckles, as Richie approaches the truck.

“Aw, you jealous, Billy?” Richie jeers, vaulting into the back of the truck in one, easy movement and grabbing Bill by the face to plant a hard, wet kiss against his mouth.
“RICHIE!” Eddie screeches, as he sees them through the back window, and Bill pushes Richie away by the shoulders, wiping his sleeve across his mouth.

“Gross! You f-fu-fucking jerk!” Bill doesn’t really seem that bothered, though, and he’s laughing.

“Aw, Eds!” Richie quickly leaps out of the other side of the truck, and presses himself to the passenger’s side door, leaning through the open window, “How’s my sexy little boy?”

“Don’t be so fucking gross, and take a damn mint!”

“Aw, I love you, too.” Richie coos, kissing Eddie’s cheek and just catching his lips before he can lean away. Eddie reluctantly kisses him back, just can’t ever seem to resist Richie no matter how hard he tries.

“Rich, would you get in the damn truck?!” Mike laughs.

Eddie quickly rolls up the window between them, and it sufficiently forces Richie away from him. Richie pouts and presses his lips to the window, but Eddie only rests his middle finger up against it.

“I’m wet.” Richie chuckles, as he hauls himself into the back again, and Bill sniggers and shakes his head.

Back at the farm is where their real work begins.

First, they attack the truck with buckets of warm, soapy water, sponges and cloths, sluicing it as best they can to get the thick of the dirt off, before wiping, buffing, and scrubbing at its exterior until it’s clean. As in, Stan and Eddie level of clean. This step alone takes over an hour, even with all seven of them working at the same time, though Richie, naturally, keeps getting distracted trying to turn it into a water fight. Twice, he flicks water at Eddie, and is rewarded with a torrent of high-pitched cursing and threats, but when he throws a wet sponge at Bev, he ends up with an entire bucket of filthy, brown water thrown over his head. They’re all in hysterics for a while, but Eddie’s shrill laughter is audible several decibels above the rest, and Richie zones in on him, starts chasing him across the lawn. Eddie is quick on his feet, though, and the fastest sprinter of all of them, and easily outruns Richie, who, despite his long legs, is the slowest. So Richie goes for Bill instead, the second nearest target, and tackles him to the ground. Before long, Richie and Bill are rolling around in the grass and wrestling against each other, shouting and laughing and covered in dirty water and grass stains and fresh mud. They’re both so mucky when they finally pull one another to their feet, that they spend the next fifteen minutes rinsing themselves off with the hose while the truck dries out under the sun.

Next is the most difficult part; they have to take off the old, flaky, rusted paintwork, so Mike, Bev and Bill take it in turns using a belt sander to buff the body smooth. Mike is more than used to hard work and heavy-lifting, Bill is incredibly handy and enjoys D.I.Y, but Beverly is the most excited about getting to use power tools, and when it gets to her turn, does the rest of the sanding herself. Ben has no interest in trying to save his ‘masculinity’, by taking a turn at this, and just watches her proudly and in awe as she handles the heavy machinery with ease. Richie, however, tries to take it from her several times, but, to everyone’s relief, she won’t let him have it, and only scares him away by threatening to sand off his dick.

They paint the truck, next, first masking off the windows and layering it with a primer, and then using a spray gun to replace its dazzling, white colouring. This time, they do let Richie take a turn, and he seems to be enjoying himself too much to bother trying to squirt anyone with it. While the paint dries, Mike and Bill carefully replace the wipers on the windscreen, and pop a new wing mirror in, in place of the shattered one on the passenger’s side. Stan and Eddie climb inside to clean out the cabin, and Bev hangs charms and air-fresheners from the rear-view mirror.
Once they’ve finished, the truck looks great. Not quite brand-new, but clean, and shiny, and rust-free. Mike loves it.

Bill begins to comment on how nice Stan and Eddie made the inside look, but then he feels hands over his eyes from behind, and it’s Richie.

“Hang on a sec, Bill, we have one more thing to add.”

Bill chuckles and folds his arms across his chest slightly nervously.

“Wh-wh-what are you guys u-up to?”

He hears them all moving around, the crinkle of plastic, and the shuffle of feet on the grass, and a few minutes later, Richie uncovers Bill’s eyes.

Emblazoned in large, reflective letters, right down the side of the truck, is the word, ‘SILVER’.

He sees all of their eyes on him, breath held in excited anticipation, and cannot help the tears that well up in his eyes. He smiles, a wide, genuine grin, which he hopes will help conceal the way his breath shudders when he lets it out. Then Richie’s arms are around him from behind, and Mike pulls him against his chest from the front, and he feels someone nuzzle in and kiss the side of his face; he thinks it might be Bev, but he can’t tell, because he’s being squashed between several bodies, now, and there’s laughter all around him.

Bill Denbrough is a man, now.

And he knows that somewhere, somehow, in some plane or universe he cannot comprehend, that little Billy and Georgie Denbrough, and six other children, are playing in the rain, in the front street of his house, safe, and happy, and loved.
They are 18 years old.

And all seven of the Losers’ Club sit in the back of Mike’s newly refurbished truck, in the empty parking lot of a Five Guys.

It’s late evening, in Spring, and the air is clear and crisp, but not particularly cold. Not that it would matter if it were, because Beverly has already put her feminine touch on the truck. Now, the back is lined with a mishmash of shawls and throws and patchwork blankets in a strange jumble of patterns and colours, and laden with cushions that are just as uneven in shape and size, but which all seem to meld together into one, comfortable arrangement. She insists that it’s ‘boho-chic’, and that the mismatched colours and patterns complement one another fashionably. Stan hates it, but he doesn’t say anything, just makes sure he always sits in the back, driver’s side corner, where there’s a solid, blue pillow with no garish patterns, for his own peace of mind.

“So,” Bev says loudly, as she finishes her Cajun fries and licks her fingers, stuffing the empty wrapper into a trash bag that’s been taped against the back of the van, “we’re all in agreement that we’re going for N.Y.U?”

In a previous, heartfelt, but slightly anxiety-inducing conversation, Eddie had expressed his fears about being split from the group after high school. With graduation looming over them, they’d all been thinking about it more than they’d care to admit. And promises to visit one another were just falling short; they had all agreed that they wanted to go to college, except for Richie, who still didn’t seem sure about pursuing academia any further, but the thought of the seven of them being apart for such long periods of time was too much to bear. Once they had acknowledged that they all felt the same way about it, Beverly had insisted there was no other option than to make sure they all get into the same college, and that meant agreeing on one that provided the variety of courses they would require for them all to get what they wanted.

Beverly looks back at a list she started, on a notepad by her feet; she picks it up again, along with a fancy, orange pen with feathers and glitter on the end, and taps the page.

“Accounting.” She points the pen at Stan, who nods neatly.

“Architecture.” She motions to Ben next to her, poking the pen into his cheek.

“Creative Writing.” Bill nods as she points to him, next.

“History.” Bev gestures towards Mike.

“Costume Studies.” This time, she presses the pen against her own chest.

“Biochemistry and Molecular Pharmacology.” She chuckles as she points towards Eddie.

“Aaaaand…” She flicks the pen up a little, so that it’s pointing to Richie, who Eddie is leaning back against, “Rich?”

Richie slurps his strawberry milkshake loudly in response, and for long enough that Eddie eventually reaches over his shoulder and snatches it away from him, popping off the lid so he’s forced to drink it from the lip of the cup rather than through the straw. Eddie throws the lid and the straw into the trash bag.
“I dunno.” Richie responds with a shrug, chuckling.

“Did you not even look at the prospectus I gave you?” Stan asks irritably, “It’s been seventeen days, Richie!”

“Yeah, seventeen days without this boring, college bullshit.”

Stan tenses, and he glares at him.

“Don’t you even care if we all end up together, Richie?!” He snaps, “Like it’s not going to be difficult enough already, making sure we all get the right grades and—”

“What am I supposed to do?!” Richie interrupts, the level of his voice rising, throwing his cup, and the remainder of the milkshake inside, over the edge of the truck violently. It scatters across the dark asphalt in a startling splatter of pale pink mess. Eddie flinches, “Seriously, Stanley, since you’re such a fucking genius and you have everything all planned out, what the fuck can I do?”

Stan watches him with a bitter expression.

“No, seriously, name ONE fucking thing I’m good at!” Richie continues, shouting, now.

They all look to Richie, whose angry eyes are slightly red at the edges, prickling threateningly with tears he can’t bear to allow. Eddie looks shocked at Richie’s sudden change in attitude.

“Rich…” He begins softly, but is ignored.

“You guys are all so fucking smart and good at stuff! Stan, with his damn numbers, Bill’s writing, Eddie and his fucking molecular whatever! But what the fuck do I have?! Do you really think they’re gonna let me into fucking N.Y.U with average grades, no extra-curriculars, and a fucking criminal record?!” Eddie goes to say something, and so does Bill, but he cuts them off again, “NO! No, they’re not! And I’m gonna let you all down, as per fucking usual, because you all have your fucking hearts set on this and I’M NOT GOOD ENOUGH!”

A brief, painful, and stunned silence follows Richie’s outburst, as his head sinks low against Eddie’s back, his face hidden by his hair and Eddie’s thick pink sweater.

No-one really seems sure how to react, before Eddie turns around between Richie’s knees, legs crossed, rests his chin against Richie’s lowered head and wraps his arms around him protectively.

“You’re such a fucking dumbass, Rich.”

Eddie feels Richie’s shoulders shaking, and pulls him closer, concealing Richie’s head against his chest. He knows Richie hates being upset in front of people; he doesn’t like to appear weak.

“You’re probably the fucking smartest out of all of us, you just don’t even try.”

Eddie rubs his fingertips against Richie’s scalp, through his thick mess of hair, occasionally burying his nose into it a little.

“You still have good grades, even though you’re always in detention, and you never pay attention in class, and sometimes you don’t even show up at all,” Eddie continues, “And it’s really fucking frustrating, actually, to see you coming out with top marks in stuff, even though the rest of us have to work super hard for that.”

A few of the other Losers laugh, nodding in agreement, and Eddie feels Richie’s shoulders relaxing.
“Yeah, a-and you’re the f-f-funniest person I know, Rich.” Bill adds, chuckling.

“Definitely!” Mike sniggers, nodding.

“Totally!” Bev shouts, “We don’t even care that you’re super gross!”

“Or that you give us dumb nicknames,” Ben joins in, smiling.

“The fact that I haven’t actually murdered you yet and hidden your body should tell you all you need to know.” Stan drawls, and they hear Richie laugh into Eddie’s polo shirt. Stan unzips his bag, and neatly pulls out an N.Y.U prospectus; there are slivers of coloured post-it-notes sticking out from the tops of some of the pages, and Stan slides it over to Richie carefully, “I’ve highlighted the courses I think you’ll be interested in.”

Richie finally raises his head, straightens his glasses, sniffs a little, and looks at Stan, while Eddie tidies his hair.

“I knew you wouldn’t do it yourself.” Stan says matter-of-factly.

Richie just stares at him.

“And F.Y.I, since, as you already pointed out, I’m a fucking genius and I have everything all planned out, the green is the one you’ll choose. You already have the grades for it. And I can help you write a résumé.”

Richie holds the little green tab, and flips to that page.

“Drama?” He asks, sceptically, “You’re fucking kidding me, right?”

Eddie chuckles, picking up the book and reading the page.

“Stan’s right, Rich, this is perfect! You love performing!”

“Yeah, like…stand-up comedy, maybe, but…”

“And you can sing!” Mike jumps in, “Remember the other day when we were driving to the quarry? You were singing ‘Billie Jean’, and you killed it!”

“And it’s not like you’re shy.” Bev chuckles, leaning back against Ben.

Richie scoffs, but he can’t help but look pleased, “Can you guys imagine me with a bunch of fucking drama geeks?”

“Uh, yeah!” Eddie laughs, frowning like it’s obvious. “Have you fucking seen what you’re wearing?” He motions to Richie’s shirt, which, today, is a vibrant, almost neon yellow, and has sunflowers patterned all over it. His glasses are bigger than ever, and have green rims, and he has beads and even some feathers hanging from one of the front belt loops of his ripped jeans, “You already look like a character from a play no one fucking wants to see.”

Richie laughs, with a loud, ‘YOWZA’, and nuzzles Eddie’s cheek playfully.

“Alright then, fuckers, guess the drama group at N.Y.U is about to get fucking censored.”

After that, Richie throws himself fully into his senior year, determined not to let his friends down. He stops intentionally skipping classes, for the most part, and almost always shows up to school on time, only ever a couple of minutes late here and there when he’s been determined to finish his morning or
afternoon cigarette. He also joins not one, but nearly ALL of the Losers’ respective groups and clubs, to help boost the ‘extra-curricular activities’ section of his résumé. He’s fairly good at baseball, and does enjoy it, though he sometimes forgoes the rules and loses points for his team because of it. Bill gets frustrated with him, but can’t help thinking that Richie’s presence does make practise more entertaining. He’s equally frustrated, when Richie joins Bill’s creative writing club, and the first piece of his own work he reads aloud is one long, incredibly vulgar, metaphorical description of someone eating a hotdog. Bill is torn between chastising him for being gross, and commending him, because it’s actually annoyingly well-written. Thankfully, in the book club, at least, which they are now ALL members of, Richie gets so absorbed in his comic books that the only noise they hear from him is his boot squeaking against the linoleum from the constant bouncing of his leg.

Stan helps Richie to start compiling his résumé, especially since Stan is the only one of them who owns a computer, and can type it up professionally. He and Richie also try to throw together some sort of performing arts portfolio, but Richie has only ever been in a few school productions before, back in middle school, and he has never played a lead role. Unfortunately, this means that his ‘portfolio’, is a little sparse and uninspiring, but Stan assures him that as long as he keeps his grades up, and, to quote, ‘sorts out his disgusting attitude’, he’ll be fine.

Richie also starts picking up more shifts at the record store, where he now spends almost every weekend working, insisting he’s not going to struggle to pay his own tuition. He knows his parents won’t help him, he has no other family to rely on, and he’s almost certainly not the right candidate for any kind of scholarship, so he’s going to have to make do. He knows Bev, Ben, and Mike are going through similar tuition-related anxieties; those of the Losers who don’t have their parents’ money to rely on, or savings accounts, and aren’t sure to get funded scholarships. It’s tough, but knowing they have each other to fall back on makes it far less daunting.

About a month later, Bill takes his driving test, and passes first time, with only a couple of minor faults. He tries to modestly put it all down to Mike’s help, and insists on paying him back somehow, but Mike just laughs and rolls his eyes and assures Bill that he passed his test because he’s a fast learner, and dedicated, and he worked really, really hard.

Richie, however, is not satisfied with just a ‘congratulations’, and a hug. He convinces them that they have to throw a party in celebration of Bill’s latest success, and even dedicates his own house as the ‘venue’.

“My parents are out of town, and they won’t even notice if we trash the house; it looks like that anyway.”

While Bill reluctantly agrees to the ‘party’, he makes sure Richie is aware that this isn’t going to be a ‘big deal’, that he doesn’t want some huge ‘thing’ made out of it, and that the only people he really wants there if they are going to do this, is the six of them. This has clearly fallen on intentionally deaf ears, though, because when they show up to Richie’s house the following weekend, and climb out of the truck, and there’s loud, thumping music coming through the open windows, and they can see flashing lights inside, and there are empty cups and bottles all over the unkempt lawn, they realise that at least half of the school is there, and several other people besides.

Eddie, Stan and Ben seem particularly uncomfortable with this revelation, as they pass a crowd of rowdy strangers on the way up the front path, and feel glad that Bill and Bev are leading them confidently at the head of the group.

Richie’s house is a mess.

Those who’ve ever been there before, only Eddie and Bill, in this instance, know all too well that it was pretty much like that already. The battered, old couch was already that greyed, sunken and full
of holes, the wallpaper was already stained and peeling at the edges with damp, the carpet was already thick with dust and caked with dirt from years of heavy footfall and lack of care, and there was already grimy clutter littering every available surface. Now, though, in the wake of the huge, slightly sweaty crowd that’s stumbling around the downstairs of Richie’s house, it looks worse than ever, something Eddie didn’t consider possible.

Richie pushes through the throng of drunken high-schoolers to greet them excitedly as they enter the front door, slinging his gangly arms around Bill and Bev, his glasses slightly askew and a bottle of beer in one hand.

“YOU’RE HERE!” He yells, to be heard over the blaring music, and because he’s clearly been drinking for a while already, and, well, it’s Richie.

“Are you drunk?!” Eddie snaps viciously from behind Bill, looking disgusted.

“WHAT?! No!” Richie laughs giddily, pushing between Bill and Bev clumsily to get to Eddie, stooping to try to kiss him. Eddie grabs at his shoulders and roughly pushes him away, though.

“Are you kidding me, Rich?! I can fucking smell it on you!”

“Aw, c’mon, Eds, it’s a party!” Richie chuckles, lifting his arms up excitedly and slopping some of his beer onto the floor. He quickly lowers his arms again, but obviously couldn’t care less about spilling on the carpet, because he doesn’t even look at it. “I haven’t even had that much, I swear!”

“You’ve had enough.” Eddie growls, leaning away as Richie gropes at him again.

Richie is about 6’2”, now, and looms well over Eddie, but this doesn’t seem to make him any more intimidating to his 5’3” boyfriend, who folds his arms and glares him right in the eye as he starts to lecture him on being an embarrassment.

Stan rolls his eyes and edges his way past them, and he, Mike and Ben squeeze into the kitchen, as Eddie and Richie continue to bicker loudly in the hallway, Eddie’s screechy voice audible even over the loud music.

“YOU FUCKING MORON!”

Bev grabs Bill by the hand and drags him into the lounge, the room that seems most full of people, dancing her way through the crowd like there’s no one else there, as Bill laughs behind her, and watches her fondly.

In the kitchen, Stan, Ben and Mike hover by the table, which is laden so heavily with bottles and cans, red plastic cups, and bowls of cheap snacks, that there isn’t an inch of space left at the edges. As designated driver, Mike grabs himself a can of coke, occasionally greeting people he knows, seeming in his element. Ben goes for a beer, at first, but sees Stan’s judgemental expression from the corner of his eye, and pretends he was reaching for a coke, too. Stan won’t drink from a can, and doesn’t really drink carbonated drinks, either, so he fills a plastic cup with water and takes a sip as he finds a spot in the corner that isn’t cramped with sweaty, drunk teenagers. His eyes examine the crowd slowly, and Ben and Mike know all too well that he is irritably and viciously judging everyone.

Mike seems like he might be enjoying himself, if it weren’t for Stan’s obvious aversion to joining in the festivities, and he doesn’t want to leave him standing there alone and miserable, so he joins him in the corner, trying to engage him in conversation, while Ben slightly nervously looks around for Bev.
Thankfully, Richie appears, to break the awkward ambience, dragging Bill and Bev behind him by a hand each, and with Eddie yapping at his heels, still ranting about the effects of alcohol on the human body, looking livid.

“Richie are you even fucking listening to me you ridiculous, giant piece of-”

“LET’S DO SHOTS!”

Eddie is silenced, but looks appalled.

“WHAT?!”

“R-R-Rich, I don’t think that’s such a g-good idea.”

“Don’t be such a pussy, Bill! It’s your fucking party!”

Despite the looks on some of their faces, and Eddie’s continuing, angry protests, Richie proceeds to line up a row of plastic shot glasses on the kitchen counter, filling each of them messily with tequila, spilling a lot of it over the edges.

“Okay, so, you’re supposed to do this with limes, too, but I don’t think my mom’s ever even seen a fucking vegetable, so…”

“Lime is a fruit.” Stan mutters in the background, but Richie completely ignores him, grabbing a large container of salt from the cupboard. Eddie looks absolutely repulsed.

“Why the fuck are you putting salt in it that’s so disgusting like this wasn’t bad enough already-”

“You don’t put salt in the tequila, Eds! You have the salt first!” Richie laughs, “Here, I’ll show you!” He spits onto the back of his hand, tips some salt onto the wet mark so it sticks, licks it off again, and then knocks back the tequila, grimacing slightly. “YOWZA! Okay, now you guys!” He chuckles, “Y’all need to loosen up!”

Eddie looks at him like he’s just watched him drink sewage.

“C’mon, Billy Boy! You’re the guest of honour!” Richie laughs loudly, and shoves one of the little plastic cups into Bill’s hand, tapping the base, “Show us how it’s done, Big Bill!”

Bill looks very unconvinced, but he holds out his hand anyway, and Richie tips a small amount of salt into his palm, looking excited.

Clearly not one to back down from a challenge, nor one to decline trying anything once, Bill licks the salt out of his palm and then follows it with the drink. He does finish it all, not as quickly as Richie, but the cup is definitely empty, and then he starts coughing, and wincing, and his eyes are watering. Richie slaps him on the back a few times, in fits of laughter as Bill continues to choke and has to wash it down quickly with a can of lemonade. He finishes that in one go, too.

“It b-burns!” Bill shouts croakily, and laughs along with Richie.

“Mike!”

“No, thanks. I’m driving!” He chuckles, holding up his coke. “I’m good, thank you.”

“Okay, Bev!”

Beverly steps forward with a slightly smug look on her face, not even bothering with the salt, and
knocking back a shot of tequila like it’s water, slapping the plastic cup back against the counter upside-down. She shares a high-five with Richie, as they turn to look at Ben.

“Um…okay,” He sighs, slightly anxiously, “You do know alcohol kills brain cells, right?”

“Right?!” Eddie shrieks from behind him.

“That’s okay, Benny, you have so many, you can spare a few.” Beverly chuckles, sliding her arms around his waist from behind and resting her chin on his shoulder. This seems to give Ben a much-needed confidence boost, and he swallows the contents of the next cup without the salt, copying Bev. He grimaces a little, and smacks his lips together a few times, as though contemplating the taste.

“It’s actually not that bad,” He chuckles, sounding surprised, and Richie watches him, impressed, while Bev laughs sweetly and litters the side of his face with kisses.

Richie looks at Stan, next, with a smug smirk and a quirked eyebrow.

“Stanley?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“What? It’s a party.”

“A party where you’re peer-pressuring your friends into drinking alcohol because you think it’s fun?”

“Geez, loosen up there, Tightly McWhitey.” Richie sniggers.

Stan glares.

“R-Rich.” Bill cautions quietly.

“Fine!” Richie sighs dramatically, “I’m not forcing anyone to have fun! I just thought it would be funny to watch Stan get all flustered!” He chuckles, reaching over to pinch Stan’s cheek, but is slapped away.

“There’s nothing cool about drinking alcohol, Richie! It’s not like it’s some sort of achievement!”

“We’re just having fun, Stanley! What’s the big deal?! Bill did it!”

Stan’s fingers twitch, and Richie smirks at him.

“So? We don’t have to do everything Bill does.”

Bill looks slightly hurt.

“H-HEY, I’m not t-telling anyone to do anything.”

Stan looks at him apologetically.

“Sorry, Bill.”

“I forgive you.” He chuckles, and Stan can’t help the way his breath catches in his chest.

Richie is still watching Stan with a horrendously smug look on his face.

“Fuck you, Richie.” Stan mutters as he takes one of the shot glasses from the countertop and, while
consistently making eye-contact with Richie, swallows its contents in one go. He doesn’t flinch, or shudder, or cough, but his eyes water ever so slightly, as though it’s taking all of his willpower not to lose face by reacting. He places the cup back on the worktop carefully, to the cheers of his friends. He can’t help but smile as Richie tries to grab him and ruffle his hair, ducking just in time, but allowing him a sort of half-hug from the side.

“Get off me, you giant, lumbering imbecile.”

“Aw, Stanny, you know you fucking love me!”

“Regrettably.”

“STAN LOVES ME! HE FUCKING SAID IT!”

They’re all so busy laughing and watching Richie drunkenly clinging to Stan’s side, that Eddie thinks he has gotten away with not having to drink a shot at all. That is, until Richie yells ‘EDDIE!’ in Stan’s ear so loudly, that Stan quickly pushes a hand into his face to force him away.

Eddie flinches at it, and then quickly turns his discomfort into anger; his usual tactic.

“NO!”

“Aw, c’moooooon.” Richie coos, holding the tiny glass up in front of Eddie’s face, “Look, it’s just your size, Eds.”

“FUCK OFF!”

“Although, actually, I guess this is like the size of a pint glass, to you.”

Eddie is clearly trying very hard not to find this funny.

“STOP!”

“Do you want me to drink half first?”

“Richie I swear to GOD!”

Richie chuckles, and before he can push the joke any further, Eddie snatches the glass from his hand, and knocks it back as fast as he can manage. Straight after, he gags, seems for a while as though he might puke it back up into the glass, and then starts coughing violently. Richie rubs at his back and holds him tightly, laughing, as Eddie splutters and screeches slightly into his chest.

“OH MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK, WAS THAT BLEACH?!”

Richie continues to laugh loudly and for long enough that Eddie eventually pushes him away.

“It’S NOT FUNNY!”

“It’s okay, Eds! Not everyone can handle it!”

Eddie freezes up, glares at him for a while, and then picks up another shot, downing it right in front of him. This time, he only coughs and wheezes a little, though his eyes are still watering nearly to the point of streaming, and then he throws the little plastic cup at Richie. It bounces off the side of his head, but Richie only laughs.

“Eds, you don’t have to prove anything! EDS!” Richie stops laughing briefly when Eddie swallows
another shot, and throws that cup at him, too. He holds his hands up to block it, this time, watching it clatter to the kitchen floor, and then grabs him when he goes to pick up another, “EDDIE!” Richie wraps his arms around him tightly, chuckling, and steering him out of the kitchen, while Eddie grumbles in his arms and elbows him slightly in the ribs.

After that, the party becomes somewhat of a blur.

Three hours after the shots, and Mike and Bev are killing it at karaoke. And they’re so good, that no one else has even bothered an attempt, since. They’re currently singing an absolutely hilarious, yet beautiful duet of ‘Don’t Go Breaking my Heart’, and they’re both such amazing singers, that the majority of the party-goers have squashed together in the lounge to listen and watch them. Every time they finish a song, they are rewarded with raucous cheering and applause. Ben is perched on the arm of the couch nearby, staring at Bev like he’s watching his favourite idol in concert, with a ridiculous, lovesick grin on his face. He has had about four beers since the shots earlier, and is clearly intoxicated. Mike is completely sober, but having the time of his life all the same, and Bev has had one shot and two beers, but she doesn’t seem drunk at all, either.

Bill has had one beer, which he’s been holding all night. He’s ever-so-slightly tipsy, and it has given him the confidence to wander around the party talking to random people, some of whom he knows, some of whom are complete strangers. Typically, they all seem to like him, though, even the ones who aren’t utterly wasted. He gets several high fives, and even a few hugs out of it, mostly from girls.

Eddie, on the other hand, is completely and utterly hammered. Even if his tiny size didn’t give him an already low-tolerance, Eddie is clearly a lightweight. He hasn’t even had anything else to drink since the three shots he pounded earlier, but that was much more than enough to get him drunk. Presently, he’s on the couch with Richie; he keeps shifting between being pressed hard up against his side with his leg over him, and straddling his lap, where he is now, his hands clamped in his hair, telling him over and over how much he loves him and how special he is and how pretty his hair is.

“I love iiiit.” He slurs, sliding his hands around in Richie’s hair and tangling it up, “I love it your hair Richie your hair is so beautiful and special to me.” He starts crying, while Richie just watches him, utterly fascinated and entertained, holding his arms around his waist.

“Wh…Eds why are you crying?” He chuckles, bouncing his knee a little, “C’mon, don’t cry.”

“I j-just love it so m-much R-Richie I love y-your amazing hair it’s soooo amazing.” He continues to sob as he buries his face into Richie’s hair between his hands. Richie’s face ends up crushed against Eddie’s chest, but he clearly doesn’t care, laughing against his collarbone and seeming to be enjoying the unusual level of affection.

“Well, that’s okay because it’s your hair, too, Eds.”

Eddie sniffles against Richie’s head.

“W-why?”

“Because I belong to you, Eddie.”

Eddie slides down so that his forehead is against Richie’s instead; his eyelashes are wet with thick tears.

“I love you, Richie.” He starts bawling again, and Richie looks touched and amused and concerned all at the same time. He lifts his hands up to Eddie’s face and uses his thumbs to wipe away the tears.
“Okay, I love you, too, but you gotta stop crying. I don’t want you to cry.”

Eddie instantly stops crying, like he doesn’t even remember what he was sad about in the first place.

“I love you, Richie,” He repeats, sniffing hard.

“I know. I love you too, Eddie.” Richie chuckles.

“I love you.”

“Yeah, you said that. I still love you, too.”

“I love you more than I love…your mom.” Eddie sniggers, stroking his hands across Richie’s cheeks.

Richie laughs, loud and genuine.

“I love you more than I love my mom, too.”

There’s at least another half hour of this, before Bill wanders into the kitchen, and puts his empty bottle beside the trash, hoping Richie’s going to recycle them or something. He picks up some empty cups while he’s there, and wipes up a spill from the counter absently. He was expecting to see Stan still hanging around in the kitchen, but he can’t see him, even though the crowd has petered out a little as the night progressed. He feels a worried knot in his chest when he realises he hasn’t seen Stan for at least an hour, and quickly heads back into the lounge, scanning the room. He leans down to Ben.

“Hey B-Ben, have you seen Stan?”

Ben shakes his head.

“No. I thought he was with you?”

“Nope.”

Bill notices that Richie and Eddie are missing, too, now.

“Where’d those two l-lovebirds go?”

“Outside, I think.” Ben chuckles.

Bill looks to the window, and can see a crowd gathered outside, where Richie is climbing up onto the roof, likely to do something ridiculously stupid if Bill doesn’t immediately put an end to it. He hurries into the hallway, and collides with Eddie, who staggers until Bill steadies him.

“Sorry, Ed, you o-okay?”

Eddie looks pale, and his eyes are glassy.

“I…I don’t feel so good, Bill.” There’s a little whine in the back of Eddie’s throat, and Bill reacts reflexively, putting a firm arm around his shoulders and steering him up the stairs.

“O-okay, up we go.”
Bill barges the bathroom door open with his shoulder before even thinking, but finds himself frozen when he sees Stan against the bathroom wall, sharing an intense, needy kiss with none other than Jeremy fucking Weaver. His mouth goes dry. His heart stops. He goes to say something, maybe fumble through an apology when sorry is the last thing he’s feeling, but his voice won’t come. It’s trapped in his throat with the bile that has risen there, and when Eddie collapses against the sink and vomits into it, Bill feels that he might soon join him.

Stan and Jeremy jump apart, and while Jeremy’s eyes go straight to Eddie, repulsed, Stan is looking at Bill, his eyes slightly wide and his mouth still open and wet. Bill has to tear his eyes away, finds he can’t look at him, because looking at him hurts, so he rushes to Eddie, holds his arm around his back to steady him, and turns on the taps to flush away the watery orange mess in the basin, cleaning it with his hand. Stan is by Eddie’s other side, then. Bill can sense him, and he feels a hand close to his on Eddie’s shoulder, and suddenly their proximity feels like torment.

Bill can hear Jeremy trying to talk to Stan, but Stan waves him away, irritably tells him to ‘get out’, while the two of them rub Eddie’s back and Stan cleans his face with some moistened tissue. Even after Jeremy has gone, neither of them speak, nor look at each other.

They help Eddie down the stairs in silence, and Richie is at the bottom, holding out his arms, with worry lined all across his face. He strokes Eddie’s hair back from his sticky forehead, throws a bottle of water to Bill, and then carries Eddie to the truck.

Mike drives them all home, and Richie insists on coming, with no concern whatsoever for the drunken strangers he’s leaving in charge of his house. They have to stop twice for Eddie to vomit out of the window, while Richie holds him and gives him water and cleans Eddie’s chin with the corner of his patterned shirt.

Back at Bill’s house, when Mike has taken the others home, and finally managed to drag Richie away from Eddie to take him, too, Bill stands in the kitchen, his mind empty, as his father yells at him, and his mother supports Eddie at the sink. He pukes three more times, before being carted off to bed with a bucket, and Bill finally retreats to his own room, sinking down against the door and into his knees, and he just sobs, as quietly as he can.

And he hopes that by crying, he can relieve some of this pain in his chest, because it hurts, god, it hurts. Bill has broken limbs before, he has cut himself, fallen off his bike more times than he can count, twisted his ankle, grazed his knees, but this is like no pain he has ever felt before.

And even when he stops crying, the pain is still there.

It keeps him awake all night long, clutching his legs to his chest against the bedroom door until he can see the first trickles of sunlight breaking through the window. But they don’t feel real.

Nothing does.

Because he can heal from a broken leg, or a broken arm.

But never before, has he healed from a broken heart.
They are 18 years old.

Stanley Uris takes a bath.

Stan has never really liked baths; the water always turns tepid so quickly, becomes murky and slightly greyed with soap, and he can never shake the feeling that he’s just wallowing in a pool of his own dirt. Of course, Stan has never really been dirty enough for that to be true, but now…

…and he feels filthy.

Disgusting.

Behind his closed eyes, in his subconscious mind, in his restless dreams, and his sickening nightmares, Stan sees Bill’s face, his wide, glistening blue eyes tainted with shock and revulsion.

He hates him, now.

Bill hates him.

Bill should hate him.

Because Stan has always been the weakest of his friends; he knows that.

He has always been the weakest, the most fragile, the easiest to break, the fastest to run away.

And Bill is exactly the opposite. Bill does not run away, Bill runs into danger, towards it, pushing forward, fighting with every fibre of his being, protecting those he knows cannot protect themselves, and even those who can, willing to suffer, willing to die without a second thought. He is fierce, and brave, and strong, and good.

So good.

But Stan…Stan is weak, and powerless, and afraid.

So afraid of the creature that hunted them, all those years ago, that he still feels that same fear now. So afraid, that he is still scared to walk down the street alone, that he is still terrified of the dark, that he is still frightened of closing his eyes because when he does, he can see them.

The deadlights.

And he was getting better. He knows he was getting better. Because he was starting to feel the warmth of the sunlight again, starting to see the blue in the sky and imagining a life beyond it, starting to hear his friends’ laughter echoed back from his own lips like he was happy again.

He was happy.

And when he looked at Bill’s eyes, from across the table, or over the top of a book, or as they walked down the street with their friends, and saw Bill looking back, Stan felt love, and comfort, and happiness such as he had never dreamed he could feel. He saw hope there. He saw life there. He saw the brilliant blue of infinity that brought him peace.

Stan felt, when he was looking into Bill’s eyes, that even if he were looking into the eyes of God
himself, he would not feel as safe.

But, now, his faith is shaken.

Because how could an almighty, divine being such as Bill Denbrough, ever love Stanley Uris.

Stanley Uris, who is frail.

Stanley Uris, who is cold.

Stanley Uris, who is hateful.

He remembers seeing the light dim, in bright blue irises, like grey clouds suffocating the sun, when Bill saw him kissing Jeremy in Richie’s dirty bathroom. Did Bill feel anger, then? Did he feel disgust? Did he feel hatred? Stan thinks he must have felt all of those things. It has been thirteen days, and they have not spoken, since. Bill has not even met his eye.

And Stan feels the absence of Bill’s light in his life, like a bulb that has suddenly burst in a dark room, like the slowly diminishing smoulder of a candle that has burned out, like a total eclipse that has blocked out the sun.

And without the light of the sun, Stan knows he will die.

And he doesn’t care.

He feels empty.

Numb.

The cloudy water is still around him in the bathtub, but he cannot feel its warmth. He cannot even feel its soft, enveloping presence against his body, because he feels nothing. He twists his hand against the edge of the tub, rests his arm against the porcelain that should be cold, but does not recoil from the contrast, because the feeling isn’t there. Droplets of water trickle from his pale fingertips and pool in the crease of his palm, before cascading slowly down his arm, following the fine, prominent veins there like rain dripping from the spindly, skeletal branches of dead trees in winter.

Stan ponders the gentle pulsing of life in his wrist, wonders, if he sliced it open, and let the bright red colour pour out over his skin, if he would feel any pain. Would he feel the warmth of his own blood as it drained from his body? Would he feel something, then?

His cheeks are wet, now, and it is not from the bath. Salty tears catch in the corners of his lips, as he slides his hands up over his face, and sobs recklessly into his shaking fingers, wondering if he will ever again in his life be free of this feeling.

This feeling of wanting everything to stop.

This feeling of wanting to die.

To be nothing.

It would be so easy.

He knows his father’s razor is in the cabinet by the sink. He knows he could do it. He knows everybody would be better off without him. He knows they might feel sad, at first, but then...

Bill.
Bill would cry.

Bill would cry and hurt and scream and feel pain like nothing else he has ever felt in his life.

Stan drags his hands down his face, uncovers his eyes.

No.

He won’t be responsible for that.

Even if he has to remain alive and suffer. Even if he has to watch Bill grow, and thrive, and fall in love with someone else, marry, have children, become old and frail, but happy. Stan knows that every single breath of his life would hurt, but he would endure it, rather than ever be the reason Bill feels pain.

And then he sees it.

The tiny, paper bird Bill made from a napkin some weeks earlier, pressed up to the corner of the bath, slightly concealed behind the curved drapes of the shower curtain. And it is crumpled, and wilted with the damp of the bathroom, as Stan leans over to scoop it into his palm, like he’s holding a real, delicate animal. He considers it must have fallen out of his pocket when he got undressed, but wonders how it went this long unnoticed. One of its wings is a little lopsided, and on the same side, he sees a tiny dot of dark blue ink, blossoming from within its body, the moisture in the room causing it to leech out like the unfolding of a flower in spring.

His unsteady fingers unfurl the neat folds like he is unwrapping a fragile piece of china, until the napkin is open in his hand. He instantly recognises the little messy, childlike scrawl of Bill’s handwriting.

“The little bird perched in the tree does not worry about the branch breaking, because his trust is not in the branch, but in his own wings.”

Stan reads it over and over until he cannot see it anymore through the tears in his eyes, but this time, they are not followed by sobs, but by laughter, as he buries his face into the dampened fabric, staining the already bleeding ink with his teardrops.

Bill.

Stupid, clumsy, beautiful, Bill.

Stanley Uris gets out of the bath.

The following morning, Stan walks to school with Ben, as normal, at 6AM. It may seem frighteningly early to most students, to most people, but Stan and Ben enjoy the quiet the early morning brings with it, and the absence of anyone but ancillary staff at the school before it properly opens for the day. That way, they can run in peace, and, more importantly, shower and get ready in an empty locker room without having to worry about being disturbed. Stan, in particular, does not enjoy showering at school, but when there’s no one else around, and he can wash his hair in silence and low, tranquil light, he can stand to do it.

On this morning, though, as Stan steps out of the showers, he notices Ben’s absence right away. Ben showers and dresses quickly, and doesn’t fuss around the way Stan does making sure the cubicle is completely clean before he steps into it, but he’s usually still waiting by the lockers when Stan eventually emerges from the steam, reading a book. He’s not there, now, and neither are any of his things. Stan rubs at the water droplets that cling to the ends of his curls as he heads over to the bench
where his bag is, assuming that Ben has just gone to the library, or the bathroom, as he sits down. He dries his feet, pulls on his socks and shoes, and folds the towel neatly, enjoying the silence of his own company as he brushes the tangles from his hair with a wide comb.

There are posters all over the locker room walls, now, every one advertising the same thing: senior prom is in a few weeks.

Stan doesn’t particularly have much interest in it, himself, thinks it’s a rather pointless and overrated tradition, but he knows that the rest of the school, and most of the other Losers, are excited about it, so he’ll gladly tag along. Well, gladly, may be a strong word, but he’ll tolerate it. For now, he feels slightly sick whenever it crosses his mind, because he knows it’s typical to take a date to the prom, and he wonders whether Bill will ask anyone. There’s a pretty, blonde-haired girl in Bill’s creative writing club, who often bats her eyes at him, and makes him blush. Stan thinks Bill will probably invite her, and tries his best not to imagine pushing her in front of a bus at the end of school.

Of course, Ben and Bev are going together. There was never much of a ‘proposal’ for this; Stan hears there’s some sort of obtuse, American etiquette that dictates you have to cause a scene and make some huge gesture when you’re asking someone to the prom, even if you’re already dating. Another ridiculous cultural norm. Thankfully, though, Bev is about as far from ‘culturally normal’ as you can get, and she and Ben agreed they were going together before the announcements for prom even began. Surely, Ben would have put together something adorably romantic, given the chance, but he was never allowed the opportunity. He still keeps pointing out that Bev is his girlfriend to anyone who’ll listen, though, with a proud grin on his face.

Richie’s ‘promposal’ was very different, though. Unexpected, of course, since Richie doesn’t seem the type to conform to social stereotypes, but, then again, he’d never pass up the opportunity to attend a party, nor to embarrass Eddie, it would seem. Most importantly, though, Richie feels the need to announce his love for Eddie very loudly and publicly every chance he gets. Which is how he ended up on the roof of the school during a football game, when the whole school was gathered on the pitch, with a megaphone in his hand. The Losers had never seen Eddie’s eyes wider than in that particular moment, as Richie started shouting his name into the mouthpiece and asked him to be his date, declaring that he asked Eddie’s mom, first, but she was busy. The whole school was screaming and cheering and laughing, but Eddie looked like he was either going to cry, or faint. His eyes became even wider, still, when Richie promptly tripped and fell off the edge of the roof, and the seven of them spent the next five hours in the emergency room, while Richie had his broken wrist plastered, and stitches right across his palm. He’d have a scar there, too, now, to match the one on his right hand, the one they all share; the Losers’ Club badge.

Mike already has a date for the prom, too. Her name is Sasha; another senior, a dark-skinned girl who they share several classes with, who has the most incredible, thick black dreadlocks that cascade down her back nearly to her thighs. She’s on the cheerleading squad with Eddie, an excellent dancer and singer, and is also frighteningly clever. The other Losers insist she’s perfect for Mike, because she’s basically a slightly more confident, female version of him.

Jeremy Weaver has already tried, more than once, to ask Stan. The first few times, Stan saw it coming, managed to dodge him, escape his attention, and just generally make himself unavailable. He has been avoiding Jeremy ever since their kiss at Richie’s party, and had hoped that that in itself would indicate his disinterest, but clearly it didn’t have the effect Stan had hoped it would. He would be lying if he said he even liked Jeremy, which made him feel much worse every time he thought about kissing him, about how much he had wanted to at the time, and not because it was Jeremy, but just because he wanted to kiss someone, anyone. Because Stan had never kissed anyone before that, in all his nineteen years of existence, and was suffering badly at the hands of desperate need and lack of sexual satisfaction. And while he was loosened a little with alcohol, and sitting on Richie’s
staircase, watching Bill through the balustrade, and feeling every nerve in his body ignited with the desire to be touched by him, there was Jeremy. And no matter how hard Stan closed his eyes while they kissed, and tried to imagine that was Bill’s tongue in his mouth, and those were Bill’s hands on his waist, it still felt wrong. And he can still taste Jeremy’s lips, whenever he thinks about it, a slightly bitter, almost antiseptic tang that makes him feel physically nauseous, now. Some nights, during restless sleep, he has even considered making himself sick, pushing his fingers to the back of his throat in an attempt to purge the memory at the same time as his queasiness, but instead he just lies there in a cold sweat, wondering why Jeremy just feels so wrong.

One day, Jeremy finally caught Stan on his own, in the corridor between classes, and Stan was forced to face him. And he wondered to himself, almost hatefully, why he didn’t feel bad for rejecting him. Why he didn’t feel guilty at all, when he bluntly told Jeremy he wasn’t interested, and never would be. Why he didn’t feel vile, when he turned and walked away from him, and he could hear Jeremy’s light, ‘oh, okay’, behind him. He should have felt awful, but he didn’t.

Not until the guilt and disgust, at himself, this time, slowly started to eat away at him from the inside, eventually leading him to the bathtub.

Stan zips up his bag neatly, so that the two tabs are perfectly centred at its top, and holds it by the handle as he stands, barely considering anything other than his first period of biology as he pushes the locker room door open.

And when he sees it, he nearly drops his bag, his expression startled as he turns slowly on one polished heel, looking up and down the corridor in awe.

Flowers.

Everywhere.

Both wild flowers, and those cut and arranged in a shop, covering every inch of the floor, strung in garlands all across the walls, hanging from the ceiling, propped at the edges of the corridor in huge bouquets all the way down, like the aisle of a wedding might be. And he recognises the ones scattered at his feet at once; ‘Alstroemeria’, the first flower he ever gave to Bill. As he steps through them carefully, trying not to crush the petals under his feet, the delicate pink and yellow of the ‘Alstroemeria’ blends into cherry-red; ‘Amaryllis’, the second flower he left at Bill’s locker. Then comes ‘Anemone’, fluffy and lilac-coloured, then ‘Anthurium’, a waxy looking flower the colour of blood, ‘Aster’, the flower of patience, ‘Birds of Paradise’, vibrant orange and purple, a symbol of joy and magnificence. And so it goes, from ‘A’ onward, every flower Stan has ever given to Bill, piled up against the edges of the corridor like autumn leaves, and scattered down the centre like petals on the surface of a pond.

Stan is so stunned, he barely has time to process where the flowers might have come from, but he knows there is only one person who could have known their significance. And even when he reaches a shower of peonies, the last flower he left before he stopped giving them to Bill, he expects it to stop, but it doesn’t. It continues to ‘Queen Anne’s Lace’, a flower so intricate and delicate that its blossoms are like tiny feathers, and there is a white card on the ground, now, with Bill’s writing scribbled across the front as neatly as his messy hand can muster, ‘Queen Anne’s Lace: Sanctuary’.

Stan feels himself crying already as he keeps walking, more out of shock and disbelief than anything, his shaking, uneven breaths breaking through the silence in the corridor softly.

‘Ranunculus: Radiance’, is next, little, sunshine yellow flowers, that soon disappear into piles and piles of beautiful roses. Literally hundreds, in every colour you could possibly imagine a rose to be, covering the rest of the corridor, right up to the double doors at the end, which are
surrounded so thickly by deep, red roses, that it looks like some kind of fairy-tale grotto. There is no card, here, but Stan doesn’t think there needs to be.

He feels himself hold his breath as he pushes the doors open, and Bill is standing at the other side, looking more nervous than Stan has ever seen him before, fiddling with the stem of a rose anxiously. His breath seems to catch, too, when he sees Stan, and the two of them just stand there and stare at one another for a while, in perfect silence.

And it is perfect.

Because Bill is there.

“S-S-Stan…” Bill approaches him quickly, his brow gently furrowed, “D-don’t say anything, j-j-just let me…”

“Bill…”

“P-please go to the p-prom with me.”

Stan drops his bag.

He feels numb.

But this time, it is not an unpleasant numbness, it is the draw of breath before the drop of a rollercoaster, it is the second of silence before the crescendo of an orchestra, it is the moment of hopeful darkness before a firework explodes into a kaleidoscope of life and colour.

Stan watches Bill’s anxious, blue eyes for a while, more in love than he has ever been, and starts to laugh, resting his hands up over his mouth. He can still feel tears in his eyes.

“You’re such an idiot, Bill.”

Bill smiles, chuckling a little. His voice is quiet and gentle and full of mirth.

“P-Please, Stan, go to the p-pr-prom with me.” Bill holds out the rose to him, “I know y-you think it’s dumb, but...I w-want you to be there. With me.”

Stan lowers his hands to reach out and take the rose, and Bill looks completely smitten.

“So i-is th-that a ’yes’?”

“That depends, are you going to wear plaid?”

Bill laughs, and tugs at the arm of his flannel shirt slightly bashfully.

“N-no.”

“Then ’yes’.” Stan chuckles softly, while Bill comes closer to him slowly, his voice lower, now.

“C-can I k-kiss you?”

Stan’s mouth goes dry.

This is what he has wanted all along, so why does this feel so much harder than kissing Jeremy?

He knows why.
Because this matters.

He nods, a very slight movement of his head, so very, very thankful that Bill is braver and bolder than he is, when Bill presses their lips together.

It’s a brief, closed-mouthed-kiss, but it is firm, and meaningful.

And Bill’s lips aren’t as soft as Jeremy’s chap-sticked ones, they are dry, and a tiny bit rough, but it just feels right, and comfortable, and good, and Stan wishes it hadn’t been over so soon, but he’s not brazen enough to push for more, especially not in the middle of school.

“Bill, how did you get all of these?” Stan motions to the rose in his hand.

“I c-collected some of them.” Bill chuckles, “But m-most of them I b-bought.”

“You bought all these flowers?”

“Y-yeah, I h-had some m-money saved up.”

Stan tenses slightly.

“For your car?”

Bill just shrugs.

“I can’t believe you would do that…” Stan stares at him for a while, before sliding his arms around Bill’s firm shoulders. He feels Bills arms around his waist, and it just feels right.

The moment isn’t long enjoyed, though, when Richie, Eddie, Bev, Mike, and Ben burst through the door next to them, all cheering and clapping and shouting when they see Bill and Stan embracing in the middle of the corridor. Stan pulls away slowly, looking slightly disappointed. Bill notices his expression, and chuckles sympathetically.

“S-sorry…I couldn’t d-do all this on my own.”

Stan rolls his eyes and laughs as Richie collides with his back, slinging his arms around his chest, and Bev does the same thing behind Bill, forcing the two of them back together, at the centre of what quickly becomes a tight, group hug, where everyone is laughing, and the pain Stan felt the previous night, in the bathtub, seems like a distant memory.

Stan watches Bill’s joyful face, as he jokes around with Richie over Stan’s shoulder.

And he wonders how many times Bill Denbrough will save his life.
They are 18 Years old.

And prom is fast approaching.

After school one Friday, close to summer, the Losers’ Club gather on the bleachers by the high school’s track.

The only ones who actually just end up sitting there, though, are Richie and Bev, sharing a cigarette and a bottle of Mountain Dew, as they watch their much more active and health-conscious friends perform physical activities. They swap bracelets, and listen to rock music on Bev’s Walkman, sharing a pair of headphones, and at one point, Bev even pulls a miniature sewing kit out of her backpack and starts mending a hole in the side of Richie’s jeans. Several times, he curses and flinches away when she accidentally pricks him in the thigh with the needle, but Bev only laughs and tells him to ‘woman up.’

Ben has been there the longest, and was already running on the track since before the others arrived, and he’s still running, now. He’s more determined than anyone else when it comes to exercise, and uses it as a means of staying slim, rather than for fun, like Bill and Mike, or for other health and fitness reasons, like Stan and Eddie. No matter how many times they all insist that he doesn’t need to keep pushing himself so hard, no matter how many times Stan tells him he is statistically the ideal weight for his height, no matter how many times Beverly tells him he is beautiful and perfect and she loves him no matter how he looks, Ben still feels this unwarranted pressure to keep running. He says he’s worried that if he lets up, even a little, he will get fat again.

‘“Fat” is not a dirty word,’” says Bev, “It does not equate to ‘ugly’,” and the other Losers agree, but, sadly, Ben does not.

Except for Eddie and Bev, Ben is the shortest in the group, and this seems to upset him almost as much as still being the most bulky. Eddie could not care less about being small, for a boy, and, if anything, is proud of his stature, but Ben finds it somewhat emasculating, and thinks it means that any amount of extra fat on his body will be even more noticeable. He isn’t even short; he’s 5’9”, which is about average for a man, but no matter how many times they remind him of this fact, he still gets frustrated standing next to Bill and Mike, who are both 5’11”, Stan, who is 6’, and especially Richie, who is 6’2” and brags that he’s still growing. At 5’3” and 5’5”, Eddie and Bev are the only two who are actually tiny in comparison, but what they lack in size, they make up for in assertiveness and self-confidence, two things Ben is sadly lacking.

So, Ben continues running, further and further every time, lapping around the track over and over and over until he is so exhausted, he simply cannot keep going. His friends know he cannot be reasoned with on this, that there’s nothing they can do to stop him, so they just continue to be there, ready to support him no matter what.

Richie and Bev tally Ben’s laps in the logbook Stan started, though they’re not nearly organised and attentive enough to remember to check the timings, and they keep getting distracted, so they just make it all up. Bev insists it doesn’t matter, because Ben needs to stop taking his running so seriously anyway. She fills the spaces where the times should be with little notes that say things like, ‘He ran that lap super fast because he’s amazing!’, ‘He looks really cute when he’s running so who cares how fast it was!’, and, ‘Ben Hanscom has lapped right around my heart (again)’

Stan is running with him, but rather than countless, steady laps, like Ben, Stan will sprint a lap or two.
incredibly quickly, stop for a break, in which he walks, and then sprint another lap again, and so on and so forth. Watching Stan run beside Ben, and frequently dart past him, is almost like watching a house cat being chased by a cheetah. Ben is shorter, and slightly stocky, built for endurance, whereas Stan is tall, lean and quick. They make a great duo, though, when exercising together, because there is no feeling of direct competition; each has their strengths and weaknesses, and it creates a healthy balance. Stan is also the first to notice when Ben has finally pushed himself too hard, and convinces him that they’re going into the ‘cool down’, walking beside him, chatting to him and assuring him how incredible he is.

Bev rummages through Bill’s bag beside her, and pulls out a pack of coloured pencils, using them to decorate Ben’s running logbook with little vibrant hearts, flowers, and cartoon animals. She’s very artistic, just as artistic as Bill, if not more so, though where Bill enjoys delicate water colours, realistic sketching, and more emotional art, Bev prefers bold, bright colours and patterns, and more comic-style drawing. A little more rooting around in Bill’s backpack, and she finds some really nice felt pens, and uses those to decorate the cast on Richie’s wrist in much the same way as the notebook. The white plaster has already been signed by all of the Losers, and Richie himself, who has written ‘The Meat Master’, in bold, messy font right down the middle; apparently this is his nickname for his right hand. Eddie, in particular, doesn’t find this funny in the slightest, and finds it even less funny, when Richie follows Eddie’s tiny, neat signature, with brackets encircling the words, ‘Pussy Destroyer.’

Bill and Mike are in the middle of the field, alternating between running back and forth between two coloured plastic cones, reaching down to touch them at either side, and doing cycles of push-ups and sit-ups in reps of twenty. Stan watches Bill, during the cool-down periods where he’s walking instead of running, and when he starts running again, Bill watches Stan, following him with his eyes around the track, tripping over the cones at least twice, while Mike laughs at him and teases that he’s like a lovesick puppy.

“I feel fricken’ exhausted just watching this shit!” Richie shouts dramatically, leaning back on his elbows against the row of benches behind him, while Bev tips a bag of skittles into her mouth and laughs, colouring in some of the margins in Ben’s notebook.

Stan probably won’t be pleased when he finds out that she’s messing up his neat, impeccably organised charts, and he will definitely be mad when he sees that she’s so heavy-handed with a felt tip that the colours have bled through onto the pages beneath. Bev knows this, but she says she thinks that Stan is too uptight and could stand to get angry and vent a little of his bottled-up frustration, insists he would feel better if he just let loose and screamed at someone once in a while, or even gave them a swift kick in the gonads; she was clearly referring to Richie when she said this, but would gladly sacrifice herself to help Stan feel more at ease, even if it meant getting snapped at. Richie disagrees. He says Stan just needs to get laid.

Richie and Bev are just lighting another cigarette when Eddie marches over to them from the direction of the school; he can walk surprisingly fast for someone with such short legs, probably as a result of always having to keep up with Richie, who’s like a giraffe. He’s wearing his cheer squad uniform, and obviously just finished practice.

“Hey there Hot Stuff!” Richie calls, and whistles obnoxiously. Then he takes a slow drag from the cigarette, and Eddie gives a wide berth to the smoke cloud that streams from his lips as he exhales, scowling.

“Shut up, Richie! And that’s fucking gross, put it out!” He grimaces at the smell of burning tobacco as he drops his backpack near them, “You know I fucking hate it when you smoke! Disgusting!”
“It helps my Bad-Boy persona,” Richie chuckles, taking another quick puff before passing it to Beverly. She registers Eddie’s disgust more empathetically than Richie, though, and stabs it out.

Eddie snorts, “You’re about as much of a ‘Bad-Boy’, as Barney the fucking dinosaur! That shirt that you’re wearing right now literally has baby ducks on it!” He motions up and down Richie’s vibrant, patterned torso, “You eat lucky charms for every damn meal, and your glasses are so fucking thick you can see into the fucking future!”

Richie’s face lights up; he looks equal parts shocked and amused, and Bev laughs so hard, Ben startles as he’s running past, like he thinks she’s in danger. He stumbles and trips, going head-over-heels into the rough, rubber surface of the track.

Richie lets out a very loud, unsympathetic snort, while Eddie hurries over to help him up, and Bev holds her hands over her mouth, both worried and slightly tickled at the same time.

“Oh, Ben!” She calls, in a concerned, but giggly voice.

Eddie ushers Ben over to the bleachers with an arm around his waist, dusting him down like an overbearing mother. Ben’s knees are both scraped and bleeding, and his palms look red and sore from the friction, but he’s otherwise okay. He chuckles bashfully as Bev pulls him over to her and sits him down, and then starts fawning over him, holding his cheeks and smattering little butterfly kisses all over his reddened face. Eddie is in his element, of course, fanny-pack at the ready. He kneels in front of Ben and cleans the grazes on his knees and offers him juice, while Richie is still laughing hysterically beside them.

“You hit the fucking DECK, man! That was hilarious! You should have fucking seen it!”

“Shut the fuck up, Richie!” Eddie snaps, getting to his feet and rounding on him, “People hurting themselves isn’t fucking funny!”

“It’s okay, Ed, I’m fine,” Ben smiles, softly, “It was pretty funny, I guess.” Bev has her arm around him, now, and he’s tucked against the crook of her neck and no longer looking sorry for himself, though still a touch embarrassed.

“Hmph!” Eddie folds his arms, and looks at Richie again, “Well, you know what, Rich, next time you trip over your own gangly-ass legs and fall off a roof, don’t expect me to come running! I’m just gonna fucking point at you and laugh my ass off!”

Richie smirks and raises his eyebrows, “Falling off a fucking roof is kinda different to tripping over and landing on a relatively soft surface, Eds!”

“You’re a relatively soft surface.” Eddie mumbles irritably, as he turns away.

This earns a chuckle from Richie.

“Eds, c’mere.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Nu-uh.”

“Come here my little Sugar Lump!”
Eddie looks as though he’s finding it hard not to smile, now.

“No, Richie!”

“My little Peanut M&M!”

Eddie bites his lip.

“My little Jelly Tot!”

“STOP!” Eddie turns further away, defiantly, though he’s snickering, now.

“My fluffy little Marshmallow!”

Eddie dives on him, now, nuzzling his face almost aggressively into Richie’s hair as they both laugh.

“Shut up, DUMBASS!”

Richie holds Eddie tightly against him with both arms, pulling him into his lap.

“I can’t help it, Eds! You’re just so fucking tiny and cute! You’re fun-size!”

Eddie sniggers into Richie’s hair, and his voice is muffled.

“Gross.”

“I just wanna fucking lick you all over!” Richie laughs, resting his lips against Eddie’s shoulder, and then playfully biting his surprisingly firm and pronounced bicep.

“FUCK OFF!”

“Ugh, I just wanna eat you!” Richie chuckles, growling and littering Eddie’s exposed neck and jawline with hot, wet kisses, while Eddie giggles and pushes at his shoulders.

“GET A ROOM!” Bev shouts, laughing.

Eddie quickly puts a stop to the gratuitous PDA, though, forcing Richie’s head away from his neck and clambering out of his lap. He hops down the bleachers onto the track and tucks one of his legs up behind him, holding it there by the ankle, stretching.

“You know, the same thing happened at cheer practice today as last time. I was doing a back handspring, and my…this ankle…” he motions to his right one, the one he’s holding on to, “…it feels super weird and almost clicky I seriously think there’s something wrong with it and it’s only gonna get worse. This one has always been like my weak ankle though so it was only a matter of time, pretty soon it’s just gonna like snap or something.”

Richie rolls his eyes slightly, “There’s nothing wrong with your ankle, Eds.”

Eddie lowers his foot back to the ground.

“You think I don’t know when there’s something wrong with my own body?!”

“That’s exactly what I think!” Richie chuckles, “Last week you were convinced you had breast cancer because you had a fucking bruise next to your nipple!”

“MEN CAN GET BREAST CANCER TOO, RICHIE!”
“It was a HICKEY, Eds!”

“Well, maybe if you would stop DISFIGURING my body, I wouldn’t have to FUCKING worry about it!”

“Oh, you weren’t fucking WORRYING ABOUT IT when it was being created!” Richie laughs.

Eddie looks livid, but their bickering doesn’t have time to escalate, because it has drawn the attention of Bill and Mike, who are jogging towards them across the field.

“Why are you guys sh-shouting?!” Bill asks, exasperated, picking up a bottle of water and unscrewing the cap, “Can’t you guys j-just be nice to each other?!”

“He’s being a dickbag, Bill.” Eddie says quickly, looking to him for support.

Richie gasps theatrically.

“R-Rich, stop being a d-d-dickbag.” Bill chuckles, finishing the water in one go. He’s fairly sweaty, and his bangs are sticking to his face.

Mike is equally sweaty, but looks refreshed and happy. He sits next to Richie, and pulls a large tub full of fruit out of his bag, peeling a banana and throwing an apple to Bill. Bill takes a bite out of it, and perches on the end of the bleachers to watch Stan, who is still running.

“What’s the big deal?!” Richie cries, “Everyone here likes dick, anyway!”

Bev cracks up, and even Eddie is trying not to laugh.

“Um…I don’t?” Ben raises his hand, looking amused.

“Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it, Haystack!” Richie winks.

“Richie that’s g-gross.” Bill sniggers.

“I’ve dabbled.” Mike interjects quietly, chuckling.

“Mikey, MY BOY!” Richie claps, "See?! EVERYONE likes dick!"

“RICHIE!”

“What?! I’m Dick!” Richie laughs, holding his hands against his own chest, “It’s short for Richard! I dunno what you guys were fucking thinking!"

Stan is jogging over to them, now, clearly having noticed he’d been abandoned. As soon as he reaches the bleachers, Bill jumps to his feet, like he has been burned by the bench. He grabs a bottle of water and a clean towel and hurries to give them to Stan.

“Thanks, Bill.”

“Desperate.” Richie hisses behind his hand, and Eddie kicks him.

Bill ignores it, though, because he’s far too busy looking at Stan like he hung the fucking sun and moon, watching him dab at his neck slightly with the towel. And then they both just look at each other for a while slightly nervously, smiling and letting out soft, anxious little laughs.

“My god, I’m gonna fucking commit.”
“Richie!” Eddie screeches, while Bill awkwardly clears his throat and sits down again.

“The sexual tension between you two is causing me physical fucking pain. Please, on behalf of all mankind, just do something about it.”

Eddie cringes, then looks like he’s about to tear Richie a new one. Bill gets there first, though.

“R-Richie shut the f-f-fuck up!”

Stan just rolls his eyes and sits down.

“What?!” Richie yells innocently, “We’re all thinking it!”

“No…no we’re not.” Mike chuckles, tucking into a sandwich, now.

“So you’re not gonna at least give Stan the old five finger hug?” Richie waggles his fingers in front of Bill, who looks torn between wanting to punch him in the face, and wanting to bury himself under the bleachers.

Beverly is holding her fingers hard against her lips, like she’s trying desperately not to laugh, and Ben nudges her slightly.

“A bit of the ol’ buff and wax?” Richie continues, “A backseat handshake?”

Bill shakes his head slowly, staring Richie dead in the eye, but he has cracked a smile, now.

“You’re not gonna shake hands with the President?”

Bev sniggers, and so do Ben and Mike.

“The two-handed bandit.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Stan interrupts, taking a deep breath. There’s silence for a short while, afterwards, and then Bev and Bill catch one another’s eye and just start laughing. Ben and Mike soon follow, then Richie and Eddie, and finally, Stan. They sit on the bleachers and laugh and talk and share snacks until the sun goes down.

And then suddenly, it’s prom night.

Bill paces in front of his house anxiously, waiting to see Mike’s white truck, and wonders vaguely why the idea of taking Stanley Uris to the prom makes him more terrified than climbing into a sewer to confront a murderous, child-eating clown. He starts panicking about whether or not he should have hired a nice car, or chosen a more fashionable suit than the boring, black tuxedo he’s wearing, or had a haircut. He unfastens and re-ties his bow tie seven times, and it still doesn’t sit right.

Eventually, he trips into the garage in a frenzy, almost incomprehensible because his stutter is so bad, until his father sighs and fixes it for him, rearranging Bill’s shirt collar, fastening a button he’s missed, and straightening the red rose boutonnière fastened to his lapel.

“Bill, you’ve known Stanley since you were four years old, I’m sure he’s not going to care if your tie is a little crooked.”

“Th-th-this is S-Stan we’re t-talking about, dad! H-H-He’ll n-notice!”

Bill feels even worse, a couple of minutes later, when Eddie finally comes down the stairs, and he looks incredible. His dark, sleek hair is styled into flawless waves, his suit is perfectly fitted to his body, and has a baby-pink jacket that only Eddie could pull off, his shoes have been shined, his shirt
looks impossibly crisp, and he has a neat little boutonnière of pretty white flowers Bill recognises, but can’t remember the name of. Eddie is holding another of these in his hand.

“Y-Y-You look amazing.” Bill states quietly, his brow furrowed with worry, like he’s pleased for Eddie, and slightly in awe of him, but simultaneously jealous.

Eddie’s cheeks flush ever so slightly.

“Thanks…s-so do you, Bill.”

“W-w-well…i-i-is that for R-Richie?” Bill motions to the buttonhole flowers in Eddie’s hand, “Was I s-s-s-supposed to g-get something f-for Stan?”

“I only got it because I knew he wouldn’t get the right thing otherwise, and then we wouldn’t match. He better be wearing pink, too, that’s our theme.”

“You g-guys are m-m-matching?”

“Well, yeah,” Eddie chuckles, like it’s obvious, “Most couples wear matching colours to prom.” He sees the look on Bill’s face, “Didn’t you ask Stan what he was wearing?”

“N-n-no.”

“Oh.” Eddie purses his lips a little, “Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

Bill thinks it probably does, though.

They hear the tell-tale horn of Mike’s truck, and the two of them manage to escape through the door without Mrs. Denbrough taking too many pictures on her disposable camera. She keeps on and on about how handsome ‘her boys’ look, and definitely has tears in her eyes when they take it in turns to kiss her on the cheek before leaving.

Mike is in the drivers’ seat, as usual, wearing a navy-blue suit with black velvet lapels that just looks dashing on him. Bill and Eddie stop by the window to marvel at him and tell him how wonderful he looks, before climbing into the back, where Ben and Bev are. Bev is wearing a lovely green dress that comes to just above her knees, with glitter all about the hem. It sparkles spectacularly when Bill pulls her up by her hand and twirls her around, and her eyes glimmer just as much when she laughs, as her dazzling, ginger curls bounce round her head. Bill pulls Ben up, next, admiring him just as enthusiastically, and spinning him, too, for good measure. Ben is wearing a similar black suit to the one Bill is wearing, and a green tie that perfectly matches the shade of Beverly’s dress.

They pull up to Richie’s house minutes later, and he’s sitting on the porch; he always seems to be sitting outside. Just as Eddie had hoped, Richie is wearing a pink jacket, too, though it’s a slightly darker, more vibrant shade of bubble-gum pink than Eddie’s pastel one. He also has the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, is still wearing rubber bands all over his wrists, though just the pink ones, now, and even has pink frames around his glasses. He approaches the side of the truck and he and Eddie kiss over the side while they laugh giddily into each other’s mouths, and then Eddie fastens the white boutonnière to Richie’s lapel neatly, looking absolutely smitten.

Finally, they get to Stan’s house, and Richie gives Bill a firm clap on the back as he nervously climbs out of the truck to knock on the door. To Bill’s horror, Stan’s father answers it, instead.

“William!” He smiles, holding his hand out, and Bill shakes it, hoping Stan’s father doesn’t notice how sweaty his palm is.
“H-Hello, M-Mr. Uris.”

“You know, I’ve always thought you were a fine young man, William. If anyone were to be Stanley’s date to the prom, I’m glad it’s you.”

“Th-th-thank you, Sir.”

“Dad,” Stan eases his way past his father, wearing a beautifully fitted tuxedo, with a white pocket-square, polished shoes, and a bow tie that is patterned with red plaid. His hair is perfect, his clothes are perfect, his shoes are perfect; Stan is just perfect, and Bill finds he can’t draw his eyes away. Suddenly, the nerves he felt only minutes before just seem to vanish, “Dad, please don’t embarrass me.”

Stanley’s father laughs, as Stan himself stops in front of Bill, and looks him up and down a little. Bill feels his anxiety return with a vengeance all of a sudden, until Stan smiles and leans in to leave a feather-light kiss on his cheek.

“You look great,” Stan says pointedly, as though reading Bill’s mind.

“Y-y-y-you l-look…” Bill tries to push on, as he normally would, but his voice will not come, gets stuck somewhere in his throat in a tangled mess of nerves and excitement and sudden awareness of everyone watching him, of Stan watching him. But Stan notices, sees the embarrassment and frustration in Bill’s eyes, and nods understandingly.

“I know.” He says calmly, though he is far from calm himself, “Thanks.”

And then they are at the prom, and there’s laughter, and music, and dancing, and drinks, though thankfully, none of those are alcoholic; Eddie still gags when he thinks about it. At one point when he and Richie are dancing together to a slow song, and they’re chest-to-chest, Eddie feels something solid in Richie’s jacket pocket, and pulls out a silver flask. He’s about to be appalled and angry, until it rattles, and he unscrews the cap and notices that it’s just filled with skittles. Eddie is in hysterics for so long afterwards that he literally has tears streaming down his cheeks, and Richie has to hold him up.

Bev dances to every song, without fail, whether fast or slow, rhythmic or not, pulling a different Loser up to join her each time, and ending with Ben, when the melodies start to soften to slow, romantic ballads. They sway in the middle of the floor together, and Bill watches them fondly and thinks that he has never seen either of them so content.

Stan doesn’t really like dancing in front of people, even though he does get up when Bev drags him, and once, reluctantly, with Richie, but mostly, he and Bill just sit in the corner close together, talking and watching their friends jump around like idiots, and laughing softly, and smiling at one another like happy, lovesick children. As the night goes on, and the mood in the hall becomes more gentle and relaxed, Bill and Stan are moving closer and closer together, heads leaning in and voices softening, and before long Richie looks over and sees them kissing. And the way Bill and Stan are kissing is nothing like the way Richie and Eddie kiss, because Richie and Eddie kiss hard, and fast, and playful, and it’s nothing like the way Ben and Bev kiss either, because Ben and Bev kiss light, short but frequent, teasing and cute, but the way Bill and Stan are kissing is slow, and deep, and worshipful, each one treating the other like some holy relic to be pleased and adored.

And Richie looks over again, about quarter of an hour later, and they’re still kissing.

Half an hour after that, and they’re still kissing.
An hour later, they’re still kissing.

Richie nudges Eddie in the ribs, and motions over to them, chuckling.

“Hey, Eds, look.”

Eddie doesn’t look, but he sniggers a little.

“I know, Richie.”

“Do you think they’re gonna fuck?”

“Richie!”

“Do you?”

“How should I know?!”

“We can’t let them outshine us, Eds.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“C’mon!”

Richie tugs at Eddie’s hand and drags him out of the hall, through the double doors and into the corridors of the school. This part of the building is still lit, for students to pass back and forth to the bathrooms, but Richie keeps leading him further, through another set of doors, into a part of the school that is dark, currently unused and uninhabited.

“Rich, what are you doing?” Eddie asks wearily, becoming slightly uneasy as they descend further into the darkness of the winding corridors and away from the streams of light and music and voices behind.

“Don’t you trust me?” Richie chuckles, as he tugs Eddie into an empty classroom, and closes the door behind them.

“Absolutely fucking not.”

Richie fakes looking hurt, and pouts as he gently presses Eddie up against the door.

“We’re not doing this right now, Rich.” Eddie sighs, though he doesn’t resist, and shudders ever-so-slightly when he feels Richie’s knee intentionally pressing close to the part of his thighs.

“Why the fuck not?” Richie nuzzles at Eddie’s soft hair a little, before looking down to meet his eye.

“Because we’re at school and it’s fucking weird.”

“No one’s gonna find us, here, Eds,” Richie assures, un-popping the buttons on Eddie’s jacket between his finger and thumb, and sliding his hands inside it, tickling his fingers across his waist and making him squirm and giggle.

“No!” Eddie ducks away under Richie’s arm, and backs against one of the desks, though there’s a playful glint in his eye, “Keep it in your fucking pants, you creep!”

They both laugh at that.
“Can I keep it in your pants?” Richie chuckles, as he follows him, pushing Eddie up against the desk, now, sinking between his thighs. He can feel that Eddie is a little hard already; he reacts that way to adrenaline sometimes, Richie has noticed.

He remembers the same thing happening when they went to the funfair a couple of weeks back. Eddie white-knuckled it all the way around one of the big rollercoasters, clinging to Richie the entire ride, and was really shaky and strangely agitated when it was over, and still kept groping at Richie’s hand and his jacket. Richie spent the next twenty minutes grinding him up against the wall of a toilet cubicle, with Eddie’s legs tight around his hips and his fingers clawing at his back as he muffled moans of approval into Richie’s shoulder. It was the first time in his life Eddie hadn’t cared about the number of germs there are in a public restroom.

Richie makes sure their hips are together, makes sure Eddie can feel the press of Richie’s erection against his own, but he doesn’t give him anything more than that, just a promise of what he could have if he really wanted. Richie knows it will get a reaction, eventually.

“You’re like a sex maniac!” Eddie scolds, though sure enough, Richie feels Eddie’s thighs squeeze against him.

“To be a ‘sex maniac’, you gotta have sex, Eds,” Richie chuckles, leaning down to rest their foreheads together.

The comment makes Eddie squirm uncomfortably against the edge of the desk.

“W…we’re not doing that yet, okay?”

Richie slides his arms around Eddie’s shoulders slowly, placing a gentle kiss against the corner of his mouth.

“I know, Eddie,” He assures softly, and the comfort in his voice seems to make Eddie relax a little; soon his arms are snaking around Richie’s waist, and he pouts.

“You want to, don’t you?”

Richie shrugs his shoulders a little, “Well, yeah. Who wouldn’t wanna do it with you?” Richie chuckles, and Eddie sniggers bashfully and rolls his eyes, “But I don’t want to if you’re not one hundred percent fucking sure, you hear me? You better not go agreeing to anything just because you know I want to.”

Eddie stares hard into his eyes.

“Eddie.” Richie says firmly, “Promise me.”

Eddie chuckles softly and tightens his grip around Richie’s waist, tightens his thighs against his hips, too, squeezing him, “I promise, you dingus.”

Richie grimaces, “‘Dingus?’ Fucking ‘dingus?’” He laughs, “Geez, Eds, way to kill the fucking mood.”

“Shut up.”

“Improving.” Richie watches him playfully, “But I know you can do better than that.”

“Go fuck yourself.”
“That’s more fucking like it!” Richie laughs, and Eddie sniggers, lifting his hands from Richie’s waist to slide them up either side of his face. He rests the pad of his thumb against Richie’s bottom lip, and tugs it gently, his expression softening.

“You know you’re beautiful, right Rich?”

Richie looks slightly blindsided by the comment, and Eddie sees him swallow hard.

“Why would you say that? You’re really killing my boner right now.”

But Eddie knows he’s lying, because Richie seems to lean harder into him, and his eyes get more intense.

“Because it’s fucking true, dipshit. And I don’t think I’ve ever told you before.” Eddie feels Richie’s lips part and gets the sudden urge to press his thumb into his mouth, so he does, just onto the inside of his lip; it’s wet, and hot, and Eddie feels his own body react with a shiver. Richie doesn’t respond, this time.

“Sometimes I think…you don’t know how beautiful you are,” Eddie continues, cupping Richie’s cheek in his free hand, though his focus is entirely on his mouth, “And then I think…that I wanna spend the rest of my life making sure you do.”

Their eyes meet suddenly, now, and Eddie removes his thumb from between Richie’s lips.

“…Are you fucking proposing to me right now?” Richie chuckles, though Eddie notices a very slight flush to his cheeks that wasn’t there before.

“No!”

Now it’s Eddie’s turn to blush.

“That was basically a proposal.”

“No, it wasn’t!”

“I will marry you.” Richie says bluntly, but his voice is so serious, Eddie just stares, “Maybe not now, but one day. I will marry you, Eddie Kaspbrak.”

Eddie feels like he has forgotten how to breathe, and then he tightens his hands either side of Richie’s face, pulling him in and kissing him, hard; so hard it’s like he’s trying to steal breath from Richie, instead.

And then it’s no longer cute, no longer romantic, just a lot of hard, desperate kissing with lots of spit, and tongues, and teeth. Eddie bites Richie’s bottom lip sharply, pulls it, and it doesn’t quite bleed, but it stings. Richie tries to make a comment about Eddie being like a nippy little hamster, but Eddie cuts him off with another bruising kiss, and tugs at Richie’s hair between his fingers, so roughly it hurts, but god, that makes Richie hard.

And Richie can feel the prominent strain of Eddie’s erection, now, and hear the whimpers caught in his throat every time Richie ruts into him, and feel Eddie’s small hips lifting up desperately to meet him, and fuck, Richie can’t take it when Eddie is needy, because he thinks it’s the hottest fucking thing he could possibly imagine, and it makes him want to do things to Eddie that he doesn’t think Eddie is ready for. So he just has to settle for whatever he can do, anything to make Eddie feel good, and he really would do anything.
He kisses his way down Eddie’s jaw, and onto his neck, lips still so wet with their mixed saliva that it leaves a glistening trail against Eddie’s tanned skin, and sucks a mark into his neck that he knows Eddie will complain about, later, but right now he couldn’t fucking care less. Neither of them could. Richie can hear Eddie urging him on, encouraging him, begging him for more, and Richie vaguely thinks that if any more blood rushes into his dick right now he’s going to pass the fuck out, and wouldn’t that be a great end to prom night. At least it would be a funny story to tell later.

He pops the button on Eddie’s dress pants between them, and can already feel the heat radiating from inside against the tips of his fingers. Richie could do it like this, slip his hand inside and give Eddie the best fucking hand job he’s ever had; he knows it wouldn’t take long to finish him off that way, but then he has a much better idea, and feels the smirk spread at his own lips against Eddie’s neck. Eddie feels it too, though, and he knows no good can ever come from that smirk.

“What the shit is so funny?”

Richie straightens up and chuckles, takes a moment to appreciate Eddie’s swollen lips and his mussed hair, and then pulls a chair over from the next desk over, resting it back against the desk between Eddie’s knees.

“Sit.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see. Just sit.”

Eddie lets out a soft, slightly irritated sigh, resting his feet against the chair and then sliding down into it from the desk.

“If you start stripping, I’m fucking leaving.”

Richie laughs, and shakes his head, “No,” then he gets to his knees on the floor in front of Eddie. Eddie immediately tenses up, sitting forward.

“Rich…w-we fucking talked about this.”

“All right then, let’s move on.”

“Rich…w-we fucking talked about this.”

“Yeah, I know,” Richie rests his hands against Eddie’s knees, slides them up to his thighs and leans between them, reaching up a little to give him a soft, reassuring kiss, “I get it, ‘germs’. But I don’t care about that shit.”

Eddie’s brow furrows.

“So, I should still be able to do it, right? I’m not asking you to return the favour.”

Eddie still looks wary, but Richie’s hand is between them, and he starts rubbing slow and hard between Eddie’s thighs with his palm, and Eddie’s stance softens, his eyes cloud wantonly.

“I won’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

“R-Rich…”

“It’ll feel so good, I promise.”

Eddie’s hips are straining against Richie’s hand, lifting from the chair, and his eyelids flutter briefly as he stares at him.

Then finally, Richie gets what he needs, a slow nod.
Richie feels a swell of excitement in his chest, as he gently untucks the hem of Eddie’s neat shirt from his trousers, and unfastens the bottom four buttons. He gets a good look at Eddie’s smooth, toned stomach and leans in to kiss at it, feeling the tiny hairs prickle up beneath his navel as Eddie shivers, and goose pimples erupt all over the tanned surface. His other hand is still working its way over the tent in Eddie’s trousers, keeping him at a pleasant level of pleasure and pliancy that will work in both of their favour. Richie feels Eddie’s strong hands grip at the collar of his jacket as he continues to rub with the heel of his hand, and with his lips, graces the taut lines of Eddie’s lower abdomen with little licks and kisses and a few grazes of his teeth. He uses his teeth, then, to pull down the zipper on Eddie’s dress pants; he hears Eddie’s breath hitch at this, and then a frustrated grunt that’s demanding he hurries up.

Richie considers making a joke, but he knows it will only make Eddie mad, and he wants to keep him just where he has him right now: needy and desperate and so hard it must almost hurt. His hand isn’t rubbing at Eddie’s crotch, anymore, and the lack of attention hasn’t gone unnoticed. And Richie enjoys being a tease, most of the time, likes watching Eddie squirm and get good and riled up, but more than that, he likes making Eddie feel good. When he tugs Eddie’s trousers off his hips a little, pushes apart the folds of material where his zipper is, he sees the pronounced lump in Eddie’s glaringly clean, white underwear, and has an overwhelming urge to get his mouth against it right there and then, suck him through it, give him a taste of what’s to come next, but he knows Eddie would hate it if Richie got his spit all over his underwear, and messed it up. So he does the next best thing, or the better thing, really, pulls down the front of Eddie’s boxer briefs, braces his other hand against his hip, and takes him straight into his mouth.

The noise that comes out of Eddie’s lips, then, is heavenly.

Richie feels Eddie’s forceful fingers tighten in the shoulders of his jacket so suddenly he wonders if the material will tear at the seams where it joins the arms, but he literally couldn’t give less of a fuck.

Because this is the closest to ecstasy Eddie has ever been in his life. He thought he knew pleasure before, from the callous, nicotine-stained tips of Richie’s fingers, the warm, firm surface of his palm, the way he just knows how and when to clench and unclench his grip, when to go fast and when to go slow, but this…this is like nothing Eddie has ever felt before…Richie’s mouth. Richie’s dirty, disgusting, amazing mouth, so wet and hot and fuck, Richie’s tongue. Eddie can barely register one feeling from another at this point, but he distinctly feels Richie’s tongue sliding up against him, right where he’s most sensitive, one slow lick after another, each one sending a shock of pleasure up Eddie’s spine like lightning. He bucks his hips, he can’t help it, but Richie follows the movement, moves with it, and doesn’t seem to miss a beat, though afterwards his hand tightens its press against Eddie’s hip, settling him back into the chair, for now, while he’s still exploring with his tongue.

Eddie’s head drops back briefly, hits the desk behind him before lifting again, and he can feel fire in his every nerve as he watches the top of Richie’s dark, curly head between his thighs. He moves his hands up from his shoulders, until the tips of his shaking fingers feel those exquisite coils, tangle up within them, manicured nails scraping Richie’s scalp as Eddie grips his hair like it’s his only source of life.

“R-Rich…Richie…please…please…” Eddie whimpers desperately, but he doesn’t even know what it is he’s pleading for, it just comes out faster than he can think, if he can think at all.

He feels Richie’s amused little hum against him, and it vibrates through his body until his back is arching up from the chair and the edge of its plastic back is biting uncomfortably into his shoulders. Eddie doesn’t care, though, just curses over and over and over while he feels Richie’s head rising and falling beneath his palms, then feels Richie’s strong hands on his hips, tugging him right to the
edge of the chair, pulling him closer, deeper, drawing him into a pleasure that is all-consuming, euphoric, while Eddie just moans and gasps and whines helplessly, thinking that if he ever calls Richie’s mouth disgusting ever again, he’s fucking lying.

He feels his orgasm peaking faster than he can acknowledge it, gives a weak tug to Richie’s hair as the germaphobic part of his personality tries to break to the surface, but it’s far too late; Eddie comes, hard. But Richie doesn’t flinch or gag or push him away, if anything he pulls him closer, holding Eddie through his climax, and then drawing his lips back in one final, slow movement.

Their eyes meet for a while, as Richie sits back on his heels, and then Eddie shakes his head quickly.

“Rich, don’t.”

He sees the movement in Richie’s throat as he swallows, and Eddie gags.

“RICHIE!”

Richie just laughs, rubbing the heel of his palm up across his lips.

“Oh my GOD, Richie!”

“What?!”

“You fucking…” Eddie sighs, tugging his underwear back up onto his hips.

“It doesn’t taste that bad…”

“STOP! Don’t fucking describe it!”

Richie chuckles, resting his hands either side of the chair and leaning up between Eddie’s thighs towards his face.

“You wanna taste it?”

“GROSS!”

“C’mon, Eds, kiss me!”

“NO GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Just then, they hear running footsteps, and a loud BANG, as Bill barges through the door with his shoulder, with Stan close behind him.

“E-E-Eddie…”

All four pairs of eyes meet for a while in silence, and then Richie starts laughing.

Eddie’s eyes are wide as he pushes Richie away with his foot and quickly fastens his trousers.

Bill throws his hand over his eyes and lowers his head, while Stan turns away.

“Wh…E-Eddie I th-thought you w-were in danger!”

Richie is lying on the floor, laughing hysterically while Eddie glares at him with a dark flush across the tops of his cheeks.

“I’M NOT IN DANGER, BILL, WE WERE JUST…”
“Please, we don’t need the details.” Stan says from over Bill’s shoulder, and he looks surprisingly amused. Bill sniggers, and they watch while Eddie gets up and tucks his shirt back in neatly, fastening his jacket.

“Th…this is not what it looked like…”

“It’s EXACTLY what it fucking looked like!” Richie laughs, as he pushes himself to his feet, “And it could have been even more if you fucking cock-blockers hadn’t interrupted us!”

“RICHIE!”

“Y-you guys d-disappeared and we were looking for you! And we h-heard Eddie shouting and th-thought he was in trouble!”

Eddie folds his arms across his chest bashfully.

“Where’s everyone else?” Richie asks, with a smug smirk still plastered across his face.

“Mike went off with Sasha.” Stan says, as Bill moves aside to let him in the door, “Ben and Bev left like a half hour ago.”

Richie whistles, chuckling, “So what have you guys been doing all this time?”

“Talking.” Stan says firmly, his eyes meeting Richie’s.

“Yeah, it sure fucking looked that way.” Richie chuckles.

“Well, at least we have more decency than this.” Stan motions to Eddie and Richie.

Eddie lowers his head shamefully.

“Whatever, Stanley!” Richie laughs, completely unashamed, “You’re just jealous that while you guys were busy sucking face, I was sucking some good dick.”

“RICHIE! OH MY FUCKING GOD!” Eddie’s enraged eyes are wide, as he storms his way past them all out of the door.

Bill is just standing there holding his hand over his mouth, “Rich!” He snorts, then he quickly follows Eddie, running to catch up to him.

Stan looks at Richie disdainfully and then follows them.

Finally, Richie leaves, walking alongside Stan, with the biggest grin on his face.

He sees Bill with his arm around Eddie ahead of them, rubbing at his shoulder and laughing, and soon Eddie laughs, too, and everything is just…

…good.
Hi, everyone!

Firstly, I would like to apologise profusely in advance that this is not a new chapter, just a little ‘interlude’; I couldn’t think of a better way to do this (if anybody knows of one, please let me know.) This may be a little TLDR;, in which case, I’ll summarise: I just need/would really love some more focused and/or detailed feedback and suggestions from the readers!

I would like to begin, also, by sincerely thanking each and every one of you who has read, commented and left kudos on my fanfic! I am completely and utterly blown away by the amazing support and love I have received, and I honestly cannot say how grateful I am, nor how happy it makes me! I was never expecting this fic to be so popular!

Moving on to the point of this annoying insert between chapters (again, sorry!), I would just really like to know more about what people want to read/where they’d like to see this fanfic go in general. Since people have asked me where I’m headed with it, what plans I have in future, etc, I’ve been thinking a lot about what I think people would like to see, and I thought, ‘what better way than to just ask?’ So I’m asking, if you could please leave a comment, as brief or as detailed as you would like, about what you would like to see more of/less of, what would improve this story for you, where you’d like to see it go, what you like/don’t like about it. Feel free to be critical, as long as it’s constructive, please. Of course, this is still predominantly a Reddie/Stenbrough fic, and that won’t change, but if you would like some more focus on a particular character or pair of Losers, please let me know. As a side note, I really like writing sexy/smutty scenes, so I’m just wondering what people’s views are on those in particular (eg. Whether you’d like more/fewer of them etc. Please don’t be shy asking/requesting for this, too!) Also, I’m happy for people to message me in private if they’d prefer, or here’s my IT sideblog on Tumblr: https://growingupaloser.tumblr.com/ Please follow me if you’re an IT fan and have a Tumblr! Feel free to send me headcanons, too! Maybe I can include them in the fic if I like them enough and they fit! Soooo, this is becoming far too long-winded, so I will end it here, but I look forward to hearing people’s views and ideas! Thank you very much in advance!

If you’re not interested/don’t want to comment, that’s fine, too! Thanks for reading, anyway, and once more, I’m sorry this isn’t a proper chapter!

Love,

Sarah

xxxxx
They are 18 years old.

And the Losers are on their way to college.

Most of them received their acceptance letters around the same time. Within one week, Stan, Ben, Mike and Bill were all accepted into N.Y.U, Eddie and Bev came the following week, and after that, it was just Richie.

For a while, no letter arrived, and they toyed with every possibility; maybe it was sent to the wrong address, maybe it got lost in the post, maybe his application was still being reviewed, but then it just got too late, and they lost all hope of an acceptance ever coming. A dark cloud seemed to hang over the group for a while, and Richie, in particular, was quiet and morose. The others assured him that they’d never be separated, that Richie was coming whether he got into N.Y.U or not, that he could just find a job in New York and reapply the following year, but he’d had his heart set on this. For once in his life, Richie had felt he had a purpose, that he might amount to something more than ‘the class clown’, or the delinquent, that he could prove his parents wrong, and be successful, and be happy, and really be good at something, and nothing seemed to be able to lift him from the depression he fell into in the wake of this rejection.

That is, until Bev was at Richie’s house, one day, on a dull, cloudy afternoon. They lay on Richie’s dirty bedroom floor, side-by-side, with their legs up on the bed, listening to music and chain-smoking one slightly crumpled Marlboro after the other, not talking, just appreciating each other’s company, thick black and ginger curls splayed out on the carpet and mingling together with the proximity of their heads like fiery embers on coal. And then, out of nowhere, Richie just started crying, holding his slightly stained, shaking fingers over his face. And when Richie cried, he did not sob; it was not loud and obvious, nor snivelling and self-pitying, nor a calm and restrained, almost elegant trickle of tears. The way Richie cried, then, was stifled, but full-body shaking, sharp, short, quiet breaths of a boy who had long ago learned to repress feelings of sadness, to conceal them…a boy who had learned that to cry at all, was to cry alone. Bev stubbed out the remains of her cigarette into the ashtray beside them, and rolled onto her side to pull his lanky body against her chest, holding him close, tucking her arms around his shoulders and his head, as Richie cried, for the first time, like a boy who knew the loving embrace of someone who cared that he was crying at all.

And Richie didn’t cry for long; a couple of minutes, and that seemed to be enough, but Bev still held him tight, and twirled strands of his hair around her pretty fingers, and sang sweetly into his ear.

“She’s got a smile, that it seems to me
Reminds me of childhood memories
Where everything was as fresh as the bright blue sky
Now and then, when I see her face
She takes me away to that special place
And if I'd stare too long,
I'd probably break down and cry.”

And Richie listened, and slid his hands around her small waist until his arms were draped about it,
and nuzzled his face into her warm chest, as she continued, in a light, melodic voice.

“Oh, oh, oh

Sweet child of mine

Oh, oh, oh, oh

Sweet love of mine.”

And the next verse, he sang with her, muffled in the material of her dress, but she could hear the ‘Richie-esque’ enthusiasm and vigour returning in his slightly coarse voice, now.

“She’s got eyes of the bluest skies

As if they thought of rain

I’d hate to look into those eyes

And see an ounce of pain

Her hair reminds me of a warm, safe place

Where as a child I’d hide

And pray for the thunder, and the rain

To quietly pass me by.”

By this point, they were both smiling, and Richie seemed to bounce back from his brief meltdown as though it hadn’t ever happened at all, jumping to his feet and pulling her up with him, as they loudly sang the next chorus together, and danced around the room, Richie twirling her around by the hand and lifting her so that she could stand on his bed, even with her boots on.

“Oh, oh, oh

Sweet child of mine!

Oh, oh, oh, oh

Sweet love of mine!”

Afterwards, she jumped off the bed and into his arms, and kissed him on the lips as he held her up, and she stroked his messy hair back off his forehead and told him how much she loved him and how amazing he was, and that if she had to smuggle him into New York in her suitcase, she would, and she knows any one of the others would, too.

And when they descended the stairs to leave, and Bev noticed a pile of unopened mail by the door, crushed into the corner as though kicked aside, she flicked through it and pulled a large, thick letter from within, bearing the N.Y.U logo. Of course, she then proceeded to slap him mercilessly over the head with it as she laughed in exasperation.

“You didn’t even fucking look at the mail?!”

Richie’s eyes were wide as he tore it open and began to read.
“I…I got in, Bev! I FUCKING GOT IN!”

When he found out, Eddie cried, as he beat Richie even more aggressively with the envelope than Beverly had. In celebration of his success, Bill’s parents bought him a car. A small, cherry-red, Volkswagen Golf. He hadn’t nearly saved up enough to buy one himself, especially since he’d spent most of his accumulated wages on flowers. His father had given him a particularly stern lecture about that. It isn’t a new car, by any stretch; it has had several previous owners, but, to Bill, it’s perfect. He named the car, ‘Red’, with the same level of creativity Bill usually has when naming his possessions. Stan teased slightly that Bill names things like a toddler, but Richie insisted that it was perfect, because when Bill says the word, ‘red’, and his stutter gets caught on the ‘R’, it sounds like the revving of an engine.

So, now, whenever they talk about Bill’s car, they all call it ‘R-R-R-Red.’

Bill’s parents were most generous of the bunch, with his reward. Stan’s parents took him out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Bev’s aunt bought her some new clothes. Ben’s mom got him all new notebooks and stationary. Eddie’s mom didn’t get him anything, just cried about him leaving, but the Denbrough’s got him a cell phone so he and Bill could keep in touch; he’s not the first Loser to have one, Stan is somewhat of a technology enthusiast and has one already. Mike’s grandfather was surprisingly supportive, too, and gave him a rather sizeable amount of money, insisting it was an accumulation of what he had earned at the farm. Richie’s parents, unfortunately, but expectedly, didn’t seem to care. In fact, he didn’t even bother telling his father at all, after his mother’s unenthusiastic reaction to the news. So, as a group, the other Losers decided that they would treat Richie themselves, by driving to Portland and spending the day at the funfair, one of Richie’s favourite things ever.

Driving from Derry to Portland takes around four hours, and, thankfully, they now have two vehicles to share, since there’s no way they’d be able to travel on the highway in the back of the truck. Bev and Ben go in the truck with Mike, while Richie, Eddie and Stan travel in Bill’s car. Since Bev already knows Portland, she’ll be the one giving directions, so Mike drives in front, with Bill following. Mike is also the more confident driver, and Bill has never driven outside the quiet streets of Derry, so he’s a little nervous about being out on the highway with heavier traffic and faster speeds.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t help that Richie is in the back of his car.

It starts about ten minutes into the journey; Richie has never really been on a car journey longer than a couple of minutes before, and he quickly gets agitated and bored. He’s also cramped, since he’s so tall, and Bill’s car is so small, and Richie’s legs in particular are crammed in uncomfortably close to both his own body, and the chair in front. He is already bouncing his leg, and his knee is occasionally knocking the back of Stan’s seat.

“Richie, stop!” Stan eventually snaps his head around, glaring at him.

“Stop what?!”

“You’re shaking your leg and it’s hitting the back of my chair!”

“What, like ‘this’?” He bounces his leg a little harder.

Eddie rolls his eyes, though he looks as though he’s trying not to laugh, and Bill is trying to focus on the road, but keeps glancing at them.
“R-Richie, stop being a d-douche.”

“Well I said I wanted to sit in the front! You made me sit in the back even though I’m the tallest!”

“I w-want Stan to sit in the front!”

“Why?! Just ‘cause you’re dating?! If I make out with you, can I sit in the front?”

Stan rolls his eyes, though there’s a small smirk on his lips. Eddie sniggers.

Richie sighs and sits back, folding his arms, and it’s quiet for a while, until Richie starts clicking his tongue. Stan looks like he’s about to jump into the back of the car and strangle him.

“Hey Eds, d’you wanna make out?”

“What? No, Richie!”

“But it would help to pass the time!”

“No!” Eddie laughs and pushes Richie’s hands away when he tries to grab him.

“Just for a second! I promise I’ll keep it PG!”

“No!”

“Why not?!”

“Pick a reason! Bill and Stan are right there, you know?!”

“They’re not even looking!” Richie laughs, leaning over towards him, “Besides, it’s only kissing.”

“Please don’t start m-making out in the back of my car.” Bill chuckles, “She shouldn’t have t-to see that.”

“You know, when you refer to your car like it’s a woman, it really creeps me out, Bill,” Eddie says bluntly, and Stan snorts softly as he turns on the radio, listening to the weather and traffic updates.

Eddie lazily starts playing with Richie’s hair by his ear, and it seems to keep him distracted momentarily.

“S-s-sorry. You give b-boats female pronouns, so I thought cars m-must be the same.”

Richie rests his head on Eddie’s shoulder, seems to relax a little, and stays there for a while. Only about fifteen minutes pass, though, and then he sits upright again, messing with the kippah on the back of Stan’s head and lifting the edges, trying to see under it.

“Hey, Stan, how do you keep your tiny Jew hat on your head?”

Eddie chews his lip and sniggers, “Rich.”

“It’s called a kippah, Richie, you know that!” Stan growls as he slaps at Richie’s hands, “And it’s clipped in, so stop! You’re pulling my hair!”

Bill keeps looking over at them, now.

Richie chuckles and neatens it up again in Stan’s curls, and then it’s pleasantly quiet and relaxed again for a while, until Richie unfastens his seatbelt and starts rummaging around in the trunk of the
car, where all of their bags are. Eddie watches him, and looks anxious when Richie takes his seatbelt off, holding onto his side like he thinks if they suddenly crash, he’ll have to prevent Richie from being thrown around with his own hands.

Richie returns from the trunk with a large bag of Cheetos and breaks the tranquil silence in the car, first with the over-enthusiastic crinkling of the foil packet, then of loud, obnoxious crunching. Bill swears he can see a vein about to burst in Stan’s temple from the corner of his eye, and he can’t help but laugh. Stan looks at him and watches the little wrinkles that appear at the corners of Bill’s eyes, and then starts laughing, too. Before long, they’re all laughing, and a sort of comfortable, excited giddiness seems to fall over the car.

They play ‘would you rather’, for a while, which starts off light-hearted and funny, with questions like, ‘would you rather go to school naked, or have to make out with the janitor,’ but then it takes a distinctly R-rated turn, when Richie starts asking the questions, and Bill puts a stop to it.

Stan is quite happy to just sit there quietly and watch Bill, anyway, because Bill seems so excited and happy about driving his own car and spending the day out with all of his friends, that he’s barely even stuttering, and every time a song comes on the radio that he likes, he starts drumming along to the beat with his hands against the steering wheel, and gets really into it. But then Bill’s drumming stops, and he sees Stan watching him, and looks over, and smiles, and Stan smiles back, and Richie and Eddie both pay attention to the way Bill’s right hand reaches over and slides into Stan’s in his lap.

Richie and Eddie share a look, after, and Eddie feels himself smiling so hard, but simultaneously trying so hard not to, that his cheeks hurt.

They’re just over an hour into the journey, though, when Mike’s white truck, ahead of them, pulls over to the side of the road, and Bill has to pull over, as well. They see Ben climb out, first, and hurry over behind a tree to vomit. Bev jumps out next, and follows him. Eddie grimaces and looks away quickly, holding his hand up to the side of his face.

“Oh my god I swear if I see someone puke I will fucking puke.”

It turns out that Ben gets car-sick, so they end up having to take a break, during which time they eat the sandwiches Stan and Bev prepared earlier, and Eddie gives Ben some motion-sickness pills. At this point, they’re not at all surprised that Eddie has those, even though Eddie himself does not get car-sick at all. Stan says he gets a little queasy in cars sometimes, too, and gives Ben some candied ginger pieces.

When they set off again, the traffic is heavier, and Bill gets separated from Mike’s truck, and after a while, they can’t even see it anymore. They’re getting closer to Portland, and Bill doesn’t know which turns he’s supposed to take to get to the funfair, and he starts panicking and stuttering again. Stan pulls a road map from the glove compartment, and starts trying to give him directions, but it appears that they’ve finally found something Stan isn’t good at, because ten minutes later, they’re lost.

“You were supposed to take that last left!”

“A-are you s-sure you’re looking a-at the map properly?”

“Yes, Bill! It’s a map! How difficult can it be?!”

“Can you p-please just give it to E-Eddie?!”
“I can read a map, Bill!”

“Stan, you’re holding it upside-down,” Eddie says quietly from the back seat.

There’s a short silence, before Stan huffily thrusts the map over his shoulder into Eddie’s hand, and then proceeds to look out of the window and stop talking to any of them. Eddie manages to lead them back onto the right road very easily, since he’s brilliant at directions, but Bill still seems nervous, and keeps looking at Stan with a furrow in his brow.

Stan and Bill very rarely fall out, but when they do, they’re not like Richie and Eddie, who bicker and shout and will often even physically fight. Stan is a professional at the silent-treatment, and Bill doesn’t retaliate, it just makes him really uncomfortable and upset.

“S-S-Stan?”

Silence.

“…A-at l-least we’re going the r-r-right way now, huh?”

More silence.

“Bill, watch the road!” Eddie shrieks from behind him, causing Bill to jump and swerve the car rather violently before straightening out again.

“D-d-d-don’t sh-shout at m-me while I’m d-d-driving!”

Stan looks at him, now, sees Bill’s hands shaking on the steering wheel and hears the severity of his stutter, and sighs softly.

“He thrusts his fists against the posts,” Stan says clearly and calmly, gently tapping out the beat of the syllables against his leg with his index finger.

Bill goes quiet for a while, takes a deep breath, and then repeats it.

“He th-thrusts his fists ag-against the posts.”

“And still insists he sees the ghosts.”

“And still ins-sists he sees the ghosts.”

Bill seems much calmer, now, and his hands are no longer shaking. Nothing more is said, after that, but Richie wonders when Stan and Bill ever got so close. Since he saw them kissing at the prom, he’d only seen them kiss again once, since, and it wasn’t nearly as intense. And they had a tendency to hold hands, occasionally, and they were sweet with it, but other than that, Richie hadn’t really seen much of them together as a ‘couple’. He watches as they shoot each other the occasional little smile, and once, Stan reaches over and brushes his fingers across the back of Bill’s neck where his hairline begins, but it’s such a brief touch, that Richie almost feels frustration at it.

When they finally arrive at the funfair, Richie is in his element.

He’s so happy and grateful to be there that he keeps hugging people, and putting his arms around them, and he’s running around the place like an excited, hyperactive child. Bill sees a few parents with children who are being better-behaved than Richie, and it makes him laugh; they don’t care at all if he’s being embarrassing, because they’re just so pleased that he’s so very happy. Even Stan allows himself to be dragged by the hand a few times when Richie wants to show him something.
Eddie tries to keep tabs on him, at least, by linking his fingers with Richie’s as much as possible, and following after him everywhere he goes, but fifteen minutes in, they’ve all had cotton candy, and sugary drinks, and popcorn with caramel drizzled all over it, and Eddie gets on some kind of sugar-induced high, starts talking at five thousand miles per hour, and is running around with Richie, now, almost as enthusiastically. Richie starts carrying Eddie around on his back, and forcing him to go on every ride with him, and Eddie complains that he feels nauseous a couple of times after he’s been on the really fast rides, but then he still goes on another one right after when Richie asks him to.

Ben and Bev end up going through the ‘Tunnel of Love’; Ben tries to be cool about it and act like he thinks it’s lame, but Beverly gets so hyped and decides it will be a really cute idea, so he goes with her anyway, holding her hand to help her into the little swan-shaped boat. Eddie insists he wants to go on it, too, but he won’t go on it with Richie, because he knows he’ll get handsy once they’re in the tunnel, so Eddie goes through with Stan instead, since Stan doesn’t really like fast rides, and that doesn’t leave him a lot of options. When they appear out of the other side, Bev and Ben are all giggly and tickling each other and Ben has a distinctly reddened face.

They take a break from the rides for a while to go through the part with the stalls and games, and Mike is such a good shot at everything, that he ends up winning a prize each for all six of the other Losers. Whether it’s knocking over tin cans, firing at a target, throwing a ball into a hole or through a hoop, Mike just aces it every time. And Bill seems to be getting a little jealous, especially when he sees Stan next to Mike clapping and cheering him on, so it ends up as a ridiculous competition between them. Bill is a good shot, too, but he’s still not quite as good a shot as Mike, and Mike just laughs every time and is a very good sport about it, and is really happy and excited for Bill every time he gets a bullseye. Mike is so nice about it that Bill feels guilty afterwards for being jealous, and gives him a hug and pats him hard on the back and tells him that he deserves to be the best, because he is the best.

Then they reach the ‘Test Your Strength’ machine, and Bill and Mike just share a look and both laugh, but they go for it anyway. They’re both pretty strong, and get the little black ball close to the top of the tube, but Mike is still stronger. Bill doesn’t even seem mad, this time, though, and just jokingly suggests that maybe Mike ought to be the leader of the Losers’ Club. That is, until Bev grabs the mallet, and it goes even further than either of theirs did. She walks away with a triumphant look on her face, with Ben following behind her, beaming from ear-to-ear.

Finally, as the sky is starting to bleed out into a warm, watercolour sunset of oranges, purples and pinks, they line up for the enormous Ferris wheel. Eddie gets a little huffy when Richie starts making jokes about him not being tall enough to ride it, and loudly asking the attendant if it’s alright for him to bring his son with him, while putting his arm around Eddie’s shoulders. They all laugh at this, including Eddie, but he still digs his elbow into Richie’s ribs and then gets him in a really tight headlock that Richie physically can not escape from.

“Say you’re sorry, Rich!” Eddie chuckles, roughing up his hair, “Say you’re sorry and I’ll let your scrawny ass go!”

Richie is trying to push Eddie’s arm away, and failing. “What the fuck, Eds, why the shit are you so freakishly strong?!” He laughs, while Bev, Bill and Mike get behind him and start tucking Milk Duds, jellybeans, and M&Ms down the back of his jeans, “STOP PUTTING THINGS IN MY ASS!”

When they finally reach the front of the line, Bev gets into a car, and Richie climbs in next to her, shaking sweets out of the leg of his pants and straightening his glasses.

“That’s fine, I didn’t wanna fucking sit next to you anyway,” Eddie mutters, but when Richie looks at him, Eddie chuckles and sticks out his tongue.
“You can sit next to me for the rest of your life, Eds, let someone else have a turn!” Richie shouts, laughing as the carriage moves along to the next one.

Ben looks slightly affronted, though, that he didn’t get to sit next to Bev.

“I’m watching you, Tozier!” Ben chuckles, as he gets into the next carriage, “Keep your hands above the bars!”

Bev looks back at him and laughs, while Richie dramatically stretches and rests his arm around her, winking at Ben over his shoulder.

Bill is next in line, beside Stan, and they both look at each other, before Stan holds his hand out and ushers Bill forward into the car with Ben.

“Guess we’ll sit together next time.” Stan chuckles.

Stan gets into the next car, and Eddie squeezes in against him, so that Mike can fit in with them and doesn’t have to sit on his own. Eddie seems pretty comfortable like that, anyway, like he feels he’s safer between them as the wheel starts to turn.

“Did you guys hear that hundreds of people die every year on Ferris wheels?” Eddie suddenly seems tense, now that they’re climbing higher, “I mean the drop alone could kill you if you fell out but imagine hitting all those metal bars on the way down? And if the wind was really strong I bet it could just blow the whole thing over, like onto its side, or maybe it would just start rolling and when it got to us we’d be crushed under its weight like ants under a bike tire. Oh my god…if a screw came loose-”

“I’m sure they properly maintain their rides, Eddie.” Stan assures softly, “There are serious safety measures in place, here, they don’t just build these things and hope for the best.”

Mike nods, putting his arm around Eddie’s small shoulders and squeezing, “Stan’s right. Besides, even if anything happened, I would save you,” He chuckles, “If you fell, I would catch you.”

“Thanks…” Eddie laughs sheepishly, and he seems to relax a little, but he does keep looking down at the ground in mild horror as it gets further and further away.

Two carriages away, though, the conversation is very different. Richie still has his arm around Bev, and she’s holding onto his hand and leaning against him.

“Hey Bev, remember that I told you what I was doing that night at the prom?”

She sniggers softly, “Yeah?”

“Why won’t you tell me what you and Ben were doing?”

“It’s confidential. If I told you, I’d have to kill you,” she chuckles, adjusting Richie’s rings and twisting them so they’re facing the right way.

“But we’re, like, best friends, and best friends tell each other everything,” He looks at the side of her head, “We’ve seen each other naked.”

“Yeah, so?”

“But you won’t tell me your dirty secrets? I tell you all of mine. In detail.”

“I literally never asked you to, you just tell me anyway.”
“Did you guys do it?”

“Do what?” She chuckles.

“You know…it?”

There’s silence for a while, and Bev looks at him, and then Richie just gasps.

“You DID!!”

Bev just laughs.

“You guys FUCKED?!”

She continues to laugh.

“Was it good?!”

Beverly nods her head, and Richie claps loudly.

“Where?!”

“…In the back of the truck.” Bev says quietly, sniggering.

“WHAT?!”

“Shhhhhh!” She holds her finger to Richie’s lips, but she looks highly amused.

Richie is whispering, now, but his whispering is still louder than most normal people’s talking voices.

“Does Mike know?”

“Nu-uh.”

They both start laughing.

In the carriage beneath theirs, Ben and Bill, who can hear everything they’re saying, sit in awkward silence. Ben’s face is in his hands. Eventually, Bill looks at him and sniggers, and Ben starts laughing, too, though his cheeks are so red, Bill thinks he might have a stroke.

“C-congratulations,” He says quietly.

“Please, don’t.”

On the car ride back, as the sky darkens to deep, velvet blue, Bill looks in the rear-view mirror and sees that Richie and Eddie are asleep, Eddie’s head on Richie’s shoulder, and Richie’s head on top of Eddie’s, and he smiles to himself. He can see Mike’s white truck, right in front, shining brightly in the darkness like a guiding star. And through the rear window, he sees that Ben and Bev’s heads are together, too, with a set of headphones stretched over them to share, and a blanket tucked up around their shoulders, and everything just feels warm to Bill, then.

He glances at Stan to his right, and sees that Stan is already watching him, though he shifts suddenly when he meets Bill’s eye, as though embarrassed at being caught. Bill just chuckles softly, though, and it seems to diffuse the awkwardness.
“Bill, can I ask you something?” Stan asks suddenly, his voice soft, as though trying not to wake Richie and Eddie.

“S-sure.”

“Are we…I mean…I know we went to the prom together, but, we haven’t really talked about what this is, yet.”

Bill is silent for a while, as though contemplating the question.

“What do you m-mean?”

“Are we together?” Stan oddly seems less nervous about this conversation than Bill is.

“You mean l-like…a couple?”

“Yeah.”

“I…I don’t know…I g-guess…I didn’t know i-if th-that’s what you want…wante-”

“I do.” Stan says bluntly, before Bill has even finished stuttering out his sentence, staring hard at him, now.

Bill lets out a soft, relieved noise, and smiles.

“Y-yeah, I-I do, too.” He responds quickly.

“Honestly, I never thought you liked me that way.”

“Wh-who could n-not like you that way?” Bill chuckles slightly bashfully, “I-I mean, you’re smart, y-you’re funny, you’re beautiful…”

Bill just continues to stare at him, and his eyes soften. Then he takes a short, audible breath, as though preparing himself for something.

“Bill, I’ve been in love with you since the third grade.”

Bill looks at him briefly, and he seems slightly taken-aback. He goes to speak, but Stan cuts over him, as though he needs to continue and push through all the way, now that he has started.

“I knew I loved you before I even knew I liked boys. And I know it seems like I can’t have possibly known what love felt like when I was so young, but I did, Bill, believe me, I did.”

Stan watches the side of Bill’s face, catches his eye when Bill turns every few seconds to show he’s listening.

“You were everything I ever wanted to be…strong, brave, passionate, fearless, everything I thought a good person should be; a hero. And I felt like…if I followed you around enough, then maybe…maybe some of those qualities would somehow brush off onto me, and then…I wouldn’t feel so weak.”

“S-Stan, you’re not-”

“And then…maybe you could see me the way that I have always seen you. And maybe you could love me back.”
Bill goes to speak, again, but Stan stops him, and his eyes are slightly cloudy with tears, now.

“But no matter what…I was never good enough…”

“Stan-”

“Please, Bill, I need to say this…I need to tell you…I’m sorry…but I have to tell you…sometimes I feel like…I don’t think I can live without you…”

Stan has looked away, now, almost in shame, rubs his fingers roughly across his cheeks under his eyes to try and staunch the flow of tears like he’s simultaneously angry and embarrassed about it.

“…I know it’s ridiculous, I know it’s too much…”

Bill looks completely bewildered, his forehead wrinkled with worry.

“…but after you saw me with Jeremy, and…I never wanted to kiss him…I was just so frustrated…because I was always too much of a fucking coward to tell you…because I’m always a coward!”

Stan is really crying, now, and has tears pouring down his cheeks, but his focus on telling Bill what he needs him to hear seems to be enough to prevent him from sobbing, enough that he can speak relatively clearly, though his speech is broken frequently when he has to take in a sharp, shaking breath. Bill can see and hear slight movement in the back of the car, and he knows Eddie and Richie are awake, now, but neither of them speak. He can’t bear to look, though, because he doesn’t want to see what he himself is feeling, reflected in their expressions.

“…and I thought that you must hate me, because I’m such a coward…”

“I would never-”

“…I know that, Bill! I know you wouldn’t think those things, or say those things…because you’re too good, you’re so…but I can’t help…this voice in my head…I just…sometimes I feel like…I don’t want to be here…”

Bill can see Stan scratching at one of his wrists, and he feels suddenly sick.

“S-Stan…have you b-been taking your m-med-”

“YES!”

Suddenly, boldly, Bill pulls the car over to the side of the road, and unclips his seatbelt. A couple of seconds later, he sees Mike’s truck pull over, too, and sees Mike craning his neck out of the window to look back.

“Of course I’ve been taking it, Bill, but…”

Bill turns towards him properly, now, and unfastens Stan’s seatbelt, too.

“…sometimes it doesn’t help…I can’t…”

Bill pulls him into a tight embrace, leaning over against the backrest of the passenger’s seat so that he can hold him properly, and Stan buries his face into the crook of Bill’s neck, where they can hear him weeping helplessly.

Eddie and Richie watch silently from the back seat, feeling powerless.
“You are strong, Stan,” Bill says quietly against the side of his head, barely stuttering, “You are so, so, strong, s-stronger than me.” He strokes his hand up and down Stan’s back slowly, “And even when you don’t feel like you are, I’ll be strong for you, okay?”

Stan lifts his head, and Bill wipes at his cheeks with the corner of his sleeve.

“W-we all will.”

Eddie scoots to the very edge of his seat and wraps his arm around Stan’s back, kissing his cheek and tucking his head in against him in a hug, while Richie reaches over to hold one of his hands. Stan can’t see it past Bill, but he feels Richie’s fingers between his own, and a callous thumb caressing his palm.

“But you have to t-tell us when you’re feeling l-like this, when it’s getting b-bad again, okay? Please, Stan.” Bill holds his hands either side of Stan’s face, now, looking desperately into his eyes, and Stan swallows hard. “And w-when we get back, you need to t-talk to your dad, okay?” Bill says softly, still just looking at Stan, and not even seeming concerned that he’s leaning so far between the front seats that the gearshift is jabbing into his ribs.

Stan nods slowly, “I…I know.”

“And i-if you have to go back to the Doctor, I’ll c-come with you.”

Stan nods again, looking into Bill’s eyes, this time, “Thank you.”

Bill leaves a slow, soft kiss against Stan’s lips, before he moves away, and Richie and Eddie sit back, too. There’s the sound of four seatbelts all being fastened one after the other, and then Bill holds an indicative hand up to Mike, and they pull back onto the highway.

“Oh, and S-Stan…”

Bill says gently, once they’re back on the road.

“I love you, too.”
They are 19 years old.

And the Losers are in their freshman year of college.

Life has never been better.

They’ve been lucky enough to find a shared, student house with five bedrooms that could accommodate all seven of them, at a decent price. It’s in Brooklyn, so it’s not too far from the main NYU campus, and the building itself is tall, and quite narrow, squeezed in between a laundromat owned by a Vietnamese couple, on one side, and a small, grubby dive bar on the other.

Their house has four floors altogether; at the very top, is an attic bedroom, which is the biggest of them all, the floor below that has two more double bedrooms, and a family bathroom, the next floor down is the same, and the ground floor consists of a large, open-plan kitchen/diner, and two reception rooms, though one of them was literally empty when they moved in.

Now, though, the Losers have been living there for a couple of months, and have left their mark on the building in the best way possible.

Mike has become the proud owner of the attic room; he had to fight Richie and Bev for it, since it’s the largest bedroom by far, has exposed brick walls all of the way around, which they all think look cool, and a big skylight on the high ceiling above the bed. Eventually, though, they had to agree that Mike probably deserved to have first pick, since he’s the first one to offer literally anything of his own to any of them.

When they eat fast food, Mike always gives Richie half his fries, even when Richie has already eaten a large portion of his own, and brings him Tupperware filled with leftovers from the huge meals he and his family make on the farm. Sometimes, Mike weaves Richie new bracelets from bits of coloured string and thread, and he even has one on his wrist from Mike that’s made of straw. He also brushes Richie’s hair out for him properly when it’s starting to get matted, because Mike is very gentle and patient, so he’s the only one of them Richie will trust to do it; Richie literally never brushes his own hair, and Mike is the only other person who understands the difficulty of working with coarse, unmanageable curls, since Stan’s and Bev’s are both smooth and easier to tame. Mike has a huge family, and several young cousins, and has almost daily styled the hair of five little girls since he was at least ten years old. He also tried growing his own hair out, once, towards the end of high school, and the other Losers were obsessed with how amazing he looked with a natural afro, but Mike found it too much of a hassle, and it only lasted a few weeks.

He goes clothes shopping with Bev even though her style is so eclectic and ever-changing, that they end up having to go into every store so she can decide what vibe she’s feeling that month, and he carries all of her bags, and is unendingly enthusiastic about watching her try on clothes and look at fabrics and trawl through thrift store after thrift store trying to find what she calls ‘hidden gems’. Bev really likes clothes that have been owned by someone before, because then they have a history and a story behind them that she enjoys the mystery of, and if they look worn, or distressed, she only thinks that makes them more enchanting. ‘Pre-loved’, she calls them. That, and, Bev loves a bargain. Bev also has a habit of jumping onto people’s backs at random intervals; usually while they’re walking somewhere, but sometimes she even does it just as they’re standing still and talking, she just really likes being carried around. They’ve all carried her at some point, but the most frequent targets are Ben, Mike, Richie, and Bill. Mike is her favourite, though, because he’s tall, and strong, but also warm, and soft, and can carry her for long periods without getting tired out, and he’s always happy
Mike drives Eddie to the doctor *every time* he thinks there’s something wrong with him, even when they all know there isn’t, because he understands that sometimes Eddie just needs to feel *sure*. And he brings him herbs and flowers from the farm and was the first to introduce Eddie to traditional, plant-based remedies. He knows there isn’t always any actual science behind herbalism, and using plants for medicinal purposes, but at the very least, drinking chamomile tea, or putting lavender in his pillowcase, are much healthier and less risky alternatives to taking unnecessary medication that could cause side effects and long-term damage. And Eddie is so suggestible that as long as Mike tells him ‘this will help you sleep’, ‘this will help cure your cold’, ‘this will get rid of a scratchy throat’, that even if the remedies themselves don’t have any effect, they’ll work like placebos. And Mike is such a good listener, and so generally calm and good-natured, that he is the *first* Eddie goes to when he has a problem, even above *Bill*.

Mike was the only Loser who actually learned a decent amount of Hebrew, because he not only finds it interesting, and enjoys the historical significance of religious texts, but knows that Stan loves having someone to talk to about Jewish culture who will share his enthusiasm, and take it seriously. Since they’re also the two of the Losers who suffer the most from social stigma and prejudice, Stan, being Jewish and gay, and Mike, being black and presumably bisexual (he has never *said* so, but they know he has had feelings for girls and boys before), they can often understand one another on a level that none of the others may ever understand. When someone sprayed ‘Faggot Jew Boy’ on Stan’s locker in tenth-grade, Mike was the first to start scrubbing it off, and the only time any of the Losers had ever seen Stan try to physically attack someone, was when a random group of teens on the street called Mike a ‘nigger’. Stan had remained riled for the rest of the day, and had only calmed when Mike had gently talked him down.

Ben and Mike share so many passions in common that they spend *heaps* of time together. Aside from the fact that they’re library buddies, and both love to read more ardently than any of the others, they’re both food-lovers, too. Although Ben has a love/hate relationship with anything food-related, he loves to cook, and try out new ingredients, and now that he only eats strictly controlled portions, he spends more time thinking about it and fussing over it than ever. Mike has a similar devotion to it, though he isn’t concerned about how much he eats, but does love growing his own food, and likes everything to be organic. Now that they’re in college, Ben and Mike are the resident chefs of the house, and almost always make recipes together. Ben prefers cooking, while Mike prefers baking, so with the two of them, the *Losers never* go hungry, and are treated to *amazing* cuisine that most students would probably die for. And if Ben and Mike aren’t around, or just don’t feel like cooking for the fourteenth night in a row, the rest of them have to fend for themselves.

Stan is a decent cook, too, but not nearly as good as Mike and Ben, and he’s so much of a perfectionist that all of his meals take hours of preparation, and Bev can handle herself in the kitchen, too, but she often throws in random ingredients that don’t seem like they should go together, ‘just to try it’, which has resulted, more than once, in the Losers having to fork out the money for takeout. As for Eddie, who has been coddled his whole life and has never *had* to cook, Richie, who hasn’t ever been coddled, but doesn’t see why you should make your own food when you can buy it already prepared for you, and Bill, who can make a brilliant cappuccino, and is good at decorating cakes, but the first time he tried to cook, somehow managed to both set a dishtowel on fire, and break the oven door, the three of them should probably never be allowed in a kitchen unsupervised.

Mike and Bill’s friendship is a little different to the others, because they are an odd contrast of strangely competitive, and startlingly affectionate towards one another. Because they’re both interested in sports, and are the only Losers who really do take an interest in it, they go to matches together, watch football and baseball on TV together, and often train or practice together, too. And it’s an odd juxtaposition, really, because the two Losers who are most interested in sports, and
therefore stereotypically the most ‘jock-like’, are actually the two nicest, sweetest, and gentlest of all of them. They’re always strapping each other’s sprained wrists and ankles, and bringing each other water and fruit, and giving hugs, and pats on the back, and the other Losers have even seen them giving each other foot massages before while they’re watching a match on TV.

So, taking all of this into consideration, the Losers jointly decided that Mike ought to have the biggest and best room in the house, and were actually thrilled, in the end, that he got it.

“Besides,” Mike had said, the day they moved in, “I need a floor to myself. I shouldn’t have to be down hear listening to y’all bumping uglies.”

But the attic room is so nice, and so spacious, and they’re all so obsessed with the amazing skylight, that they end up hanging out in there a lot anyway. And the bed is the biggest one in the house, and has the thickest mattress, so Mike often finds it difficult to get the other Losers off it and out of his room. Some nights, they go up there just to lie on their backs and stargaze through the ceiling; Bev likes doing this the most. And sometimes she lazily paints Mike’s nails while they chat, but he doesn’t seem to care. And sometimes Stan will sit with them and name the constellations, while Richie stretches across his knees like a cat and requests that Bev paint his nails, too. And Eddie will appear, and take Mike’s old Derry football jersey down from where it’s hanging on the wall like a mural, and sit with it draped over his shoulders like a comforter, and if he crosses his legs, it covers all of him, so that just his head and toes are visible. Then Bill and Ben will join them, with mugs of hot cocoa, and Bill will ask Stan the names of some of the individual stars, and then he’ll come up with little stories about them, and how they ended up there, about their relationships to one another, and Ben will write down short poems about them and pin them to the board in Mike’s room.

The board is already filled with interesting things: small pieces of ribbon from awards he has won, polaroid pictures of the Losers on days out together, the strip of white gauze from the centre of Eddie’s old cast, with the word, ‘Lo(gger)’ down the centre in faded marker pen, from when they were twelve. There are a couple of playing cards that Mike and Bill would often fasten into the spokes of Silver’s wheels so it made that cool sound when they rode it, a pair of Richie’s old, battered glasses hanging by a piece of string, some drawings Bill did of the animals on Mike’s farm, and one in painted watercolour that he did of Mike, and a number of other things, all of which Mike treasures.

And once, at least once, all seven of the Losers fell asleep curled up together on Mike’s giant, comfortable bed, in a tangle of curly hair and overly-long limbs, and the smell of nicotine and peppermint mingled with the lingering aroma of chocolate, where the only sound was Richie’s soft snoring, and Bill’s quiet mumbling in his sleep.

The floor below the attic room has two more bedrooms, and those belong to Bill and Stan. It isn’t difficult to figure out which is which. One of the doors is always closed, while one of them is always wide open. One of the rooms is impeccably neat, and made up of neutral, cool colour tones, a scale of white to black, while the other is comfortably messy, and made up of deep, rich, warm hues, like scarlet red, and forest green, and sapphire blue. One of the rooms has an impossibly neat desk, with a computer, and a pot plant, and nothing more, while the other has a desk that is littered with paper and pencils, and paints, and an old typewriter that stands proud at the centre of the clutter like a shining trophy. One of the beds has red tartan sheets, made of warm, thick flannel, that is slightly crumpled all over, but looks plush and inviting, while the other has smooth, stone-grey, cotton sheets, and a white throw at the end, and is so neatly made that there isn’t a crease in sight on any of it. One of the rooms has its walls scattered with posters, and hand-made paintings, and photographs, like a messy, mismatched collage, while the other room’s walls are bare, except for three small, square, framed pictures of tiny birds, lined up in a perfect row.
The floor below *that*, has two more bedrooms, one of which belongs to Ben and Bev, and the other, to Richie and Eddie. Ben and Bev had no qualms whatsoever about sharing a room, and have adapted to one another fairly easily. Their room, except for Mike’s, is probably the most inviting of them all. It is filled with cushions and pillows and drapes and curtains and blankets, of varying colours, shapes and sizes; an artistic mess of vibrancy and sparkle. Bev has clearly had the most input in its decoration, but Ben is rather blasé about interior design, since he prefers the architecture of a room. In this instance, his main influence has been rearranging Bev’s clutter so that it flows as a coherent space, and together they have created something that Richie lovingly names ‘the gypsy caravan’. Bev often lights incense in there, too, which Ben thinks is too much, but he doesn’t really mind, and it only gives the room even more of the feeling that it’s owned by some kind of mystical, eccentric fortune-teller. Everyone else thinks it’s cool, but Stan and Eddie definitely don’t. Stan avoids looking into it, because it’s so mismatched and claustrophobic, and Eddie *hates* the smell of incense, and nearly has an asthma-attack just from walking past the door.

Richie and Eddie’s room, on the other hand, has so far caused so many arguments, that *six* times, Richie has ended up sleeping on the couch. Originally, Eddie seemed surprisingly relaxed about the prospect of having to share a room with Richie; they had slept in the same bed plenty of times before, though always in Eddie’s room. But very quickly, the reality of their differences started to cause problems. The first fight, was because of Richie dropping his dirty clothes on the floor, and refusing to pick them up. He insisted that he would pick them up later, and that it wasn’t a big deal. Eddie strongly disagreed. The second, was because Richie kept eating food in their bed, which Eddie thinks is basically *animal* behaviour. Richie conceded at first, and said he wouldn’t bring food into their room at all, but then later that evening, Eddie had slid his hand under his pillow while he was just drifting off to sleep, and had quickly pulled it out again to find his fingers covered in jam. He woke all seven of them with his yelling, that night. The third time, Richie had broken their desk chair by standing on it, something Eddie had specifically told him not to do. Thankfully, Bill managed to nail the wooden back on again, so they didn’t have to buy a new one. The fourth had been because Richie had clearly had a cigarette in there while Eddie was out helping Stan and Mike with the grocery shopping, and no amount of airing it out could hide the smell of tobacco from Eddie, who has a nose like a bloodhound. The fifth was because there’d been a large spider on the bedroom wall, in the middle of the night, and rather than helping to get rid of it, Richie had used the edge of a shoe to flick it *onto* Eddie. Their screaming had once again woken the entire house, until Mike carefully carried the spider between his palms and put it outside. The sixth, and final time, *so far*, was because Richie had poured fake blood all over the bed, and hidden in the closet, and when Eddie came home from a late lecture, and entered the room, and dropped his bag in horror, Richie jumped out of the closet and grabbed him. Unfortunately, this had not ended up in laughter, but in tears, with Mike and Bill driving them to the emergency room, because Eddie had reactively grabbed the lamp from the bedside table, and smacked it against the side of Richie’s head so hard that he concussed him.

Since *that* prank disaster, though, it has been a while since Eddie kicked Richie out of their room. It seems like, in his anger at being constantly tricked and scared and made fun of, Eddie decided that ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,’ is the best course of action. He has started pulling pranks on Richie, in retaliation, and it has almost turned into a *war* that now involves all of the other Losers, too. Unfortunately, since Richie has been so annoying to *everyone* for so long, they’re only willing to help Eddie. Recently, Eddie got Bev to help him sew up all of the purposely-made holes in Richie’s ripped jeans, which really confused him for a while. Ben helped him scrape the middles out of a pack of Oreos, one of Richie’s staple snacks, and replace the fillings with toothpaste, and Eddie also replaced all of the sugary sweets Richie keeps in a tin on his bedside table with raisins and sunflower seeds. As it turns out, Eddie’s pranks are quite tame, compared to Richie’s, and they don’t have the desired effect, but once Bill, Bev, and Mike are involved, they begin to escalate. Last week, the three of them, and Eddie, filled a bucket with mayonnaise, waited for Richie to come back from class, and then threw it out of the window over his head as he came to enter the house. They’d never seen
Eddie laugh as hard as he did, then. In fact, Eddie seems a lot happier in general, despite how much he and Richie argue when they’re in such close quarters. It just seems like that’s how their relationship works best, and even when Eddie is angry and shouting, it so often becomes laughter, that they wonder if Eddie is ever really mad at Richie at all.

The main lounge, where there are a couple of couches and a large television, is the room they mostly hangout all together in, but the second lounge, at the back of the house, is becoming more and more eclectic and crowded as time passes. First of all, it was a games room, per Richie’s request. The Losers all chipped in to buy him a Playstation for his nineteenth birthday, and he is obsessed with it. They bought a few beanbag chairs, and Bill donated the little TV from his old room, and balanced it on top of a pile of old books in the corner, so that Richie can use it for his video games. Eddie actually hates it, because it means that Richie sometimes now pays more attention to his Playstation than to him; he thought it would be a good idea at first, getting Richie out of his hair for a while, but now he’s becoming slightly jealous of it. Richie is always trying to get Eddie to play it with him, but he won’t. Bill does, though, and Bev, too, and Mike doesn’t find it all that interesting, but he’ll still have a go if Richie asks him. Ben and Stan are both fairly indifferent about it, too, but the first time Richie convinced Stan to verse him on Street Fighter, he regretted it, because Stan has amazing hand-eye coordination, and beat him easily.

A few weeks after that, Bev got a mannequin that she found by a dumpster behind a clothing store; Richie helped her carry it back to the house, and she did clean it, but they’ve never told the others where they got it from, because they know Eddie and Stan wouldn’t let her keep it if they knew. She told them that one of the other students in her Costume Studies class gave it to her. It has a missing arm, and it’s a little battered, but Bev put it in the ‘games room’, and she uses it for dress-making. The neck portion, since it doesn’t have a head, is now filled with multi-coloured pins, and thanks to Richie, it has nipples drawn over the top of its plastic breasts, and some crudely-drawn pubic hair on its smooth nether-regions. There are now several baskets filled with scraps and rolls of fabric, and Bev’s sewing machine, on a table in the opposite corner to Richie’s Playstation. Thankfully, it’s a big enough room that they can share it, because Bill sometimes paints in there, too, and leaves a box of art supplies by Bev’s ‘crafting station’, and there’s an easel folded under the table, a present he received from Stan last Christmas.

The final, strange addition to this lively, mish-mash of a room, is a big, freshwater fish tank by the door to the kitchen. They all agreed that they wanted a pet, but since the house is rented, cats and dogs aren’t allowed, and they eventually agreed that fish were the way to go. They’re easy to take care of, they’re not too expensive to keep, but they’re still quite fun. So they went to a pet store all together one Saturday, and picked out a tank, and each chose their own individual critter to add to it.

Mike was drawn to the bottom-feeders right away, the kind that eat the algae and the debris in the tank and keep it clean and habitable for the other fish; he likes the fact that they’re useful. He ends up choosing a Plecostomus catfish. It’s not the most attractive of creatures, it’s dark, and rather large, and Eddie thinks it’s kind of creepy, but Mike insists it’s a friendly, hardworking fish, and affectionately names it, ‘Lenny’.

Stan chooses, next. He is instantly attracted to a lovely, white angelfish that doesn’t appear to have any other colouring, any missing scales, or any physical imperfections at all. It’s a beautiful fish, and Stan admires its aesthetically pleasing faultlessness. He names it ‘Zakiah’, which is Hebrew for ‘purity’, and doesn’t like it when any of the other fish in the tank go near it, nor when Richie puts his hand into the tank when he’s feeding them, because he likes the way that some of them try to nibble at his fingers.

Ben sees the dwarf puffer fish, and falls in love right away. It’s a tiny creature, and rather funny looking, with disproportionately large eyes and a little round belly. He says he likes that its big eyes
always look as though they are filled with wonder, as though it is constantly in awe. Bill laughs and says that’s a lot like the way Ben looks at Beverly. Ben names the teeny puffer fish, ‘Dickens’, after one of his favourite classic authors. Richie is quick to quip his usual ‘nerd alert!’ one liner, something he happens to say a lot in reference to Ben, Eddie, Mike and Stan, in particular.

Eddie insists right away, before he has even seen any of his options, that he wants a shrimp, because they are tiny and the name of the species is often used synonymously with ‘weakness’, but in reality, they are very powerful creatures. He watched a documentary once, with Ben, Mike and Stan, about the ‘mantis shrimp’, which has the fastest punch in the world, and can break through the shells of crabs and even aquarium glass. Of course, he can’t get one of those, so he ends up with a ghost shrimp, instead. Since it’s mostly transparent, he hopes this will mean it’s less likely that it will be eaten by any of its tank-mates. So far, it appears to have survived, with help from some dense foliage and rocks at the bottom of the tank, but Eddie still checks every couple of hours to make sure it’s still alive. He names his shrimp, ‘Spaghetti’, with input from Richie, of course.

Bill knows he wants something simple, just a common goldfish will do, because he’s sure, and rightly so, that the other Losers will try to choose the strangest and least common creatures they can possibly find. But while they’re in the pet store, and they’re browsing, he is drawn towards a bright yellow guppy, with a fin missing, that is swimming at a bit of an odd angle. He doesn’t even ask any more questions, or look at any other fish after that, he just says he’ll take it right away. Of course, Bill names the little guppy, ‘Georgie’. He talks to it all the time, too, when he’s feeding the fish, when he’s cleaning the tank, when he’s in there painting at the easel, and the other Losers think it’s adorable, especially that Bill says ‘good morning’ and ‘goodnight’ to it every day.

Bev takes the longest to decide which one she wants, because she keeps changing her mind. Every time they look into a different tank in the pet store, or at a different species, suddenly she wants ‘that one!’ even if she was sure the last time. But when she sees the beautiful betta, and is told that it is also known as the ‘Siamese fighting fish’, she knows for sure that’s the one. It has exquisite purple and blue fins and tail, about three times the width of its body, that flow and twist through the water like they’re made of silk. She is told by the store assistant that the fish she chooses is a male, but Bev insists that it is female in heart and spirit, and calls it ‘Lola’. This prompts a very strange conversation between the Losers about whether or not fish can be transgender. Stan says that animals have sexes, but no concept of gender, which is exclusive to humans, and therefore, the fish can be whichever ‘gender’ Beverly decides. She seems happy with this answer.

Richie originally wants to get something dangerous, like a shark, or a jellyfish, but then he finds out that the freshwater ‘sharks’ they could buy aren’t actually even sharks, and that he can’t get cool, stinging jellyfish, either, so at first he’s a bit bored with the whole concept. That is, until he sees a long, skinny fish that looks a bit like an eel, with Barb-like protrusions sticking out of its face, called a ‘kuhli loach’, and thinks it looks ‘frickin’ weird’ enough for him. The sign on the side of the tank says they don’t like to be kept alone, and he can totally relate to that, so he gets two, and lovingly names them, ‘Piss’ and ‘Shit’. If anything, he thinks it’s hilarious hearing the other Losers, especially Stan, having to use their names. Also, he likes being able to say things like, ‘has anyone fed Piss and Shit today?’

They all love the tank, though, and everyone contributes to its upkeep, to the feeding, and the cleaning, though when it’s time for a full clean-out, Mike is almost always the one who ends up doing it, because it’s a huge tank, and the amount of water it requires means that it’s a lengthy, tedious and heavy job. Richie gets bored of the cleaning if it takes longer than a couple of minutes, Bev loses interest almost as quickly, Stan doesn’t like heavy lifting, and Eddie downright refuses to put his hands inside the tank, for various outlandish reasons. Either way, though, it’s a very well-looked-after aquarium, and a strange, but lively addition to their home.
And it really is a home.

A very happy, comfortable, cheerful home, overflowing with love, and owned by one very dysfunctional, and completely unconventional, family of seven.
Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone!
Just wanted to apologise for how long it has taken me to get this chapter out! I've been
at London Comicon this weekend, so haven't had much time to write lately! I did bring
my laptop with me so I could do a little bit of writing in the hotel, though (that's
dedication, right?) Anyway, hope you enjoy it! And a quick WARNING: This chapter
has sexual themes THROUGHOUT, and VERY EXPLICIT SEXUAL CONTENT
AFTER ABOUT HALF-WAY THROUGH! Just in case anyone is uncomfortable
with that.
Thank you!
xxxx

They are 19 years old.

Sex is not a taboo subject in the Losers’ house.

In fact, it’s rather lucky that it isn’t, because really, it is one of the most frequent topics of
conversation where Richie is involved.

Because Richie Tozier has never been uncomfortable with sex, or anything relating to it, at any point
in his life, nor will he ever be. He never had the ‘birds and bees’ talk with either of his parents, he
never listened in class when they awkwardly breezed over sex education, like it was some kind of
embarrassing, weirdo cousin that had to be mentioned at the family dinner, but continued to be
ignored afterwards, and Richie grew up, he felt unfortunately, before the internet was really a ‘thing’,
so exactly why Richie has never found sex to be an uncomfortable subject remains rather a mystery.
But to Richie, sex is just good. It feels good. It looks good. It sounds good. He likes watching it. He
likes hearing about it. And most of all, obviously, he likes doing it. Not that Richie has ever had sex,
per se, but of everything he has done, so far, he has never had any complaints. He has never
understood why people find sex so alarming, or disgusting, or awkward to talk about, because as far
as Richie is concerned, there aren’t really any negatives.

Beverly would have to disagree. At least, she knows from personal experience that sex isn’t always
fun, nor pleasurable…nor consensual. Before she was even old enough to understand what sex really
was, she has known, at least, of its influence, of its power. Known that, as a girl, and now as a
woman, she simultaneously holds all of that power in her hands, and yet holds none. That she can
use her body to manipulate, and to bargain, but this ability does not make her feel as though she has
the upper hand, as though she is in control, because, in reality, she knows that that privilege remains
with the men who admire her. The men who would look at a ten, eleven, twelve-year-old girl, and
incomprehensibly feel desire. Men like her father.

However, even as a sexual assault survivor, a child of abuse, Beverly has never had trouble talking
about sex. She wears her ‘survivor’ title like a badge of honour, has grown to understand that she
should not feel shame, that she should not feel dirty, that she should not feel to blame. And, frankly,
Beverly has never even been afraid when she thinks about having sex, either, although her
understanding of it is slightly warped. Because as far as Beverly was concerned, sex wasn’t
something she would personally ever enjoy or get pleasure from. She was happy to do it for someone else, as long as she was giving it to them willingly, but she never really knew that sex could feel good for her, too, until she was with Ben.

And that’s really saying something, because Ben has no idea what he’s doing when it comes to the sexual aspect of their relationship. He’s nervous, and clumsy, and embarrassed, and doesn’t like being seen without his clothes on, and is constantly afraid of doing something wrong. But none of that matters at all, because he is gentle, and passionate, and he really, really cares about making sure that Beverly enjoys it, too, much more, even, than he cares about getting enjoyment out of it himself. And Beverly isn’t used to that, and she was surprised, at first.

When it was prom night, and they were snuggled up together in the back of Mike’s truck, and watching the stars, Beverly never considered that she could feel so completely comfortable and safe with another human being. And then they were kissing, and giggling, and hands began to wander. And those were Beverly’s hands, doing all of the wandering, because she knows Ben would never touch her unless he was absolutely sure she wanted him to. In the end, she moved his hands herself, guiding them to her waist, first, and then onto her breasts, and she could feel how much he wanted her, but he never pushed, he never made her feel as though he was holding the reins, and not her. Beverly was surprised at herself, at how much she enjoyed the feeling of sexual intimacy when she was in control of it, at how often they laughed, at how natural it was, despite Ben’s nervousness. And she found that she enjoyed guiding him, and showing him what to do; there was a sort of adorable playfulness to it that both of them just had fun with. And when they were having sex, tangled up together beneath a large, patterned throw, Beverly felt she finally understood what people were talking about when they called it ‘making love’. It felt comfortable, it felt right, it felt good.

Still, Beverly didn’t experience climax, that first time; Ben was so upset, and visibly distressed that she didn’t, he almost cried, and kept apologising over and over and over, until Beverly started laughing, and hugging his face into her chest, and telling him how much it really didn’t matter. And it really didn’t, because Beverly doesn’t think sex has to end in climax to make it good, and even if it did, he has more than made up for that since; he’s still timid in bed, and sometimes has to be encouraged, but he is selfless, and impossibly considerate, and as it turns out, something Beverly quickly told Richie, because she just couldn’t keep it to herself, Ben gives mind-blowing head. It has taken every single ounce of self-control Richie has, which isn’t a lot to begin with, not to reveal that he knows this, not even once, because he knows Ben would be horrendously embarrassed.

And speaking of horrendously embarrassed, Eddie still hates talking about anything to do with sex, even though he and Richie are probably the most sexually active of all of the Losers, and everyone knows it. Because, to Richie’s absolute elation, and Eddie’s absolute dismay, Eddie is loud. When they first started living together, the others pretended not to notice, because they knew Eddie would be mortified, but eventually, Richie brought it up at the dinner table, because he felt that if they confronted it head-on, it would diffuse some of the awkwardness. And it did, in a way, despite the fact that Eddie refused to talk to him for the next couple of hours, for bringing it up. Bev suggested they try playing music while they’re being ‘intimate’, and they did, a couple of times, but it actually seemed to make it worse, because every time they heard music coming from Richie and Eddie’s room, everyone else knew exactly what they were doing. Richie’s solution was even less helpful. He decided that it would draw attention away from Eddie if he himself was twice as loud. But Eddie was just as embarrassed, if not more, by Richie’s exaggerated grunting and groaning, and made him stop. Eventually, they resorted to confining as much of their sexual activity as possible to the brief periods of time when there was no one else in the house, or, at the very least, during the middle of the night, when they know people are asleep. And even then, Eddie tries his best not to make any noise, or to muffle himself in the nearest part of the bed, though Richie starts to take this as a challenge, and is entirely unhelpful.
Mike is a bit of a wild card, really, because none of the other Losers ever expected him to be so casual about sex. In fact, sometimes they think that Mike is too casual about it, because they’ve been living together for a total of about five months, and so far they’ve seen him with seven or eight different people, and that’s just the ones they witness coming home with him late into the evening, or leaving his room early in the day. Stan complains that he’s tired of running into strangers in the bathroom when he just wants to brush his teeth, since he, Bill and Mike have to share the bathroom on the third floor, but Mike retaliates that he’s tired of running into Stan and Bill making out in it when he’s just trying to take a shower. Stan usually shuts up quickly after that. At first, it was just girls Mike was bringing home with him, usually girls he had met on campus or who he shared classes with, but then he started bringing boys home, too, and for once, the Losers were actually surprised by the revelation of someone’s sexuality, because they genuinely thought he was joking when he said he’d been ‘dabbling’. Eddie was a little bothered by it at first, because he was always under the impression that if you were going to have sex with someone, you had to really love them, and Mike can’t possibly love all of those people, so he asked him about it. Mike’s first response was to laugh. Then he explained to Eddie that as long as both, or all people involved (Eddie’s eyes bulged slightly at this), are enjoying themselves, are consenting and are comfortable, then it shouldn’t matter how many people you want to sleep with.

Bill is probably, surprisingly, one of the most sexually modest of all of them. He isn’t shy about showing his affection to Stan, will kiss him in front of people, and hold his hand, and snuggle up to him on the couch, but when Richie asks him inappropriate questions about their sex life, Bill just tends to laugh, and shake his head, and never answers. He doesn’t appear embarrassed, per se. In fact, it seems more like Bill is trying to protect Stan’s privacy than his own, because Richie has had conversations with Bill about masturbating before, and about weird fantasies, and pornography, and other such stereotypically ‘male-centric’ things, and Bill has never seemed uncomfortable talking about those. And so, as frustrating as it is to Richie, who likes to know everything about everyone, and be involved in everybody’s business, he doesn’t know whether or not Bill and Stan have done anything more than kiss, yet.

They haven’t.

And no one is more aware of this than Stan.

Because Stan knows his friends all think he’s uptight, and in many respects, he knows they’re right, but as far as sex and sexuality is concerned, they couldn’t be further from the truth. In fact, they might be shocked if they knew just how far from the truth that actually is. In reality, the only thing about sex that Stan really feels uncomfortable about, or concerned by, is the fact that he isn’t having any. He and Bill have technically been together, as a couple, for about eight months, and yet, to Stan’s utter, unendurable frustration, they’re still in the middle of this ridiculous, maddening game of ‘chicken’, with neither of them ever making a move. They’ve kissed, oh, they’ve kissed. They kiss a lot. Stan makes sure they do. He kisses Bill whenever he can get his hands on him, whenever they can get a second alone, and it never ends the way he wants it to. Either they’re interrupted by one of their housemates, or it just…ends without ever escalating past kissing. For a while, Stan was beginning to worry that Bill wasn’t actually sexually attracted to him at all, and that maybe their relationship was just based on platonic love, blossomed from their close friendship, but when they’re kissing, and he feels the way Bill’s hands grip his waist so tight it’s like he’s preparing for something, sees his pupils dilate and smother the pure, sparkling blue with darkness, feels Bill’s pulse racing when Stan’s lips are on his neck, and he knows. And that makes it all the more confusing that they just never seem to be able to push past that point. Once, when they were well into an hour long make-out, Stan felt Bill’s hands drift down to his hips, and he swears, if it had gone on a while longer, and Bill had just dug his fingers in a little harder, he could have come just like that. It would have been pathetic, and embarrassing, but Lord, he could have handled it. But Richie had burst through the door into the bathroom, where Stan was backed up against the sink, started laughing
raucously, and completely ruined the moment. Stan had never wanted to hurt Richie as much as he had then, and that’s really saying something.

And even though they all know Stan is a virgin, because he unashamedly told them so when Richie asked him, and they know he has never had any sexual experience at all with another person, because Richie asked him that, too, they still come to him for advice, and with questions, because Stan is somehow, astonishingly, some kind of sex guru. He does read a lot, and he’s the only one of them with access to a computer, so they assume that’s where he has accrued his extensive knowledge. He’s also blatantly unashamed talking about sex, and never makes it feel awkward or silly. Which is why, one Thursday afternoon, while Richie, Bev, Ben and Bill are at college, Eddie comes to Stan for guidance.

There’s a light rap of knuckles against Stan’s bedroom door, even though it’s open, because he and Mike are in there together, studying, sitting on Stan’s bed and each pouring over an open book.

“You don’t have to knock, Eddie, you can come in,” Stan says gently, when he looks up and sees him. Mike looks up, too, with his warm, trademark smile.

“Hey, Eds.”

“Hey Mike,” Eddie mutters almost absently, and hovers nervously in the doorway for a while before coming in, his eyes focused on Stan, “You told Richie that you want people to knock before coming into your room.”

“I tell Richie a lot of things,” Stan says dryly, and Mike laughs.

Eddie sniggers a bit, but he still looks distinctly uncomfortable, and they’re both watching him, now.

“You okay, bud?” Mike asks gently, concern written all over his face, noticing the way Eddie is picking at the skin around his fingernails.

“Yeah, uhm…I just wanted to…talk to Stan…”

Stan closes his book slowly, pushes it to one side to show Eddie that he has his full attention, and pats the edge of the bed. Eddie seems hesitant, but he sits down, anyway. Well, more ‘perches’ rather than ‘sits’, as though he’s ready to leave already.


“Uhh…it’s okay, Mike, you can stay…I don’t mind it’s just…sort of embarrassing…”

Mike puts his book down, and settles back onto the end of Stan’s bed, watching Eddie with a warm, supportive smile, that suggests he has no need to feel embarrassed, whatever it is.

“What’s on your mind, Eddie?” Stan asks softly.

“Okay…” Eddie takes a short, but deep breath in, like he’s steeling himself for what he’s about to say, “I don’t think there’s a way to say this that’s not gonna be super awkward, so…I’m just gonna say it…” There’s another short pause, “I, uh…I think I wanna…uhm…well, I don’t really think it because really I know…I…I…w-want to have sex with Richie.”

Eddie appears to hold his breath after this, but when he sees that neither of them overreact to it, and Stan just says, ‘okay’, while Mike nods, he relaxes a little.
“I know you guys all probably think we’ve done it already or we like do it all the time or whatever… but the truth is…we haven’t done it yet…and…and I know Richie wants to and I think I want to as well, but I’m scared…I’m worried because…because I know how it’s going to go…I know I’m gonna be the one who has to…” Eddie’s brow furrows as he makes some vague, suggestive gestures with his hands, “But I’ve never done anything like that before and all I can think about is all of the germs and how dirty that part of your body is because that is literally where you take a shit from and-and what if it hurts because I know I have heard that it hurts and I mean it’s obvious it’s going to hurt because of the…the anatomy of that situation is just…you know, nothing is necessarily supposed to go in that part of your body and.”

Stan shushes him with a hand against Eddie’s knee, while Mike just looks at him in a mixture of sympathy and mild amusement, like he’s concerned about how worried Eddie is about something Mike doesn’t think is a big deal.

“Oh…one thing at a time,” Stan says calmly, “First of all, you don’t ‘have’ to do anything. If it worries you that much, then just don’t do it. If Richie is making you feel like-”

“He’s not!” Eddie says quickly, and rather loudly, “No it’s not like that I swear! He wouldn’t…he doesn’t even talk about it anymore because he knows how much it freaks me out, but…I know he really wants to…and…and I want to…but I don’t want to tell him that I want to because I know he’ll get excited about it and he won’t be able to stop thinking about it and I don’t wanna get his hopes up when I don’t know for sure if I’ll be able to go through with it…”

“Oh…” Eddie sounds disappointed, like he thought he’d have someone with experience to talk to.

“But, it can’t really be that different to having sex with a woman, and I have done that,” Mike assures, chuckling, when he sees Eddie’s disappointment, “Once you get over the initial nerves, it’s all fine.”

“It’s not the same at all.” Stan says firmly.

“Well…okay, it’s not the same, but you still shouldn’t be worried about it, it’s just sex.” Mike rubs Eddie’s back, and puts his arm around him.

Eddie still looks fairly panicked, though.

“W…will it hurt?”

Mike and Stan share a look that makes Eddie’s expression fall even further.

“It will, won’t it?!” It’s gonna hurt and I won’t be able to do it you know how I feel about pain I have a really low tolerance! Oh my god I can’t do this what if we can’t ever do it because of me and I ruin our whole relationship?! Richie’s gonna wanna break up with me because he’s gonna get bored like he gets bored of everything and-”
“Woah, woah, woah!” Mike squeezes Eddie’s shoulder tightly, and sniggers as he looks at him, “Calm down, little man, you know that’s never gonna happen!”

“Of course it isn’t. Eddie, you’re being ridiculous!” Stan sighs, rolling his eyes a little, “Yeah, it might be uncomfortable the first time, but it only hurts if you don’t do it right. And you know I love more than anyone to talk about how useless Richie is, but in this instance I have to admit that he would take this seriously. We all know he would never hurt you.”

Eddie frowns, but he clearly can’t dispute this.

“And besides, if you’re that worried about the pain, you don’t have to do it that way around. Make Richie take it first until you both feel more comfortable; you’re not ‘the bottom’ by default just because you’re smaller.”

Eddie’s cheeks are flushing, now, “W…well…I thought about that, but…I don’t wanna do that…at least…not yet…” He looks horribly embarrassed talking about having sex so openly, but Stan and Mike are both being so nice and mature about it that he keeps going, anyway, “I just…I wouldn’t even know what to do if I had to…I don’t think I’d be any good at it…”

“Okay. Then, you just have to be prepared.” Stan says matter-of-factly. Mike is just listening and nodding along, still holding his arm around Eddie supportively.

“Prepared how?”

“Well, make sure you have plenty of supplies, for one.”

“S…Supplies?”

“You know, like, lubricant, condoms, wet wipes, towels…”

“Towels?” Eddie looks worried by this.

“Eddie, do you know ‘anything’ about how two guys do it?”

Eddie appears slightly nauseous, “I know enough to know it scares me and it’s dirty and it hurts.”

“It doesn’t have to be any of those things. It’s supposed to feel good.”

“I…I don’t really see how…”

“Have you never tried putting anything else inside yourself before? Like, not even your fingers?”

Mike doesn’t seem particularly shocked by this question, but Eddie reels at Stan’s bluntness, “What?! NO!”

“You don’t have to freak out about it, it’s normal…”

“W…well, have you?!” Eddie retaliates shrilly, clearly assuming Stan will share his aversion to being asked a question like that.

He’s wrong.

“Yes.”

Eddie looks like he doesn’t know what to say after that. There’s a bit of an awkward silence, and then he turns to Mike questioningly.
“Oh…no, I’m not really into that,” Mike chuckles, “I’m more of a… ‘giver’ than a ‘receiver’. I don’t 
think I want anything going up there. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, of course.” He adds 
quickly.

Eddie looks at the bedspread for a while, as though he’ll find more answers, there. Then he looks 
back to Stan, slowly.

“So…it doesn’t hurt?”

“No.”

“Isn’t it…dirty, though?”

“Not if you clean yourself properly.”

Eddie looks really deep in thought, then. Stan and Mike just watch him in silence, as though 
allowing him time to process the information.

“And it actually…feels good?”

“No one would do it if it didn’t.”

There’s another long silence, and then it is broken by Eddie’s laughter, muffled in his hands, which 
are covering his face, both embarrassed and tickled by the sheer awkward nature of the conversation. 
Stan glances at Mike, and then they both start laughing, too. They stay in Stan’s room for the next 
couple of hours, just talking, until they’re interrupted by the sound of voices, and the front door 
opening.

By the end of their talk, Eddie seems to feel much better.

But Stan doesn’t.

Because he’s finding it almost irritating that people keep coming to him for advice about something 
he hasn’t ever even had the luxury of experiencing for himself before. He has read a lot, and he likes 
being prepared, and he likes just knowing about things. And when he first realised he was gay, he 
did his research, because Stan researches everything until he knows it inside and out. When he first 
became interested in bird-watching, early in middle school, he could recite the name of every bird in 
his encyclopaedia within a few weeks, in perfect alphabetical order. When he gained an interest in 
flowers and plants, in high school, he could name them all in English ‘and’ Hebrew, within a couple 
of days, and could recognise many of them by scent alone. So it only followed that when Stan 
realised he was gay, when he was thirteen years old, he did as much research as he possibly could, 
hiding books and magazines inside the pages of others at the library. And eventually, when his 
parents bought him a computer, and the World Wide Web became widely accessible, Stan had all the 
information he could possibly want, right at his fingertips.

But just knowing all of that information doesn’t count for anything if he can’t put any of it to use. 
And Stan knows that he can have a short temper anyway, but the older he gets with his virginity still 
intact, and the more time he spends with Bill, the more likely he is to snap at the other Losers, the 
more likely he is to lose patience very quickly, the more frustrated he seems to get.

And Lord, is he frustrated.

He tosses and turns in bed that night thinking about the fact that Eddie Kaspbrak, the tiny, 
mysophobic, panic-ridden, ball of fury he calls one of his closest friends, is going to lose his virginity 
before Stan. And that means that so is Richie, one of the dirtiest, most irritating, and goofiest people
Stan has ever met in his life. And everyone knows that Ben and Beverly are already enjoying regular intercourse, and so is Mike, with so many different people the other Losers can’t even keep track of his partners. Stan finds it really difficult to fall asleep, when he’s feeling so bitter, and cold, and frightfully unsatisfied.

When he eventually does sleep, he dreams about Bill.

He always dreams about Bill.

Stan thought he had passed that awkward, unpredictable, wet-dream phase of his life, when he was pubescent and hormonal and first started to realise he had sexual feelings for Bill Denbrough, but now that Bill is taller, and more handsome than ever, and his shoulders are broader, and Stan knows the feeling of Bill’s solid chest against his body, knows the firm, dextrous grip of his artistic hands, and the intoxicating taste of his plump lips, his dreams are even more vivid, and frequent, and filthy.

He drifts feverishly in and out of his slumber, in a hazy, sweaty jumble of moments which he can’t recall are reality or fantasy, the kind of unpleasant, almost hallucinogenic sleep that actually leaves you feeling more tired than before. In his dazed, disordered dreams, he feels Bill’s body on top of him, between his legs, grinding him into the mattress so hard he can’t breathe, hot breath against his neck, the tickle of satin hair brushing his cheek, Stan feels the strain in his groin of a pleasure that should be amazing, but that just isn’t real. The feelings and images blur during a moment where he might be awake, but he can’t really tell, then he’s back, he feels Bill’s hands on his bare skin, blunt nails drawing their way down his stomach to his hips, there’s a head between his shaking thighs, and more pressure is building, there, again, but it’s still not right, it’s still not enough. He feels cool air tickling against his face, drawing attention to the sweat on his forehead, and it’s quite unpleasant, but then it’s gone again, and he’s on his front, now, he’s aware of Bill behind him, he knows it’s Bill without looking, can feel his chest against his back, feel some kind of fullness inside him, and he’s being rocked forward, in short, sharp movements, and fuck, it’s good, but it’s still wrong.

God, he wants it to be real.

And he feels like crying because that horrible, straining pressure is still there in the bottom of his abdomen, like his body is desperate to experience this pleasure, to taste this bliss, but he can’t.

It’s just a dream.

It’s not real.

He needs more.

He wakes up slowly, in a dizzy, uncomfortable haze, and his eyelids feel heavy, and he can sense a familiar, almost painful, constricting, stickiness in his underwear, and he audibly sighs, as though venting some of his irritation to the room. Stan has lost count of how many times he has woken up like this, in recent memory, but he knows it’s a lot. He knows it’s too many. And it has always been frustrating, but now, it’s getting unbearable; this is the first time it has made him feel tearful, because he is so pent-up, that he almost feels like he needs to cry to release some of it.

Stan rolls onto his front, squinting groggily in the dark at the alarm clock on his nightstand. It’s 2:18. The neon numbers are fuzzy at the edges and it mirrors a slight buzzing in his head, the kind of irritating, background headache caused by lack of decent sleep, or being woken too early. It’s only making him feel more aggravated. And the fabric of his clothing against his body is bothersome, too; Stan gets really cold when he sleeps, so he often wears a sweater to bed, and thick socks, as well, and this is his favourite cream sweater, and his socks match nicely, and normally they’re comforting, but now they just feel itchy and claustrophobic. And that’s not to mention the fact that the soft, light
material of his pyjama pants now feel as though they’re suffocating his crotch. He knows he has to do something about that, because he’s so hard he has gone past the point of waiting for it to just go away on its own. But he almost lacks the energy to do it, because he knows he can make it feel good, he has done it so many times and in so many different ways that he might consider himself an expert at this point, but he also knows that no matter how many times he does it, it still won’t be enough, he still won’t feel satisfied, he’ll still want more.

Stan ponders this, as his hips press ever-so-slightly into the bed, betraying his mind in a search for pleasure and relief. He has the sudden, overwhelming urge to keep going, because it feels good, to just keep grinding into the mattress until he sees stars behind his eyelids, but he doesn’t, almost as though he’s punishing his body for succumbing to its base urges so easily. Instead, he gets up, throwing the sheets away from his body aggressively, and then occupying himself for several minutes by remaking the bed impossibly neatly, tucking in every edge and corner until it looks like it belongs in a showroom rather than a bedroom.

He paces for a while.

He tugs his sweater away from his skin and considers changing into something else, because it’s bothering him so much, but his room is cold, so he doesn’t.

He goes over to the desk, and moves the pot plant a few millimetres to the left.

Seconds later, he returns to it and moves it the same distance back to the right again.

This happens again several times, until he forces himself to stop, because he knows by now that he will never be fully satisfied with its placement.

He can’t bear to mess up the bed he has just made, so instead of sitting, when he feels tired, he leans back against the wall by the door; his head makes a soft thud against it.

His hands find their way down to the uncomfortably tight material between his thighs, pressing and kneading and rubbing slowly through the fabric. He knows he’ll have to change his clothes, if he does it like this, but he almost doesn’t care, because he needs it. And he tries not to think about Bill, he really does, because if he thinks about Bill he knows it will be over too soon, and Stan likes to do this slowly, to get the most out of it he can, to delay the finish for a much more satisfying end result.

But he can’t.

He can never stop thinking about Bill.

And it’s like something snaps, then, and his hand has found the door handle before his brain has even ordered it to, and then he’s out in the corridor, and he can see the door to Bill’s bedroom right across from him, no more than five or six steps away. And Bill’s door is slightly ajar, and there’s a faint, warm, slightly flickering light coming through the gap, and Stan doesn’t really believe in ‘divine intervention’, despite being devoutly religious, but if ever there was a sign from God telling him what to do, he swears this is it. Because the corridor is cold, and dark, and the light coming from Bill’s room just looks so warm and inviting, and before he knows it, he has entered its glow.

Bill is sitting at the desk, wearing a pair of striped pyjama pants and a white t-shirt, one knee pulled up towards his chest so that he can rest a notepad against it, onto which he is scribbling quickly in pencil, beside the light of a single candle. He doesn’t seem to notice Stan come in, at first, because he’s so deep in concentration, like if he doesn’t finish writing, he’ll forget what it was he wanted to write. When he does see him, from the corner of his eye, he jumps slightly, and then lets out a soft, quiet laugh, resting his hand against his chest.
“You s-scared me.”

“Sorry.” Stan pushes the door to again, and his eyes scan Bill’s room. Everything about it is just warm, and comfortable, and charming, despite all the clutter. It is the opposite of Stan’s room, which is perfectly neat and organised, exactly the way Stan likes it, but which sometimes feels cold and… lonely.

“You okay?” Bill asks gently, affectionately, examining Stan’s face for a sign of anything that might cause concern.

“Yeah…” Stan nods, tugging the sleeves of his sweater down over his hands a little, and folding his arms as he goes to stand beside him, “What are you writing?”

Bill is still watching him like he has to make extra sure Stan is okay, before they move onto another topic.

“Oh, uh…this probably s-seems a little w-weird, but...sometimes I have these really vi-vivid nightmares, and…I write them all down before I f-forget.” Bill taps the end of the pencil against the page a few times, “S-s-some of them I can flesh out and make g-good stories out of.”

Stan doesn’t even know why that makes him feel guilty.

“What was this one about?” He points to the notebook balanced on Bill’s knee, the topmost page of which is covered in tiny, messy handwriting.

“A clown.”

Stan’s stomach lurches uncomfortably, but he can’t recall why that makes him feel so uneasy. He tightens his arms across his chest as he shudders. Bill is still watching him.

“A-are you cold?”

“A little. But it’s fine, I’m always cold,” Stan shrugs, but it doesn’t seem to matter, because Bill is already up, and pulling a tartan throw from the end of his bed to wrap it around Stan’s shoulders. He hates when Bill is so nice, because it gives Stan this sinking feeling in his chest, like he knows he doesn’t deserve him. Still, he smiles.

“I said ‘it’s fine’, Bill.”

Bill chuckles softly, “I still don’t want you to be c-cold.”

There’s a short silence between them, and Bill is still standing really close to him, holding the edges of the throw against Stan’s chest.

“Y-you can stay in h-here…if you w-want to…”

Stan feels his stomach lurch again, but this time, he doesn’t feel uneasy at all. He’s suddenly hyper-aware of how hard he still is, and he thanks himself for not changing out of his thick, cream sweater, because it’s hiding his embarrassing arousal from Bill somewhat. Not that he would even care if Bill noticed, he just wonders what he’d do if he did. Would he be disgusted? Creeped out? No. Stan knows he wouldn’t. This is Bill. Bill would, at the very least, be understanding even if he were embarrassed. And at most, he would…

Please.
Stan doesn’t speak, but he can feel himself begging with every fibre in his body.

*Please, Bill.*

He feels his eyes stinging with tears, and he hurries to blink them away, rubbing his hands across his face, but he knows it’s too late. He doesn’t even know *why* it’s happening.

“W-what’s wrong?” Bill steps closer. His voice is thick with worry, “Do you f-feel bad again?”

“No!” Stan shakes his head, and he has managed to stop the tears before they really started, but he knows his voice still sounds weak and emotional, “I’m fine I don’t know why…there’s nothing wrong with me this is just embarrassing.”

Bill is rubbing his shoulders comfortingly, now, and he’s so close, Stan can almost feel Bill’s breath on his face.

“I-it’s okay, Stan, you c-can tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell! I’m fine! I promise.”

“S-sorry, Stan, but you’re a b-bad liar.”

“I think I’m just tired.”

“I d-don’t think that’s it.”

Stan can feel his heart beating faster and faster by the second.

“Okay! I’m not sad! I’m frustrated!” He blurts, suddenly.

“Wh-why? Is it me? Is it s-something I did? Are you m-mad at me?”

“No, Bill!” Stan lets out a short, heavy breath, “I’m not mad!”

“But you j-just said—”

*Frustrated, Bill! I’m so…frustrated.* The second time he says it, it sounds pathetic, *pleading*, like he’s begging Bill to understand what he means, but they could keep going in circles like this forever.

“I want you.”

The silence in the room, then, is awful.

Stan can’t tell what Bill is thinking from his blank expression.

So he just keeps going.

“Bill, I *want* you,” he says again, thinking he can’t possibly say it enough times to prove just how *much* it’s true, “I *need* you.”

Stan’s fingers pull at the front of Bill’s shirt, but they’re so close already. His voice isn’t raised, anymore, now it’s quiet and desperate and heavy.

“I just…I can’t stand it…I want you…I want you to *touch me*…” Bill’s expression has softened, now, and Stan can see warmth and love and desire in his eyes that spurs him on, “Everywhere. Anywhere. I don’t even care I just *need* you to *touch me.*” Bill’s hands are still holding the throw
around Stan’s shoulders, and he sees and feels them loosen, “And I want you to kiss me. I want you to kiss me everywhere, too, put your mouth all over my body.” They both lean in, now, their eyes lock, for a while, and then Bill’s gaze drifts down to Stan’s lips, following their movement as he talks, “I want you to taste me.” Stan swears Bill shudders. “I want you to put your tongue and your fingers inside me.” Bill is drifting ever closer, and when Stan speaks, now, he can feel Bill’s hot breath ghosting his lips, and then their foreheads are together. “I want you to fuck me.”

That seems to be the last straw, because the second those words leave Stan’s lips, Bill’s mouth is on them. And Bill is a clumsy kisser at the best of times, but this time, their teeth crash together when they meet, and it hurts a little, but Stan couldn’t care less, he wouldn’t have even cared if Bill had stabbed him at this point, he still would’ve kept kissing him. And it’s a frenzied, needy, careless kiss that doesn’t have the time to be deep and passionate, the way their kisses normally are, because their mouths are parting and reconnecting so hard and so frequently that it only takes a few minutes of it before neither of them can breathe properly. But breathing is clearly at the very bottom of the list of things they care about doing right now, because they don’t stop, and the throw has left Stan’s shoulders and is pooled around them on the floor, and Stan’s hands are fisted in the front of Bill’s shirt so hard he thinks he might rip it, and Bill’s hands are constantly moving, first on Stan’s neck, then in his hair, now they’re on the small of his back, pulling him closer.

And Stan feels physically faint at the feeling of Bill’s hands there on his body, but every part of him is still screaming for more, even as their kiss slows and deepens, so that tongues can safely navigate their way between lips without being bitten or battered. And then it all becomes less aggressive, and less rushed, and Stan sinks against Bill as he feels his hands slip up under his sweater and start running all over his bare back, and Lord, he has never been more turned on in his life. Bill’s fingers are so warm against his cold skin, and the perfect combination of soft and textured, as they feel all up and down the ridges of his spine, trace across his shoulder blades, and then stop right at the bottom again, pressing gently but repeatedly into his lower back and his hips, in some sort of weird, subconscious massage Stan never knew he wanted or needed until he relaxes, and actually feels his legs weakening.

Bill gives him a little indicative tug, then, as he backs into the chair, sinking into it slowly so that their lips never have to part, and bringing Stan down with him, into his lap. Stan feels Bill’s hands brace on his hips as he straddles him in the chair, chest-to-chest, and he feels the hard, distinct shape of Bill’s erection against his own, and he feels dizzy with lust.

Their kiss is still so passionate and deep, and Stan never thought Bill was a particularly skilled kisser, his kissing is always more rash and enthusiastic than talented, and his lips are always dry and chapped, and sometimes he’s really clumsy, but now he’s licking at the sensitive roof of Stan’s mouth slowly, over and over and over, and it feels so good, and Stan starts following the languid movements with his hips, grinding into Bill’s lap, and it’s like every nerve in his body is prickling with pleasure, and he’s so glad he didn’t stay in his room.

And then Stan hears Bill groan into his mouth, on a hard, slow grind, and he swears his brain is going to short-circuit if Bill makes a noise like that again; he almost whimpers in response, because he can’t handle how amazing he sounds, and how amazing he feels, just how amazing Bill is. He’s finally thankful for all of the self-practice he has had, increasing his sexual stamina, because he knows if he hadn’t, he’d be embarrassingly close to coming right now already. In fact, he still thinks he’s close. And that would be fine, if it weren’t for the fact that Stan can’t bear for this to end so soon. And if he comes, now, it’ll be good, yes, but he knows it could be so much better. So he stops moving his hips, and parts his mouth from Bill’s, admiring the way Bill follows him and chases his lips a little at first, feeling sadistically powerful.

“Bill…” Stan’s hands slide up either side of his face, drawing Bill’s eyes away from his lips and up
into his own. Bill looks as wantonly *wrecked* as Stan feels, pupils blown so wide he can barely see
the colour of his irises, already full lips swollen to *godliness* and wet with Stan’s saliva, “Bill, please
will you…do something…for me…” Bill is clearly listening, and nods, even though he doesn’t know
what’s being asked of him, yet.

“A-anything,” He responds, and Stan *knows* he means it. He shudders at the thought.

Stan reaches for one of Bill’s wrists, now, lifts his hand between them, close to his lips, and draws
the tip of his tongue up the centre of his palm. Bill watches Stan’s mouth in lustful fascination,
unfurling his fingers and stretching them out as Stan’s tongue slips between them, between his
middle and ring fingers, then follows all the way up to the pad of the longest, and presses both of
them between his lips. Bill looks as though he has never seen anything sexier in his *life*, he doesn’t
even seem to be breathing. And once Bill’s fingers are in Stan’s mouth up to the furthest knuckle, he
draws back slowly, releases them again, leaving Bill looking weak and slightly stunned.

“Bill,” Stan repeats his name, as he presses forehead to forehead, and the way he says it sounds so
hungry and desperate, that Bill’s brow furrows in lovesick compliance, and Stan knows before he
says anything more, that Bill will give him *anything* he wants.

“I-it’s okay,” Bill assures softly, as though he’s *really* giving him permission to ask for *anything*.

“Please.”

Bill leans in to Stan’s neck, now, dry, but soft lips brushing their way up from his collarbone to his
jaw, encouraging him to tip his head back. And he does, giving Bill full access to the long, slender
expanse of pale, unblemished skin, there. Stan can’t see, now, as Bill scatters gentle, slow kisses
across his neck and jawline, but he feels the heel of Bill’s hand against his abdomen, and then his
fingers pressing down to breach the waistline of his pyjama bottoms and his underwear, and soon he
can feel Bill’s damp palm curving around his bare erection and he has no idea how this can feel *so
much better* than his own hand, but *fuck*, it does.

But that’s still not what he wants.

He wants something *inside* him. He wants that profound, all-consuming pleasure that can only come
from deep within his body. He has felt it before, he has done it himself, but there’s only *so far* she
can reach, so much he can do. He can never seem to reach that blissful climax he knows is there, if
he could just get the angle right.

He doesn’t know if he has it in him to tell Bill what those two spit-slicked fingers were really meant
for, maybe it wasn’t as obvious a suggestion as he thought, but then he feels lips against his ear, and
Bill’s low, gentle voice is whispering.

“L-lower?”

Stan feels a shiver run through his whole body, and he nods quickly, he drops his head forward, it
hits against Bill’s, and they’re eye-to-eye again.

“T-tell me what to do,” Bill says softly, then, as Stan feels Bill’s hand pushing down between his
thighs and underneath him. It’s a poor angle for this, but Stan doesn’t say so, because he *so* wants to
stay here, as close to Bill as he is now, right in his lap, right against his chest, foreheads together.

The tip of Bill’s middle finger, still fairly wet, presses in to rest against the tight ring of puckered
muscle there, and Stan knows it might be uncomfortable, because he has never done *anything* like
this without lube, before, and he knows that Bill has probably never done anything like this before,
period, but right now, he really couldn’t care less; he has never wanted anything more in his whole life.

“Push…it’ll go.” Stan says quietly, and notices the very audible shake in his own voice.

There’s a second’s pause, and then he feels Bill’s finger sink into him slowly. It doesn’t go in nearly as easily as it would have if they weren’t just using saliva for lubrication, but the extra friction, and the little bit of extra force behind it, combined with the fact that that’s Bill’s finger inside him, makes Stan feel light-headed.

“Are you sure it doesn’t hurt?”

“It doesn’t,” Stan responds quickly, holding onto the backrest of the chair behind Bill’s head as he shifts his hips a little out of his lap, making room for his hand.

Stan’s underwear and his pyjama bottoms are really hindering any decent movement, but when he feels Bill’s finger plunge all the way into him until it can’t go in any deeper, he thinks movement doesn’t matter. Bill’s eyes are still cloudy with lust, but there’s concern in the lines on his forehead, because he clearly doesn’t know what he’s doing, and he’s worried about hurting him.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Stan breathes again, against Bill’s lips, and gives him a few short, encouraging kisses, that quickly end with their mouths reconnecting hot and hard again.

Lost in the heat of the lengthy, passionate kiss, Bill starts moving his finger; Stan feels it twist slightly, at first, as though testing how far it will go, and what resistance is there, but when he realises he can move it, then he suddenly doesn’t seem timid about it, anymore. It starts off slow, and deep, and Stan follows the movements with his body and his hips subconsciously, his pulse quickening, breath shaking into Bill’s mouth, and eyelids fluttering closed. The shameless, carnal desperation he felt in his dream, is building in him again, now.

He wants it deeper, harder, faster.

But he doesn’t have to ask.

As soon as Bill hears a quiet, indecent whimper from the back of Stan’s throat, Stan feels the finger inside him push as though trying to get deeper, and then the movements quicken, gradually get faster over the space of a minute until Stan’s lips go lax against Bill’s because he can’t focus on kissing anymore. There’s pleasure burning in the bottom of his abdomen, but it isn’t fast, and uncontrollable, like when he touches himself on the outside, it’s a slow, intense accumulation, like the building of a thunderstorm.

“I—is it good?”

Bill’s soft, lusty voice makes Stan shudder, and he opens his eyes just enough to see that Bill is watching him, but he doesn’t feel embarrassed or exposed, he feels safe, and loved, adored, like anything he could possibly want, Bill will give him.

He nods, and gravitates towards the crook of Bill’s neck, burying his face into it, breathing in the heady, masculine scent of him, enjoying the feeling of closeness and protection as Bill’s other hand slides against his back and grips at him possessively, and his finger keeps moving inside him, fast and deep and oh so good.

And then Bill’s finger slows, and retreats, Stan feels it leave his body and he wants to complain at its absence, until both of Bill’s hands are on his hips, and he stands to lift Stan onto the edge of the desk, instead. There isn’t a lot of room on it, since it’s littered with pencils, and pens, and balled-up paper,
and paintbrushes, and tubes of acrylic paint in various stages of emptiness, and Bill’s typewriter is
cold against the sliver of skin between Stan’s sweater and his waistband, until Bill pushes it aside.
And then he leans past and in one, sweeping movement, pushes everything else off the desk.
Thankfully, the clutter doesn’t contain any heavy objects, and it isn’t loud, except for the high-
pitched, wooden clatter of so many pencils and brushes hitting the also-wooden floor. Stan couldn’t
care less if anyone heard it, though, because he’s too distracted by Bill now tugging at the waistband
of his bottoms, before he relieves him of not only those, but his underwear, and his socks, too. He
would feel cold, and exposed, and perhaps nervous, now, in his semi-naked state, were it not for the
fact that Bill is leaning over him, shielding his dignity, keeping him warm, and keeping him roused,
as he lifts the hem of Stan’s sweater up under his arms and presses his lips to his chest.

Stan rests up on an elbow and glides the fingers of his free hand through Bill’s silk-like hair,
watching desperately as those gorgeous, sinful lips encircle one of his nipples. And Bill doesn’t suck
hard, or bite, or even graze with his teeth, he’s so gentle and compassionate that it makes Stan
experience both overwhelming infatuation, and frustration, but then he feels Bill’s finger plunge into
him again, and it’s at a better, more accessible angle, now, and all he can do is whimper quietly.

It’s followed by another, Bill’s ring finger, this time, not long after, and Stan is really glad he
included it in his earlier demonstration, when he wet them in his mouth, because Bill has clearly
taken the hint and gone for both together. There’s a slight stretch, but it doesn’t hurt; Stan is used to
doing it with two fingers, that’s when it really starts to get intense. The movements are slowed again,
for a while, and Bill takes the opportunity to lavish Stan’s lips with gentle kisses, and whispers how
beautiful he is, while Stan stares at him through lidded eyes and slightly dishevelled curls, and
responds with equally hushed encouragements, assuring him how good it feels.

And Stan’s breathy reassurances really seem to help Bill’s confidence with it, because soon his
fingers are sinking in and out much faster, again, and Stan feels the intensity of the pleasure in his
groin increase tenfold. It’s all he can do not to literally cry, because it feels so…fucking…good, and
he knows they’re not even at the best part, yet. Not yet. Every time Bill’s fingers push in deep and tilt
a little, Stan can feel it, that acute, hot prickle of intensity, that’s teasing him with a promise of the
most satisfying climax he has ever had. Sadly, he doesn’t think Bill even knows what a prostate is,
much less what you can do with one. He tries for a more instructive approach.

“Bill…Bill…” Stan gives a gentle tug to his hair, where his hand is fisted, drawing Bill’s attention up
from his neck and his jaw. He feels winded every time those piercing blue eyes meet his, and this
time is no exception. He manages to choke out a weak, ‘slow down’, though. Worried that he’s
hurting him, Bill follows the instruction instantly. His fingers almost stop; their deep, slick, languid
movements make Stan feel even more wrecked than when they were moving quickly.

“D…deeper,” He breathes, and again, Bill complies.

“Now bend…c…curve your fingers.” Stan feels the tips of Bill’s long, slender fingers inching so
close to his prostate it’s like torture.

“F…further,” Bill has heard the desperate quiver in Stan’s voice, now, and he knows what he’s
looking for, even if he isn’t very well-informed.

Bill lasciviously admires the way Stan’s head drops back against the wall and his hips inadvertently
buck when he finally finds that solid little bundle of nerves. It feels different to everything else, he
knows that’s it, and he gets both fingers on it as firmly as he can and starts rubbing in small, slow
circles until Stan’s eyes fall closed and he’s whining and shuddering and digging his knees and his
heels hard into Bill’s sides.

And Stan has felt this before, just a few times, and only a little, but now it’s better, more certain. At
first when Bill touches it, and starts rubbing, it’s like his whole body goes numb, and then there’s an odd, but not unpleasant, tingling and buzzing sensation in his abdomen and his groin and his thighs that’s so bizarre and powerful that it almost makes him feel physically sick. But then...then that strange, prickling feeling is replaced with intense, gnawing, burning pleasure, radiating from Bill’s fingers and spreading out through Stan’s body. It’s like nothing he has ever felt, before. He can barely feel anything else, barely comprehend anything else. He vaguely recalls his hands under Bill’s shirt, gripping at him, neat fingernails clawing at the small of his back, Bill’s soft voice in his ear whispering loving encouragements that are driving him even deeper into lust-fuelled insanity, he feels his foot slip against the edge of the desk, but a warm hand catches under his knee, lifts it slightly, and fuck, he’s going to come. At least, he thinks he is, because he’s right there on that mind-numbingly good edge of an orgasm, where the pleasure is unbearable, but his climax doesn’t hit. And he gets stuck there, on that torturous precipice; it’s perfect, beautiful, blissful agony. He can vaguely hear his own voice, but it sounds pathetic and choking, almost sobbing, saying Bill’s name over and over and over, until finally, desperately, he comes. And Stan always thought it was actually a vast exaggeration when people said they saw stars during an orgasm, but now he’s not so sure, because his vision goes hazy, and his mind is swimming like he’s verging on unconsciousness.

When he fully comes to again, he suddenly realises how fast his pulse is, it’s pounding in his ears, along with the sharp sounds of his panting breath, which is frequently choked with tremors. His whole body is trembling, but especially his thighs, and he feels too weak to move. His chest and stomach feel wet, his face feels hot, his palm beside him, that’s flat against the desk, feels sweaty and numb. And then he can’t help but let out a soft, shaky laugh when Bill is kissing the side of his face over and over, and wrapping his arms around him, and even in his post-climax-addled state, Stan has the compulsion to reach between them and press Bill’s clean shirt away from the mess all over Stan’s torso.

Once he’s sitting upright, against the edge of the desk, Stan feels even more light-headed, but he can still feel Bill’s straining erection against the inside of his thigh, and he doesn’t waste any time tucking his head in to kiss and suck at Bill’s neck, squeezing his hands down between their bodies to free it from the confines of his clothing. He feels Bill take in a sharp breath, and has the sudden urge to bite him, so he does, but just very gently, working a dark, reddening bruise into the crook of his neck. He knows Bill has a sensitive neck, especially at the back, where his hairline ends, and Stan gets a hand around there, now, brushing his fingers through his hair, gently drawing his nails across his scalp, and rubbing at the skin. He wants to kiss it, lick it, bite it, but he can’t reach from here, so he keeps his mouth where he can reach, and judging by the way Bill is starting to lean into him, and the way his hands are shaking and knuckles whitening where he’s gripping the edge of the desk either side of Stan’s thighs, he’s really enjoying it anyway.

With his hand between them, Stan wraps thin, lithe fingers around Bill’s erection, and he doesn’t waste any time getting to the good part, rewarding him with fast, firm strokes and rubbing his thumb across the slickened tip every chance he gets. He hears a needy, low groan from Bill and lifts his lips from his neck so that he can see him properly, Stan’s wet mouth grazing Bill’s, now. He knows he’s not going to last long at all, he can see as much in the crease between Bill’s eyes as he closes them tight, and he cannot believe how any human being can be so utterly stunning; an artist who is, in himself, a work of art.

“Come on me,” Stan whispers hotly into his mouth, earning a shudder and a light whimper from Bill.

He swallows Bill’s satisfied moan as he comes, pressing their lips together, tightening his thighs against Bill’s hips, locking his ankles together behind him as he draws him through it, slowing his hand, but not stopping, until he knows every last drop is splattered across his stomach with his own, sticky mess.
They stay there for a while afterwards, holding each other tightly, panting, shaking, until Stan can’t take it anymore, because now he’s starting to feel cold, and dirty, and uncomfortable, and they laugh while they both clean Stan with some wet wipes Bill normally uses to clean paintbrushes and paint spills, and they laugh while Bill gives Stan his clothes back, and puts his socks on for him, and they laugh while they pick all of Bill’s desk clutter up from the floor and put it back in place. Stan doesn’t think he has ever felt this giddy and relaxed in his life.

And when Bill quietly asks, “W-will you stay h-here tonight?” Stan doesn’t even answer, he just climbs into Bill’s bed as he tidies his hair with his fingers.

Stan wonders, as they lie together in the middle of the bed, face-to-face, and Bill’s arm is around his waist, how it can be possible that he finds a room with so much clutter and mess so perfectly comfortable, but suddenly he feels heavy, and tired, and like this is exactly where he wants to be, maybe even for the rest of his life.

Bill’s gentle fingers are stroking through his curls every now and then.

And Bill’s soft lips are frequently pressed to his, or to his cheek, or to his forehead.

And who would ever have thought that Stan Uris could fall asleep pressed against someone else’s body, feeling their hot breath tickling his face?

But he does.
They are 19 years old.

Richie Tozier has always been somewhat of a mystery to his friends.

His funny, carefree, lovable prankster outward personality is so loud and obvious and incessant, that it’s almost impossible to view him as anything but those things. To anyone looking in from the outside, Richie is the kind of person who never gets upset, who never gets mad, who never allows anything to bother him at all. Even some of his closest friends have never seen Richie cry. And even some of his closest, closest friends, Bill, Stan and Eddie, people Richie has been friends with since as far back as kindergarten, have only ever seen him cry once or twice.

That’s not to say that Richie doesn’t care about things; they know all too well that he does. Richie cares so much about his friends, that he would willingly sacrifice his life for any of theirs without a second thought, and they all know he would. He’s the first to notice when someone else is upset, he’s the first to notice when someone else is hurting, he’s the first to wade in when someone else needs help. Unfortunately, though, they also know all too well that Richie is the last to take action when he, himself, is in pain.

Because there is one thing Richie Tozier doesn’t really care about at all.

And that’s Richie Tozier.

Which is why it’s so difficult to tell when there’s something wrong with Richie. Why it’s so difficult to realise he is suffering, because he hides it so well.

Because he doesn’t want people to see it.

Because he doesn’t think he deserves them to.

This time…

…this time it’s bad.

Something that has been festering beneath the surface, like an internal wound that is slowly rotting from the inside out.

It begins to manifest itself in stages, little signs that might be easy to miss if you weren’t looking.

Thankfully, there are people in Richie’s life, who are always looking.

Stan is the first to notice.

The very same morning after Stan and Bill first ever share a bed; Bill’s bed. It’s later than they’d both normally get up, especially Stan, who is almost always the first to rise of all of the Losers, alongside Mike. Stan did wake up early, this morning, same as usual, but things feel…different, now. He doesn’t feel the same urgent need to get out of bed the instant he wakes, to start his routine, because this time, Bill is here. Because Stan opens his eyes, and there is Bill’s sleeping face, only inches away, softly snoring, eyelids fluttering just-so, perhaps in the wake of a dream Stan hopes is a pleasant one. And Stan feels peaceful, lying there next to him, admiring the way the transitional spring sun, somehow brighter in a crisp, cold sky, breaks through the little gap in the curtains and highlights the shimmering strands of copper and red in Bill’s beautiful auburn hair. He watches the
stream of golden light fall across his handsome face, traces the edges of it with feather-light fingertips, over the bridge of Bill’s nose, and down the side of his cheek, tucking a small section of loose bangs behind his ear. The moment feels perfectly serene.

That is, until Stan hears heavy, graceless footsteps in the corridor outside, and Richie’s loud, insufferable voice, breaking sharply through the blissful silence like a foghorn.

“Biiiiiiillllllll!”

Shit.

“Williaaaaaam!”

Before Stan can do anything to prevent it, Richie is barging his way in through the door, which is still slightly ajar from the previous night. The sound is finally enough to wake Bill from his slumber; he’s a rather heavy sleeper. Now, though, he startles awake, as the door swings fast on its hinges and hits the adjoining wall.

“Oh my GOD!” Richie exclaims, after he has forced his way inelegantly into the room, wearing nothing but a pair of faded boxer shorts and a long-sleeved t-shirt that is full of holes, with the ‘AC/DC’ logo emblazoned across the front. It is somehow still too big for him, despite the fact that he’s a giant, and is hanging off one of his shoulders. “Stanley?? What ON EARTH are you doing IN HERE?? IN BILL’S BED?!” He is getting gradually louder and louder, and is now leaning comically out through the doorway with his hands cupped either side of his mouth, bellowing his dramatic performance for the entire household to hear. Somewhere in the distance, probably from the bathroom, they can hear Mike laughing.

“B-beep beep, Ri-Rich,” Bill chuckles, and groans groggily, burying his head beneath the pillow and holding it down against his ears.

Stan just rolls his eyes, and then his body away from Bill, propping himself onto his elbows to look at Richie scathingly.

“Well, I was ‘sleeping’.”

“Bet that’s not all you guys were doing, huh?!” Richie laughs, as he clambers onto Bill’s bed and plops himself down heavily between them, all knees and elbows.

Stan shoves Richie’s gangly arm out of his face, though he is now sporting a very small, but decidedly smug smirk. Richie doesn’t fail to notice this, either.

“You were doing something?!”

“That’s none of your business.” Stan says bluntly, but he’s looking hard into Richie’s eyes, in silent communication, and Richie’s eyebrows rise quickly and he’s laughing again.

“Did you fuck?!”

“No.”

Bill’s slightly uncomfortable tittering is muffled beneath the pillow. He draws his head back out and his cheeks are all red, and his hair, almost always flat and smooth, is now fluffed up by static, and sticking up all over the place. He’s looking at Richie.

“Wh-why are you s-so obsessed with wh-what we’re d-d-doing?”
“Because I think I’m going to die a virgin at this rate, and if that’s how my life is going to be, I’d like to at least live vicariously through one of you.” Richie sighs theatrically, throwing himself over Stan’s lap and dropping the back of his hand against his forehead, nearly battering his own glasses off his face.

Stan sniggers and rolls his eyes again, pushing a little at Richie’s head at first as though to force him off, but it’s half-hearted, and his hand settles in Richie’s hair, and he starts ruffling his fingers gently through the curls with definite affection.

“If that’s the case, you should probably be living vicariously through Mike, instead.”

Bill chuckles, and nods, resting his chin on his hand, and watching Richie and Stan almost adoringly.

“Well, you see, I would, but have you seen some of the fucking fuglies he brings home with him? Some of them have hot bodies and all, but that girl he was with last week? Talk about a ‘butterface’! Yeesh!”

“M-maybe M-Mike’s not so shallow.”

“Or maybe Mike just likes to hit it from the back.” Richie asserts shamelessly, swinging his legs over Bill’s back and getting himself comfortable, “That way he doesn’t have to look at their faces.”

“Richie, that’s disgusting.” Stan sounds disapproving, but he straightens Richie’s glasses on his face anyway, and continues to run his fingers through his messy hair.

“What? Like you guys aren’t so fucking superficial? Bill has literally been hot since forever, and Stan looks like he was fucking carved by Michelangelo. I totally get what you see in each other.”

“That’s not all there is to our relationship, Richie!” Stan retorts irritably.

“Yeah! I m-mean, Stan is b-beautiful, but he al-also h-has, uh...uhmmmm...uhh...” Bill purses his lips comically as though in thought for a while, and laughs when Stan gives him a ‘look’, “I’m k-kidding! S-s-sorry.”

Stan chuckles, and rest his chin atop Richie’s head, and it’s when his arms slide around Richie’s chest, and they fit far too easily around him, and he feels the distinctive ridges of Richie’s ribs, that he thinks something about it feels… off. He knows Richie has always been skinny, especially since he grew so tall and was…stretched out, almost, but this…this feels different…it feels wrong. He almost flinches away from him, because he hasn’t really been this close to Richie in a while, and he’s sure the last time he hugged him, he wasn’t this...skeletal.

“Richie, you’re so skinny.” Stan says it almost like it’s a question.

“Yeah.” Richie laughs, like it’s obvious, “So?”

“I guess I just never really noticed before.”

“Okay…” Richie snorts and makes faces at Bill, but it almost seems like he’s trying too hard to make light of it. Even Bill’s expression twitches briefly with confusion, like something strange has passed between them all briefly, and then it’s gone.

They don’t talk any more about it, after that.

Ben is the second to consider that anything might be wrong.
He’s always in the kitchen, since he cooks the most, and even though Stan likes to organise the cupboards, and the refrigerator, and decide where everything goes when they’ve been grocery shopping, Ben is probably the one who knows the kitchen’s contents the best. There’s a specific cupboard in the uppermost top corner, and it’s the best one, because it’s filled with all of the unhealthy snacks their hearts could possibly desire. And everyone knows that Richie raids this cupboard on the regular, and is the most enthusiastic about choosing which treats go in it, despite the fact that he almost never pays his share of the grocery bill.

The other Losers don’t really mind, though; they pick up Richie’s slack where finances are concerned, without ever mentioning it to him, because they don’t want him to worry or feel guilty. And Stan does all of their accounts, and makes impossibly neat and organised charts and lists on his computer of all of their incomings and outgoings, and makes sure they never overspend, so Richie’s little hiccups don’t really affect them all that much.

At the very least, they have four half-decent incomes, that, along with plenty of federal loans, which are also dealt with by Stan, and some parental help, from Stan’s, Bill’s, and Ben’s parents, in this case, the Losers never really worry about money.

Bill is re-applying his skills as a barista, though this time it’s at the local Starbucks café. He tried freelance writing, at first, but the only work he was really getting was writing ads for newspapers and magazines, and not only did it not pay well, but he found it boring and unsatisfying, too. He still dabbles in it occasionally, though, when he wants a bit of extra cash.

Stan works at an accountancy firm, on weekends, and he’s so precise and efficient and so good with numbers and computers, that he’s already better than a lot of his co-workers, who have been there for decades. He can also type really, really quickly, which lends itself to a lot of afternoons in Bill’s room, helping him type up his stories and some of the paid articles he writes, because Bill prefers pen and paper, and he’s surprisingly slow at typing. Everyone knows that’s not all they do on those long afternoons in Bill’s room, though.

Ben starts working as a tutor for middle and high school kids, and although his dream is to be an architect, the other Losers often comment on how great he would be as a teacher, because he’s really clever, and very gentle and patient, and he’s brilliant with children. And he brings the kids he tutors homemade cookies and buys them little gifts when they pass tests he has helped them to study for, and lends them his own books, and gets really emotional when they do well.

And Mike always drives Ben to his tutoring sessions; the two of them often overlap, because Mike now works weekends in the library right next to the nearest high school. Even the kids who don’t usually read have started hanging out in there, just so they can chat with Mike, the cool, young librarian, who doesn’t mind when they’re a bit loud, and has an awesome truck, and always sets up little games and treasure hunts in the library to encourage kids to get involved with reading.

Now, though, they’re starting to be able to add Eddie to their little job roster, because within the space of three weeks, Eddie has learned to drive on an intensive course, bought himself a car with his surprisingly bountiful savings, and has started taxiing people around for money. At first, he was just doing it for free, because he has realised he actually loves driving, and he’s so good at it, that he feels it’s finally something he has full control of; being behind the wheel, commanding such a powerful machine, makes Eddie feel powerful, too. He started offering rides to people from college, and the word spread, because he has a really nice car, and he keeps it impossibly clean, and he can somehow memorise street names and road maps almost eidetically, and then he got so many requests that people started offering him money to take them places.

Eddie is so possessive over his car, that for a while after he first bought it, he wouldn’t let his friends
even go near it, especially not Richie. Which is understandable, since Richie is a human tornado, and Eddie’s car is both beautiful and expensive; a BMW 7-series, with a glossy black exterior, five doors, and leather seats. And even when he finally agreed to allow them near, and inside his car, Eddie still vacuums the interior every other day, and cleans and polishes the outside every weekend, and tucks it under a thick tarp every night between Mike’s truck, and Bill’s crappy little Volkswagen Golf, like he thinks if anything happens, at least the other two vehicles will be hit or targeted first and divert injury from the BMW. And still, he won’t allow any of them to bring food or drinks within a 10-foot radius of it, and definitely won’t let them put groceries in the trunk or on the seats, in case anything spills or leaks. Richie jokes that Eddie gets more turned on by the car than he does by him, and insists the three of them are now in a polyamorous relationship.

Still, the car has been good for all of them, because not only does it make Eddie happy, but now that he basically has his own taxi service, they have more money coming in, and they definitely don’t have to worry about paying for Richie’s insatiable appetite.

And it really is insatiable; Richie and Bill, in particular, have always been big eaters, and are often stupidly competitive about it. The other Losers can still vividly recall the last time the two of them decided to turn it into a contest, at an all-you-can-eat buffet, and Bill ended up vomiting in an alleyway, while Eddie hid his head inside his jacket and screeched ‘I told you!’, and Mike, Bev and Ben patted at Bill’s back and laughed, while Stan rolled his eyes and grimaced, and Richie whooped and danced around behind him in victory, seeming completely unaffected. Richie seems to be able to eat and eat and eat and just never get full; he’s just always hungry, which is why Ben thinks it’s strange, when they put away the groceries, and he opens the snack cupboard, and it’s just as full as it was last time. Normally, it’d be empty by now.

Richie comes into the kitchen while Ben and Mike are making dinner, and Bev is sitting on the countertop, swinging her legs, as her and Mike sing a rousing rendition of ‘You’re the one that I want’, as Sandy and Danny from ‘Grease’, and are theatrically performing it out. Mike is peeling potatoes, but so far has been peeling the same one for about ten minutes, since he keeps stopping to dance against Bev, and using the peeler as a microphone during his parts of the duet. Richie sees them and laughs, and starts dancing with Mike as he moves around him to get to the refrigerator, singing along loudly, and then dances around Bev on his way back, cracking open the can of soda he’s now holding.

“Hey, Rich, did you notice we got the double stuff Oreos this time? There are three packs in the cupboard,” Ben mentions offhandedly, as he’s slicing an onion. He feels Richie lean against his back, looping his arms around him, with his chin on Ben’s shoulder, and can’t help but notice the way the hollows of Richie’s cheeks look slightly sunken from the corner of his eye. It might not be visible to anyone else, but Ben thinks it’s glaringly obvious.

“Yeah…” Richie responds dully, watching the knife in Ben’s hand.

“They’re still your favourite, right?” Ben notices Richie’s uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm.

“Yeah, I guess…I’m just…not really all that hungry.”

Ben is chopping more slowly, now.

“Oh. Well, are you feeling okay? Do you think you’re getting sick?”

Richie lets out a soft, but slightly indifferent laugh.

“No…I don’t think so.”
They’re both silent for a while, and Ben feels Richie’s arms tighten just-so around his chest, before letting go.

“Hey, maybe I’m just finally full,” Richie chuckles, as he moves away, back to his usual, giddy self, but Ben thinks it seems forced. “Or maybe Eddie is slowly poisoning me like I’ve always suspected!” He calls as he leaves the room, and Ben stands there for a while quietly, thinking hard.

He watches Richie while they’re at the table, and notices that while he diverts them all loudly with jokes and impressions and distracting bravado, he barely eats any of his food.

Mike is the third to see that something is wrong.

He’s taking out the trash, and stuffed into the corner of the outside trash can, he sees a couple of unopened letters, bearing the NYU logo. He carefully wiggles one of them free from the black bag it’s trapped against, and sees the name, ‘Mr Richard Tozier’, addressed on the front. The second letter is the same. Mike doesn’t really know why, but before he even knows what the letters are about, he feels a bit sick. He has his suspicions, and assumes the worst.

It makes his heart sink, thinking about how enthusiastically Richie has taken to being in college, and studying theatre. Mike remembers when Richie had to ‘audition’ as part of his original application, and Mike drove him up to New York, with Eddie in tow. It was an eight and a half hour drive, which meant that they had to drive through the night to make the morning audition, and the three of them were fed-up and exhausted by the time they got there, and it was the first time they had ever seen Richie genuinely nervous for something. They knew he had to prepare a monologue, as part of what the ‘School of Arts’ called his ‘artistic review’, but Richie, being Richie, didn’t prepare a damn thing. Yet, somehow, when it came his turn to perform, he just nailed it, with his effortless, stand-up comedy routine, switching voices and expressions to play different characters. And Richie’s impressions have literally never been good, so Mike and Eddie were both surprised when they were good… in fact, when they were shockingly good. And he sang a bit, and danced a bit, and it somehow all fit into one outstanding, cohesive piece; you’d have thought he had been planning and rehearsing it for months. And Eddie was crying with laughter, as he watched from the back of the room, and then crying with pride, when it was over, and they knew he’d done so well, and even though they hadn’t slept in nearly twenty-four hours, the three of them sang loudly in the front of the truck the whole drive back to Maine, gleeful and excited.

And when they all moved to New York, and Richie started his classes, and he came home a hyperactive, enthusiastic buzz of energy, rambling on, and on, and on about how the theatre kids were all freaks, but they were amazing freaks, and how there’s a girl in his school who can swallow swords, and a guy who wears a monocle and a top hat all of the time unironically, and they were all so happy that Richie was so happy that they spent the rest of the night just listening to him talk and do impressions and tell jokes, and it was great.

And so, knowing that, Mike can’t just let this slide, he approaches Richie with the crumpled letters in his hand, finding him in the alley behind their house, leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette.

“Rich?” Mike questions seriously, holding up the letters with his eyebrows raised.

Richie sees them and lowers the cigarette from his lips, and Mike is sure he sees fear and pain in Richie’s eyes, for a second, before he laughs it off.

“Yeah, my bad. I missed a couple classes.”

“A ‘couple’ of classes?” Mike waves both of the letters in front of him, “Are you sure? They send
“Mike, it’s not a big deal, okay?” Richie chuckles, taking another drag of his cigarette, but his fingers are shaking a bit when he does it, “I slept in, I was lazy, I missed some classes, it won’t happen again, yada yada yada.”

Mike looks sceptical, “Rich,” but Richie cuts over him before he can say anything else.

“Stop, Mike! I’m good, it’s all good! It’s not a big deal!” He repeats, but the shake in his hand is getting worse. He straightens his glasses on his face using the knuckle of his thumb, and Mike suddenly notices how red the whites of Richie’s eyes are, concealed behind the thick, smudged lenses. He moves closer, leans back against the wall beside him, and rests his hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

“You okay, Rich?”

Richie shrugs his hand away, but it’s not aggressive, and he lets out another short laugh.

“I’m fine. Gimme a break, I’m just trying to enjoy my fucking cigarette.”

Mike is silent for a while, but he keeps watching him.

“Stop staring at me, ya weirdo!” Richie sniggers, flicking the cigarette butt onto the ground and grinding it out with his boot, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re stalking me, Michael.”

Mike can’t help but chuckle, but he still feels unsettled.

“Just promise me you’re not gonna miss any more classes, I can drive you to school if you-”

“I can get to school on my own, I’m fine! Geez, I expect this from Eddie, but you?!”

“I care about you, Richie.”

Richie seems to go silent for a millisecond too long, and Mike notices that, too, before Richie says, “Gross,” and smirks as he passes him to go back inside the house.

“Just promise me!” Mike calls after him as he follows.

“Sure, whatever!”

Mike stands in the alley for a while, feeling confused and a little bit numb.

Bill sees it, next.

He and Richie are lounging together in the ‘games room’, in a beanbag chair each, playing Street Fighter on Richie’s Playstation, shoulders and elbows bumping together as they both furiously button-mash in an aggressive attempt to win. Neither of them do, though, that time, because Richie’s nose starts bleeding out of nowhere, and he drops the controller to cup his hand over the bottom half of his face, using the other to push himself to his feet. Bill pauses the game and looks at him in shock, standing, too.

“Wh-what happened? R-Rich…”

“I’m fine, I’m fine! Just grab me a Kleenex or something, wouldya?!”

Bill hurries into the kitchen, and returns with a wad of kitchen towel, pressing it up into Richie’s
hands against his face.

“H-here, h-h-hold it.”

“I know, I know!”

“Why is your n-nose bleeding?”

“How should I know?!” Richie’s voice is muffled in the paper towels, and he winces a little, as though it stings when he applies pressure, “Maybe it’s from all the times people have punched me in the face!” Bill knows he’s never going to let that go.

Bill laughs a bit, but he looks sympathetic, “Maybe you sh-should go see a doctor.”

“No way! They’re just tiny little nosebleeds, it’ll be over in a couple of seconds.”

“They?’ You mean it’s ha-happened before?”

“Well…once or twice, it’s not a big deal or anything.”

“R-Rich, that’s not n-normal.”

“How do you know?! Are you a doctor?!”

“Y-you don’t have to be a d-d-doctor to know that’s not normal.”

Richie pulls the bloodied mess of tissues away from his face, and wipes under his nose a bit, haphazardly.

“See? It stopped already.”

Bill doesn’t look convinced.

“Rich, if you need t-to go to the doctor, we c-can lend you the mo-money. Whatever yo-“

“NO!” Richie glowers at him, now, “Don’t even fucking start that shit, Bill!”

Bill is taken-aback by Richie’s sudden aggression. The room is silent for a while, as Richie stuffs the dirty, sodden paper towels into the back pocket of his jeans, and then sits back down heavily.

“Are we gonna fucking play, or what?”

Bill sits down almost cautiously next to him, and complies, but he is so caught up in keeping an eye on Richie, that he loses every game after that.

Bev is the fifth to see a sign, but the first to see it clearly for what it is.

She and Richie go to a tattoo parlour together, each excitedly intending to get their first ever patch of permanent ink, probably one of many. Bev goes first, and gets a group of three little butterflies on her ankle, in an array of pretty colours. It stands out prominently above her patterned converse sneakers, since she went without socks, for this very reason, and it looks great on her. She is bouncing in her chair with thrilled anticipation when Richie sits down to get his, but her bouncing soon stops when he rolls his sleeve up to his elbow, and she can see the edge of some bruising peeking from beneath the fabric. She doesn’t say anything, then, just watches Richie get his wrist tattooed in controlled silence. He gets ‘Eddie’, in black ink; small, messy letters spelling out the name. Richie seems so happy about it, and can’t stop looking at it all the way home, as they walk side-by-side, that she
almost doesn’t have the heart to bring it up. But she knows she has to.

“Rich,” she grabs him by the arm, holds onto his hand tenderly, and lifts up his sleeve, half way up his bicep, this time.

There is a small cluster of bruises, on the inside of his elbow, in various colours and stages of healing, and several tiny red marks she knows are from needles. Track marks.

“Rich…” she repeats his name, softer, this time…saddened.

He tugs his hand away from her so fast she flinches, and pulls his sleeve back down to just above the tattoo on his wrist, staring at her hard.

“It’s nothing,” he hisses, but when he sees the look on Bev’s face, he tries to lighten the mood again, and chuckles, “Bev, it’s nothing, I swear, I just tried it!”

“Tried what?”

“I…it was just…nothing that bad, it was just a little bit of meth.”

“Just? Then why are there so many marks, Rich? That’s not just one time!”

“Okay so I did some morphine, too.”

“Richie…”

“What can I say? I like trying exotic new experiences,” he sniggers, but Beverly doesn’t look as though she finds it funny at all.

“It’s not funny…”

“It’s a little funny,” Richie continues to laugh, “the look on your face…”

“I’m not laughing.” She looks serious, now.

“Oh, c’mom, Bev…”

“Does Eddie know about this?”

Richie’s smile instantly drops, and he goes quiet.

“There’s nothing to know, Bev, it’s just a bit of fun…”

“No, it’s not!”

“Bev, stop!” His voice is rising again, now, defensively.

“But…”

“NO! Just fucking drop it, okay?!”

She goes quiet, but her eyes are brimmed just slightly with tears, and she’s looking at Richie in a way he will likely never forget. They walk the rest of the way home in depressed silence, and when they do get there, Eddie doesn’t have the reaction to Richie’s tattoo that he was hoping for, either.

“You got a TATTOO?!”
“Yeah,” Richie is clearly enthused, “Cool, huh?”

Eddie is holding Richie’s wrist and staring at it with slightly wide eyes.

“Of my name?! In such a visible place?!”

Richie snickers, clearly expecting Eddie to freak out at least a little, anyway.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Richie?! I mean are you fucking serious?! Do you know how unhygienic those places can be did you even do any research whatsoever before you went to get this? Did you even check to see if this person was certified to permanently inject ink underneath your fucking skin? Do you even realise how many infections you could get from this and how this could swell and fester and disfigure your arm and scar you forever?!”

“It’s not gonna get infected,” Richie chuckles, “He’s a proper tattoo artist, and his place was super clean, me and Bev scoped it out ages ago!”

“And why the fuck would you get my name?!”

“Because I-”

“What if we break up?!”

Richie seems to freeze, now, and his brow starts to furrow.

“…What?”

“What if we break up and you have my name permanently tattooed on your body where everyone can see it?! Don’t you think that would be horrible?!”

Richie looks like he has just been punched in the gut.

“…Why would we break up?”

“I’m not saying we’re gonna fucking break up, I’m just saying, hypothetically, if you-”

“Yeah. I fucking got it.” Richie cuts over him, and leaves the house without another word, slamming the door behind him.

Eddie stands there for a while in the hallway, stunned.

It seems like Eddie is the last to notice.

But, really, he isn’t.

Eddie has noticed everything, has known longer than anyone, is hyper-aware of the changes in Richie and what they might mean, but he has been stubbornly refusing to acknowledge them. Terrified of confronting it, sickened close to vomiting every time he thinks about it, worried into tears he sheds in private every time he considers having to face up to it, because that will be the moment it is no longer just a worry, but reality.

Eddie has seen the way Richie has gradually lost interest in food, has watched him every time they sit down to a meal and he pushes his dinner around the plate with his fork after eating only a couple of mouthfuls. He has seen and felt his protruding ribs and too-pronounced hipbones, the paling and sallowness of his pretty, freckled skin, the way his thick, healthy hair has lost some of its lustre, the redness in the whites of his eyes, and the worsening tremble in his tobacco-stained hands and fingers.
He has watched as Richie leaves the house for cigarette after cigarette after cigarette, tripling his intake of nicotine over the space of a few short weeks, getting antsy and agitated far more, even, than normal, pacing, twitching, fidgeting far worse than Eddie has ever seen. He has seen the bruises on the insides of Richie’s arms, the ones he tries so desperately to hide, and every time, Eddie has guiltily and nauseously wished Richie had hidden them better, that he had never had to see them, that he had never had to think about them, because Eddie knows all too well what those bruises indicate, and they terrify him more than anything else he has ever encountered.

And Eddie has tried, god he has tried, to make this go away. But he knows that he hasn’t tried nearly hard enough, that he hasn’t done nearly enough, that his feeble, cowardly attempts at fixing it have made no difference, have maybe even made things worse. He always hoped it would just go away on its own, that Richie would get bored of this phase of his life like he gets bored of everything else, and he’d move on. So all of the times Richie came home stinking of marijuana, Eddie yelled at him, and made him wash his clothes and his hair to get rid of the smell, but he never did anything else to try to prevent it. Bev sometimes smoked weed with him, too, and even Bill tried it, once, so Eddie thought it couldn’t really be that bad. And the time Richie came home in something Eddie could only describe as a frenzy, pupils dilated so big they nearly covered his irises, sweating and shaking and unable to stay still, and Bev said he had taken ecstasy someone gave him in the campus library, Eddie was mad, but he didn’t shout, that time. He just gave him plenty of water, and dry crackers, and sat with him and played with his hair to try to soothe him until he came down. And he made Richie promise, made him swear he wouldn’t take anything else, that he definitely wouldn’t touch the hard stuff. And Eddie thought he took him at his word, but deep down, he knew Richie was lying.

He has hidden Richie’s cigarettes, crushed them up, burned them, thrown them away, all out of anger and spite. He has scolded and cussed him out so many times and so thoroughly that his throat has hurt from shouting. He has cried, and cried, and cried, until he’s raw, when he knows no one can see or hear him, out of sheer guilt, because he knows he is not mad at Richie…not really. Because really, he is mad at himself. Mad at himself for not acting sooner. Mad at himself for not helping. Mad at himself for not intervening when he knows that Richie cannot help himself.

Mad because Eddie saw the look in Richie’s eyes, when Bev’s super cool aunt came up to visit them, and stayed at their house for the week, and brought them all handmade gifts like scarves, and beaded bracelets, and even a weird-looking clock. And Eddie saw the look in Richie’s eyes both times Stan’s parents came to visit, and took Stan and Bill out for dinner at fancy restaurants, and to the theatre, and to museums, and the many times Stan talks on the phone with his dad, or his mom, or both, and he hears him say, ‘I love you, too’, each time. And Eddie sees the look in Richie’s eyes every time Mike drives back down to Derry to visit his family on the farm, and comes back with boxes of fresh vegetables, and hen’s eggs, and homemade food, and photographs of him smiling with his relatives. And Eddie sees the look in Richie’s eyes every time Ben’s mom sends him baked goods, and books, and money in the mail, and they write lovely letters back and forth to one another to keep in touch, and Ben spends hours happily thinking up poems about his mom, to include in his letters to her. And Eddie saw the look in Richie’s eyes when the Denbroughs came to visit, and they took Bill and Eddie out for the day in Central Park, and before they left, Mrs Denbrough gave Richie a hug, too, and Eddie could see Richie’s fingers gripping at the back of her sweater so hard it broke his heart. And Eddie sees the look in Richie’s eyes at the beginning of every month, when Eddie has received a ‘care package’ from Mrs Kaspbrak, filled with things like medicine, and socks, and blankets, and hand sanitizer, and even a rape alarm, once. And Eddie doesn’t find some of those things useful, anymore, and they remind him of a time in his life he would rather forget, but at least he still knows his mother cares about him, even if it’s too much.

But Richie’s parents haven’t sent any parcels. They haven’t come to visit. They haven’t tried to call, or written letters, or bothered to get in touch with their only son at all. And Eddie has met Mrs
Tozier; he knows she isn’t a monster. But every time he sees that look in Richie’s lovely, dark brown eyes, he hates her just a little more.

Eddie wishes he could prove to Richie that it doesn’t matter. That his awful, loveless parents can hurt and neglect him all they fucking want, and it won’t make any difference. Because Eddie Kaspbrak has so much *fucking* love in his tiny body for Richie Tozier, that he thinks it might actually kill him, one day.

He thinks about this, one evening, while he’s picking Richie’s discarded clothes up from their bedroom floor, and he handles Richie’s favourite denim jacket with such care, and holds it close to his face so that he can smell the familiar and comforting scent of cheap cigarettes and even cheaper cologne; no matter how much Eddie pretends to hate it and tells Richie he smells disgusting, he’ll never really feel at home without it. And he feels his heart swell with affection, and pride, then sink again with anxiety, and fear. Especially as he’s folding it up, and a small, clear packet, filled with white powder, drops out of an inside pocket Eddie didn’t know was there, and hits the ground.

He freezes.

His heart stops.

He feels suddenly and violently sick, and almost retches, but the motion is deadened by an intense rush of anger and adrenaline as he snatches it up off the floor.

Eddie has lost the ability to consciously think, as he storms through into the kitchen, where Mike, Ben and Stan are cooking and talking, and throws the packet fiercely into the middle of the dining table. The room falls silent, and all four of them stare at the tiny pouch of white powder like it’s a bomb that could go off at any second.

“What the *fuck* is that?” Eddie asks quietly, though there’s a terrifying, aggressive quiver in his voice that causes all three of their heads to turn to him, now, instead.

There’s another horrible stretch of silence, of realisation dawning in every mind. Mike turns off the stove, and it further emphasises the emotional and physical coldness in the room.

“Eddie, where did you get that?” Stan inquires, finally, though his expression, and the tone in his voice, as he stares at the plastic packet, show that he already knows the answer.

“What the *FUCK* is that!” Eddie repeats, much louder this time, more hysterical. He’s shaking all over, now, and still gripping Richie’s jacket in one white-knuckled fist.

“Is that…” Ben begins, but is interrupted by Beverly. She and Bill have been drawn in from the lounge, no doubt by Eddie’s yelling.

“Cocaine.”

She says it fairly bluntly, with an air of nonchalance, but her eyes are staring unblinking at the powder in dismay. Bill looks equally distressed.

“Holy shit.” Mike breathes softly, as he leans against the counter.

Eddie looks so faint, now, that Ben quickly pulls out a chair and sits him down, rubbing his shoulders and talking softly.

“It’s okay, Eddie. It’s gonna be okay.”
Richie still isn’t home. They all know his last class finished hours ago, and he should be home by now, but he’s almost always late. It never used to worry them, but now it does.

Eddie starts crying as Ben leans down to hug him tightly and kisses the top of his head.

Bill acts first, as usual.

“W-w-we have to g-get r-rid of it.” He goes to grab the packet, but Eddie practically shrieks at him.

“**NO!”**

“B-bu-but Eddie, w-we—”

“**NO! Don’t touch it!”**

Bill looks hesitant for a while, like he’s considering doing it anyway, but eventually he recoils, and the six of them end up sitting in awful, disconsolate silence for nearly an hour around the table, like they’re waiting to stage an intervention none of them want to take part in. Dinner has been completely forgotten.

They hear the distinct *click* of the front door.

And before anyone else can react, Eddie has jumped to his feet, still clutching Richie’s jacket against his chest, grabbed the packet from the table, and is charging out of the kitchen in a tear-fuelled rage.

He and Richie meet in the hallway.

“**YOU FUCKING LIAR!”** Eddie howls through furious tears, throwing the packet at Richie as forcefully as he can muster, and then throwing his jacket at him, too, for good measure.

Richie looks stunned, but he doesn’t even have time to acknowledge the cruel revelation of his new habit, because Eddie has seen the size of his pupils, and the beads of sweat on his forehead, and the tremor in his fingers.

“**YOU’RE FUCKING H-HIGH?! YOU’RE L-LITERALLY FU-FUCKING HIGH R-RIGHT NOW, AREN’T Y-YOU?!”** Eddie looks so hysterical he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He’s crying so hard he has developed a gasping stammer that rivals Bill’s, and his hands are shaking even more than Richie’s.

“Eds…” Richie tries to reach out to him, to hold onto him, but Eddie pushes him away so hard there’s a distinctive *thud* as Richie collides with the wall.

“**D-DON’T Y-YOU FUCKING DARE! DON’T Y-YOU FUCKING T-TOUCH ME!”**

The other Losers have all hurried out into the hallway, now, but they look incredibly reluctant to intervene, like they think it could only make things worse.

“Eddie, calm down,” Stan says softly from behind him, about to place a hand on his shoulder, but Eddie gives him such a ferocious glare that Stan actually backs away.

Richie looks absolutely *distracted.*

Eddie is still crying so frantically and forcefully that he keeps doubling over. He looks as though he might faint, or vomit, or both. And he doesn’t say anything more to anyone, just drags himself towards the stairs and disappears up them, and then they can hear the distinctive, sickening sound of coughing and retching echoed in the toilet bowl. And despite being almost unresponsively high on
whatever drugs he has been abusing, and with bruising and aching in his back from being thrown against the wall so hard, Richie still tries to go to him, first. He knows how much Eddie hates being sick, and how much it scares him. Stan stops him, though, and holds his arm tight around Richie’s back, and steers him into the lounge, while Bill and Mike hurry up the stairs.

“Richie, no, come on. You’re just going to make it worse. Leave him be for a while. It’s okay.”

For the rest of the evening, Bill and Mike stay upstairs with Eddie, while Stan and Bev sit with Richie, and give him water, and force him to sit still, and Ben travels between the two, bringing blankets and pillows for Richie on the couch, where they’re desperately trying to get him to just sleep, and all the while assuring him that Eddie is fine, and that Mike and Bill are looking after him.

Richie still won’t sleep, though, and after a while, when he’s clearly coming down from his high, he just sits and stares at the floor, his brow knotted in shame and worry and fear, while Bev strokes his back and kisses his cheek and his forehead and holds him tight. He doesn’t even acknowledge she is there.

And when it is well past midnight, and exhaustion begins to take its toll, Richie finally lies down and seems to fall asleep, and they all finally go to bed, though Eddie stays in Bill’s room with him.

Stan is most reluctant to leave Richie on his own, and considers taking him into his own room, something he’d never allow otherwise, but since Richie has finally calmed and he doesn’t want to wake him, he leaves him anyway. Stan can’t sleep though, thinking about him down there in the dark, all alone, and he tosses and turns for hours before he eventually gets back up again and quietly sneaks out into the corridor. Bill’s door is closed, which is a sign in itself that this isn’t a normal night, because Bill never closes his door fully. Stan can hear Bill’s voice inside, talking gently, and he can hear that Eddie is crying again, though it is muffled, as though perhaps it is against Bill’s chest. Stan finds comfort in that, as he descends the stairs.

But when he reaches the lounge, the couch is empty, except for the tangled blankets they left Richie in only hours before.

Stan checks the kitchen, but it is just as dark and devoid of life.

He checks the ‘games room’, and it’s the same.

He is sure he didn’t hear anyone come upstairs, but he goes back up anyway. His heart is beginning to race, now. He checks both bathrooms, Richie and Eddie’s room, his own room, again, and then back downstairs.

Richie still isn’t there.

Stan goes back up the stairs more quickly, now, knocking on the door to Ben and Bev’s room, but when Ben eventually opens the door, looking dishevelled, Stan can see clearly that it’s just the two of them inside, as he scans it over Ben’s shoulder.

“Stan…what’s wrong?”

Beginning to panic, Stan hastens up the next two flights to the attic room, banging hard on the door, now.

“Mike! Is Richie in there with you?!”

“What?!” He hears shuffling, then footsteps, and the door opens. Mike seems surprisingly alert, “No, he’s not in here, why?”
Stan doesn’t respond, he flies back down the stairs, now, straight to Bill’s room, opening the door without knocking.

“Well! Bill, Richie’s gone!”

Bill gets out of bed right away, and Eddie is sitting upright behind him, his eyes puffy and red, looking distinctly as though he hasn’t slept at all.

“Well what you mean?” Eddie croaks, and his voice is still laced with tears.

Stan looks at Eddie, and then back to Bill, desperately.

“Well Richie is gone.”
They are 19 years old.

Eddie reacts so quickly, they don’t have time to stop him, to rationalise.

Mike, Ben and Bev are in the corridor, too, now, just dazedly figuring out what has happened as Eddie dodges between them and nearly falls down the stairs because he’s taking them so fast. And there are voices calling out behind him, frantic footsteps as Bill chases after him, but Eddie doesn’t listen or stop. He feels a hand on his shoulder as he’s pulling on his shoes, and he shrugs it away aggressively without even acknowledging who the hand belongs to. He pushes past the body, just a vague, tall shape to Eddie as he hurries into the hallway. He can still hear people yelling, but the words don’t make any sense to him, because they’re not important. Nothing else is.

Before he knows it, he is fumbling with keys in the front door with shaking hands, and then he’s outside on the street. And it’s dark, and bitterly cold, and drizzling in a fine, freezing mist that is somehow worse than heavy drops of rain. And Eddie is only wearing shorts and a sweater, and loose sneakers with no socks, but he couldn’t care less that his legs are so cold he can’t feel them, that his lips are trembling and numb, that his normally perfectly-coifed hair is falling out of its place and sticking to his reddened face, that he hasn’t eaten since breakfast, that he hasn’t slept yet, because all that matters is Richie.

Bill catches up to him seconds later, while Eddie is marching down the street in a frenzy, but he doesn’t try to stop him, just throws Richie’s denim jacket around Eddie’s shoulders as he falls into step beside him, hopping a bit to pull on the back of his shoe, like he left in as much of an unprepared rush as Eddie did.

Eddie is calling out for Richie, now, screaming his name desperately towards empty streets and dormant buildings. He doesn’t give a flying shit if he wakes people up. Eddie thinks they should be awake, because why should they be comfortable, and warm, and resting, while Richie is out here alone? Beside him, Bill starts shouting, too, and not once does he stammer on Richie’s name as he does it, and then Eddie hears another voice, deeper, and Mike is at Eddie’s other side, pressing close to him protectively as they search in the dark.

Then Stan is there, beside Bill, making suggestions and starting to map out directions like the only way he can stay calm is to force himself to believe he is somehow organised and in-control. And then Bev and Ben are close behind, Ben still in his pyjamas, Bev wearing nothing but one of Ben’s shirts that she slept in, both with coats thrown hurriedly over the top and boots hastily pulled on, all loose, trailing laces and bedraggled hair.

Eddie can hear them all talking quickly, but the words and voices blur together into a jumble of noise he can’t unravel or make sense of. He isn’t even thinking about shouting, either, his brain is so disconnected, but his voice continues to bellow out on its own, repeating Richie’s name over and over and over, louder and more desperately each time.

They search the streets for hours, for about fifteen blocks in every direction around their house. They look down every side street, into every alleyway, into every bar, every store that’s still open, everywhere they can possibly think he could have gone, but they still don’t find Richie. And when the sun has finally come up, and it’s morning, and they’re all exhausted, and completely dispirited, and Eddie looks as though he might actually collapse, Bill halts the group’s advance.

“I th-think w-we have to call th-the police.”
Eddie doesn’t even look around when the rest of them do, just keeps scanning the streets as though Richie is somehow suddenly going to appear from behind a car or something.

“Bill, we can’t,” Bev responds quietly, shaking her head and holding her fingers up against her lips; she has been biting her nails all night, something she does when she’s stressed. Now, they’re bitten so far down some of them are bleeding, and the black polish there is so cracked and chipped there’s barely any left. Mike is holding his arm around her shoulders tightly, and she’s huddled against him to keep warm. Ben is at Mike’s other side, looking similarly dejected and cold.

“Wh-why n-not?” Bill keeps looking at the back of Eddie’s head worriedly.

“If Richie is caught…carrying something…or…or high on something…” Bev pauses, and Bill seems to agree, because he goes quiet, too.

“We should go back home,” Stan says assertively, “We can have something to eat, get changed,” He motions to Bev and Ben in particular, who are the only ones who are clearly wearing pyjamas, since what the others are wearing could pass off as clothing, but they are all dishevelled and, though it has stopped raining, soaked through, “Then we’ll come up with a plan.”

“No.” Eddie says decisively.

“Eddie, we can’t just-”

“I’m not going home without Richie.”

Bill turns to Eddie properly, pityingly. His voice is gentle and compassionate.

“E-Ed…we h-have to-”

“NO.”

“W-we c-can come ba-back out, later.”

Eddie looks at Bill, now, staring into his eyes, clearly angry.

“The rest of you can do whatever the fuck you want. I’m not going home without Richie.”

And with that he starts walking again, and he looks tragic, wet, freezing, dejected, with goose pimples all over his skin, wearing a huge, grubby, denim jacket that’s swamping his small frame, scuffs and dirt all over his pristine sneakers, his hair flat and messy against his pallid face, eyes still reddened and puffy.

Bill goes to grab for him, and the rest of them watch in shock as Eddie turns on his heel and throws a swift punch at Bill’s face. Bill just manages to avoid taking it right in the nose, but Eddie’s knuckles connect sharply against his cheek, with a horrible, piercing, cracking sound.

Bill winces, falters, and his eyes are watering.

So are Eddie’s, staring wide at Bill, now.

But Bill doesn’t back down, and despite the distinctive, painful-looking mark on his cheek, he doesn’t even seem mad, as he reaches out to hold Eddie’s hand, the one that’s still fisted, and looks with concern at Eddie’s reddened knuckles, also damaged in the impact.

Eddie’s eyes are flooding with tears again, now, as he tries to pull his hand away, but this time, Bill has him. He reaches out to grip at Eddie’s other wrist, too, and then wrestles him into a hug; Eddie is
shockingly strong, but Bill is much taller, and it’s this advantage that allows him to do so. Eddie continues to struggle against him for a while, before he breaks down into Bill’s chest, sobbing raw and loud again.

“I’M SO SORRY, BILL! I…I’M S-SO SORRY!”

Bev slides her bitten fingers up over her lips as she starts to cry, too, feeling Eddie’s anguish alongside her own, but Ben and Mike are either side of her, holding her, and each other. Stan watches Bill and Eddie from a few steps away, breathing deeply, as though willing himself to stay focused.

Billtightens his arms around Eddie protectively, burying him against his chest as he continues to wail.

“IT’S M-MY FAULT! IT’S MY FAULT!”

“No. No, it’s not. It’s n-not your fault, Ed.”

“IT IS! I SH-SHOULD HAVE D-DONE SOMETHING! IT’S MY FAULT! N-NOW H-HE THINKS I H-HATE HIM! IT’S M-MY FAULT HE’S G-GO-GONE!”

“He d-doesn’t think that…he’s j-just upset…we’ll f-find him. I promise we’ll find him.” Bill’s eyes are brimmed with tears too, now, stopped only from falling by sheer power of will.

“I DON’T W-WANT TO GO HOME W-WITHOUT R-RICHIE!”

Bill is stroking Eddie’s hair, now, and rocking him a little, trying his best to calm him down and comfort him.

“I-if we go h-home, j-just for a little while, we c-c-can take my car, and Mike’s tr-truck, cover more ground. Th-that way we can f-find him faster, okay?”

Eddie goes quiet, now, sniffing and hiccuppinghis way to a point where he can adequately function, before nodding. And Bill keeps his arm around Eddie tightly all the way back to their house, and Stan holds Eddie’s hand on the other side, and gently strokes his bruising knuckles with his thumb.

They stay at home long enough for Ben and Bev to get dressed, and for Mike to force a bottle of water into Eddie’s shaking hand, before they set out again, this time in Mike’s truck and Bill’s car, since Eddie is in no fit state to drive, and they check everywhere.

They scour the university campus, the Tisch School of Arts, where most of Richie’s classes are, the campus library, the local library, Central Park, every fast food place in the immediate area, the arcade, all of Richie’s favourite record stores, the skate park he hangs out in sometimes, and every other place they can possibly think he might have gone, but Richie isn’t anywhere.

And every time they leave a new location, and they still haven’t found him, Eddie looks a little closer to completely falling apart.

Like the source of his very life is missing.

It’s evening, and dark again, by the time they return home, just to check that he hasn’t come back. But the door is still locked, the lights are all out.
Nobody is home.

Eddie wraps Richie’s jacket tighter around him, clinging to it like he’ll die if he takes it off, breathing in Richie’s scent at the collar as his swollen, bloodshot eyes continue to leak silent tears into the fabric.

Ben and Bev climb out of the back of Bill’s car, now. They have decided to stay at home, in case Richie comes back, because they definitely don’t want to miss him, and if he does return, they don’t want him to have to do so alone. Stan is in the truck with Mike, while Eddie rides shotgun beside Bill, and they don’t stop for any kind of break, this time, not to change clothes, not to eat, not to rest; both vehicles pull away from the front of their house almost straight after stopping, circling the neighbourhood for what feels like the hundredth time in the past eighteen hours.

It’s only when they’re driving close to the docks, in the same neighbourhood, and they’re right by the tall, barbed-wire gates of a shipping port, and Eddie sees a hole in the fence, large enough for a man to crouch through, that he yells at Bill to stop the car. And Eddie doesn’t know why he feels like there’s something significant about this place, but he seems to remember scolding Richie about a tear in his shirt, once, and he remembers Richie mentioning that he tore it on a wire fence, and he remembers Richie’s unusual aversion to walking near the docks, even though it meant they had farther to walk to get home, one time when they went to the Thai restaurant around the corner from here. And Eddie’s heart is thundering so hard in his chest when Bill starts pressing on the brakes, that he feels he might actually vomit it up, and he doesn’t even wait for the car to stop, just forces the door open and jumps out into the road, almost falling, swerving around the bonnet of a passing van as it blares its horn, and sprinting faster than he has ever run in his life towards the dock.

He can hear Bill calling his name, the sound of car doors, but he doesn’t stop, ducking through the hole in the fence and continuing to run. His lungs are burning. There’s a cramp in his side. He’s so, so tired. He’s going to be sick, he’s going to faint, he’s going to die, that’s what he feels, but he has never so impulsively ignored his body’s distress.

Then he sees him.

A tall, skinny figure, slightly concealed between two rusty shipping containers.

It’s Richie.

Eddie runs faster.

There’s a man beside Richie. Two men. And a woman. Junkies. The man closest to Richie looks intimidating; shaved head, tattoos on his face and neck, hefty rings on his fingers all lined up in a fat row like knuckle-dusters. Richie’s lip is split and bleeding. Richie looks sad, he looks scared, almost cowering away into the peeling metal behind him. Eddie spots each of these things, one after the other, like a marksman scoping out weak-spots in a target. He is filled with so much rage he cannot see through it. His body is moving faster than his brain. He doesn’t acknowledge what is a bad or good idea, as he collides with the man with the shaven head, his first instinct to shove him, get him as far away from Richie as possible.

And then, his second instinct is to attack.

A delirium of passion and fury, Eddie does everything he can in his power to hurt this man. He punches him, kicks him, as hard as possible, jabs him roughly with elbows and knees, claws at his face and his arms, at any exposed skin with neat, blunt fingernails, digging them in, animally tearing welts into his flesh wherever he can reach, grappling with him ferociously when the man has recovered enough from his shock to fight back. And he’s taller than Eddie, much taller, and much
bigger, too, and it seems so odd, this huge, hulking, skinhead stranger with a tarantula tattooed down one side of his face, wrestling with, and losing ground to, a pretty, neat, 5’3” boy with manicured nails, who’s wearing a jacket that’s far too big, small shorts, and a pink, knitted sweater.

Eddie can hear Richie screaming close by him, see Richie’s filthy, skinny, ringed fingers between Eddie and this strange man, trying to force them apart, trying to push the man away, trying to do anything to make sure Eddie doesn’t get hurt, but it’s too late for that. Eddie takes a set of large, ringed knuckles to his temple, and he staggers back and trips dazedly onto the damp, hard ground.

Eddie feels mildly concussed, but he can hear Bill’s voice, then, loud and aggressive, and see Bill’s back as he stands between Eddie and the giant ogre of a man. Richie is between them, too, holding back the tattooed stranger and scuffling with him, still cursing and screaming, his voice raspy and strained. Then Mike is there…maybe Stan, too…but Eddie feels so woozy he can’t distinguish one person from another for a while. He looks down at the ground, where his own fingers are curling against it, gripping as though making to push himself to his feet, and he sees that his knuckles are bruising and bloodied and split in places, and there’s blood underneath his fingernails, too, and he really feels like he’s going to be sick, then, but he hears Richie’s voice again, and starts clambering drunkenly to his feet. Then there’s a strong hand around his upper arm, an arm around his waist, a body that smells like Mike.

There’s a lot of shouting and cursing that Eddie can’t decipher, but parts of it, he understands.

“What does he owe you? I’ll give you double. I can double it!” Eddie knows that’s Stan’s voice, and he sounds confident, but it is laced with fear.

“No…no, please…I can do it, I can fix it…Eddie…” That one is definitely Richie. He sounds so desperate, pleading. Eddie wants nothing more than to get to him, now, but he thinks if he steps forward, he’ll black-out. He doesn’t have to, though, because Richie is right in front of him, then, trembling fingers touching Eddie’s cheeks, gripping at his hands, and Eddie grips back as hard as he can, clutching at him.

Over Richie’s shoulder, Stan has a wallet in his hand, now, and he’s counting through a neat stack of twenty and fifty dollar bills, which seems to have drawn the attention of the three strangers away from Eddie.

“Eddie…I’m so sorry…Eddie…”

Eddie feels his consciousness strengthening every time Richie says his name so hopelessly.

“Eddie…” Eddie can see thick tears streaming down Richie’s dirty cheeks, now, and he feels Mike move away as Eddie reaches up to cup his hands either side of Richie’s face. His fingers slide up to tangle into his grubby, messy hair, “Eddie…I’m so sorry…”

“It’s okay,” Eddie says softly, and for the first time, today, he doesn’t feel like crying. He feels like being strong, “It’s okay, Rich.”

And then Richie just collapses against him, in a very literal sense, head buried into Eddie’s collar as he starts to cry, hard. And Eddie really thought he had seen the pinnacle of sadness, all those years ago, when Stan had tried to overdose in Bill’s bathroom; the way Stan was, then, Eddie will never forget. He is still haunted by it, to this day. But the way Richie is crying, now, bawling, struggling to stand, gasping for air, is something else. This is not just sadness, this is anguish. This is raw, pure, pain, radiating from the deepest recesses of the human soul, seeping from his every pore. Eddie feels Richie’s grief so palpably he physically feels his heart aching in his chest like it’s about to stop.
Eddie sinks to his knees with Richie, on the gravel, slowly, carefully, taking his weight, holding him close, removing the denim jacket from his own body and pulling it around Richie’s shoulders nice and tight, concealing and protecting him, as he kisses his temples and the top of his head, and whispers to him gently.

“I love you, Richie. I love you.”

Eddie’s hands and fingers are stinging and throbbing every time he moves them, and there’s a dull, swelling pain in the side of his head, but he doesn’t care.

Bill, Stan and Mike are standing close by them, now.

Eddie doesn’t even care if the other people are gone or not.

If they come near Richie, he will kill them.

“I love you so much.” Eddie kisses his temple, again, firmly. “I won’t ever let anything happen to you.” He rests his cheek against the side of Richie’s head, still hearing him cry, still feeling him shake. “I love you. I’m sorry. I love you.”

Eddie knows that no matter how many times he says it, it will never come anywhere near to expressing just how much love he really has.

He feels Richie’s hands clinging desperately to the back of his sweater. “It’s okay, Richie.” Again. “I love you.” Again. “We’re going home, okay?”

And they do.

And Eddie won’t let Richie out of his sight, after that, holds onto him tightly in the back of Bill’s car the whole ride home, laces their fingers together and keeps them that way as they enter the house, even as Bev hugs Richie, and then Ben hugs Richie, and then Mike, and Bill, and Stan, and every hug is long, and meaningful, and warm, all stroking Richie’s back, and his hair, and assuring him, as Eddie did, just how much they love him, and still, Eddie holds his hand throughout, will not let go. Even though Richie has stopped crying, now, and he just looks emotionally and physically exhausted, and fairly ill.

Eddie runs him a hot bath, helps him undress, sits on the edge of the tub as Richie climbs in, and gently washes his hair for him, taking care on every knot and tangle. Eddie has already cleaned himself up as best he can over the sink and changed into a clean shorts and sweater combo; a quick wipe-down wouldn’t have been his first choice, but having a shower would have diverted his attention from Richie for a minute, so it just wasn’t happening. He scrubs Richie’s back, rubs his shoulders, sniggers and doesn’t get mad when he’s splashed, is just so happy when he sees Richie crack a smile. And before long, Richie seems almost back to his usual, dorky self. He tries to pull Eddie into the bathtub with him, and Richie’s face lights up when Eddie laughs, and Eddie’s face lights up when Richie laughs, and when Richie climbs out of the tub, and Eddie wraps a towel around him, and has to get on his tiptoes and make Richie lean his head down so he can dry his hair, they’re both laughing and messing around like giddy, lovesick children. It returns the warmth to the house that had recently been lost.

“I’m gonna go get something. Go get dressed.” Eddie stands on his toes to kiss him, before leaving the room, while Richie smiles to himself and retreats to their bedroom.

Eddie has already laid out some clothes for him, some boxer briefs, some comfy grey sweats, and a big, thick sweater. His glasses have been cleaned, and are folded on the nightstand. Richie pulls his
clothes on gladly, and his glasses, and discards the damp towel into the laundry basket, before collapsing onto the bed. He vaguely wonders if it has always been this comfortable.

Richie rolls onto his back when he hears Eddie come into the room and the click of the door closing, and then Eddie crawls onto the end of the bed, and sits with his calves resting over Richie’s, placing a large, plastic bowl filled with all kinds of candy between his thighs. Richie can’t quite decide which he thinks looks more appetizing.

_Eddie’s thighs, for sure._

He can feel his appetite returning for the first time in weeks.

“I thought we weren’t allowed food in the bedroom,” Richie chuckles, as Eddie throws a handful of skittles into his own mouth. There are band aids all over Eddie’s knuckles, and the memory of what they’re hiding would be horrifying, if it weren’t so adorable.

“I make the rules, so I’m allowed to break them.”

“Are you just gonna sit there and eat them all in front of me as punishment, or…”

Eddie sniggers and rolls his eyes, shifting briefly to prop up and fluff the pillows behind Richie’s back, encouraging him to sit further upright.

“No. I thought we could play a game.”

Richie looks both intrigued and amused, especially as Eddie shifts closer to him on the bed, so his knees are over Richie’s knees, now.

“Really? What kind of game? What’s it called?”

“It’s not called anything, it’s just a game that I came up with in the last ten minutes.”

“It sounds like a pretty shitty game if it doesn’t even have a name.”

Eddie gives him a ‘look’, but then he laughs.

“Fine, it’s called, ‘Shut Up, Richie.’”

“That’s not very original.” Richie chuckles, reaching for the bowl of candy, but Eddie slaps his hand away.

“Nu-uh! You have to play the game!” Eddie is giggling.

Richie holds his hands up, smiling, and looks surprisingly excited. He loves it when Eddie is playful.

“Okay, okay, geez, Eds! Tell me how to play the game, then!”

“Okay, so, you have to close your eyes, first,” Eddie chuckles, “And no peeking, otherwise that’s cheating, and you lose!”

Richie obligingly does so, then puts his glasses back on the nightstand, and holds a hand over his eyes, for good measure, with a playful smile on his lips.

“Now I’m gonna put something in your mouth, and you have to guess what it is.”

“Woah,” Richie sniggers, “I really fucking like this game, already. I don’t think we need the candy,
though.”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“And if you get it right, I’ll give you a reward.” Richie fucking swears there’s a hint of salaciousness in Eddie’s voice when he says that, and it makes his skin tingle.

“Yowza.”

“Stop.”

“Sorry.”

“Okay, here’s the first one,” Eddie reaches into the bowl and pulls out an M&M, leaning over toward Richie’s face, “Open your mouth.” When Richie does as he’s told, with a smirk at the corners of his lips, Eddie places the little chocolate treat in the centre of his tongue, watching him closely. Richie eats it and answers in seconds.

“Easy. That’s an M&M,” He chuckles, and so does Eddie, and he leans in to place a soft, brief kiss against Richie’s lips, not even long enough for Richie to react and try to reciprocate.

“Was that my reward?” He says sceptically, “Geez, Eds, I kiss your mom harder than that.” Eddie snickers, “Shut the fuck up, Richie,” and goes back to the bowl, “That was just a warm-up.”

“I’m intrigued and aroused.”

“I know,” Eddie chuckles as he picks out a blue raspberry Jolly Rancher, trying his best to unwrap the packet quietly, before resting it against Richie’s bottom lip. He watches as Richie obligingly opens his mouth again, and pushes it in onto his tongue. Richie barely has time to taste it before he laughs.

“Jolly Rancher. C’mon, Eds, this is so fucking easy!”

“Correct.” Eddie smiles, as he admires the happy, carefree look on Richie’s face, seeing the colour returning to his cheeks, “But what flavour?”

“Blue raspberry,” Richie scoffs, like it’s obvious.

Eddie leans in to kiss him again, but this time, it’s anything but chaste, tilting his head so their mouths slot together full and deep. He can taste the syrupy, slightly sour candy on Richie’s lips, and he glides his tongue across them, feeling Richie flinch when Eddie worries the cut on his bottom lip, and sighing comfortably against him when Richie readily opens his mouth and encourages Eddie inside. It’s a slow, warm, loving, sticky kiss, passing the little hard, blue candy from one mouth to the other, back and forth, tasting it and each other. Richie still has his hand over his eyes, and Eddie can feel Richie’s knuckles against his forehead, occasionally lifting so that they can brush against the soft, fluffy strands of Eddie’s hair that fall there. Eddie tastes and feels so good, and comfortable, and warm, and soft, and Richie feels like he’s melting along with the candy.

When the Jolly Rancher has finally dissolved, Eddie pulls away, chuckling against Richie’s lips, and gives him a little peck on the nose.

“Wow,” Richie breathes, happily, “If that was only reward number two, what else do I get?”
“You’ll see.”

Eddie takes the opportunity, while Richie’s eyes are covered and he can’t see, to glance down his body, and, just as he had hoped and expected, Richie is getting hard already. It doesn’t usually take much, anyway, but Eddie has plans, and this time, he’s actually really trying to get him excited.

God, he wants to make Richie feel good.

“Well, next one.” Eddie opens a packet of pop rocks. He knows Richie will guess this one right away, because who wouldn’t, but he’s not really interested in making the game difficult, he just wants Richie to have fun.

“This is the best game I have ever played.”

Eddie uses his thumb to gently open Richie’s lips again, tipping about a teaspoon of pop rocks into his mouth, and watching Richie’s face light up.

“Oh shit, I fucking love pop rocks!”

Eddie laughs.

“Remember that time Bill choked on a packet of pop rocks, and we were all laughing so much you cried?” Richie sniggers, swallowing.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I love listening to you laugh,” Richie says, then, and Eddie feels his heart fluttering in his chest with so much affection it’s almost too much to bear. He giggles sweetly as he leans in to place another soft kiss against Richie’s lips, and then another at the corner of his mouth, another against the fingers covering his eyes, then his nose, then his cheek, then his jaw, and they’re getting slower and firmer, now, as he kisses his way down Richie’s neck to the bit of collarbone that’s exposed where his sweater is hanging off one shoulder. He sucks into the skin there, bites it gently, feels Richie shudder, and bites it again, as he worries the little wet mark into a hickey.

“You’re the best fucking thing that ever happened to me,” Richie breathes satedly. Eddie feels Richie relaxing further into the pillows as he brushes his lips across to Richie’s shoulder, now, and leaves another wet, sloppy mark there, too. And Eddie is trying his damn best not to get hard, too, because he wants this all to be about Richie, and not him, but fuck, he likes it when Richie praises him like that.

When he looks down between them, though, he can see the sizeable tent in Richie’s sweats, and he thinks, at least, he’s winning. He gets a little lost in it, and almost forgets about the game, as he lifts Richie’s sweater and ducks down to kiss at each of his ribs, and then presses his lips around one of his nipples, sucking on it gently.

Richie simultaneously loves and hates slow and gentle. It drives him crazy.

“Fuck, Eds, I’m dying, here.”

Eddie chuckles against Richie’s chest, feeling the tiny hairs stand up all over his skin as he grazes his lips across to his other nipple, and gives it just as much soft attention. He’s close enough to sit on Richie’s knees, now, but he won’t move any further into his lap, like he knows Richie wants him to. He wants Richie to feel good, sure, but a little teasing never hurt to rile him up, first, especially since Richie always does the same to him.
“Well, that’s too bad. You have to keep playing the game,” Eddie says playfully, as he sits back up straight, leaving Richie’s sweater rucked up under his arms.

“Then hurry up and give me the next one!” Richie chuckles, still covering his eyes, but Eddie can see Richie starting to get twitchy and fidgety in anticipation.

“Excuse me, please don’t rush me,” Eddie smirks, “I’m the judge, so…”

“I’m sorry, Your Honour.”

Eddie snickers as he takes a strawberry Twizzler out of the bowl, leans forward with a soft, ‘Open,’ and presses it between Richie’s lips. He doesn’t need to wait to see if Richie will get this one right, because he knows he will, so he leans in ‘Lady and the Tramp’-style, and bites off the other half of it, his lips touching Richie’s briefly. Eddie watches Richie’s face as they’re both chewing.

“Oh that’s a strawberry Twizzler,” Richie chuckles, his voice a little muffled.

“Uh-huh.”

Eddie shifts, now, so that he’s lying down between Richie’s thighs, with his head close to his chest. Richie groans appreciatively when he feels Eddie’s weight finally press down on him, and Eddie tries his best not to think that feeling Richie’s hard-on against his stomach is the hottest fucking thing he has ever experienced.

He can feel Richie’s hips twitching with the desperation to move, to grind or buck up into him, and Eddie smirks against Richie’s stomach as he slowly licks across it in short, strawberry-flavoured, sticky trails, every single one earning a hitch in Richie’s breath above him, and a distinctive shudder. Every time Richie lifts his hips, pushes his dick up into Eddie’s stomach, Eddie pushes him back down again, and holds him there, not allowing anything more than what he’s currently willing to give. He leaves the slowest, softest, wettest kisses all over Richie’s abdomen, delighting in watching and feeling him squirm, especially when Eddie gets so close to the edge of his sweats, to Richie’s hipbones, and the fine trail of dark hair between, that he can feel the metal eyelets on his waistband against his chin.

“Oh my god, Eddie, you’re gonna fucking kill me,” Richie chuckles, but there’s a desperation in his voice that is making Eddie impossibly hard.

And Richie can feel his heart beating so fast in his chest it’s pulsing behind his eyelids. Because Eddie’s mouth is getting so fucking close to his dick, now, and Richie wasn’t sure this was ever going to happen, because they’ve talked about it, and joked about it, but Richie knows Eddie still has such a thing with germs, and putting certain body parts near his mouth, and he used to swear, when they were younger, that he’d never do it. Richie has sucked Eddie off before, plenty of times, though, even then, he tends to have to catch him off guard with it, make him needy and whiny and desperate and then get a few good licks in so Eddie is too lost in how good it feels to want him to stop. Eddie is surprisingly easy when he’s horny, and Richie knows he could probably get him to do other stuff they haven’t tried yet, too, but he doesn’t want to push any boundaries. He still imagines fucking him every goddamn day of his life, but he doesn’t know how close they are to that, yet, either. Eddie still hasn’t let Richie anywhere near his ass, except for a few good squeezes and a lot of grinding. If Eddie knew how fucking much Richie wanted to pound his tiny, tight body into the mattress until he was crying with pleasure, he thinks Eddie would have an aneurysm.

Richie finally feels Eddie’s lips leave his stomach and the lack of his warm, wet little mouth is cold and very unappealing in comparison.
“You’re such a tease!” Richie whines, though he’s laughing through it, “Can I uncover my eyes, yet?”

“No!” Eddie chuckles, “You have to win the game, first.”

“I’m literally dying, Eds!”

“You’re not dying, quit being such a drama queen.”

“I can’t help it, it’s just who I am as a person.”

Eddie takes a double stuff Oreo out of the bowl, now, twisting it apart carefully, and tossing the side with no cream on it back into the packet. It’s fine, really, because Eddie likes the cookie part, and Richie tends to lick the cream out of them and leave the rest, so between them, nothing will get wasted. Eddie is so used to having Richie’s spit in his mouth, anyway, that eating things he has licked barely seems gross, anymore.

He scrapes his pointer finger through the cream, getting as much of it off the cookie as he can, and then dropping that half into the bowl, too, crawling up to get to Richie’s mouth again, and sitting on his thighs, wiping a little of the white cream onto Richie’s bottom lip and watching him closely. Richie’s tongue presses out to lick it off, and when it does, Eddie pushes his finger into Richie’s mouth.

Richie chuckles around Eddie’s finger, licking and sucking at it obscenely while Eddie watches him in mesmerised fascination. He can’t tell whether it’s gross or arousing, but Richie seems to be enjoying himself so much that it doesn’t matter, as Eddie pulls his finger from between his lips with a wet pop.

“That was the middle of an Oreo, plus a side of Eddie Kaspbrak,” Richie chuckles, “My favourite treat.”

Eddie giggles and smacks a kiss to the back of Richie’s hand over his eyes.

“Oh, boy, I guess you win.”

“Can I uncover my eyes, now?”

“Yeah.”

Eddie is smiling when Richie uncovers his eyes, and they both laugh, and Richie admires the way Eddie’s nose crinkles like it always does when he’s really happy. And he watches his little sun-kissed freckles bounce and that adorable quiff-y curl fall down onto his forehead.

“You’re literally the cutest fucking thing I have ever seen in my life.”

“Shut up.” Eddie pouts bashfully, holding onto each of Richie’s hands and linking their fingers, “You know, you’re cute, too, Rich.”

“You think I’m cute?” Richie chuckles, using their laced fingers to pull him closer.

“Of course I think you’re cute,” Eddie rolls his eyes playfully, “You’re the cutest, most annoying dumbass I know.”

“That’s the sweetest thing you have ever said to me.” Richie laughs as he nuzzles at Eddie’s nose.

“You are cute, though,” Eddie assures, firmly, “And you’re smart, and talented, and super, super
funny.”

Richie looks like he couldn’t get any fonder. But before he can say anything, Eddie continues.

“And you’re hot.”

Richie’s smile becomes somewhat smug, “You think so, huh?”

“I know so. Like…”so hot it makes me wanna barf’ kind of hot.”

Richie sniggers, as Eddie’s hands loosen from his own and trail up into his hair instead.

“Like…so hot sometimes when I look at you I feel dizzy.”

Eddie’s fingers slide through Richie’s thick curls either side of his head, rubbing at his scalp a little, massaging it with his fingertips. Richie is watching him silently, now, appearing really subdued. Eddie is starting to talk much more quietly, now, like he doesn’t want to be overheard.

“Sometimes I think about you…when I’m taking a shower.”

Richie swallows thickly, and feels Eddie’s hands tightening in his hair.

“You’re the first and only person who has ever made me feel…like that.”

Eddie is pulling at his hair a bit, now.

“Like what?” Richie asks softly, feeling himself getting impossibly hard, just at the thought of Eddie talking dirty to him.

“Like I wanna be…dirty.” Eddie tugs at Richie’s hair particularly hard, now, and earns a shudder and a buck of his hips. Eddie doesn’t allow them to connect with anything, though, rising up on his thighs so that he’s just too far away.

“Fuck, Eds…”

“I have to give you your reward, first,” Eddie whispers, and then he releases Richie’s hair, slowly, moving back down his body to rest between his thighs like he did before. He’s lower this time, though, and Richie curses aloud, again.

“Oh, shit.” He reaches down to stroke at Eddie’s shoulders and his arms as he watches him get comfortable, “Eds, if you’re about to do what I think you’re about to do then first of all, fuck, and second of all, are you sure? Like I need to know you’re one hundred percent sure or I can’t enjoy this because-”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“Eddie please just tell me you’re not only doing this for me because I don’t want-”

“I want to!” Eddie snaps, but then he seems to regret shouting and he nuzzles Richie’s hip a bit, “I want to, Rich, I want to make you feel good.”

Richie reaches down to brush Eddie’s hair back away from his face gently.

“Okay, Eds,” he rubs Eddie’s shoulder again, “just…stop if you don’t like it, okay?”

Eddie nods a little, and tugs his fingers into the waistband of Richie’s sweats and his underwear,
pulling them down just enough to loosen his erection so that it lies flat against the bottom of his stomach. He has had Richie’s dick in his hand before, and he has rubbed up against it enough times, but he has never been up this close and personal with it before, and suddenly he feels nervous. It’s a good kind of nervous, though, like…even a little excited. He knows he can make it feel good, so he isn’t worried about that; it isn’t rocket science, after all, and he has a dick, too, so he knows what feels good to one.

“Just…start slow.” Richie suggests gently, and Eddie can feel Richie’s hands rubbing into his shoulders, and it feels good, and he thinks about how comfortable he is around Richie, and how there really isn’t any pressure, and he knows Richie will guide him through it, and he suddenly doesn’t feel nervous anymore.

“Don’t come in my mouth.” Eddie says suddenly, and Richie sniggers.

“I won’t.”

“I’m serious, Rich. If you come in my mouth I won’t ever fucking speak to you again. You better warn me.”

“I won’t, Eds, I swear.”

Finally, tentatively, Eddie sticks out his tongue and dips his head down to slide it across the tip. He hears Richie’s breath hitch, and feels a shudder of arousal through himself that he really wasn’t expecting. Eddie supposes that maybe this isn’t going to be anywhere near as bad as his overactive mind had insinuated. It doesn’t even taste bad, just…a little salty, like normal skin, with hints of musty bitterness. He draws his tongue across it again, and again, and he can feel one of Richie’s legs shifting next to him to bend at the knee, and Richie’s fingers gripping into his shoulders a bit, and he can hear him cursing softly as he tries to keep his cool, and Eddie never thought he’d be so turned on by Richie being needy, but knowing he is holding all of this power over him, knowing that in seconds he could be responsible for Richie losing control and aching with pleasure above him is making Eddie ache, too.

He licks at the tip again a few more times, slowly, just to enjoy the delicious shiver it sends up Richie’s spine every time, and on the fourth or fifth stroke he lets his tongue rest there, and gets his hand around the base for stability, as he envelops his lips around the head.

“Fuck, Eddie.”

Hearing Richie say his name so wantonly does the job of quelling the last of Eddie’s nerves in a hot, dizzy instant, as he does his best to start sucking. He mimics maybe sucking a lollipop, or a popsicle, since that’s his only frame of reference, and he knows it’s probably not supposed to be the same at all, but he can feel Richie’s fingers digging into his shoulder as he supports himself on his other elbow, and his hand is shaking, and he thinks it must still feel good. All the while, he’s edging his lips further down, taking Richie further into his mouth, and he feels the sudden, dawning realisation that there’s no way he’s going to fit the whole damn thing in, like Richie does to him. Eddie gags really easily, and that’s without anything touching the back of his tongue or his throat, not to mention the fact that Richie is bigger than Eddie to begin with.

Eddie feels Richie’s hand on his jaw, then, thumb brushing against it softly, encouraging, and comforting.

“Eds, relax. Loosen your lips. Don’t suck just…move your head.”

With Richie guiding and encouraging him softly, Eddie feels surprisingly comfortable, and he does
loosen his lips, until they’re just ‘resting’ rather than gripping, and when he starts bobbing his head up and down a bit he can feel the rhythm and the movements becoming easier and more obvious, like...how he thinks they’re supposed to be. The way Richie does it to him.

“Fuck.”

Every time Richie curses, Eddie feels a strain between his own thighs that he’s trying to ignore, especially as he starts to move his head a little faster, and he’s inching lower again, until he has as much as he can in his mouth without it hitting his throat, and Richie’s fingers are still resting loosely against his cheek, and he can hear Richie groaning low in his chest.

“Fucking...Shit, Eds, you’re doing so good...”

Eddie hears himself whine softly at that, before he can do anything to prevent it, and he feels Richie tense at the sound. They’re both getting lost in it, now, as Eddie starts putting his hand to use at the base, the only bit of dick left that his lips can’t swallow, stroking in short, sharp jerks that mimic the movements of his head. Eddie doesn’t really like talking during these heated moments, he finds it embarrassing, and he’d die if he knew someone could hear them, but clearly Richie’s love of talking extends to the bedroom, too, and that, Eddie does like. Who knew Richie’s trash mouth could ever be so appealing, and even sexy. Eddie certainly wouldn’t ever have thought so, but hearing Richie curse and praise him and say filthy things really fucking gets Eddie off. In fact, more than once, something Eddie would never admit to anyone, Richie has managed to make Eddie come just by hissing dirty things in his ear and barely touching him.

“Fuck, your mouth feels so fucking good you’re doing so fucking good.”

Eddie’s mind is swimming dizzily with lust every time Richie opens his goddamn mouth. He feels hot, he feels good, he feels so hard it hurts, and knowing that he’s making Richie feel good is driving him insane. He presses his palm down hard between his own thighs instinctively, squeezing against it, desperate for some pressure, and that little bit of strain really spurs him on, gets him to tighten his lips, and jerk faster with his hand. And he knows Richie is getting close because he can see the tension in his abdomen, and the thought that Richie is experiencing that tight, wonderful coil of pleasure building in his body, and the way Richie’s hand is gripping Eddie’s jaw, now, like he’s readying to push him away whether he wants to or not, and the way Richie’s dick feels surprisingly good sliding in and out between Eddie’s lips, is making Eddie question everything he has thought about sex his whole life. Suddenly, Richie coming in his mouth doesn’t seem completely disgusting.

It doesn’t really matter whether he’s questioning it or not, though, because Richie has a firm hand under Eddie’s chin, now, and is pushing him away.

“Eds I’m gonna come...fuck I’m gonna come...”

Eddie retreats, but he keeps his hand moving and tightens his grip as he pushes himself up onto his knees, and he can see Richie’s face, now, and the way the very tips of still-damp hair are sticking to his face, and his head is tipped back into the pillows, and his thick lips are parted in ecstasy as his eyelids flicker closed. And Eddie grips his other hand at the inside of Richie’s thigh, pushes it open a bit, he doesn’t even know why the instinct is there, but suddenly he really fucking wishes Richie was naked and maybe he was closer between his legs. And he thinks he might come himself just from watching Richie’s hips lift a little from the bed towards Eddie’s hand, and he’s moving it as fast as he can, now, wanting to give Richie everything he can, make it as fucking good as he can. Then Richie curses, loud, loud enough that Ben and Bev must have heard it, at least, but Eddie doesn’t even care, just admires the convulsions in Richie’s abdomen and the strong rut of his hips as he comes.

Eddie has to physically stop himself from maybe grinding against Richie’s ass while he keeps jerking
him slowly through the last of his orgasm. He has never really had the urge to fuck Richie before, but it’s there, now, even though it’s really new and kind of scary. He thinks it’s mostly because he’s so painfully hard he just wants something to grind against, though. Mostly.

“Fuck, Eds,” Richie lets out a breathless chuckle, and Eddie feels suddenly snapped out of his thoughts as he meets his eye.

“Was it good?”

“Are you kidding me? I feel like you literally just…sucked my fucking life out through my dick.”

Eddie sniggers and shakes his head, as he gets up off the bed to take a handful of wet wipes from the bedside drawer, cleaning his hand and then Richie’s stomach, before tugging Richie’s underwear and his sweats back up. He throws the wipes into the trash can, but before he can do anything else, Richie grabs his wrist and pulls him back to the bedside so he can get an arm around Eddie’s waist.

“Want me to return the favour?” Richie chuckles, but Eddie shakes his head.

“Want me to use my hand?”

Eddie shakes his head again, but he giggles a little as Richie pulls him onto the bed on top of him, sliding his arms around him and repeatedly kissing at his neck.

“I’m super tired, now, you wanna just sit on top and grind a bit?”

“Richie!”

“What? Look at how fucking hard you are!” Richie laughs as he slides his hand down between Eddie’s thighs, squeezing the lump, there. Eddie’s expression softens, and he relaxes against Richie’s warm body, nuzzling into his neck as Richie strokes him slowly through his shorts and whispers against his ear.

“Don’t you want me to get you off?”

Eddie shudders, and he knows Richie won’t just drop it, now, anyway, and he really does want Richie to get him off. His hand on its own, even over the top of two layers of clothing, is doing fucking wonders. He nods into the crook of Richie’s neck.

“Tell me what you want, Eds.”

Eddie doesn’t really know what he wants.

“This wasn’t about me, you know, Rich?” He mumbles against his neck softly, but he is involuntarily squeezing his thighs against Richie’s hand and pushing towards it, and Richie chuckles into his cheek.

“What if I wanna get you off? I like making you feel good, Eds. I like watching you lose it.” When he says that, he squeezes Eddie’s erection hard, causing Eddie to tense up and sigh lustfully. Then Richie brushes his lips over closer to Eddie’s ear, and says, much more quietly, “I wanna eat you out.”

Eddie freezes.

“Will you let me?”

A couple of weeks ago, Eddie would have freaked out big time, hearing Richie suggest such a thing.
It still isn’t something he has ever really considered. But now, as hard up as he is, as comfortable as he is with Richie, trusting him implicitly, and as eager as he is to explore and try new things, Eddie wonders how bad it would be just to…try? He knows Richie would stop if he told him to, if he didn’t like it. He knows it’s not something that could possibly hurt. He knows he’s clean…down there… because lately he has been making extra sure. So…what reason does he have to say ‘no’?

Eddie nods into Richie’s neck.

“Shit, seriously?” Richie breathes, and his hand moves away from between Eddie’s thighs, and he’s holding onto his waist.

Eddie just nods again, but he doesn’t move, himself, until Richie physically moves him, rolling Eddie off him onto the bed. Eddie knows his cheeks are burning, and it must be obvious, but he doesn’t really even know why he’s so embarrassed, when Richie clearly isn’t. Richie is on top of Eddie, now, watching his face.

“You don’t seem so sure, Eds,” Richie chuckles, pressing a few soft kisses to his lips, “Are you embarrassed? That’s fucking adorable.”

“Shut the fuck up, Richie.”

Richie sniggers, brushing their lips together.

“I’m sorry, I’m just kidding. If you’re sure, roll over.”

Eddie swallows hard, looking into Richie’s eyes for a while, and he feels oddly…safe.

“I bet it will feel good,” Richie smirks, sticking out his tongue a little, and drawing the tip over Eddie’s bottom lip. Eddie shudders, and his lips part. “When I get my tongue right inside you.”

Eddie can’t help the little groan he lets out, then, and he’s not even sure where it comes from, but now that he has thought about having Richie’s tongue there, he can’t shake the image from his mind, can’t stop thinking about how good it actually might feel. Before he knows it, he’s on his stomach, and Richie has moved back and he’s stroking his hands up across Eddie’s ass, and then sliding his shorts and his underwear down his thighs. And then Richie is groping at him in a way that Eddie is finding he surprisingly likes, gently squeezing his fingers into soft flesh, pulling apart his ass cheeks, and then he feels his tongue and it’s like nothing he has ever felt. It’s hot and wet and it tickles and it feels good, and Eddie never realised he was so, so sensitive there, but fuck, it’s like most of the nerves in his body are compressed into that one, small area, and when Richie slowly laves his tongue up it, his whole body trembles.

Richie kisses the back of his thighs a few times, and the cheeks of his ass, and he hums against him smugly.

“Feels good, huh?”

“Y-yeah…”

Richie doesn’t waste any time, pressing his mouth straight in again and licking and tasting and rubbing with his tongue, and kissing and sucking and gently biting the backs of his thighs. And Eddie finds himself sinking further into the mattress, and whining and whimpering pathetically as his thighs shake and he tries to keep his hips up exactly as they are, because it feels so good and he thinks if he lowers them, even a little, he’ll lose that perfect rapture he’s in right now.

“R-Richie…”
He whines out his name a few times, and it only seems to encourage Richie to go at it even more eagerly. And when Eddie actually feels Richie’s tongue press in, go inside him, he finds himself impulsively pressing back. Richie chuckles and hums against him and slides his hand around Eddie’s thigh to start jerking him off at the same time, and Eddie is in such a state of euphoria that he finds himself with his face pressed into the sheets, moaning and panting helplessly until he can feel saliva leaking from the corner of his lips into the fabric and he presses his mouth to the back of his hand instead to stop it, and to muffle the noises he’s making before they get any louder.

And climax literally hits him seconds after Richie starts touching his dick, and he feels himself come onto the sheets, but he can barely acknowledge it because he feels so light-headed and suddenly wiped out.

When Richie finally lets go, he trails butterfly kisses all the way up Eddie’s back to his neck, and then nuzzles in to kiss at his cheek, chuckling.

“I’ve changed my mind. That’s my favourite snack, now.”

Eddie wants to tell him he’s gross, and to shut the fuck up, but all he can manage is a soft, bashful giggle.

And then Richie tugs Eddie’s briefs and his shorts back up, after making another joke about Eddie still wearing briefs all the time, and flops down onto the bed next to him heavily, pulling Eddie against his chest, and breathing in with his face pressed into Eddie’s hair. And it’s like all of the pain and sadness and anger they felt over the past few days is suddenly manifesting itself in exhaustion and heavy limbs and eyelids, and Eddie can barely muster the energy to change the sheets, but he has to, forcing Richie to get off the bed long enough to put a fresh set on, and then collapsing against him again in a clean bed. Richie reaches over to turn off the lamp, and it’s silent for a while, before Richie starts talking again.

“Hey, Eds?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.” Eddie feels Richie’s arms tighten around him. His voice sounds heavy, and full of emotion.

“I’m sorry, too.” Eddie slides his arms around Richie’s waist; he doesn’t care if his hands end up numb by morning.

He just wants to hold him and never let go.

“No, I mean…I just farted.”

There’s a brief silence, and then Richie starts laughing.

So does Eddie.

“Goodnight, dumbass.”

“Goodnight, Eds.”
They are 19 years old.

The Losers have just taken Richie to his first appointment with his therapist.

They wait in the Starbucks café where Bill works, watching spring turn into summer through the large, storefront windows, the afternoon sun casting warm shadows onto the busy streets of New York City.

Outside, a yellow cab pulls up to the sidewalk, and a young couple get in. A man and a woman. This is the only thing that Eddie notices distinctly about them, the fact that they’re opposite genders, as he watches them vaguely, and fiddles with his fingers, and taps his nails against the face of his wristwatch, and feels a tightness in his throat and chest, and the urge to use an inhaler he hasn’t needed since he was fifteen. Not because he has asthma, because Eddie knows that he doesn’t have asthma. What he does have, though, is anxiety, and nothing makes him more anxious, nowadays, than not being with Richie, than not being able to see where he is, than not being able to make certain he’s okay.

Because Richie’s recovery has not gone smoothly. It is moving forward, almost certainly, but it has...
not moved forward as quickly or as easily as anyone had hoped.

At first, in true Richie fashion, he attempted to go cold-turkey. He stopped everything, including smoking, including alcohol, he even stopped eating candy and drinking sugary drinks, because Richie really can’t seem to be able to do anything by halves; he has to go hard. Two days into his new ‘cleanse’, though, and Richie was rather violently ill. He was constantly shaking, breaking out in cold sweats, so weak and fatigued and aching all over that he didn’t want to get out of bed, or couldn’t. He didn’t want to eat, had no appetite at all, and when he did, he would almost immediately vomit it back up again, but no matter how much his friends pushed, he still refused to see a doctor. It had to get to the point where even drinking water made him sick, and he could barely walk to the bathroom on his own, and one day he passed out just from standing up, before he agreed to allow Stan to organise and pay for Richie’s medical insurance, so he could get proper treatment. The six other Losers ended up spending the next two and a half days with him at the hospital, periodically, while they performed blood tests and took urine samples, and pumped Richie full of IV fluids and very low levels of morphine to help control the pain he was in, which they weaned him off gradually until it was replaced with oral painkillers. And afterwards, he was referred to a doctor, who referred him to a psychiatrist, and that’s when the waiting began.

And boy, did they wait, because the last time Richie saw this doctor, and was told he was on the waiting list, was exactly fifty-eight days ago; Eddie has been counting. In fact, Eddie knows they’d have been waiting longer, were it not for the fact that, when the doctor asked Richie if he had been feeling suicidal, he answered, ‘yes’. And Eddie was there for that part. He saw it, and heard it, and swallowed it down with the hard, bitter lump in his throat, and pretended not to react too strongly, because he knew it would upset Richie. But when they got home, and Richie was explaining to the others what the doctor had said, Eddie locked himself up in the bathroom and, as silently as he could, cried so hard into his hands that he felt as though his heart had burst, and poured out of his body with his tears until there was nothing left, and he was empty inside.

And Eddie hadn’t left Richie’s side, since then.

He had endured it all, gladly, no matter how disgusting or horrible or heart-breaking. No matter how much it had made him want to cry, and scream, and hide away in terror because it felt like too much to handle, Eddie was there. He was there every time Richie was sick, kneeling beside him on the cold, bathroom floor, brushing back his hair, stroking his back, wiping the vomit from his chin and his lips, cleaning up the gruelling contents of his stomach from the floor every time Richie didn’t make it to the toilet in time, all the while, trying desperately not to retch. And he was there every time Richie couldn’t sleep, sitting awake with him all through the night, fetching him water, talking to him, distracting him with kisses and the occasional sweaty, sloppy hand job, ignoring the constant, irritating bounce of Richie’s leg against the bed and the way he just could not stop fidgeting. And he was there every time Richie cried, because Richie never cried in front of anyone else, just Eddie, and Eddie would hold him as tight as he could, and bury Richie’s face against his chest, and whisper ‘I love you’ against the top of his head, ignoring the dampness on the front of his shirt or his sweater, of tears, and sweat, and mucus, and perhaps a little vomit, because just then, germs didn’t matter.

It had gradually become easier, though.

Soon, Richie stopped vomiting as much, and then at all, and then his appetite started to come back in sudden bouts of ravenous hunger that Eddie made sure were controlled, because he knew if it were up to Richie, he’d binge and probably make himself vomit again. And along with Richie’s appetite, his colour started to come back, as well. The gaunt hollows of his cheeks started to fill handsomely. The sunken, tiredness of his eyes was replaced with their usual, fiendish glisten. His ribs and hips became less pronounced. His hair gained back some of its shine, or as much of a shine as Richie’s hair could ever have, since he never washes or combs it. He started to sleep better, too, and then so
did Eddie. In fact, Eddie thinks they’ve never slept better than they do now, curled around each other
like two pieces of a puzzle that don’t seem as though they should fit together, but that are somehow
perfectly aligned. In fact, they’re more like pieces from two entirely different puzzles, and yet the
small curve of Eddie’s back fits perfectly against Richie’s chest, and when they’re the other way
around, Eddie thinks his arms fit perfectly around Richie’s skinny waist, and he likes how
comfortable and at home he feels, when he nuzzles into the back of Richie’s neck, and is buried in
that swamp of fluffy hair. And when they’re face-to-face, they’re so close Eddie cannot just count
the freckles on Richie’s face, but the lashes resting on the tops of his cheeks, the pores on the end of
his nose, and he can see the little shallow indents in Richie’s bottom lip, where his two front teeth sit,
still ever-so-slightly too big for his mouth. And Eddie finds, sometimes, when he’s looking at Richie
this close, that he cannot bear to sleep, that every time he closes his eyes to try, he has the impulse to
open them again, because he doesn’t want to waste a second in which he could be looking. And
sometimes he even feels the urge to cry, because he is so in love it is overwhelming.

And gradually, all those times spent kneeling on the cold, hard, bathroom floor, with the stench of
sweat and vomit hanging heavy in the air, Richie’s strangled, gritty sobs of pain and sadness echoing
quietly around the tiles, have become times spent brushing teeth side-by-side, trying not to laugh and
dribble toothpaste every time their eyes meet in the mirror. Times spent with Eddie showing Richie
how to floss, and winding up doing it for him, after being appalled that he hadn’t ever done it before,
and yet more hysterical laughter, when the floss snapped between Eddie’s fingers and he accidentally
punched Richie’s glasses off his face. Times spent taking showers and baths together, washing each
other’s hair, and each other’s bodies, Eddie feeling a little surprised that he’s completely comfortable
having Richie’s bare body touching his, even though it’s the first time they’ve ever fully been naked
together. And Eddie not minding at all when Richie wraps his arms around him, and they’re pressed
flush, with Richie’s chin on Eddie’s shoulder and his full weight leaning against him, because he
really likes it when Eddie washes his hair, with strong, firm fingers massaging his scalp and working
out all the knots. Times spent making dumb foam moustaches, which Richie always accompanies
with an equally dumb voice, and Richie is laughing so hard when Eddie makes his own moustache,
and a beard, and does a dumb voice back, that his sides hurt. Times spent singing stupid duets under
the spray of the water, in which Eddie doesn’t even care that he always gets the female parts,
because he’s having too much fun, and he gets especially enthusiastic during their almost daily
rendition of ‘Baby, It’s Cold Outside’, completely unaware that the other Losers frequently stop
outside the bathroom door to listen, because they think it’s impossibly adorable, and it’s such a relief
to see Richie and Eddie happy again.

And then, too, all of those horrible, long nights spent awake because Richie was in too much pain
and discomfort, or too agitated to sleep, have become nights spent just talking because they want to,
snuggled together under the same blanket, with mugs of hot cocoa and midnight snacks. Have
become nights spent going on long, slow drives in Eddie’s car, listening to their favourite songs on
the radio, pulling over to the side of the road in the middle of nowhere just to watch the stars, driving
around the streets of New York in the early hours of the morning just talking and laughing and being
together, and enjoying every second of it. Times spent learning more about each other than they ever
have before, exploring each other with soft, slow, silent kisses that can last for hours, naked together
in the dark, with roaming, curious hands and lips exploring every nook and crevice and freckle of
each other’s bodies until they know them by heart.

And they take everything relaxingly slow, during these moments, relishing in each other, taking their
time, even when Richie still aches with the urge to utterly wreck Eddie, and it’s even worse when
he’s agitated and craving. But he wants to ensure that Eddie always feels comfortable and at ease,
helping him to open up to Richie more and more.

And Eddie is surely opening up, surely feeling less embarrassed and uncomfortable, day-by-day. He
doesn’t shy away when Richie sees him naked, now, doesn’t recoil if he is touched in certain places.
Now, he initiates their intimate moments almost as much as Richie does, and seems far less embarrassed about using certain words that once he would have died rather than say aloud. Where once, Eddie would cringe at the idea of having to perform oral sex, now he does it willingly and regularly, and every time, he’s getting better, every time, he takes him deeper, until his lips are touching his groin and Richie is a mess of whispered curses and twitching hips desperately trying not to buck. And where once, Eddie would have been repulsed at the idea of rimming, and ashamed beyond belief, now, he openly asks for it, sometimes even begs. And at first, he was still timid about it, allowing Richie to take full control, but now, Eddie likes to lie down against Richie’s body, with his head resting on his thigh, and his knees either side of Richie’s shoulders, while he gets eaten out, likes the feeling of closeness he gets that way, and the way Richie’s arms curve up around his thighs to rest his hands against the small of his back and his ass and press him open. And the last time, Eddie was even brave enough to push himself up onto his knees and sit back a little, bracing his hands either side of Richie’s waist as he rocked his hips back ever-so-slightly against his tongue, whimpering softly and letting his head drop back. And Richie lasciviously watched the smooth, tan curve of Eddie’s back rolling gorgeously above him and thought that he never wanted to see anything else for as long as he fucking lives.

But it still isn’t all sunshine and rainbows and laughter and nice, slow love-making. Because Richie has started smoking again, even more than he used to; he’s up to about twenty a day, now, as opposed to his previous three or four. And sometimes, when he’s feeling extra antsy and getting cravings, he takes more of his prescribed pain medication than he should. Eddie keeps Richie’s meds, now, to prevent him from abusing them, but he’s crafty, and still difficult to keep track of all the time, even when they spend so much time together. And Richie has told the others that he still doesn’t feel quite himself, because he is learning to open up to them, to avoid a repeat of what happened last time he kept his emotions bottled up. He talks to Eddie, Stan and Bev the most, and between them they can often deduce how Richie is feeling even if he doesn’t say it plainly. They know he’s depressed. Stan recognises it more than anyone, and fusses over Richie even more than Eddie does, sometimes, but he also knows it isn’t a problem that can just be fixed by the determination of your loved ones, and certainly not overnight. It’s one of the many reasons Stan has pushed and pushed for Richie to be able to get proper, professional help, no matter how much he has to spend out of his own pocket to do so. Stan is the one calling the doctor over and over while Richie is waiting for an appointment, trying to hurry the process along. Stan is the one making Richie leave the house with him when he goes running, and walking with him, instead. Stan is the one going to Richie’s drama school to speak to his professors and the school administrators, to explain his absences and to figure out where he can catch up when he comes back.

Really, though, everyone has been helping Richie in their own ways.

So that’s why they’re all there, now, waiting in the Starbucks café, having taken days off work and breaks from studying to come along and support Richie on his first day of therapy. Eddie decided it was best to allow him to speak to the psychiatrist alone, even though Richie insisted he didn’t mind Eddie coming with him, because he knows there might be things Richie doesn’t want Eddie to hear, and he wants him to be able to speak as openly as possible without worrying.

That, and, Eddie has other plans for today, that he thinks are just as important.

“Hey, Eds?”

Eddie hears a soft, warm voice close to his ear, and he turns to look at Mike, who has concern written all over his handsome features, and his hand on the back of Eddie’s chair.

“You okay there, little lamb?”
Eddie makes a non-committal noise of assent, and nods. Usually, he doesn’t like it when people call him ‘cute’, or refer to him in a way that suggests they think so, but Mike’s nicknames don’t bother him at all. Mike uses pet names for all of the Losers, and more often than not, those names make reference to farm animals.

“He’s gonna be okay.”

Eddie nods again, but again, it feels false, like he doesn’t quite believe Richie will ever be okay.

Eddie feels Mike’s hand slide over his on his knee beneath the table, and it’s big, and calloused, but it’s warm, and he can’t really explain how, but he instantly feels better; safer. He turns his palm upward so their fingers can slide together a bit, and while Mike’s thumb continuously strokes the back of Eddie’s hand, Eddie feels a little of the tension in his shoulders melt away.

Bill returns from the counter, then, where he was buying drinks, and chatting to one of his co-workers, and plants a kiss against the corner of Stan’s lips as he leans down to pass him a to-go cup of coffee.

“Do we all get a kiss with ours?” Bev chides as Bill slides her frothy, caramel-flavoured drink toward her on the table.

“No.” Bill chuckles, and Stan rolls his eyes, though he looks amused.

Ben, Mike, and Eddie get their drinks, next, and Eddie holds the paper cup between his palms and finds comfort in the radiating heat. He ordered a hot cocoa, and he’s not sure why, because he doesn’t even like it all that much. Richie does, though, and that’s all he was really thinking about at the time, he supposes.

“Eds, d’you wanna get som-something to eat first?”

Eddie looks up from the cup to Bill, and they’re all watching him, now.

“No, I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

“No…”

“Are you nervous?” Bev giggles, leaning over and nuzzling at his cheek affectionately.

“I guess…”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t even hurt that bad, I swear,” She loops her arm through Eddie’s, “You wanna go now? You’ll feel better once you’re there.”

Eddie nods, and everyone gets up. Beverly keeps her hold on him all the way out of the door and down the street, pressed close against him. She smells like incense and floral perfume and menthol cigarettes all mixed together, but Eddie doesn’t find it unpleasant at all. Bev is always soft, and warm, and nice-smelling, and she’s gentle, and affectionate, and although Eddie isn’t at all attracted to girls, he can understand why people are. He imagines if he were that way inclined, perhaps he would want to be with someone like Bev. Although, maybe that’s just because she’s like the female version of Richie, if Richie was clean and had a little more self-control.

They reach the storefront of a rather fancy-looking, upmarket tattoo parlour, and Eddie feels his stomach lurch uncomfortably when they go inside and the shrill bell rings above the door. As far as
Eddie is concerned, there are two kinds of stores that have bells: ones that are cutesy, and in which it adds to the aesthetic, and ones that are kind of creepy, and he can see for sure that this place isn’t ‘cute’. There’s a woman sitting at the reception desk, and she has tattoos all over her body, and piercings all up and down her ears, and vibrant purple hair, and a spike right through the bridge of her nose between her eyes, and all at once Eddie feels way out of his comfort zone. He’s not even sure he knows how to speak to someone like that, and he even feels worried that she’s going to take one look at him and laugh, but he doesn’t have to worry about it too much, because Bev does it for him, chatting to the woman enthusiastically as though they’re old friends. Now that they’re closer, Eddie can see that the woman at the desk looks very clean, and she’s pretty, and has nice, straight teeth, and she seems really friendly, and keeps smiling at him, and he feels a little more at ease, if a little bit guilty that he judged her so readily based on her outward appearance alone.

“You must be Eddie. I’m Laura,” She holds her hand out, and he shakes it timidly. When he thinks about it properly, it’s ridiculous that he should be nervous around somebody just because they are bold, and confident, and quirky, because really, those are all of Richie’s most prominent qualities, and Eddie definitely isn’t nervous around Richie.

He supposes it just makes him feel a little bit…boring.

Maybe Richie would prefer to be with someone like her.

“This your first tattoo?” There’s a slight, Southern lilt to her voice that’s oddly soothing.

“Yeah,” Eddie responds, and it comes out quiet and a tiny bit squeaky, and he instantly feels like an idiot.

“It’s okay,” The woman laughs, and shrugs, “Most people are nervous when they get their first one. I know I was. In fact, I’m nervous every time I get one, I don’t think you ever get used to it.”

Mike, Ben, Bill and Stan are examining the artwork all around the walls of the parlour, and flipping through a table-book of tattoos. Bill looks particularly impressed, and Eddie can hear him trying to convince Stan that maybe they should get tattoos. Stan doesn’t sound at all on board with this idea. In fact, Eddie distinctly hears Stan say, ‘No’, in that firm, final way Stan always does, and that’s the end of it.

“I’m just…I really don’t like pain. Not that anybody does…well, I’m sure some people do, but…I really, really don’t like it and I have really sensitive skin…and I think I’m prone to infections and-” Bev’s finger goes to Eddie’s lips to shush him, and she laughs sweetly.

The woman at the desk just looks bemused. She stands and Eddie sees that her jeans have rips all up and down the legs, like the ones Richie likes to wear, and she has shiny, purple boots with little silver spikes all over the toes and heels.

“C’mon, let’s get you set up.”

She leads Eddie over to the back of the store, where there are several black, leather chairs that are not inherently intimidating, but in this case, Eddie thinks look like the kind of chairs people get strapped into to be tortured. There’s a middle-aged lady sitting in one of the chairs, getting her whole back tattooed by a man with a bald head, a long, greying beard, and very hairy knuckles, and Eddie barely notices what her tattoo is supposed to be, because he’s so concerned with the fact that there are beads of blood sitting atop her skin in some places, and it all looks sore, and red, and painful.

The shrill, buzz of the needle is making him feel nauseous, now, and he suddenly really wishes Richie was here.
That’s why he’s here, though.

He’s doing this for Richie.

And it’s that thought that pushes him forward to sit down in one of those scary, leather chairs that probably makes Eddie look like a child comparatively; his feet barely touch the floor. And it’s the thought of Richie that keeps him from jumping back up again and running away, when Laura with the purple hair sits down on a wheeled stool beside him and puts on a pair of black, nitrile gloves that make Eddie feel as though he’s back at the doctor’s surgery with his mother. And it’s the thought of Richie that keeps Eddie from hyperventilating in blind panic as he’s watching Bev, Bill, and Laura, all leaning over a piece of what looks like tracing paper and talking about design and placement and other things Eddie is sort of blocking out, the sound of that needle in the background still consuming all of his thoughts.

And then Eddie vaguely hears Bill ask, ‘can I?’, and she is handing over the pencil, and Eddie sees Bill crouch to the height of the low table, and start writing out Richie’s name in neat, calligraphic letters, and he feels a little better, somehow. Because now it won’t only be a piece of Richie, but a little piece of Bill, too, that’s etched on his body forever.

*Eddie has never told anyone, not even Richie, but Bill was, and always will be, Eddie’s first love.*

Before he knows it, his arm is resting across the table, palm up, and she’s placing the paper on his wrist and wetting it like you would with one of those fake tattoos for kids (Eddie thinks that’s probably more fitting for someone like him), and then peeling it away to reveal the stencil. It’s neat, and pretty, just the way Bill clearly assumed Eddie would like it to be, and he was right, because as terrified as he is of getting anything permanently forced into his skin with a needle, he does think it looks quite lovely.

“How’s that?” Laura asks him, now, and Eddie feels so tense at this point, he can only respond with a sharp little nod, instead of actual words.

And when he sees her setting up the needle, and dipping it into that little pot of black ink, and then hears its horrible, sharp, droning buzz, his first instinct is to tug his arm away as it’s approaching his wrist, but he knows he can’t, knows he has to stay still, so he does. And it hurts. It hurts even more than he thought it would, and his eyes are watering, and he has to look away because he feels sick, but Bev is holding his other hand tightly between both of hers, and sitting close by his side, and Mike’s hand is rubbing his arm, and Bill is behind him, with his hands on Eddie’s shoulders, watching the process in fascination. Stan is in front of him, with his arms folded, and he looks a little squicked about it, but still interested. Ben looks concerned by the way Eddie is so obviously in pain, from beside Bev, but he’s clearly trying not to show it in front of Eddie, and just keeps smiling at him and giving thumbs up.

“You’re doing great, Eds!” Bev says cheerily, squeezing his hand, “It’s not gonna take long at all, you can do it!”

“This is so e-cool.” Bill chuckles from behind him, and it makes Eddie feel slightly better, but he still can’t think of much but the pain in his wrist and how much it feels as though he’s being sliced open with a scalpel.

It feels as though it takes a lot longer than it actually does, because as far as Eddie is concerned, it lasts about an hour, but in reality, it only takes about ten minutes. And when she’s done, it is sore, but Eddie feels such a sense of achievement that it doesn’t even bother him.

“Eddie, don’t look yet, ‘kay? She’s just gonna clean it up for you,” Bev chuckles as she reaches a
hand up to touch Eddie’s cheek and rub at his chin a little with her thumb, “You did so great, though! I think Richie made much more of a fuss when he got his done!”

Mike sniggers and nods, and so does Ben. Stan is standing next to Bill, now, to get a closer look.

Once Laura has cleaned his wrist, she tells him he can look, and he does, and Eddie sees Richie’s name on his wrist, in curly, dark letters, that remind him of Richie’s hair, and it hits him that he’s going to have this here for the rest of his life. And he feels his cheeks hurt a little with the wide smile that stretches at his lips.

Because that reminds him that he’s going to have Richie for the rest of his life, too.

The others see that he’s smiling, and then they’re all smiling, as well, like nothing makes them happier than to see Eddie so genuinely happy, especially given everything he and Richie have been through, lately.

“I…I love it…thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Laura chuckles as she starts cleaning up, and talking Eddie through how to care for his tattoo while it’s healing, and covers it carefully with saran wrap.

Eddie knows it is only a small tattoo, and he sees that the woman with the huge back tattoo is still there, and will probably still be there for several hours longer, and it really puts into perspective how small an achievement his has been in comparison, but he still feels oddly proud of himself, as they leave the store, and he can’t stop staring at Richie’s name on his wrist.

Eddie has always been afraid of needles, since he was a small child, and so he hated going to the doctor or to the hospital. Both of those places have always freaked him out, anyway, especially hospitals, because of all of the sick people, and the general cold, clinical feeling of them. Whenever he was at the hospital with his mother, he would keep his hands tucked under his arms, and refuse to touch anything, and would often hold his breath for long periods of time just so he didn’t accidentally inhale any germs or bacteria. And it never got any easier, no matter how many times he ended up there. Now, the smell of latex gloves, or of alcohol-based hand gel, makes his stomach lurch with a myriad of horrible memories. Eddie doesn’t suppose anyone particularly likes hospitals, or needles, but his is a particularly uncomfortable fear that is almost post-traumatic in nature. He remembers fainting in the chair almost every time he had to have an injection, screaming and crying and begging them not to do it, held still by his mother’s huge, sausage-like fingers so that they could continue to subject him to it anyway. So, really, the fact that he just allowed a needle to puncture his skin over and over for ten to fifteen minutes voluntarily is somewhat of a miracle.

And he knows that the only way he was able to do it was because of Richie.

Because Richie makes Eddie feel stronger and braver than he ever imagined he could be.

As he’s sitting in the back of Bill’s car, and they’re driving over to the clinic to pick Richie up from his appointment, Eddie feels butterflies in his stomach. But he isn’t nervous; those are butterflies of excitement, and he finds himself trying not to smile like a madman at absolutely nothing, because all he can think about is how they have only been apart for just over an hour, but Eddie feels as though he has genuinely missed him. Really, he didn’t think it were possible for love as strong as the kind he feels for Richie to become any more powerful, but every day he loves him more and more.

Richie gets into the back of the car with a grin on his face, and right away he leans in to kiss Eddie on the lips, and slings his arm around his shoulders.
“So what happened? What did they say? What’s your psychiatrist like? Because if he or she isn’t completely useful, I’ll call them and make sure you get to see a different—”

“Stan, chill, it was fine,” Richie chuckles, and Eddie links their fingers up by his shoulder, keeping his sleeve over the tattoo to cover it, though, “She’s called Jane, and she’s super nice, and a bit of a MILF.”

Bill snorts, and Eddie rolls his eyes.

“Well, what did she say?”

“She gave me some anti-depressants. She says they’ll help with my ADHD, as well, and we’re gonna cover that, too. And they’re gonna do something called ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’, which sounds fancy, but I’m sure it just means they’re gonna tell me to stop being a dickwad.”

“And Stan’s pay-paying her to tell you that? I could have t-t-told you that for free,” Bill sniggers.

Richie chuckles, and he’s playing with Eddie’s fingers, “Well, she said she doesn’t do counselling because she’s a psychiatrist and she’s there to prescribe medication, but she’s gonna refer me to a psychologist, as well. Who knew? I thought they were the same fucking thing.”

“Okay, good. It sounds as though she’s actually doing her job, at least,” Stan remarks rather venomously. He has already been ranting and raving on a regular basis about the state of mental health care in America, and even wrote to the New York State Department of Health complaining about it.

Richie has already become distracted, though, as Stan continues to ramble to Bill in the front seats, and Bill just keeps nodding and agreeing reflexively, because he has noticed the saran wrap sticking out from the cuff of Eddie’s sleeve, and he’s tugging at it.

“Eds, what’s this? Did you hurt yourself or something?”

“N-No, Rich, it’s…” He tugs his hand away gently, wincing a bit as he adjusts his sleeve, “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“What are you talking about?” Richie asks quickly, but there’s a bit of excitement in his eyes that reveals he may have already guessed at what the surprise could be; Richie certainly isn’t an idiot, no matter how many times people tell him so.

Eddie tugs his sleeve up off his arm carefully, and holds his wrist out in front of Richie, watching his face and chewing at his lip.

“Holy shit.”

Stan is leaning over through the gap between the two front seats, now, and he has a small smile on his lips. Bill keeps looking up at them in the rear-view mirror, and he looks almost as excited about it as Richie currently does.

“Holy fuck, Eds, is this real?” Richie holds onto Eddie’s slender wrist gently, looking closer at the tattoo.

“Yeah…do you like it?”

“I mean…obviously I fucking love it, Eds, but…I thought you were super scared of needles.”
“Some things are more important than being scared.”

Richie looks up at him, now, and his expression softens, and Eddie is sure he can see the very beginning of tears brimming in his eyes behind his glasses, before he pulls Eddie into a firm hug to hide them. Eddie feels Richie’s face nuzzling into his neck, and he does the same into Richie’s hair at the other side, mumbling, now.

“Guess we can’t ever break up now, huh?”

“Guess not,” Richie chuckles at the other side, also muffled, in Eddie’s jacket collar.

“And I’m gonna have your dumb name stuck on me for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“I suppose that’s okay, though, since I’m gonna have your dumb self stuck with me for the rest of my life, too.”

“Are you trying to propose to me again, Eds?”

“I’m not proposing anything, it was more of a threat.”

Both of them are laughing and sniggering into each other, now, as Stan looks at Bill with raised eyebrows and smirks a bit.

Eddie lifts his head, but Richie stays where he is, and Eddie doesn’t mind, just strokes his fingers through Richie’s hair and keeps snuggling further against him.

“Actually, it was a promise,” Eddie whispers, when he can hear Bill and Stan talking again.

Richie just tightens his arms around Eddie’s waist.

“I will never stop loving you, Richie Tozier.”
They are 19 years old.

Richie has never really liked his Birthday.

He knows that Birthdays are supposed to be happy, fun, exciting things; a celebration of life and family and friendship. And Richie, in particular, the kind of person who gets unduly excited about literally *everything*, and would normally jump at the chance to have a party, or to get presents, should think of Birthdays as nothing other than positive. And, well, sure, Richie enjoys other people’s Birthdays.

Richie still remembers Stan’s eighth Birthday, when he got a really nice bike from his parents; he was the first of them to get one. Richie, Bill and Eddie were in complete awe of it, and Stan let Richie ride it first, before even he, himself, took a turn. Richie pretended he knew how to ride one, so as not to lose face, but he crashed it right away, and bust his nose on the sidewalk. And Stan scolded him a little for bashing his new bike, but he still cleaned Richie’s nose, and let him try again, he and Bill holding onto the bike at either side while Richie peddled, until he could ride it on his own. It was hours before Stan got to ride the bike, himself. And Richie remembers Eddie’s tenth Birthday, where they had a party in the garden, and all of the decorations were bubble-gum pink, and Eddie cried because the other boys all laughed at him and called him names and kept saying he was a girl. And it was the first time Richie got into a real, serious fight; he maintains that it was five against one, even though Bill threw himself into it, too, and that’s the only reason he lost, but afterwards, they sat cross-legged on the floor of Eddie’s bathroom, and little Eddie, in his tiny, pink shorts, which he still wouldn’t change no matter how much he was picked on, eyes swollen from crying, cleaned Richie’s hands and put ‘Care Bears’ band-aids all over his bruised hands and scuffed knees. And Richie remembers Ben’s thirteenth Birthday, where his mom made all of these amazing cakes and pies and cookies, and Richie ate so much that he threw up in the front street while they were playing ‘kick the can’. And he was worried about it, because he thought Eddie would freak out and think he was gross, but Eddie was the one who sat with him on Ben’s front porch while they watched the others continue to play. And Eddie told Richie that he thought his hair looked nice a bit longer, and the way it was starting to get really curly; Richie has kept his hair long, ever since. And Richie remembers Bill’s sixteenth Birthday, when he dared Eddie to kiss him, and instantly regretted it, only to be kissed by Eddie in Bill’s bathroom minutes later. He remembers how nervous he was, the smell of mouthwash, the feeling of Eddie’s determined fingers either side of his face, looking into
those beautiful, brown eyes and thinking, ‘*this is my soulmate*’.

He remembers that like it was yesterday.

But out of all of the Birthdays Richie has enjoyed, not one of them belonged to him.

Just as vividly as he remembers all of those, he remembers his own sixth Birthday, when his mom and dad got into a big fight, and he spent the day locked inside his room, covering his ears with his hands so that he didn’t have to hear them cursing and screaming, or hear his mom crying. He remembers his eleventh Birthday, when his dad gave him a dollar bill, and he used it to buy his first cigarettes from a group of older boys hanging out by the Standpipe. He remembers his fourteenth Birthday, when he decided to invite his friends over, but his mom was so drunk he turned them away at the door, pretending he was sick, so that he could put her to bed and make sure she was okay, remembers her slurring and pushing at his hands as she told him he was a burden…that he ruined her life…that she always wished she had had a daughter, instead…that he was *bad*. Richie knows that she was wasted, that she didn’t know what she was saying…but he will remember those words until the day he dies.

And it doesn’t matter how much better his Birthdays have been, since, how many presents he has received from the other Losers, how enthusiastically they try to celebrate it *for* him, despite his reluctance, because to Richie, his Birthday will always be something tainted. Tainted with badness, just like him.

So, this time, on Richie’s twentieth Birthday, it’s no surprise that no one has spoken about it, at all. They all know how Richie feels about his Birthday, and they all know why, one way or another, so he just assumed they’d leave it well alone, just allow him to sort of breeze through it without making a fuss.

He was wrong.

As soon as he opens his eyes, that morning, or afternoon, rather, since Richie is a late sleeper, he sees that the bedroom is filled with balloons, all gathered at the ceiling in bright, bold, rainbow colours, little white, ribbon tails curling and rotating slowly in the air like wind-chimes. He lowers his sluggish gaze a little, and there’s a white banner across the top of the door, with ‘Happy Birthday, Richie’, painted across it in Bill’s neatest, boldest font. His eyes drift lower, still, and there is Eddie, lying beside him on his front, with his arms folded on the bed, and his cheek on his arms, fully dressed and watching Richie as though he has been there for hours, just waiting for him to wake up.

“Happy Birthday, Rich,” Eddie smiles and leans in to kiss at his lips; just a peck, but Richie holds onto him and laughs playfully into his mouth as he rolls Eddie underneath him.

“Is this my gift?” He grips at Eddie’s hips, fairly hard, and feels them lift against him in submissive retaliation, the kind of action that makes Richie’s heart flutter, and then sends blood rushing straight to his dick.

The feeling of Eddie’s solid body could do that on its own, though, lately, because not only has Eddie taken his cheerleading back up again, this time on the N.Y.U squad, but he has also started participating in boxing classes at the local gym. At first, Richie was dead against it. He could just picture Eddie coming home with bust lips and bruises on his face, and the thought of allowing someone to hit him made Richie’s blood boil. But Eddie was determined that this was something he wanted to pursue, and Richie knows all too well that once Eddie has set his mind on something, he will see it through, and literally *no one* can stop him. He’s not entirely sure why Eddie suddenly decided that he wanted to try ‘boxing’, of all things, but Richie assumes it’s a combination of reasons, number one being that Eddie has a lot of pent up frustration coiled into such a small body,
he’s like a ticking time-bomb. And if he feels the need to punch that frustration out against a bag, or a willing opponent, then who is Richie to judge? So far, he has done a really good job of keeping to himself the fact that the thought of Eddie having all of this raw, aggressive energy gives Richie major wood. He’s honestly a little bit worried that if he pisses him off enough, Eddie will just sock him right in the face. He’s also not entirely sure he would be opposed to that.

He supposes that Eddie has other reasons, too, and there is one in particular that Richie doesn’t like to think about, and that is that Eddie, after having gone head-to-head against a particularly hulky drug-dealer on Richie’s behalf, and lost, feels as though he has to learn to fight. Richie would say that Eddie feels weak as a result, that his already intense anxiety about his height and his size and his femininity was made even worse in the wake of this horrible event. It makes Richie simultaneously furious and heartbroken to think about it. Eddie, on the other hand, would say that his top priority is to learn to better protect Richie, not to protect himself, nor to make him feel more secure in his manhood. Eddie sees the way Richie sometimes hovers by the window late at night, the way he twitches at the curtains and checks the street in front of their house left and right. He sees the way Richie obsessively locks the front door the second it gets dark outside, the way he relocks it every night before they go to bed, and sometimes goes down in the middle of the night just to make extra sure. He knows Richie is afraid. And he wants to protect him. He wants Richie to feel protected, in a way he never has before.

That is Eddie’s main reason for taking up boxing.

The fact that it is making his body toned and firm, that it is replacing all of the puppy-fat that was never remedied through growth the way Richie’s was with solid muscle, and the fact that it makes him exhilarated with adrenaline, are just added bonuses.

And Jesus, Eddie gets off on adrenaline.

Richie remembers the night Eddie came back from his first class, only a couple of weeks ago, looking a little red in the face, and slightly sweaty, with his trademark, carefully styled quiff sticking messily to his forehead. He remembers that Eddie was unusually quiet, that he briefly summarised his class as ‘good’ to the other Losers when they asked, that he made a beeline for his and Richie’s bedroom, knowing that Richie would follow him. He remembers the way Eddie threw the door closed behind Richie and backed him against it, completely uninhibited by the difference in their height as he yanked him down against his lips and kissed him like Eddie had never kissed Richie before, hard and possessive and desperate, thrumming with fiery energy. He remembers the way Eddie forced him back onto the bed, straddled his hips, both of them still fully clothed, and started grinding down into Richie like his life fucking depended on it, demandingly moving Richie’s hands up onto his bare thighs just below the legs of his shorts as he continued his lust-fuelled assault. He remembers the needy, slightly wild look in Eddie’s eyes, the way he groaned and whimpered almost in frustration, as he forced himself down harder against the solid bulge of Richie’s erection, never rubbing his own against it, but instead driving it as deep as their clothing would allow between the cheeks of his ass. He remembers getting dizzy with lust and anticipation as he watched Eddie rut above him, ‘Shit, Eddie wants to get fucked…holy shit, he really wants me to fuck him,’ was all he could think, and it made his head spin, but every time Richie went for the waistband of Eddie’s shorts, or tried to mention it, Eddie would stop him, dig his fingers hard into Richie’s wrists or the backs of his hands and move them back to his thighs with a quick shake of his head. Eventually, they both just came like that, Richie first, right in his jeans, and Eddie straight after, Richie rubbing him hard through his shorts and telling him over and over, ‘You’re so fucking beautiful, Eds, you’re so fucking hot,’ as Eddie continued to whimper and rock back-and-forth desperately in his lap.

Richie hasn’t been able to stop thinking about it, since. And every time he does, he gets really fucking hard, really fucking fast. He’s not sure what it means, but fuck, he hopes it means Eddie is
getting ready to go all the way, because Richie’s not sure he can take it any more if that’s not true.

He thinks about it, now, as he still has Eddie trapped under him on the bed, and, yeah, there we go… Richie’s almost instantly hard. Daringly, his hands creep their way down Eddie’s back beneath them, until his fingertips meet the roughness of denim; Eddie’s wearing jeans. So far, so good, he thinks, as he mouths at Eddie’s neck in several different places, distracting him and making him squirm and laugh in that cute, giggly, high-pitched way he only seems to reserve for Richie. Then Richie’s hands find Eddie’s firm little ass, and shit, if he was any good at writing, like Bill or Ben, Richie could write an epic fucking novel or poem about Eddie’s ass….maybe one day, he’ll do that anyway, that sounds like fun. It also sounds like something Eddie would hate, but sacrifices have to be made, especially for the appraisal and recognition of an ass as incredible as this. It’s like a perfect, ripe peach. He gropes at it a bit, and Eddie is squirming slightly, now, and pushing at Richie’s shoulders. He doesn’t seem uncomfortable, just…reluctant.

“Rich, no. Not right now…”

But Eddie’s body is betraying him; Richie feels Eddie’s dick twitch against his stomach as he slides his two longest fingers hard over the denim, pressing between his cheeks. He has had his tongue here, plenty of times, had it right up inside that tight heat until Eddie has literally been shaking and begging and almost in tears, but god, what Richie wouldn’t give to get his fingers in there, let alone his dick. What he wouldn’t give to fuck Eddie with his fingers so damn good and fast and hard, just give him everything he knows Eddie wants so fucking bad but can’t push past his own fears and insecurities to allow. He knows Eddie is afraid of the pain, he must be, that’s the only thing holding them back, because they’ve done almost everything besides penetration. And Richie knows that no amount of assuring and promising will convince Eddie that he won’t hurt him when, honestly, Richie doesn’t really know whether it will hurt or not. He knows he can’t promise that. So, until Eddie is ready to accept the fact that it might hurt, until he’s okay with it, until he understands that, even if it hurts, Richie will be there to soothe him and take care of him and make him feel good, they’re just going to have to wait. And Richie will wait. Even though he’s twenty years old, and still a virgin, which is really not how Richie Tozier envisioned his college life, he will continue to wait, until he’s fucking forty, if he has to. He’ll wait until he’s sixty, eighty, a hundred, if he ever lives that long, for Eddie Kaspbrak.

In any case, it’s definitely not happening right now, which Eddie demonstrates by pushing him away and getting to his feet. There’s a light flush to his cheeks as he prims his hair with his fingers.

“Rich, c’mon, everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Why? What for?” Richie groans groggily as he stuffs his face into the pillows like an irritable teenager being scolded by his mother.

“Uh, because it’s your birthday, dumbass. C’mon, get up.”

Richie feels Eddie’s hand on his shoulder, now, and he’s tugged over onto his back, and then he can’t help but laugh as Eddie pulls him to his feet by his wrists and gets up on his toes to tidy Richie’s hair. Eddie huffs when Richie snakes his arms around his waist and pushes his face into Eddie’s shoulder.

“Exactly, Eds, it’s my birthday. And I want you to come back to bed with me.”

“No. You have to have breakfast and open your presents.” Eddie is combing Richie’s hair with his fingers, now.

“Can I open you, instead?”
“That’s fucking gross…”

“C’mon, Eds, just come back to bed with me for like ten minutes.” Richie nuzzles into the side of his neck, but Eddie is busy cleaning Richie’s glasses; Eddie carries a glasses cloth with him everywhere, now. And it’s definitely necessary, because Richie’s glasses are always fucking dirty, no matter how many times Eddie cleans them.

“Maybe later.”

“Really?” Richie lifts his head to look at him, now, expectantly, feeling a bit smug.

“Later.” Eddie repeats, more softly, and he’s looking into Richie’s eyes, and there’s something in his voice and his eyes akin to…lust? Eddie quickly brushes the moment aside, though, when he pushes Richie’s glasses onto his face, “Glasses,” he says, firmly, shortly followed by, “Meds,” as he holds up two little white pills, pressing them onto Richie’s tongue when he opens his mouth, and passing him the cup of water that’s on the nightstand. He watches Richie take them, and then puts the cup back.

“What would I do without you?” Richie chuckles, pressing a firm kiss to Eddie’s forehead.

“You would definitely have fucking died by now.”

Richie is actually pleasantly surprised by how much he enjoys the rest of the day. Once he’s dressed, and as soon as he enters the kitchen, he’s met by a cacophony of shouted ‘Happy Birthday!’s and Bev hits him in a tight hug, first, closely followed by Bill, then Mike, Ben, and finally, Stan, who isn’t much of a hugger, but surprisingly seems to embrace Richie most tightly of all. The rest of the house is decorated in a similar fashion to the bedroom, especially the kitchen, which is packed with glitter and confetti-filled balloons, and strewn with banners, all obviously hand-painted by Bill, emblazoned with the words ‘Happy Birthday, Richie’ in multi-coloured lettering. There’s more confetti and glitter all over the large table, which has a pile of wrapped presents at its centre, as well as plenty of food and drink, all Richie’s favourites. He has a pile of cookies and cream flavour Pop-tarts for breakfast, and a tall glass of Mountain Dew; Eddie grimaces slightly at his choices, but he doesn’t say anything. It is Richie’s birthday, after all.

Stan oversees the order in which Richie opens his presents, clearly following a strict ‘save-the-best-until-last’ regimen. He knows that if it were up to Richie, he would just tear into them with wild abandon, and somewhere in Stan’s mind, he thinks that Richie will enjoy himself more if the process is controlled. Whether that’s actually true or not, is up for debate, but Richie knows that Stan always has his best interests in mind, so he doesn’t complain.

To be honest, Richie is surprised that the gift pile is so big; he doesn’t recall a time when he has ever received even half this many. The first one he opens is a large, plain box, with the Losers’ home address on the front, and Richie can see that the return address has a Derry zip-code, and his heart sinks a little when he doesn’t recognise it. At first, he thought it might be from his parents, but, except for this one, all of the others are wrapped in coloured paper, so he knows now that there’s no chance of such a package existing. Eddie is sitting very close to him, and watching the parcel anxiously, as though afraid of it, and Richie soon sees why, when he opens it and reads the card sitting on the top.

“Who’s it from?” Bev asks curiously from Richie’s other side, holding a mug of milky coffee between her bejewelled hands.

“Eddie’s mom…” Richie answers, very quietly. The table is silent, then, too, although several of them share anxious looks.
“Wh-what does the card say?” Eddie is fiddling with the strap on his watch nervously.

“Nothing, it just says ‘Happy Birthday Richard, from Mrs. Kaspbrak.’”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. See?” Richie holds the card out to Eddie, and Eddie takes it from him and reads it over several times, as though he’s looking for hidden meaning in those six, simple words.

“Did you tell her t-”

“No,” Eddie responds quickly, shaking his head and placing the card on the table in front of him.

“For real? You must have said someth-”

“I didn’t.”

“So…she just…remembered my birthday…”

Richie is looking at Eddie, now, but Eddie doesn’t seem to be able to meet his eye; his own are slightly red at the edges.

“…and she sent me a card…and a gift.” Richie is digging inside the box, now, and he pulls out a pack of white socks, a bottle of hand wash, a hair comb, some glasses-cleaning wipes, shampoo, and a large bottle of laundry detergent, and, right at the bottom of the box, what appears to be a wash-bag, that Richie unzips to find is filled to the brim with condoms. Eddie chokes rather suddenly on nothing but air when he sees them. At the very least, he doesn’t look as though he’s going to cry any more.

“Holy shit,” Richie sniggers, tipping them out onto the table. It’s almost comical the way they just keep coming; there are literally about a hundred.

“Oh my god…” Eddie’s hands are covering his face, now, while the others all laugh in disbelief.

“Yeah but does this mean…” Richie is watching as Eddie frantically scoops all of the condoms back into the bag, “…she’s okay with this, right?” Richie motions with his hand between himself and Eddie, “It’s weird, but…this means she’s accepting that we’re together?” Eddie finally meets his eye, and his expression softens, as though the same realisation is just dawning on him, too.

“It looks that way,” Bev chuckles, as she picks up the shampoo bottle, and the hand wash, “She’s saying, ‘you can touch him, but you have to…wash yourself first, because you’re a scumbag.’”

Richie laughs, and he’s nodding, and even Eddie can’t help but crack a smile, as he looks at Richie fondly. In fact, despite the shock and embarrassment of the plethora of condoms, Mrs. Kaspbrak’s strange, and slightly insulting, but nonetheless oddly thoughtful package seems to have made Eddie very happy, indeed. He’s resting his chin against the heel of his hand to hide the way he keeps smiling behind his fingers.

From Bill’s parents, Richie receives a large hamper of candy, and a very questionable pink shirt with bold, orange and yellow flowers all over it. Of course, right away, Richie pulls his current shirt off over his head, and puts the new one on, instead, beaming from ear-to-ear. He even gets a small gift from Stan’s parents: a little box of cookies, and a spectacle repair kit. At this point, Richie has a small gathering of gifts in front of him on the table, and he looks very happy. Eddie is watching him with such uncharacteristic, giddy affection that Bill casually nudges Stan beneath the table and motions with his head towards Eddie. Stan is beaming shortly afterward, in a display of happiness Stan very
rarely exhibits, either.

There’s a package from Richie’s drama group, too. It’s a record player; a jointly purchased gift from his classmates, and professors. He has always mentioned wanting one, ever since he was a kid. There’s a huge card alongside it, filled with little notes and signatures. Richie has been attending his classes again, now, for a couple of weeks, and it hasn’t really taken him long to catch up, especially since his tutors and friends have been so supportive and understanding of his circumstances. They just seem to like him so much, that it’s impossible for Richie to taint his record just through absence. In fact, Richie is so damn likeable, that his popularity has spread like wildfire across campuses, beyond his own school. He almost weekly gets invited to parties and to join clubs, even by people he has never met before, and the university itself has encouraged him to perform at some of its social events to the other students, doing stand-up comedy; Richie’s specialty. So far, his performances have gone down so well, that certain societies have started offering him money to appear at their functions. Richie used the first profit he ever gained from this to buy Eddie a large bouquet of pink roses.

Next, he opens up a few gifts from Bev, all wrapped in brown paper, and decorated with multi-coloured ribbons. There are several hand-made bracelets, in a mixture of colours and textures, a collection of fabric hair-ties, which she has also made herself, a necklace with the letter ‘R’ on it, and a lot of multi-coloured beads, and a silver ring with a tiny opal set into the front. Just like the shirt, Richie’s first instinct is to put all of these things onto his body, and Eddie adjusts his bracelets for him so that they fit together better on his skinny wrists.

From Ben, Richie gets a collection of Marvel comic books, the biggest container of homemade chocolate chip cookies any of them have ever seen, made by Ben, himself, of course, and a large, thick black sweater; Ben is always talking about how Richie has so little body fat, that he must get cold easily. And honestly, he does, but he isn’t the type to ever complain about it.

From Mike, he receives a stylish denim jacket, and the Monopoly board game. There’s a Mexican-wave of sniggering around the table when he unwraps it, and some eye-rolling from Stan. They’ve been bouncing the idea of ‘game night’ around for a while, though every time they play a board game together, it ends in disaster. Usually, there’s plenty of bickering, which sometimes escalates into a curse-filled argument, and in rare cases, it has ended in tears. Stan and Eddie, in particular, are both fiercely competitive, and probably shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near a monopoly board, especially not considering Eddie’s temper. Richie seems very excited about it, though.

From Bill, whose gifts Richie spots instantly, being the most messily-wrapped of them all, he gets two CDs, ‘Guns ‘N’ Roses’, and ‘ACDC’. There’s also a large, flat, rectangular package, that’s the biggest of any of the others on the table, which is instantly recognizable as canvas-shaped. Bill doesn’t ever draw or paint for a specific purpose, his art is always purely for his own enjoyment, and, no matter how often the other Losers commend his skill, he is very critical of his own work. It’s just like Bill to be so modest. However, this piece, revealed as Richie tears away the shimmering paper, really is beautiful. A comic-book-style painting of Richie, startlingly realistic, but lined boldly in black, and coloured in vibrant, pop-art hues, just the way Bill must have assumed Richie would like it to be. Emblazoned across the top, is his name, ‘Richie Tozier’, in huge, graffiti-like letters. It looks very much like one of Richie’s many band posters, or, coincidentally, perhaps an advertisement for a stand-up comedy show. Either way, it’s brilliant, and Richie is very vocally and enthusiastically pleased with it. He nearly knocks half of his gifts off the table as he lunges across it to grip his arm around Bill’s shoulders, in an awkward, tight hug. Even Eddie seems to like it, and he proves that by hanging it on the wall in his and Richie’s room, then and there.

“You can s-s-sell it when you’re famous,” Bill nudges Richie in the side as the seven of them crowd into Richie and Eddie’s room to admire the artwork.
“Are you fucking shitting me? I’m gonna keep this for the rest of my life.”

Returning to the kitchen table, Stan’s presents are even more glaringly obvious than Bill’s, so neatly wrapped, they look as though the paper was measured to the millimetre, and every corner would be a perfect right-angle if checked with a protractor. Stan’s gifts to Richie include a Rubik’s Cube, something he knows Richie can fidget with for hours, but is also mentally stimulating, an expensive new pair of headphones, and a plain, white, Calvin Klein shirt. This, Richie holds up in front of Stan disbelievingly, with one quirked eyebrow.

“C’mon, Stanny, why would you spend so much money on something you know I won’t even wear?”

“You will wear it. What about when you have to go for a job interview? Are you going to wear that?” Stan motions with his eyes to the garish, pink, yellow and orange one he’s currently sporting.

“Maybe,” Richie chuckles, shrugging, “Why’s it such a big deal? If I go for a job interview and they don’t hire me because of my shirt, maybe I don’t wanna work for them anyways. Besides, if I wanna end up in show biz, this is perfect!” As though to accentuate his point, he flings the Calvin Klein shirt onto the table, to allow for some very enthusiastic ‘jazz hands.’

Eddie snorts beside him, but Stan has as much of a deadpan expression as ever.

“You know, it wouldn’t hurt for you to put a little effort into your appearance every now and then, Richie. You’d look good if you actually tried.”

“Are you saying I don’t look good anyway?” Richie holds his hand on his chest and raises his eyebrows in mock offense.

“You’re a mess.”

Richie gasps, “Stanley, I am hurt.” There’s some tittering laughter around the table at Richie’s performance, “You know, it takes days of dedication to get my hair this sexy. Really, it’s an art form. I’m just not appreciated in my own time, and that, my friends, is the sign of a true artiste.”

Eddie cuts him off by scooping the remaining presents across the table in front of him. The rest must be from Eddie; they’re wrapped quite nicely in pale pink tissue paper, the same colour that makes up a large portion of Eddie’s wardrobe, the same colour as the polo shirt he’s wearing, now, and topped off with pretty, gold ribbon. Oddly, Richie leans in to sniff at the collection of gifts, and then he looks at Eddie.

“This smells like…” He breathes in again, and sniggers, “Did you spray these with your cologne?”

“What?” Eddie snaps, far too quickly, “No!”

Richie laughs as he tries to sniff Eddie’s neck, but he’s hastily pushed away.

“It is! You totally did!”

“No I fucking didn’t!” Eddie’s cheeks are flushed, now, “Maybe…m-maybe it just got on them somehow. They were under our bed!”

“…okay,” Richie nods, still smiling smugly, but deciding to concede, since he knows that Eddie is lying, but he also knows that he’s embarrassed, and he doesn’t want to be the cause of that, at least not for real.
As he unwraps the thin, gold ribbon, he can’t help but notice how Eddie is wearing a bracelet the same shade of gold, in place of the watch that’s normally there. That strikes Richie, first of all, because he has known Eddie since they were six years old, and when he thinks about it, he has never seen him without a watch on that wrist, unless he is showering or sleeping. Richie also finds his attention drawn to Eddie’s t-shirt. It really is the exact same colour as the wrappings that Richie is now opening, subconsciously much more gently and precisely than the others, which he tore into blindly. He can still smell Eddie’s cologne on the paper; it’s definitely the same one that is on Eddie’s skin at this very moment, and the whole thing just feels…intentional. Richie’s brain is buzzing trying to figure out whether or not this actually means anything more than just Eddie being a little picky about things ‘matching’. But Eddie doesn’t really care about things matching. That’s some Stan-level thinking, and Eddie may be clean, and terrified of germs, but he’s not that obsessive. So this has to mean something else. It has to.

The first, neat little parcel from Eddie, is a book of crude jokes. Richie reads some of them aloud to the table to a lot of groaning and reluctant laughter, before moving on to the next gift. This one is a large box, filled with all of Richie’s favourite candy and snacks. Honestly, he couldn’t have put together a better collection, if he’d made it. He almost feels a little surprised at how Eddie seems to know him better than he knows himself. The third package contains a nice pair of black gloves. Richie’s hands are always cold; Eddie insists he has poor circulation. The fourth is a tiny silver ring, in a pretty white box, with Richie’s initials engraved onto the inside of the band. Before Richie can comment at all, Eddie plucks it from its velvet cushioning, lifts Richie’s hand in his own, and slides it onto his pinkie-finger, on the side he has always mentioned feels bare. It’s a perfect addition, and Richie admires it fondly, before his eyes are drawn to Eddie’s lips as they lean in to press at his knuckles softly.

“How the fuck are you even real?” Richie breathes dreamily.

Eddie sniggers, and rolls his eyes, but Richie doesn’t look as though he is joking, at all.

“No, seriously, how the fuck do you exist? I mean it. It’s like someone went into my brain, scooped out all the good stuff, and moulded it into you.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

“I don’t fucking know. I feel high when I look at you.” Richie laughs, short and sweet, and Eddie shakes his head, but he’s smiling, too.

“Open the last one, asswipe.” Eddie points to the last package. It’s fairly small, and boxy. “That one’s from all of us.”

When Richie unwraps it, it’s a cell phone. Once more stunned by the generosity of his friends, he frees it from its packaging and holds it in the palm of his hand.

“You guys are fucking nuts…I can’t believe you would actually spend all that money…you realise I like…never pay my share of the rent, right?”

There’s a warm, gathering of laughter, then, around the table, and they are all watching Richie with wide smiles and fond expressions.

“We already set it up for you, since you’re hopeless with technology,” Stan comments dryly.

“Stan and Eddie are b-both on speed-dial,” Bill adds, softly. Stan and Eddie are still the only other Losers who own cell phones.
“So, if you’re ever in a tough situation, you know you can reach us.” This time, it’s Mike who speaks, with a comforting smile.

“No matter what time it is,” Stan says, firmly, meeting Richie’s eye, “And no matter where any of us are.”

Richie stares at him, in somewhat stunned silence, and his eyes prickle hotly at the edges, but he won’t cry. Not in front of everyone. Not like this.

“You guys are fucking insane…” He responds quietly, after an awkward stretch of silence, “You know I can never pay you back for this…all this stuff…” He motions to the generous collection of gifts on the table, “And this,” He lifts the cell phone in his palm.

“You don’t pay people back for gifts, Rich, it’s your Birthday,” Ben laughs softly, and Richie feels comforted by the gentle, steadiness of his voice, “And we love you.”

There’s another, brief moment of silence, then, broken only by the rapid tap of Richie’s heel against the kitchen floor, before he speaks.

“Gay.”

Eddie sighs as a few of the others snigger and laugh.

“Rich.”

Richie snorts.

“You know I’m kidding…I love you guys.” He looks around the table, almost timidly, “Thank you…for everything. I really mean it.”

“Alright, don’t get all sappy on us, Tozier!” Bev chuckles, reaching across to ruffle her fingers through his hair, “It’s your Birthday! So, what do you wanna do?!”

As it turns out, what Richie wants to do on his Birthday, is not much of anything. They spend the entire day in the back room, playing video games, pigging out on unhealthy snacks and candy and bottled soda, and ordering large quantities of equally unhealthy pizza for lunch. And, since it’s Richie’s Birthday, no one complains; everyone joins in. Even Stan, who, for one, is the least likely person to eat junk food, and equally unlikely to enjoy playing ‘mindless’ video games, is soon enthusiastically beating Richie at some of his favourite titles, and occasionally being fed sweet chilli Doritos by Bill.

Later, as the sky begins to darken, from afternoon to evening, and they’re half-way through a hilarious, but heated game of monopoly, in which Stan owns half of the board, Eddie gets up and says that he’s going to take a shower. He has been surprisingly docile for the entire game, to the point where Richie has noticed his unusual lack of competitiveness and enthusiasm. Normally, by now, Eddie would have aggressively flipped the board at least twice, and thrown several of the tiny, metal avatars, most likely at Richie’s head. But, this time, he has been quiet and vacant, as though his mind is occupied by something else. Richie stands immediately after Eddie gets up, but Eddie shoots him a look crossed between anger and terror.

“What? Why?”

“N-No, Rich, stay here! Just carry on with the game!”

“Because…it’s your Birthday! You have to stay! I just need to take a shower, I…spilled something
“When? I’ve literally been with you all day,” Richie seems genuinely suspicious, now, and slightly concerned.

“Yeah…it was…b-before-”

“He spilled milk on himself this morning when we were eating breakfast,” Stan cuts in coolly, “I knew you’d be thinking about it all day, Eddie,” He looks at him, now, “I don’t know why you didn’t just go and shower right away. I did tell you to.”

The way they’re looking at one another is kind of intense, and Richie notices that, too. He wonders what it is they’re hiding. Maybe…some kind of surprise for his Birthday? Although, he’s not sure what else there could be, after everything they have already given him. He knows there’s something going on, though.

“I…I didn’t want to leave, in case…in case Richie woke up…”

Richie looks between them, before shrugging his shoulders and letting out a low laugh.

“Okay.” He sits back down, and Eddie’s shoulders visibly relax.

“O-Okay…I’ll…be back in a minute, then.”

Richie watches Eddie disappear through the doorway, with a slightly smug smile on his face. He listens to his light footsteps moving quickly up the stairs, and then his mind is drawn suddenly back to the game, mostly because Stan yells at him for not paying attention. He knows that they’re up to something, and it’s actually pretty funny how bad Eddie is at lying. Stan’s a far better actor, but it’s too late for him to clean up the mess Eddie has already made with his broken, nervous responses. Eddie’s emotions are always right on the surface, and Richie can read him like an open book. Still, he doesn’t wanna be a dick and ruin their surprise, whatever it is they’re planning, so he leaves it alone, and just enjoys the game, instead.

Almost an hour later, though, and Eddie still hasn’t returned. Stan finally won the game, after he and Ben went neck-and-neck for a while, both being rather adept at strategy. There was no way that Ben could ever pull it back, though, since, towards the end, Stan owned the entirety of the most expensive street on the board, and had hotels built all over it. Bev was bankrupt within a few minutes of Eddie leaving, closely followed by Bill, then Richie, then Mike, and finally, Ben.

Richie gets up from the ground to stretch his legs out, since they’ve been cross-legged around that tiny board for the best part of three hours, in total, and Richie’s enormous limbs don’t comfortably comply with being folded. During his yawning, stretching circuit through the lounge, he curiously passes into the hallway and stops at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the railing. He can hear the distinctive spray of the shower, coming from the bathroom on the floor above, and wonders, almost in amusement, how Eddie can possibly still be in there. Eddie always takes long showers; he’s a very clean person, and a germ phobic one, at that, but even Eddie never takes this long. And if he really were up there preparing some kind of Birthday surprise, then he wouldn’t actually be showering, would he? Unless…

“Hey, Rich, why don’t you go take a shower? You can put on your new sweater, get nice and comfy, and we’re gonna do a movie marathon. You can pick the movies, of course, Birthday boy.”

It’s Bev, and she prims at Richie’s hair with her fingers, as she talks.

“I took a shower yesterday.”
“What, like there’s a rule against taking a shower if you already had one the day before?” She laughs, and makes a face as she tugs at one of his tangled curls. “Besides, you need to wash your hair.”

“What are you insulting me on my Birthday?”

They both snigger.

“It comes from a place of love, Rich.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like it.”

“Just go take a shower,” She pats at his ass as she motions up the staircase, “We’re gonna order some food, and we’ll get everything set up. You don’t have to lift a finger. Except to wash your hair. And probably your junk.”

“Eds is in the shower.”

“Then use the other shower!” She rolls her eyes, in amused exasperation, “Go on! Go!”

“Fine!” Richie starts to ascend the stairs, “But if I enjoy myself too much in there, you have only yourself to blame, Marsh.”

He can hear Beverly’s clear, sweet laughter as he stops outside the bathroom Eddie is using, and knocks on the door playfully.

“Hey, Eds, you drown in there or something?! Do you need me to bring you your floaties?!”

“FUCK OFF!”

“What’s taking you so long?! Are you jacking off?!?”

“NO! I’m trying to take a shower! You know I hate it when people talk to me while I’m in the bathroom!”

“I thought that was just while you were taking a shit!”

“It’s all the time!”

“Geez, fine, I can take a hint!” Richie chuckles to himself as he taps his fingers happily against the wood, and strokes them across the handle absent-mindedly.

It has been a while since he and Eddie showered together, mostly since Eddie hasn’t let him; it’s understandable, he just wants his privacy, since they spent so much time together, it can get a little intense. Richie still misses it, though.

In fact, Eddie has been a little distant, in general, lately, but Richie has just put it down to stress, since they’re closing in on exam season, and Eddie’s course seems insanely difficult and intense. Richie knows he wouldn’t last a second if he had the kind of workload Eddie has, especially given the addition of his cheerleading, taxiing people around in his car, and now his boxing, too. Eddie gets stressed easily, anyway, so in particularly stressful situations, his anxiety hits new highs. They haven’t been sexually intimate in seventeen days; Richie has been counting, because he has been very aware of it. And Eddie has brushed him off every time Richie has attempted to initiate anything, although he has always seemed reluctant to do so, which has made Richie even more confused. It’s all a little frustrating, but Richie is happy to give Eddie some space, if that’s what he needs to clear
his head, even if it means he has to satisfy himself for a while. It’s never the same, anymore, but he can make do.

Twenty minutes later, and Richie is showered, dressed, and back downstairs, and he can’t hear the shower in the other bathroom anymore, as he passes it, but Eddie is still in there. He knows because he can hear the familiar sound of Eddie’s blow-dryer, and a fond smirk twitches at his lips.

Richie flops down into the armchair in the lounge, stretching out his legs; they’re so long, his feet block the hall-side doorway, from here, but that was his intention. As soon as Eddie comes into the room, Richie will make sure he gets him in his lap, just in time for the movie marathon. It is his Birthday, after all, and he knows they have already given him more than he ever possibly could have asked for, but all he really wanted was to spend some long-overdue ‘private time’ with Eddie. A few gentle neck kisses, a little suggestive whispering, and some discreet, well-placed groping in the dark, should be sufficient to get Eddie in the mood.

But when Richie hears the creek of feet on the stairs, looks out into the hallway, and sees Eddie on them, on his way down, he instantly forgets his plan, forgets why he’s blocking the doorway with his feet, even forgets his own fucking name. Eddie always looks good, there’s no doubt about it, even to those who aren’t as horrendously biased as Richie, but now, he looks nothing short of stunning. In fact, ‘stunning’ isn’t a sufficient word, either, but even if his brain was working, Richie doesn’t think he has a vocabulary sophisticated enough for it to contain a word that is.

He watches Eddie as though in slow-motion. Richie thinks its reminiscent of that one scene in every romantic movie, where the female protagonist undergoes some kind of beautifying transformation, and slowly descends the staircase under the awestruck gaze of her male crush. Although, Richie is sure that none of those people, male, female, or otherwise, have ever known true beauty, the likes of Eddie Kaspbrak. Soft, luxurious waves of coifed brown hair sit just-so on his forehead, brushing his eyebrows, and drawing attention to thick, dark lashes and glittering brown eyes Richie hopes he will be coveting for the rest of his life. He’s wearing a white shirt, with short sleeves, so pure and crisp that his caramel-coloured, lightly freckled skin stands out starkly against its sharp edges, and a pastel-pink bowtie, that reminds Richie of present ribbon, waiting to be unwrapped. The same similarity is mirrored in Eddie’s belt, thin, and gold, and, like the bracelet on his slender wrist, potentially intentionally akin to the fine, golden bows he had neatly fastened around his own gifts to Richie. And there’s that colour, again, soft, baby pink, just like the tissue paper Richie’s fingers tore into hours earlier, stretched tight across Eddie’s thighs in the form of an expensive pair of fitted dress trousers Richie hasn’t ever seen before. And he’ll be damned if he’s ever gonna see them again, because fuck, he’s gonna tear into those with his fingers in exactly the same way.

He feels drawn from the chair towards him, meeting Eddie at the bottom of the stairs, and halting his advance. Their height is a little more even, like this, with Eddie two steps up, and Richie goes straight in for a kiss at those baby-soft lips, slightly glossy with chapstick. Eddie stops him, though, leans back, turns his head, and presses his hands against Richie’s shoulders to hold him back; the triple defence.

“Rich, not now, I gotta go pick something up.”

Richie holds onto the stair railing, sighing heavily and dramatically leaning forward, until his head is close to Eddie’s knees.

“What?” He straightens up again so that they’re face-to-face, “Eds, what the shit are you talking about? You come down here looking like this, and now you’re gonna leave? Why are you being so fucking cryptic? What are you planning? I don’t need anything else, you guys have done enough, I’m serious!”
“We have to pick up your cake,” Eddie won’t meet Richie’s eye, as he squeezes past him to get down from the staircase, and takes his car keys from the hook by the front door. Mike and Bev come through from the lounge, then, and they’re both wearing shoes and jackets.

“You’re all going? Why does it take three people to pick up a cake?”

“Well, someone’s gotta drive, and someone’s gotta hold onto the cake. And I ordered it, so I have to go, but the cake is big and heavy, so Mike’s gonna carry it,” Bev responds casually. She sounds so confident of her answer, that Richie finds it difficult to question.

“Oh…” Richie is still staring at Eddie, and Eddie meets his eye, very briefly, and then looks away again, with the kind of flush on his cheeks that makes the freckles stand out there in a way Richie just adores. It’s not odd for Eddie to be embarrassed by Richie staring at him, even at this stage in their relationship. Richie just assumes, but now, that Eddie will never not be made anxious by the mere suggestion of sex, or of anyone being sexually attracted to him; it’s just who he is.

Richie continues to watch Eddie as he leaves the house with Mike and Bev, admiring the way the tightness of those sinfully fitted trousers accentuate his plump ass.

Fuck, Richie’s feeling hard-up, all of a sudden. The idea of spending the next several hours watching movies with all of their friends before he can get Eddie alone doesn’t seem so appealing, anymore.

He drops back down into the armchair as he hears Eddie’s car pull away, knee bouncing, foot-tapping furiously against the floor in a way he’s feeling too anxious and over-excited to try to prevent. Ben is on the couch, trying to make conversation, but he’s only getting one-word answers, and grunts, in response, so he retreats into the kitchen, where Bill and Stan are. Richie can hear them all talking quietly, but he no longer cares what it’s about.

He stays that way until Eddie, Bev and Mike return, nearly an hour later. It’s almost 8PM, now, and Richie is feeling equal amounts frustrated and confused. And right when he was finally enjoying his Birthday, too. He doesn’t rise from his seat, this time, not until Mike and Bev come into the lounge, in somewhat of an excited rush, and they’re both honing in on him. He can still hear an engine running.

“Rich, get up and go outside,” Bev commands in a slightly flustered, giggly voice.

Richie looks at her, then. Neither of them are holding a cake.

“What? Why? Where’s Ed?” Being a naturally excitable person, his curiosity is instantly peaked, and he jumps up right away.

“Just go,” Mike chuckles, looking just as happy as Bev does. Bill, Ben and Stan are back in the room, now, and they all have similar smiles on their faces, like they’re all in on the same, cryptic joke.

Richie hurries right past them and through the front door, and Eddie is standing on the sidewalk, beside a glossy black, stretch limousine, looking incredibly nervous.

“What is this?” Richie sniggers excitedly, nodding towards the limo.

“Well, I remember you said you had always thought they were cool, and you’d always wanted to ride in one, so…”

“So we’re going for a limo ride?! Awesome!”
Richie grabs his boots from the hallway behind him, and starts pulling them haphazardly onto his feet, tucking in the laces without fastening them up. The other Losers are all standing in the hallway, but they’re not making any effort to come outside.

“Aren’t you guys coming?”

“Nu-uh,” Bev shakes her head, and she has a knowing smile on her face. They all do.

“So, what, I’m going on my own? I hope you’re at least coming, Eds?”

“Yeah.”

“Romantic,” Richie chuckles, and he goes for the sliding door at the back of the limo, but Eddie stops him.


“What?” Richie snorts, “With the driver?”

“I’m the driver.”

“What? Are you serious?” Richie looks at him, and Eddie certainly doesn’t look as though he’s joking, “…Are you trying to tell me you bought a limo?!"

“What?! Yeah, sure, Rich, I just happened to have a spare twenty thousand dollars just lying around!” Eddie rolls his eyes, “No. I got a new job…"

“As a…limo driver?” Richie seems incredibly dubious.

“Yeah…well…I liked the taxi thing, so…I got a chauffeur’s licence. I was just gonna keep using my car, but…then I saw that they were hiring limo drivers, and I thought it was kinda cool…” He shakes his head a little, and waves his hands dismissively, “Whatever, it’s complicated and boring…this is…part of your Birthday gift.”

“For real? That’s…super weird…” Richie sniggers, and he’s frowning, but when he notices Eddie beginning to look disappointed, he panics, “Which obviously means that I fucking love it! I mean, who wants to be a boring old cab driver?!” Richie throws his arms around Eddie’s shoulders in a congratulatory hug, and he feels his stance relax, somewhat, as he slides his arms around Richie’s waist and leans into his chest, like he needs the comfort. Pretty soon, he’s letting go, and pressing him back, though.

“Thanks, but…this isn’t about me, Rich. It’s about your Birthday.” Eddie opens the passenger’s side door at the front of the limo, clearly intending for Richie to get in, which he does, gladly, and with a suggestive wink at Eddie on the way past, and a sultry, “Why, thank you, Sir.” Eddie sniggers, and rolls his eyes, but that confidence seems to suddenly falter, as he rounds the hood of the limo, to the driver’s side. Richie notices that he looks incredibly nervous, again, as Eddie gives a final, panicked glance to the other Losers, and he wonders what the eventual intention is in all of this that’s making Eddie so anxious. Some kind of jolting, stomach-flipping spark fires through Richie’s brain, then, and it carries with it the word, ‘proposal’, but that’s thankfully, quickly smothered by a sudden barrage of limousine-related jokes and puns. He doesn’t say any of them out loud, though. He doesn’t think that Eddie would find them funny right now.

Then they’re driving, through the busy, night time streets of New York City, illuminated by the warm, neon glow of the street lamps. There’s soft, classical music playing on the stereo system, and the cabin is filled with the heady scent of Eddie’s cologne.
“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Eddie’s fingers are clenching and releasing on the steering wheel, during the pause at every stop light, and he keeps breathing out through his mouth, slowly, the way Richie knows he does when he’s trying to calm or prevent a panic attack.

“Eds, what’s the matter? Are you having a panic attack?”

“No…I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re freaking out about something, I can tell.”

“Richie, I’m fine, shut up!”

“Okay…” Richie twists to look over his shoulder, “Why can’t I sit in the back? Isn’t that the point?”

“Because…you just can’t…not yet…”

“But why-”

“Rich, just shut up for a second, okay?! Stop asking me questions!”

Richie goes silent, then, and he’s watching Eddie, turned in his seat to face him. There’s that anxious knot in the centre of Eddie’s brow that Richie hates, making his pretty features all dark and serious, as he stares ahead at the road.

“Eds, whatever it is, I don’t want you to be stressed out about it. If it’s for my Birthday…”

“I said I’m fine!”

“If it makes you feel like this, then I don’t think I want it.”

“I-It’s not like that…”

“Then what is it like? What’s wrong?” Richie’s voice is soft, now; reassuring, “You know you can tell me anything.” He rests his hand on Eddie’s shoulder, and rubs at his arm, and he sees the motion in Eddie’s throat as he swallows hard.

“It’s just…it is for you, yeah, but…it’s something I want, too…”

He seems to be softening up a little, as Richie strokes at his shoulder and the back of his neck, and leans in to lightly kiss the shell of his ear.

“Tell me,” It’s a command, but said gently, with care, “C’mon, get it off your chest.”

Eddie sighs, and chews at his lip a bit, “Okay…it is…I mean…it’s something I want, too…it’s something I’ve wanted for…a long time…but…I’ve just always been…really nervous about it, and…it’s…it’s my fault we haven’t been able to…”

He stops speaking, then, as though he thinks he has said too much, as though he knows that Richie must have figured it out, by now. They’re no longer driving in the middle of New York, anymore, and the roads are far quieter.

“Sex?”

Richie asks it confidently and clearly, and it slices through the quiet like a bullet.
Eddie doesn’t respond, but Richie sees him tense, and nearly flinch at the word, and he knows the answer.

“Eds…you wanna have sex?”

There’s another pause, and Richie stays silent, allowing him the time to process whatever he needs to.

Then Eddie nods.

“…Seriously?”

He nods again.

“You’re sure?”

Eddie nods a third time, more confidently, now.

“…one hundred percent-”

“Oh my god, Richie! YES, okay?! I fucking want to! I want to have sex! I’ve been wanting to for so long but I was just so nervous and worried about it and kinda embarrassed and yeah I’m a little bit scared that it might hurt but how much I want to completely outweighs everything else and I’ve been thinking about it for ages but I really wanted it to be special and perfect because I know you’ve waited so long and you’ve been so patient with me so I’ve been planning this for weeks and I knew I wanted to do it on your Birthday because then it would be special and I’ve just been so anxious about it but I’m also excited and I just want to, okay, I want to!”

“Woah…okay, Eds…okay.” Richie is watching him intently, and trying to ignore the rush of adrenaline and excitement that’s overwhelming his body every time he thinks about the word, ‘sex’.

“I really, really want to.” Eddie’s voice sounds a little desperate, now, and Richie is hit with such a sudden and powerful wave of arousal, that he almost feels nauseous with it.

Eddie’s fingers are shaking slightly on the steering wheel.

“Fuck…” Richie clenches his hands on his knees, but he can’t take his eyes off Eddie, “Me too.”

Silence follows Richie’s last two words, but Eddie is chewing his lip again, now, and Richie is bouncing his leg. It’s like there’s this sudden, electric energy between them, that has been building for a long, long time, but in the cramped cab of a limo, still driving, in the dark, down rather narrow, winding roads, now, there’s nothing they can do about it.

Not until Eddie takes the limo off the road, and into a clearing amidst a cluster of woodland. They’re on a sort of hill, from which, on one side, between the trunks of the trees, there’s a fantastic view of Manhattan, and the New York skyline. It’s startlingly beautiful, but it doesn’t matter to Richie, because all he wants to look at is Eddie. The glittering, New York landscape at night, has nothing on even that one, small curl of hair curving around Eddie’s right ear.

“Here?” Richie asks, genuinely curious.

Eddie turns the keys in the ignition, and stops the engine, and he looks at Richie, for the first time since they left the house. He still seems nervous.

“I just…I wanted us to be alone…”
“The whole ‘limo’ thing…was it just for this?” Richie sniggers, and he almost looks impressed.

“No…that was just…a useful coincidence…” Eddie opens the door, then, and gets out of the cab, and Richie obediently follows.

“So…you’ve been thinking about this a lot, huh?” Richie follows Eddie to the back door of the limo, and Eddie glances at him over his shoulder as he slides it open.

“…Yeah.”

And he’s not lying.

The inside of the limo, which is illuminated with low, warm lights, looks incredibly inviting. There’s a long, plush, leather seat, which runs nearly the length of the vehicle, and curves around by the cab. There’s a television screen on the wall opposite, above what is obviously a bar, lined with rows of crystal champagne glasses, and accompanied by a small refrigerator. The seats, and parts of the carpeted floor, are adorned with several throw blankets, and a myriad of colourful pillows, that have obviously been placed there with intention.

“‘Bev’?” Richie sniggers, tugging at the tasselled edge of a vibrant, Aztec-patterned pillow, as they climb in through the door. Eddie slides it closed behind them, and it makes a distinctive locking sound. Richie has to hunch quite far to stand inside, but Eddie can nearly stand up straight.

“Uh-huh.”

“I knew you guys were up to something.”

Richie sits down, but he’s fiddling with glasses on the bar, now.

“Take off your shoes, I don’t want the carpeting to get dirty.”

Richie does as he’s told, without giving it much thought, tugging his boots off as Eddie toes off his dress shoes by the door, as though entering a house, rather than a vehicle. Eddie’s backpack is in the corner, too, and it catches Richie’s eye, right away.

“Richie.”

“You know, you’re a really bad liar, Eds. I’m surprised you kept this whole ‘limo driving’ thing from me for so long.”

Richie’s looking inside the fridge, now.

“Rich.”

Richie turns to face him, and Eddie sits down close beside him, and he has this sort of expectant look on his face, that’s also still distorted with anxiety and uncertainty. There’s a brief silence, like the topic of their previous conversation has suddenly hit them both again, simultaneously.

Sex.

They’re actually going to have sex.

Are they actually going to have sex?

Richie’s not sure; Eddie still looks so worried he must be physically nauseous. But then, that worry seems to transform into determination, as with Eddie it often does. He flips his leg over, and settles
into Richie’s lap.

“We’re really gonna do this, huh?” Richie rests his hands on Eddie’s waist, and were it not for the fact that he wants to do this properly, wants to draw it out for as long as humanly possible, those hands would already be frantically relieving Eddie of his belt, or delving their way into the back of his trousers to grip the flesh of his ass in an almost animal manner.

Eddie nods, and this time, the movement of his head is quick, and sure.

“I mean, i-if you want to…”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Eds?” Richie leans in, and they share a brief kiss, “I’ve wanted to since we were fifteen…” Richie kisses him again, and he’s thoroughly enjoying how enthusiastically Eddie’s lips are meeting his, each time, “Five years, I’ve been waiting…” There’s another kiss, and Richie can sense Eddie’s impatience whenever they break apart, “I would have waited forever, for you.”

Their next kiss is much slower, more meaningful, and Eddie sinks against him, limbs relaxing, as though this is the first time, in a long time, that he has felt he can fully let go. As though all of the tension and anxiety pent up in his small body is finally meeting its desired crescendo. Lips part, and meet, and part, and meet, over and over and over, as they kiss hungrily, passionately, Eddie’s hands on Richie’s shoulders, and his neck, and in his hair, Richie’s hands on Eddie’s tiny, solid waist, and his hips, holding him steady as they begin a languid, controlled rhythm of Richie’s hips rolling gently up, Eddie’s hips bearing gently down. It’s a rhythm they have practised a thousand times before, but this time, it feels different, this time, it feels like the moment all of that ‘practice’ has been leading to.

Richie is already half hard, and his arousal is building viciously faster. Everything is Eddie, from the taste of the inside of his warm, wet mouth, where Richie’s tongue is delving deeper, consumed by his not-so-subconscious desire to be inside him. To the softness of his slightly strawberry-flavoured lips; Richie’s favourite flavour, fuck, Eddie has planned this to a ‘T’. To the crisp material of Eddie’s neatly pressed clothing beneath Richie’s fingertips, and the inviting heat of his firm flesh beneath, teasing Richie with the need to touch it, to taste it, to worship every flawless inch. To the plump, inviting press of Eddie’s perfect ass against his dick, rocking down so gently and so slowly that Richie is simultaneously in blissful heaven, and in torturous hell.

Eddie’s pushing closer, though, pressing harder, just like he did the last time, the time Richie will never fucking forget, guiding his hips so that the rapidly hardening line of Richie’s erection is sliding against the cleft of his ass with every movement, and then pressing up between his cheeks as much as their clothing will possibly permit. And Richie hears that delicious, audible shudder in Eddie’s breath, almost a gasp, as he seems to falter from their slow, conscious rhythm and grind down fairly hard, unable to stop himself. Richie tightens the grip of his hands on Eddie’s hips, steadying them both through it, because holy shit that did things to Richie, too, and he’s not even sure what those things were. His mind is swimming. Even now, after they’ve been together nearly six years, Eddie still surprises him with just how fucking sexy he can be.

Richie parts their lips, presses foreheads together, and the way their eyes meet is intense, but Eddie doesn’t shy away, stares right into Richie’s fucking soul as the rhythm of their hips gets a little faster, and a lot less precise.

“You like that, don’t you?” Richie whispers, breath ghosting Eddie’s lips. He sees Eddie swallow hard, and goose pimples spread down his arms, ignited by Richie’s voice, or from the mere anticipation of what he might say. As often as he tries to deny it, Eddie fucking loves Richie’s dirty mouth. “You like feeling me press up against your hole like that.” Eddie’s eyelids flutter, and there’s a flush on the tops of his cheeks, now, but he only pushes down harder, and, to Richie’s slight
surprise, and immense arousal, Eddie nods.

“Shit, Eds, you’re gonna fucking kill me.”

Richie glances downward, as they continue to rock together, and if Eddie’s fucking ridiculous dress trousers weren’t already tight enough before, now, they look like they’re about to tear at the seams around his thighs, pulled even more taut by the positioning of his knees either side of Richie, and the growing tent at his crotch. That must be uncomfortable. God, he has never felt a stronger desire to rip apart an item of clothing with his teeth, and bite the flesh that’s underneath it.

“Yes, wrapped yourself up nice for my Birthday, huh?” Richie sniggers, as he slides his hands down Eddie’s hips, and onto the spread of his thighs, down to his knees, and then back up again, pressing his thumbs in right by his groin, but never touching him there. Eddie likes having his thighs touched and kissed. Really, it’s a win-win situation, because Richie fucking loves them, too; right now, he wants to worship those glorious fuckers until they’re shaking, and then move on to what’s between them, until they’re desperately pressing around his head.

“I’m kinda…regretting it now…” Eddie huffs, tugging at the unyielding material between his hips, with a look of discomfort.

“I can see that. Did you get these from the teen girl’s section?” Richie sniggers as their foreheads part, and Eddie gives him a withering look, but then his lips twitch into an unintentional smile.

“Shut up! They’re fucking men’s, okay? They’re just…really tight…”

“Want a little help with that?”

Richie’s hands find their way back up Eddie’s thighs, thumbs edging around the obvious outline of his erection without ever touching it, although he does press down a bit on the tented material, tightening it further still, and enjoying the soft little hiss and the sultry glare Eddie gives him in response. He can’t help himself; Eddie is just so much fun to tease. He’s easy to rile up, liable to shout and curse, which Richie loves, as long as it’s not out of genuine anger or hurt that he’s yelling, and once he’s sufficiently overwhelmed, Richie can often get Eddie to beg. And you’d better fucking believe he wants Eddie to beg. Because Richie’s gonna make absolutely fucking sure that Eddie is wanting, that he’s hard as a rock, more turned on than he has ever been in his life, and desperate for stimulation, before Richie gladly pleasures him in every way he possibly can. If they’re really gonna do this, they’re gonna fucking do it right.

Richie’s fingers settle on the buckle of Eddie’s belt, tugging ever-so-gently, so that Eddie falls against him once more, and their heads hit back together. Richie wants him like this, right in his lap, face-to-face, close enough that he can see every blissful moment of ecstasy in those soulful, brown eyes. The love of his life. His soulmate. The meaning of Richie’s life, itself, is right here in front of him, and he’ll be damned if he’s not going to enjoy every fucking incredible microsecond of this moment.

Eddie’s fingers wind their way up into Richie’s curls, then, nails grazing his scalp, scratching at it in the kind of soft, affectionate way you might do to a dog. But Richie is a sucker for it, and leans into every touch submissively, as his own, much larger hands work open the fine, golden buckle of Eddie’s belt. The grinding has stopped, now, to allow Richie to manoeuvre the accessory out of the loops on the waistband of his trousers, though every opportunity they get, their hips are rutting back together again. And Eddie is already getting a little aggressively needy, to Richie’s delight, using his grip on Richie’s hair to pull his head this way and that, wherever he wants him so that he can reach one side of his neck, or his face, or the other, kissing at his cheek, and his jaw, and his neck below his ear, and then his neck lower down. Once he’s there, the kissing gradually dissolves into slow,
determined sucking; Richie can feel the hot, almost painful tingle of blood being forcibly drawn to the surface, of a bruise being worked into his skin. It feels good. Shit it feels good. Eddie knows all of Richie’s weak-spots, knows everything he likes, keeps gently tugging at his hair every now and then as he labours over this one, deep hickey. Man, that’s gonna be obvious, tomorrow.

Richie thinks about tomorrow, about the aftermath of tonight, and it hits him once more, that this is the night. This is THE night. Pretty soon, they could be, and probably will be, having sex. They’re gonna fuck. Richie’s gonna fuck Eddie. He imagines their naked bodies rocking together fast and hard, the slap of skin against skin, Eddie moaning and whining and begging in his ear and clawing at his back, and he has to stop, because the image makes him completely overwhelmed with animal desire. And that desire has everything to do with Eddie, not to do with the act of sex itself. The thought of getting his dick wet, of shoving it inside a tight, warm body is incredible, sure, but the thought of giving that kind of deep, all-consuming pleasure to Eddie, of potentially satisfying him in a way he’s never been able to, before, from the inside, out…that desire is incomparable to anything else. If he can just make Eddie feel good…feel so, so good…he can fucking die happy.

At the moment, Eddie is winning, though; he’s got Richie’s hair in his vice-like grip, and he’s still worrying that bruise on his neck with his tongue, and Richie is leaning into him like a loyal, obedient pet. Not that Richie has any kind of issue with being owned by Eddie, of course. In fact, he’s pretty sure that if Eddie told him to get on his hands and knees and lick his fucking shoes clean, he’d do it, and he’d probably enjoy himself, too. But right now, Richie wants to keep the upper-hand. This time, at least, he wants Eddie to be submissive. Richie knows it’s not a competition, of course, but since when has anything Richie and Eddie have ever done not been spiced with a little healthy rivalry? And he’s not worried about reclaiming the power, here, because Eddie definitely isn’t the only one who knows about ‘weak-spots’.

Belt now gone, Richie diverges from his original plan of relieving Eddie’s stifled erection from those criminally tight trousers, and moves his hands upward, to untuck his shirt from them, instead. He works the buttons open quickly, one after the other, from top to bottom, spending a little extra time on freeing the starched collar from the pretty pink bowtie, so that it sits around Eddie’s bare neck, instead, untouched. It is still Richie’s Birthday, after all, and he does rather like the idea of Eddie being his final, most enjoyable gift. He says as much, too. Eddie is still doing sinful things to his neck, and Richie needs every weapon at his disposal to turn the tide in his favour. And he knows all too well, that his most useful weapon has always been his voice.

“You should leave this on,” Richie slips one, long finger under the delicate, pink fabric of the bowtie, gliding it across his neck, beneath, “It’s super fucking cute.” He knows that Eddie is listening, that he’s paying attention, because the fingers loosen in his hair, and the mouth on his neck has gone from rough sucking and gentle biting, to slow, sloppy kissing, “And, y’know…” Richie pushes open Eddie’s shirt, admiring the tan, toned body underneath, “I’m still gonna open you up either way.”

There it is.

Eddie’s mouth leaves Richie’s neck; he’s momentarily thrown off, and Richie dives on the opportunity, swoops in to latch his lips around one of Eddie’s nipples. Eddie gasps, and his fingers tighten in Richie’s hair again, although, this time, Richie knows that grip is subconscious, not intentional. Eddie has three distinct erogenous zones: his nipples, his inner thighs, and the rim of his asshole, and Richie doesn’t intend on missing any of them. Not tonight. Especially not that last one. Shit, he’s gonna work on that last one until Eddie is fucking crying, he swears to all that is good and holy. If he thinks about that too much, though, he’s putting himself in danger, again, and right now, he’s focusing on zone one. Luckily, a few sucks in, and a light graze of his top teeth, and Eddie is already shuddering in his lap.
“Richie.”

“That’s it, baby boy.” Richie earns himself a distinctive groan, for that, as he brushes his lips across the now hardened bud. In company, Eddie would not only be horrendously embarrassed by a nickname like that, but he would probably cause Richie some serious pain as punishment for its usage. In private moments like this, however, it’s an entirely different story.

“Don’t stop.”

“I got no intention of stopping, Eds,” Richie sniggers, proving his point by pressing his lips down nice and firm, again, and alternating between sucking, and rubbing his tongue against Eddie’s right nipple.

There’s another lusty, thankful gasp from above him, and Richie feels Eddie’s thighs tighten against him, and a weight against the top of his head that is clearly Eddie’s face buried into his hair, because he can feel hot, increasingly jittery breath against his scalp.

He loops one arm around Eddie’s back, now, as he feels him shifting and rutting needily in his lap, again, and Richie shifts closer to the edge of the seat, leans him back a little in his protective hold, so that Eddie would fall if he let go. It’s a feeling of power and possessiveness that’s furthering Richie’s arousal, as he starts moving his own hips, again, quicker than last time. It’s less of a grind, now; there’s much more determined rhythm to it. If they were naked, this might be how they would be fucking. The thought of the similarity to that motion seems to be apparent to both of them, because, although one of Eddie’s hands is still tight in Richie’s hair, his other arm is around his shoulders, now, gripping him there, too, and his breathing is coming at more of a pant. Richie can feel Eddie’s dick pressed against his lower abdomen, and he’s so fucking hard, it must be painful.

And then he can’t help himself, anymore. Richie releases Eddie’s nipple from his mouth, and quickly relieves him of his shirt, still rocking fast against him as he brushes their lips together, lustfully admiring the look of desperation and hunger in Eddie’s dark eyes, as he hisses against his lips.

“‘You want me to fuck you like this, Eddie?’”

There’s obviously not much thought involved, anymore, only instinctual response. Eddie just quietly whimpered and fucking nods, and his assent is quick, almost frantically so.

“‘Fuck. You do, huh? You really want me to fuck you? You want me to fuck you nice and hard and fast?’”

Eddie’s just looking more and more wrecked by the second, knees digging hard into Richie’s waist, and then one of his legs is slowly but firmly sliding around him, as he stares hard into Richie’s eyes, groaning between gritted teeth in such a manner that it’s almost a growl. Richie’s right against his ass, clothed dick rutting against the cleft of clothed cheeks, and it’s simultaneously far too much, and nowhere near enough.

“Richie, please.”

“Tell me what you want, baby boy.”

“I want… I n-need…” Eddie shifts his thighs, and there’s a definite look of discomfort on his face, “Rich, it hurts, it fucking hurts…”

“I got you, Eds, I got you.”

Richie doesn’t have to be told twice that Eddie is uncomfortable; he has the button open on Eddie’s
trousers before he has even finished speaking, and he’s working on the zip as he twists their bodies and lies him back against the colourful throw that’s draped fashionably over the seat beside them. Then he’s tugging Eddie’s dress trousers off his hips, finally, struggling with them an inch at a time. It’s actually fucking ridiculous, how tight they are, and soon, they find themselves sniggering and laughing at the battle Richie is having to fight against these pink pants, to get them off Eddie’s legs. Eventually, Richie manages to loosen them up by pulling at the ankle, and then he tears them away from Eddie’s body, taking his socks with them, and leaving Eddie lying flustered, but slightly relieved, on the seat of the limo, wearing nothing but his white briefs, and a pastel pink bow around his neck.

“Better?”

Eddie nods as he leans up on his elbows, rests his bare legs around Richie’s hips, and pushes his heel into his back a bit, commandingly, but non-verbally encouraging some kind of contact and movement, again. His eyelids flutter when Richie pushes their hips together once more, but he still doesn’t seem entirely satisfied.

“Take your jeans off.”

Richie doesn’t waste any time in doing just that, both jeans and belt landing in a crumpled mess on the floor of the limousine mere seconds later. When he connects their bodies again, now, the feeling is so much more raw, more intimate. He feels Eddie’s legs press around him as he begins to rock into him once more, the thin material of their underwear leaving far less to the imagination than jeans and trousers. Eddie’s head drops back against the seat, and Richie sees the beginning of an arch in his back that’s fucking beautiful, and it only makes him rut against him harder. It’s like now that they’re both suddenly acutely aware that they’re finally going to have sex, the dam has been fucking broken, and every last drop of pent-up desperation has come flooding out, all at once, like a tidal wave. And now, they seem unable to complete any kind of meaningful task, that would lead them closer to actually being able to have sex, because they’re so busy grinding against each other like frenzied animals.

A few soft, breathy moans from Eddie seem to do the job of bringing Richie back into action, though, because for all those fucking angelic noises are driving him slowly into brain-dead madness, he knows that his end goal isn’t ‘soft’, nor ‘breathy’, at all. His end goal is loud, completely uninhibited, passionate, desperate, tear-filled screaming, and he’s not gonna get there with dry-humping, no matter how good that dry-humping is.

Richie sits back on his heel, and drinks it all in. Fingers meet Eddie’s bare thighs, now, nails grazing back and forth along the inner expanses of lightly sweat-damp skin, as Richie’s eyes focus on the tent at the front of Eddie’s briefs, stained dark with a wet spread of pre-come, that has soaked into the clean fabric. Eddie is watching him expectantly, shuddering and shifting every time Richie’s hands move minutely on his thighs. He has taken ‘zone two’, that’s for sure.

“Rich, take off your sweater.”

“Are you sure? You’re already wet,” Richie tugs at Eddie’s briefs, earning a little buck of his hips, a hiss, and a weak glare, “I mean, who knows what’ll happen if you see me without a shirt on.”

Eddie sniggers, and shakes his head, pushing Richie’s hand away from his crotch with definite reluctance.

“Just take it off.”

“Yes, boss.”
Richie would never admit such a pathetic thing to anyone, but he can’t help but feel just that little bit self-conscious when he takes his shirt off in front of Eddie. As he lifts his new, black sweater off over his head, he can see the firm, pronounced lines of muscle in Eddie’s abdomen beneath him, and it’s impossible not to think about his own inadequacy. But then he sees the look in Eddie’s eyes, the way those dark, glittering irises seem to grow even deeper in colour as he scans Richie’s body like a predator, and he notices the little increase in tension in Eddie’s stomach, the way his hips twitch, the way his lips part just-so, and he feels his confidence rekindle.

Then Eddie’s hands shoot up to his waist, slide their way up Richie’s body, clenching and releasing sporadically, gripping possessively at all the flesh he can reach, until he’s using his thighs around Richie’s hips as leverage to pull himself upright and latch onto his neck with his lips. Bare chests are pressed hard together as Eddie slides his arms around him and shivers with the contact of their skin, kissing and sucking and biting at Richie’s neck insatiably.

“Hungry, Eds?” Richie breathes softly, trying not to let the shake in his voice betray him. Honestly, though, he’s so fucking horny already that it wouldn’t take much, at this point, to tip him over the edge into dangerous territory. The kind of territory where he’s so fucking desperate to get inside that tight, firm little body that’s currently wrapped around him like a sexy, tan koala, that he’d do something they both regret. Richie knows he has very little impulse control, to begin with. Yeah… fucking ‘dangerous territory’, for sure.

Eddie responds only by latching on harder; Richie can feel the wetness of Eddie’s underwear pressed into his own bare stomach, and fuck, that’s hot. What he wouldn’t give to get his hand between them right now, into that wet, sticky mess in Eddie’s briefs, and jerk him off hard and fast until he’s coming right inside them, but really, he wants to leave his dick well alone. The harder and wetter he is, the better, but Richie is gonna focus all contact about two or three inches south of there. In fact, he’s gotta do that right fucking now.

“Lay back, Eds,” Richie commands softly into his ear, “You’re not the only one who’s hungry.”

Eddie freezes up. His skin prickles with goose pimples. He knows what’s coming. He doesn’t put up a fight, this time, though. In fact, there’s no resistance whatsoever. Richie is a little surprised, but he’s grateful for Eddie’s subordination, because he needs to occupy himself with something to distract from everything else that’s going on in his brain, right now. And what better to distract himself with, than one of his favourite activities.

Soon, Eddie’s briefs are on the floor, and he’s naked on the chair, save for that little pink bowtie, and Richie’s head is between his thighs, kissing his way down towards his ass, and sliding his hands under the small of Eddie’s back to get just enough lift to really work some fucking magic. And really, it must be; Richie considers he must be fucking great at eating ass, because there’s no way, otherwise, that he could convince a germaphobic, clean-freak like Eddie to ever let him do it. But he does let him do it. A lot. Which is how Richie knows about ‘zone three’, knows that Eddie is so damn sensitive at the rim, that Richie could probably make him come just from rubbing his tongue against it and never actually doing anything else. He does that, now, presses down firm on that sensitive little puckered ring of muscle, and wonders how it can possibly be so smooth and inviting, because that’s quite the opposite of what an asshole should be.

“R-Richie…”

This is always the point where Eddie starts to get needy and loud, starts repeating Richie’s name like a mantra, really starts to lose himself. Fuck, Richie has been waiting for this. This is the ‘point of no return’. He lets a glob of saliva drip from the end of his tongue and onto Eddie’s hole, watches the way it starts to run inside, and then follows it with his mouth, kissing, sucking, prodding his way in
just past the rim.

“Richie!”

Richie uses his thumb to press him open, as he tucks his other hand under the bend of Eddie’s knee, and pushes it back. Eddie’s lifting his own hips, now, angling towards Richie’s mouth very helpfully. From this position, Richie can’t really see him, but he wishes that he could. He bets he looks fucking amazing. He can definitely hear him, though, hear all the whining, and whimpering, and every wanton ‘Yes’ that’s barely bitten back. Richie’s tongue is inside him, now, pressing in and out in a gentle rhythm, which he can only assume is responsible for the way Eddie’s thighs are shaking either side of his head.

“Rich p-please…”

Small, strong fingers are tangling into his hair, now, but they’re not pulling, they’re pressing down. Eddie wants more, he wants it faster, he wants it deeper. And Richie wants to fucking give him that, give him all of those things, wants to get his tongue so deep inside him that he can taste his fucking tonsils, but there’s only so much he can do with his tongue.

There’s so much more he could do with his fingers, though.

That thought hits him like a fucking baseball bat to the head, and Richie finds his mind swimming with the kind of lust and excitement that’s nearly too much to bear. He removes his tongue with one last, long, slow lick, and then kisses his way back out from between Eddie’s thighs again, up to his knee, stopping to admire the dark flush on Eddie’s cheeks, the soft, pleasured furrow in his brow, and the gentle quivering still apparent in his thighs. God, he wants to kiss him, right now, but he knows Eddie wouldn’t let him. Not when Richie’s tongue has just been inside his ass.

“You brought lube, right Eds?”

Eddie nods much more quickly than he looks as though he should still be able to, “In my bag…”

Richie is reluctant to move away, but he gets up to retrieve Eddie’s backpack, anyway. It’s rather heavy, and when he unzips it, he can see why; there’s a bottle of lube in there, sure, and it’s a pretty big bottle, too, but there’s also a towel, clean underwear for both of them, a clear, zip-lock bag with more condoms in it than they’re possibly going to need, a bottle of water, and a large pack of wet wipes. Richie can’t help but laugh fondly as he pulls out the lube, and a condom, and returns to his previous position.

“You really came prepared, huh?”

“…Yeah?” Eddie looks embarrassed, and vaguely irritated, that Richie finds it amusing, “So?”

“I’m not making fun of you, Eds, I just think it’s super fucking cute.”

“It’s not ‘cute’, it’s just good sense!”

Richie drops the condom, in its little foil packet, onto Eddie’s stomach, “You’re right, it is.” He nods, sniggering, as he pops open the cap on the bottle of lube with his thumb. The noise it makes draws Eddie’s attention to it, completely. He instantly seems to have forgotten what it was they were bickering about. Richie recognises the worry in his eyes, and tips a generous amount of the lube out to begin warming it in his hand, placing the bottle onto the floor beside them, “Are you still nervous?”

“…Yeah.” Eddie admits, honestly, pulling his legs together, as though suddenly feeling self-
conscious.

“You know I’m not gonna hurt you, right?”

“Yeah, I know, I just…” He trails off, and Richie shifts closer, patting softly at Eddie’s backside.

“C’mon, lift up.” Richie’s voice is just as soft as his touch, now.

Eddie does so, clearly trusting in Richie, despite his insecurity and anxiety. Richie uses his non-lube-covered hand to lift a pillow from the floor, fluffs it a bit, and tucks it beneath Eddie’s hips.

“You comfy?”

“…I guess…”

“You guess, or you are for sure?”

“Yeah, I’m…I am.”

Richie lowers his hand to Eddie’s ass, and rests his now warm, lubed-up middle finger between his cheeks, slowly rubbing back and forth.

“Is this okay?”

Eddie looks surprisingly subdued, now. His eyelids droop a little, and he’s softly chewing at his bottom lip, as he nods.

“You tell me the second it starts to hurt, and I’ll stop. You tell me you don’t like it, and I’ll stop. You tell me you still don’t think you’re sure, and I’ll stop.” Richie settles his finger over the tight little pucker of Eddie’s entrance, rubbing in small, slow circles, now, “Okay?”

Eddie nods, again, and the way that gentle tremble is returning in his thighs is testament to the fact that it at least feels good now.

“You know the only reason you’re worried about it is because you’re overthinking it, right? Because you overthink everything.” Richie continues to talk to him, in a low, relaxed voice, as the tip of his finger presses just-so into the wet ring of muscle.

“Yeah, I…I know…” There’s a certain pleasant, breathy quality to Eddie’s voice, now, and thankfully, he seems relaxed. Richie’s own voice, and his gentle encouragements, seem to be working incredibly well. At the very least, it’s serving as somewhat of a distraction, and keeping him from tensing up. That much is obvious, when, after rubbing and circling for a while longer with his finger, Richie presses the tip inside, again, and is met with very little resistance. He still pulls it back out again, though, just moving a little at a time.

“See? It feels like it’s going in pretty easy,” Richie pushes, again, and this time, he gets his finger up to the first knuckle, so that there’s about two inches inside, “How does it feel, Eds?”

There’s a little shake in Eddie’s voice, this time, “It feels…good…” There’s relief in his tone…surprise…as well as lust. The same emotions are obvious in his eyes, too.

“It feels good?” Richie starts gently pumping the tip of his finger in and out, and fuck, Eddie’s just as tight as he always imagined he would be, but there’s so much less tension and resistance than he assumed he’d be met with. It’s like Eddie’s body wants him, like it’s allowing him in. He glances up long enough to see Eddie nod rather enthusiastically, hips twitching and shifting just enough that
Richie sees the signs, “Deeper?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me when to stop, okay?” Richie puts a little more force behind his press, then, as he slides his finger in up to knuckle number two. *Shit*, Eddie feels fucking good inside. So hot and wet and unbearably tight, smooth, soft muscle wrapping around his finger and holding it in place. He imagines how it would feel to have his dick here, instead, and he nearly chokes on the image alone. He’s watching Eddie’s face, hyper-aware of any kind of change in his expression, any sign at all that he’s uncomfortable, the movement of his lips the second he’s about to speak and tell him to stop, but it never comes. So Richie keeps pushing, feels his finger sliding further into that constricting, slippery heat, while Eddie’s thighs occasionally shudder at either side. He doesn’t even notices how deep his finger is, until Eddie groans, and Richie feels the two of his fingers at either side hit the soft, firm flesh of Eddie’s ass.

He rests his finger still, all the way inside, so fucking deep he can barely think about it without his dick throbbing painfully. There’s pre-come beading on the front of his own underwear, now, soaking into the tightened material in a sticky, uncomfortable manner, but he couldn’t fucking care less. What’s coming later will make up for that a thousand times over. At the moment, he just wants to focus on Eddie, make sure this is as good, if not better, for him, than it definitely will be for Richie.

Richie watches Eddie’s head rest back against the seat, sees the way his back keeps arching up and then lowering again, the gentle, needy writhe of his body, like waves, that seem to escalate the longer Richie’s finger is still inside him. Then he hears a rather pathetic little whimper.

“Pl…please, Rich…”

“You want me to move?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Are you sure?” Richie twists his finger a bit, and Eddie groans almost irritably.

“Richie…”

“So, after all that time worrying about it, you really like this, huh?” Richie starts to pump his finger in an out a little, and he’s surprised at how easy it is, how slick the movements are.

Eddie’s head tips back again, and his hips lift to meet Richie’s finger at the angle that clearly feels best. His breathing is suddenly coming out broken and shaky, “*Fu-ck…yeah…*”

“Oh, *shit*, Eds…” Richie can barely focus on his finger anymore, though he’s sure it’s subconsciously gaining speed by the second. His eyes are locked onto Eddie, though, unblinking, scared even to breathe, in case the sound interrupts any of those fucking *amazing* noises Eddie is making.

“Richie…I please…”

“Tell me what you want, baby boy.”

“Fast…Faster…”

“*Faster*?” Richie quickly obliges, and by now, he’s basically fucking him with his finger, in every sense of the word. The cabin is filled with the lewd, wet sounds of it, and Eddie’s rapid breathing, that’s laced with satisfied groans and lusty confirmations. Holy shit, Richie could get off listening to
this on a fucking loop. He’d never even have to touch himself. He’s not sure why he would ever even be surprised that Eddie likes it a little rough. It seems so obvious, now. His size means absolute shit, Eddie is a fucking firecracker.

“O-oh fuck…”

“Keep talkin’ to me, Eds, tell me what you want, okay?” There’s somewhat of an element of distraction in Richie’s tactic of keeping him talking, because he’s got a second finger ready, his ring finger, and it’s pressing at the wet, hot edges of Eddie’s rim beside his other.

Eddie’s eyes are shut tight, and he’s fisting the throw underneath him with both hands, “It f-feels good…” Eddie’s voice is so shaky and wanton, it’s getting more and more difficult for Richie to keep his cool.

“I know, baby boy, I know,” Richie allows his second finger to press in a little with each inward thrust of the first, and there’s a more obvious stretch, now, a more prominent resistance, but it’s still going in, and Eddie doesn’t seem to be in any pain or discomfort at all.

“Do it…Rich, do it…please…”

“Are you sure y-”

“Richie…please…p-please!” The desperation in Eddie’s voice is reaching dangerous levels of ‘there might be tears, soon’, and as fucking terrifyingly hot as that may be, Richie knows they’re not quite there, yet.

“Oh, okay…relax, Eds, I got you…” Richie stops the movements of his hand long enough to press that second finger in, fully, and just as before, it feels unbearably tight, but nothing feels too stretched, nothing feels uncomfortably taut, nothing feels as though it might hurt. He’s still scanning Eddie’s face for any warning signs, but all he sees is pleasure and approval, and a light shimmer of sweat on Eddie’s tan forehead that’s illuminated by the warm cabin light right above him, “Does it hurt? Is it okay?”

“It doesn’t hurt…”

“You swear?”

“Ye-Yeah…”

Richie starts another slow pace with his fingers, sliding them in and out languidly, watching them disappear inside Eddie’s body over and over and over. There’s resistance to the movements, now, but it’s not an uncomfortable, dry, jarring thing, it’s still slick, and smooth, and there’s a friction to it that Eddie seems to be surprisingly enjoying, like he’s being rubbed and massaged in places he never knew existed, places he never knew he needed to be touched.

Richie is quite enjoying listening to the soft, wet, sticky sounds of his fingers plunging back and forth, each thrust punctuated by Eddie’s hot, panting breath, and his frequent, pleasured whimpering. But then, he feels Eddie’s legs shifting beside him, feels Eddie’s heels digging into his sides, feels one of Eddie’s feet hit against his stomach, feels Eddie’s blunt, manicured fingernails digging into his knees. But he doesn’t feel any of that nearly as strongly and suddenly as…

“…Richie…fuck me…”

Fuck…what the fuck…holy fucking fuck. Richie has imagined Eddie saying those words a million times, jerked himself off plenty just by fantasising about it, had some of the best self-induced orgasms
of his life by picturing those words coming from Eddie’s lips right before his climax, and not a single one of those even comes close to comparing to hearing it in real life.

“…Please Richie…please fuck me…”

Eddie has met his eye, now, and that’s the only way Richie can be sure he said it for real, and that he didn’t just fucking imagine it. And those dark, dark brown eyes are staring into Richie’s so fucking desperately, he feels weak under their influence. Richie doesn’t let up that easy, though. Dirty talk is his fucking calling, and he’ll be damned if he’s gonna lose to Eddie at this stage.

“You want me to fuck you, Eds?”

“Yeah…” Eddie’s back arches hard when Richie starts talking back, urging him on. It certainly helps that Richie starts pumping his fingers in and out of him much faster, now.

“You want me to fuck you nice and hard?”

“Y-yeah…” Eddie’s head tips back, and his fingers are tightening in the throw again.

“You wanna feel me inside you? Filling you up so fucking good?

Eddie’s toes are curling, now, “Ye…R-Richie…pl-please…please…” His voice is so desperate, it sounds tearful, begging.

“You’re such a good boy.”

It’s at this point, that Eddie’s hand flies to Richie’s wrist, and shit, he’s strong; he’s gripping him with real meaning.

“No…please…”

“What? Are you gonna come?”

Eddie nods, fast, and he’s trying to sit up and he’s pushing Richie’s hand away. Even if Richie wasn’t already obliging, reluctantly sliding out his fingers, Eddie could easily overpower him, and Richie knows it. He admires the glossy, sticky mess on his fingers as he wipes it across Eddie’s sweaty thigh, leaving a glistening trail that looks fucking edible on his firm, tanned skin.

“Rich…”

Eddie is sitting upright now, although he looks a little worse-for-wear. His hair is a mess, his skin is sticky with sweat, his eyes are slightly glazed, and his breathing is heavy. He’s holding that little shiny, foil packet between his fingers, and Richie makes to take it from him, but Eddie moves first, carefully tears it open, and pulls the condom free from the wrapper.

“You know how to use one of those?” Richie asks with a chuckle.

“Yeah…do you?”

Richie sniggers at Eddie’s rebuttal, and takes the condom from him, seriously resisting the urge to try to comically blow it up like a balloon, or to place it on his head and mention the fact that it kinda looks like a tiny hat. Even if that didn’t ruin the mood, he’s sure Eddie’s yelling about it would.

“Don’t put it on your head.” Eddie says suddenly, seriously, and their eyes meet for a while, and then they both laugh, loud and genuine.
“Geez, how did you know what I was thinking? You’re so obsessed with me, I’m starting to think
you’re like a stalker or something.”

“Rich, c’mon…”

“Okay, okay.”

Eddie watches impatiently as Richie takes off his boxers, even reaching over to tug at them himself
when they’re on his thighs, basically manhandling them off his body and onto the floor. He’s
watching just as intently as Richie slides the condom on, shifting closer, hooking his legs over
Richie’s thighs in eager anticipation. God fucking damn, Richie swears he’s gonna blow his fucking
load before they’ve even started if Eddie keeps acting so needy. Eddie’s still watching as Richie
lubes himself up, hips shifting and gyrating slowly in Richie’s lap in quiet, subconscious desperation.
Richie’s starting to worry he’s not gonna last five minutes after actually getting inside him. The
thought alone is causing his stomach to knot in strange, orgasm-build-like tension.

There’s not a second wasted, after that. Eddie’s on top of him before Richie can even process his
next move, thighs sliding apart either side of Richie’s hips, staring into his eyes, silently
commanding, hands bracing on Richie’s shoulders.

“Fuck, Eds…”

“I wanna do it like this…”

“Like I’m ever gonna fucking say ‘no’ to that.”

Richie grips Eddie’s waist, and their eyes meet silently for a while, like they’re readying themselves,
mutually understanding the step they’re about to take together. Then Eddie’s nodding, indicating that
he’s ready, and he leans his face into the soft, comforting curls of Richie’s hair as Richie adjusts and
rests his hand against the base of his cock, steadying it as Eddie comes down to meet him.

He feels the head rest against Eddie’s rim, and the press of that hot, wet little pucker on its own is
amazing, rubbing against him in neat little jolts as Eddie’s hips continuously twitch at any contact.
Then Eddie is pressing down, before Richie can stop him, before they can set guidelines, before
Richie can adequately prepare. It’s as though their roles are reversed, and now Richie is the one
anxious, the one planning and preparing and worrying, while Eddie keeps pushing forward with
reckless abandon, and very little forethought, following the impulses of his body.

“Eds, be careful.”

“I’m okay…” Eddie’s voice is trembling, but regardless, there’s a confidence in it that’s reassuring.

Richie finds his own breath catching in his throat as Eddie keeps lowering, and he feels the tip of his
dick slip all the way into him with surprisingly little force. *Fuck, it feels so good already.* Eddie
hisses softly, and Richie’s head snaps up, hands move to his waist right away, holding him steady,
lips pressed in by his ear.

“Are you okay? You okay baby boy?”

“Yeah…yeah, it doesn’t hurt…it’s just…a lot…”

“Is it uncomfortable?”

“It stings.”
Richie can hear the slight grit of Eddie’s teeth in his voice.

“Should I pull out?”

“No!” Eddie lifts his head, now, un-buries his face from the dark, unruly mop of Richie’s hair so that he can meet his eye, “No…please, Rich…I wanna do it…” His eyes are brimmed ever-so-slightly with tears; they’re faint, but Richie always knows, “Please…I want to…”

“Okay,” Richie nods a little, voice soft and steady as he can muster, arms circling Eddie’s waist, hands gently stroking his back, “Let’s just take it slow, alright?”

“Yeah…” Eddie lifts his hands long enough to slide Richie’s glasses off his face, folding the arms in and placing them on the seat nearby. Richie doesn’t mind; this close, he can see Eddie perfectly. Then, Eddie’s hands go back to Richie’s shoulders, and he allows his forehead to rest against Richie’s, seeming to find comfort, there.

“Can you stay still for a while, Eds?”

“I just want to…go all the way down, first…” Eddie shifts his hips a bit, clearly testing to see how it feels. There’s concentration in his face, and determination, but no pain.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I can do it…please…”

“Okay…okay, just…please take it slow. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Richie knows that Eddie is going to do what he wants, regardless, so he gets a firm grip on his hips again, bracing him as steadily as he can as Eddie begins to push down again, and trying so fucking desperately to ignore how insanely good it feels for him. It doesn’t matter either way, though; as long as Eddie is uncomfortable, Richie won’t be able to enjoy it, anyway.

Eddie holds his breath throughout, as he sinks into Richie’s lap, brow knotted in a strange mixture of discomfort and odd, dizzying pleasure. But then he’s there, ass pressed firm against Richie’s thighs, stomach-to-stomach, chest-to-chest, forehead-to-forehead, so close, and locked so tightly together that Richie can feel every single one of Eddie’s breaths, from the hot, tickle of it on his own lips, to each firm, pulsing beat of his heart. And Richie always thought it was kinda lame, but he thinks he finally understands why people sometimes call fucking, ‘making love’.

“You okay?” He whispers gently against Eddie’s mouth, and Eddie nods, cheeks flushing, and eyelids drooping as he stares into Richie’s eyes, looking surprisingly relaxed, and exquisitely beautiful.

Richie keeps his arms around him tight, now, and Eddie is warm and soft against him, and the feeling of just being inside him, right up to the root, is fucking divine.

“Holy shit, Eds, you’re so fucking tight.”

He’s not sure, but he thinks he almost meant it as a joke. Eddie doesn’t seem to take it that way, though; the softness in Eddie’s eyes appears to darken, somewhat, with reactive lust. Then he shudders, hard, and it runs the length of his body, and somehow connects to Richie, too, like an electric charge. He feels it right in his bones.

“You really like when I talk dirty, don’t you?” Richie chuckles smugly, nails grazing across Eddie’s back, now.
Richie feels Eddie’s skin prickle, and his hairs stand on end.

“Would you like it if I told you how not a single day goes by that I don’t imagine fucking you?”

Richie watches the column of Eddie’s neck rise and fall as he swallows.

“I jerk myself off and I keep my hand nice and tight, like I always thought you would be.”

Eddie’s really getting riled up again, now; Richie can see it in his eyes, and in the sudden tension in his shoulders, and feel it in the quickening of his pulse through their connected chests. His eyes are boring into Richie’s so intensely, that Richie can’t help but feel a similar sexual fire begin to burn in his own body.

Fuck, he wants to move his hips.

Eddie gets there, first, though. Starts these tiny, slow rotations in his lap that are just fucking heavenly.

“Fuck, I always picture you spread out on your back, or sometimes your front...“ Eddie groans, low and loud, “...Yeah? You like that, Eds? You like thinking about me fucking you from behind, on your hands and knees?”

Eddie’s getting quicker, now, the movements of his hips are becoming more and more pronounced, and Richie’s just sitting back and allowing him to take control, and holy fucking shit, it feels good. It’s like if the best hand-job ever, and the best blow-job ever, started fucking each other...shit, he doesn’t even know where he’s going with this thought, anymore.

“You like thinking about me pressed up against your back like that, rocking into you so fucking deep...oh, fuck...” Richie lets out a hiss as Eddie turns his slow rotations into nice, steady grinding, “I bet it’s deeper like this, though.” Richie finds his hands gravitating towards Eddie’s hips, again, following his movements, encouraging them, “Does it feel good, Eds?”

Eddie whimpers as he nods, dropping his hands from Richie’s shoulders and gripping, instead, at Richie’s fingers, “Yeah...”

“You wanna go faster?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Eddie doesn’t need any further encouragement, the rock of his hips is steadily gaining speed, until just rocking clearly isn’t enough, and it gains a more prominent rise and fall. He’s bouncing, slightly, in Richie’s lap, now, and Eddie’s eyelids have fluttered closed, but he’s moaning on almost every outward breath, and Richie is watching his face in complete and utter lust-fuelled fascination, unable to draw his eyes away, or even to blink. He feels as though he’s completely losing himself, and everything is Eddie. But fuck if that isn’t the kind of world he wants to live in all the damn time.

“Fuck, Eds, you feel so fucking good...”

Eddie lets out another loud, satisfied groan, fingers digging hard into the backs of Richie’s hands on his hips and his waist, breathing starting to come out hot and heavy across Richie’s already heated face.

“I bet you really wanna come, huh?”

Eddie nods, and his brow is knotting, now, right in the middle.
“Tell me, Eds.”

The sound of skin hitting skin is becoming prominently audible, as Eddie’s gentle rhythm becomes harder and quicker. Richie is still resisting the urge to just flip him onto his fucking back and pound him into oblivion. Eddie’s already getting loud, and Richie’s not sure how much longer he can stand it; it’s driving him fucking crazy. He’s quickly nearing the edge of his own climax, probably faster than he ever has in his life; embarrassingly fast. He wants Eddie to finish first.

“C’mon, Eddie…fuck, I wanna hear you say it.”

“R-Richie…”

“C’mon, baby boy…say it for me…”

“I wanna…c-come…”

“Are you getting close?”

“Yea…yeah…”

There’s nothing else for it, Richie’s gonna have to give him a little more, if he wants Eddie to finish before him; he gets one of his hands onto Eddie’s neglected dick between them, fingers tight right at the tip, and starts with short, fast jerks, just the way Eddie likes it. Even if Eddie weren’t sweating, he’s fucking dripping with pre-come at this point, and Richie feels it seeping between his fingers, a bead of it trailing across his hand and down his wrist, and shit, touching Eddie’s dick shouldn’t be about to make Richie come faster; that was the opposite of his intention. Unfortunately, though, Eddie’s so fucking loud, now, and so fucking sexy, and he’s rising and falling on Richie’s dick so fast and hard and needy and clawing at Richie’s arms and his hands and whining his fucking name over and over and over, and Richie is fucking gone.

“Fuck! Shit, Eds I’m gonna come…”

Eddie’s eyes snap open, now, but they’re heavily lidded, thick, dark lashes fluttering atop his sweaty, flustered cheeks. His hips slow. He clearly doesn’t want it to be over, yet.

“Rich…”

“You’re gonna have to hurry it up and catch up to me.”

“M-Make it count…”

“What?”

Eddie leans back a bit, starts shifting his legs out from underneath himself, so that they’re resting around Richie’s hips, rather than folded either side of him. And then he starts tugging at Richie’s waist with one of his hands, encouraging him forward.

“Fuck me.” He says suddenly, and surprisingly confidently considering the way he looks; completely undone, “Fuck me like you keep saying you’re gonna fuck me.”

The commanding tone in Eddie’s voice makes Richie’s heart beat faster, but it’s laced with a neediness that makes it somehow even fucking hotter.

Well, fuck it! Richie knows he’s gonna come soon, regardless, and if a good, hard fuck is what Eddie wants before that happens, then that’s what he’s gonna fucking get.
Richie feels like some kind of large, predatory beast as he leans Eddie back against the seat, and looms over his much smaller body, but Eddie doesn’t seem intimidated in the slightest. If anything, it only seems to be turning him on more. He’s digging his fingernails into Richie’s waist, pulling him down, and then hooking his arms up around his shoulders, and one of his legs around his back, pushing, urging him to rock down.

And Richie does, more slowly at first, adjusting them both to the new position. Sex seems so much easier like this; Richie can move freely, slide in and out of him to his full length with every stroke. He likes having Eddie in his lap, of course, but this…this feels less romantic, less loving, and far more animal.

Eddie is responding to it so well, too, back arching into each thrust, fingers gripping at Richie’s shoulders possessively, moaning long and low and loud.

“Harder?”

“Yes!”

That’s all the indication he needs. As he speeds up his rhythm, he feels his hips hit into Eddie’s with significant force every time they connect. It has them both cursing breathlessly on every other movement.

If that was ‘making love’, this is ‘fucking’.

It’s fast, and raw, pure sex in its most primal form. Sweaty skin, writhing bodies, panting breath. Richie briefly feels Eddie bite at his shoulder as he lets out this guttural, growling moan, and fuck, that’s the hottest thing he has ever heard.

“Ri-Richie…harder.”

Shit.

“Faster…Richie”

Richie obliges each of Eddie’s commands like an obedient slave, until he’s fucking him so thoroughly that Eddie can hardly speak, anymore.

It only takes a few seconds of this before Richie feels that delicious heat pooling in his abdomen again, and Eddie has his head tipped back, eyes shut tight, lustfully repeating the word ‘yes’, over and over and over, getting louder with each repetition. Richie mouths at his neck, at the underside of his jaw and his chin, peppering his hot, sweaty skin with even hotter, wetter kisses.

Then Eddie goes silent, and this is it; Richie knows he’s gonna come. Eddie is always really loud, but when he’s getting close to an orgasm, he just…stops making noise.

And it’s a good fucking job, too, because Richie can finally let go of his own climax, the one he’s been desperately holding back. Three more hard thrusts into Eddie’s impossibly tight body and Richie’s impending orgasm hits him like…well…like Eddie…if Eddie hit him, it’d be really fucking hard. In fact, he’d probably be knocked out cold. He nearly is.

Eddie feels Richie’s climax acutely, wraps his arms tighter around his shoulders, and both legs tight around his waist, heads buried together, as Eddie listens to Richie’s shuddering groans, whimpering softly himself, in response to each one. He arches his back hard against him, dick pressing into Richie’s abdomen between them, rubbing up against his skin with every movement as Richie continues to rut into him all the way through his lengthy finish.
Then Richie hears Eddie cry out, right in his fucking ear; if he hadn’t already blown his load, that right there would have sent him rocketing right over the fucking edge. He feels warm, wet liquid pooling between their stomachs as Eddie comes, shuddering hard and clinging to Richie like his life fucking depends on him.

Eddie eventually seems to relax from his Herculean grip, and settle down against the seat, and Richie follows, resting against him, his head against Eddie’s shoulder. It’s a good ten minutes of silence, punctuated only by heavy, panting breath, before either of them move or speak. And even then, the only speech is a soft, satisfied groan from Eddie, and the only movement is his fingers carding through Richie’s hair, a comfort for both of them.

Richie feels…blissful.

More time passes, perhaps ten minutes, perhaps twenty, and Richie has pulled out of Eddie’s body, now, and disposed of the condom, and since he’s the first one up, he unfortunately inherits the task of ‘official cleaner-upper’. Usually, it’s Eddie, but Eddie looks so relaxed and fucking blissed-out, that Richie doesn’t have the heart to allow him to move. He cleans himself, first, and then the seat around where the ‘incident’ took place. He chuckles to himself a little, at this, while Eddie watches him in affectionate amusement. Finally, he gets to Eddie, cleaning the impressive mess from his stomach and chest, first, and then cleaning the sweat and streaks of lube from the rest of his body. And Eddie clearly really is fucking ‘blissed’, it’s almost like he’s high, because he fucking giggles when Richie rubs a wipe across his face and does his best job of tidying Eddie’s coveted hair with his clumsy fingers.

“How you feelin’ there, Eds?”

“Good…” Eddie breathes, in response, though when he eventually gets up from the seat, he winces, “…a little weird…sore.”

“Shit, sorry.”

“I’m okay.”

Richie pulls Eddie gently into his lap, as he scoops up their clothes, and they laugh drunkenly into each other’s mouths as they share sloppy kisses in between attempting to re-dress.

“Can you taste your own ass?” Richie sniggers softy against Eddie’s lips, and Eddie just smirks and buries his face into Richie’s neck with a gentle, “Gross.”

It must be well over an hour before they’re actually in any fit state to drive home, and Richie keeps leaning over into the driver’s seat to kiss Eddie’s cheek and his neck and his ear, while Eddie laughs and swats him away and chastises him for goofing around while he’s trying to drive.

And when they do get home, and Richie is met at the doorway by all of his friends, Mike right in the middle, holding this huge, homemade cake that looks as though they have all had input into decorating, with the words, ‘Happy Birthday, Richie’, in pretty, iced letters, in Bev’s writing, right across the top, he feels tears well in the corners of his eyes.

And for once, on his Birthday, they are not tears of sadness, nor of anger, and certainly not of loneliness.

Richie feels Eddie close at his side, pressed into him, arm tight around Richie’s waist, and in front, each of his five, closest friends in the world, his family, watch him with fond, happy faces.

Eddie gets up on his toes to kiss his cheek.
“Happy Birthday, Rich.”

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