do you want fries with that?
by gaypasta

Summary

Richie spends the best of times annoying the hell out of Stan in work, Stan just wants to do his Goddamn job. Richie starts annoying Stan a lot more frequently, and Stan remains oblivious to all of the not-so-subtle flirting Richie is sending his way.

OR

Stan isn't gay. Definitely not gay. The feeling he gets in his stomach when he sees Richie is 100% platonic, I swear.
Darkness still painted the sky over the town of Derry. Streetlights spilt an orange glow onto the pavement which sparked like the tail of a firework during Derry’s Halloween annual firework show when Stanley Uris cycled through the puddles. The orange sparks fell back onto the frosty ground, all the heat from the warm day before had been lost over the course of the night time. Birds chirped faintly in the background, Stanley couldn’t distinguish which direction the almost dream-like sounds were coming from - it felt as though they were circling him on his usual bike ride to work.

The warmth and brightness of summer mornings were slowly retreating back into hibernation, much to Stan’s displeasure. Having to start work at six o’clock was enough of a chore without having to cycle in the darkness. Nonetheless, Stanley enjoyed his weekend job as much as one could; the pay was decent, the hours were okay and all of his friends worked alongside him.

Except Richie Tozier.

Thank God.

Derry’s Waterfront Diner was a small venue with a fair amount of traffic. It was built only a few years prior just a mile from Derry’s centre. It’s not by any means in the heart of Derry, it is the only building in the long stretch of road before you enter the town. It was a popular rest-stop for people driving through the town to get to a better, more modern town. It wasn’t often that Stan saw a customer more than once, except maybe on their return back home.

Stan didn’t believe that he had deserved or earned the job as weekend supervisor, not just because he was barely seventeen but more so the fact that he hadn’t had an interview. Or applied for the job. Or even really wanted it. Bill had proposed it was probably because him, Stan, Richie and Eddie were the only regular customers and had gotten to know the staff. They would go to the diner every weekend after whatever shenanigans they had gotten up to in the past four years. Stan had remembered when they brought Georgie out for his birthday several months ago, and the owner - who was a fat, balding man but with a kind face and stubble that wasn’t quite ever shaven right - had brought out a cake along with a badly wrapped box with a gaudy bow sloppily sellotaped to the top. If Stan’s memory was correct - which it usually is - the group were the only ones in the diner that summer evening. Richie turned the vintage jukebox up as loud as it would go and grabbed Georgie out of his chair and danced in a way that wasn’t unlike a seizure. Stan had pointed that out and everyone laughed. Except for Bill, who was thanking the owner off to the side, trying to give him whatever amount of crumpled up dollars he had in his pocket to pay for the cake (and the damages caused by Richie’s dancing).

It was that evening, when Stan had cleaned up and righted all the chairs which had been knocked over and pushed to the side to make a crude imitation of a linoleum dancefloor that the Mr. Denton had offered Stan a job, if he wanted it. Stan had said yes, a decision he hadn’t really spent the appropriate time to think about. The job hadn’t interfered with school work or his hobbies yet so Stan had no reason to quit or go back on the offer. It wasn’t a fortnight later when Bill showed up during one of Stan’s shifts, wearing a white apron and a smile which suggested he was excited and nervous, the feeling Stan recalls having before his first ever shift. Not two days later did Eddie show up, wearing rubber gloves that were probably intended to go half-way up the forearm but
hugged Eddie’s elbows and a waterproof apron. The goloshes were overboard, Stan had thought. Eddie bussed like no bus-boy had ever bussed before, the plates were cleaner than they probably were when they were first bought.

Stan pulled up into the diner, the retro design along with the neon sign had Stan feeling a sense of nostalgia for a decade he never lived in. He rode round past the front door into the side, he hopped off his bike and kicked up his stand beside the smoking area, if he parked it anywhere else he feared a careless delivery driver would run it over. Stan unlocked the door to the large gated back entry, which held the large commercial garbage cans were stored to prevent wild animals rummaging for leftovers. Stan carefully side-stepped a garbage bag which had tipped over during the night and spewed mouldy hamburger buns.

Stan continued to do all his morning duties with monotony. He’d been here long enough and done the same thing every weekend where he doesn’t have to think about what he’s doing, it comes naturally. It was almost embedded into his head.

Unlock the back doors. Turn off security. Turn on lights. Turn on fans and dishwasher. Turn on heating. Pre-heat oven for Bill. Move the chairs the table back to the floor. Unlock the front door. Check wastage from the night before. Prep the breakfast food for Bill. Write up next weekend’s rota.

The front of house was small, there was maybe a half a dozen tables and two booths. Stan didn’t mind the horrible bright red and white floor tile, which matched perfectly with red walls and very gaudy 60’s-era decorations which basically covered the wall. It was any wonder that he could tell what colour the wall is at all. Although the decoration was, in Eddie’s words, ‘a fucking nightmare come to life’, the place was always clean, the floor always shone and Stan had never found any chewing gum under tables or seats. He checked every time.

The back of house was much bigger. The were two large benches for prep and cooking beside a large industrial sink and a large oven which was taller than Bill. The top shelf was never used, it was tightly pushed against a large griddle, which is where the magic of Bill’s pancakes were made. Beside the red-circle windowed door which led to the front of house was two fryers which had probably seen better days. There were more steel benches beside the fryers, which ended at a wall about four foot high. On the other side of the half-wall was Eddie’s ‘station’. A pretty clean and spacious area for cleaning dishes and various cooking utensils. It was always immaculate when Eddie left it. The back door was beside the counter where all the clean plates and bowls were stored, about 10 feet from the sink.

Stan had just got his pen and a clean sheet of paper to begin the rota when he could hear the familiar haphazard dismount of Silver. Not moments later he could hear Bill rustling with the fallen garbage. Bill would pick up other people’s garbage, that’s just the kind of guy he was. Stan likes to think of himself as that kind of guy too - but Stan has a good enough sense of self to know he’s not like Bill in that way. He’s like Bill in some ways, but not in the touching mouldy food way.

The back door opened and Stan looked up from the prep bench he was leaning on to greet Bill. Bill was adorning the uniformed white apron and white diner hat. That was where their uniform ended, but it was an unwritten rule to wear a black or grey t-shirt and black bottoms, mainly just to avoid ruining good clothes.

“Hey Bill, I have your prep done. All you have to do this morning is cook them off.”
Bill grinned as he shrugged off his coat and hung it up on the hooks beside the door. “T-thanks Stan. Has M-M-Mike come with the deliveries yet? W-we were out of eggs l-last night.”

Stan shrugged his shoulders. “Not yet, but it’s raining so he’s probably just taking it easy with the precious cargo.”

Bill laughed and walked into the large fridge which was tucked away beside the oven. “It’s w-w-w-warmer in here th-th-than outs-s-ide.” Stan couldn’t see Bill, but if he walked into the fridge he’d imagine he could see his breath. “Eddie coming in at n-n-n-nine?” Bill said, slightly louder than before as he hunted for the items he’d need for breakfast at the back of the fridge.

Stan thought for a second, to try to remember what he had written on the rota before answering Bill. “Yeah, he’s in nine to five today as usual.” Stan’s eye caught a handwritten note which was taped to the wall beside him.

*Stanley, I will be conducting interviews for new staff members this week for weekends. They will be starting next weekend, keep this in mind for next weekend’s rota.*

Thanks, Louis Denton

“Hey! Did you know we’re getting more people next weekend?” Stan turned to Bill, who was walking out of the fridge with about 6 boxes of bacon and 4 bottles of pre-made pancake batter. Stan pretended not to notice him almost dropping one.

“W-we are? C-cool! We should t-t-tell Richie. Maybe he’ll st-stop asking us for money. I th-think Eddie must give ab-about half his w-w-w-wages to Richie for the Arcade.” Bill dropped the supplies with a large thump onto the bench. Stan stood in horror at what Bill was suggesting. “W-we need someone to work out fr-frONT, waiting and working the d-drinks and c-cash, R-Richie could do that.”

Stan could literally not think of anything he needed less in his workplace than Richie running about around ovens and boiling oil and knives. “Nope. Absolutely not happening. I can man out front fine on my own.”

Bill smirked. “T-That’s not what you s-said last week when you w-w-were on the verge of a muh-muh-mental breakdown.” Stan rolled his eyes.

“We were busy and Eddie had phoned in sick, you were stressed too, asshole.”

“E-Eddie’s mom, you mean.” Bill corrected.

Stan rolled his eyes lightheartedly in response and continued to write up the rota, bringing one of the evening workers in a longer shift to cover for Stan doing training. He didn’t think Beverley would mind, she always asks for extra shifts. She would probably work every night and day if he asked. He’d make sure to ring her at a more reasonable hour than six-thirty to check, as per routine.

It was afternoon, the eggs had been delivered and the Bill gave Mike a free waffle to eat as he signed delivery papers. Stan thought maybe he should be more professional and not give away free food, but Mike gives them a discount so he thinks it’s fair. Stan was waiting orders, there wasn’t a
whole lot, mainly truck drivers and a family of 4 visiting relatives 4 towns over.

It was a calm atmosphere, it was lunch rush and there was only 2 tables filled and 3 men sitting at the long bench where Stan was refilling coffee. Eddie came out with a container full of freshly clean white coffee cups. Sweat was beating down his face and his inhaler was protruding out of his pocket.

“Eddie, it’s not a race, you know? You can slow down before you have an asthma attack.” Stan suggested.

Eddie looked at him as if he called him every incredulous name he could think of. “Do you know how quickly bacteria multiplies? If i slow down a plate might sit for ten minutes. By that time the bacteria has spread tenfold. And what if one of them happens to be freaking… Salmonella or something? Then do you know what happens, Stan?” He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth in an overly-panicked habit.

Stan started unloaded the cups from Eddie's arms onto the shelves behind him. “What happens, Eddie?”

Eddie’s eyes blinked about six times as he tried to force the words out of his throat as fast as he possibly could. “Someone eats, I don't know… a slice of freakin apple pie or something and feeds it to their kid. Children’s immune systems can’t handle salmonella, Stan. The kid is dead because I took too long to clean the plate. That’s what will happen.”

Stan took the last of the cups from Eddie, expecting him to walk back to his station, but he didn’t. He stood his ground expecting a confirmation. “Eddie, that’s not going to happen. I mean, it could, but statistically, it’s very improbable.”

Eddie gave Stan an offended look and walked out. Stan heard the trigger of his aspirator through the swing of the door. Stan continued to serve people with a fake smile. The mother from the family at the table had flirted with him, he was flustered but held his cool and continued to be professional. She gave him a $5 tip.

After a few hours it had quietened down, there was only and old Polish lady sitting beside the window drinking coffee, so Bill and Eddie came out front to relieve themselves of boredom. Stan was keeping himself busy polishing the cutlery, Eddie - who had taken off his ridiculous gloves - was messing with the jukebox, trying to play some better music than whatever was drifting through the speakers now.

“Hey! This piece of shit doesn’t even have Raining Men. What kind of bullshit is that? Stan I want this rectified by next week.” Eddie complained from the jukebox. Stan barely lifted his head from cleaning a spoon.

“I d-d-don’t think that Stan has control o-o-over the music.” Bill piped up from a magazine he was flipping through. Stan glanced at it. It was a furniture catalogue.

Eddie laughed, “Yeah, there’d be worse music coming out if it was Stan’s.”
Stan scoffed. “Cyndi Lauper is far better than any of the crap you listen to, Eddie. It’s not my fault your brain’s broken.”

Eddie looked offended. Stan often wonders how Eddie can spend so much time around Richie when he gets defensive about everything. Once Stan commented that Eddie got a haircut and Eddie’s face was red as a tomato by the end of his defensive tangent. “I actually think, that according to the latest Rolling Stones magazine, Clash has been rated one of the best music legends of the 20th century.”

Bill cut in, “One of the b-b-best. Cyndi L-Lauper could be up t-there.” Eddie responded by giving Bill the finger, muttering something about Bill being a shit-stirrer. Bill raised his hands in defensive and smiled out of the side of his mouth at Stan. “I-I’m just st-st-stating an ob-observation, Eddie.”

Stan shook his head and continued polishing spoons. They didn’t really look any different, but it gave his hands something to do.

The front door slammed open with such force that Stan thought that it had shattered. The Polish lady didn’t flinch. She made him feel uneasy.

“What is up fuckers and fuck-lets!”

Stan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Richie, language. You could get us in trouble.”

He saw what he assumed was Georgie drowning in one of Richie’s hoodies cross the threshold into the diner. “What’s up fuckers?” Georgie beamed.

Bill choked on his own tongue as he tried to say something but could not, for the life of him, get any words out. Eddie, of course, was laughing. “Dude that’s messed up, look-” he gestured to a flabbergasted Bill - “you’ve broken Bill!”

Stan shook his head and deadpanned. “Richie, what the hell?”

Richie, naturally found this hilarious and had a shit-eating grin on his face. Stan wanted to punch it. Georgie was completely oblivious to what was going on, but was happy to see Bill. He ran up to the counter and struggled to get himself onto the tall stools. Richie’s hoodie was shielding his eyes and all Stan could see was his tongue poking out in concentration.
Stan bent over the counter and helped hoist Georgie up. He poured him a glass of milk and set it down onto a coaster. Stan patted Bill on the shoulder and went to go refill napkins.

“Guh-Guh-Georgie, don’t s-say th-that aguh-again or Mom will be c-cross.” Bill managed to force out of his body, he seemed like the words actually physically exhausted him to say. Richie laughed again.

Georgie looked up at Bill or tried to at least. Bill pushed the hood off Georgie’s face to reveal a big frown. “But Richie said it would be funny, Bill.”

Bill reached for a straw from the cylindrical container on the counter and put it in Georgie’s milk. “That word is for grown-ups. It’s a bad word.” Georgie nodded solemnly, taking Bill’s words as gospel.

Richie walked over and took a napkin out of Stan’s hand and blew his nose with it. It was a loud, animal-like sound, or maybe a tuba. Either way it was disgusting. As Richie pulled it away from his face, a long green string kept the napkin and his own nose connected. Eddie, who had turned round after hearing the distressing noise had gagged violently and sprinted out into the back and away from this nonsense. Stan screwed his nose up at Richie, who seemed unfazed by this green string of snot. Richie wiped his nose again with the other side of the napkin and threw it at Stan.

“Dude! What the hell that’s disgusting!” Stan jumped back, his hip clipped the side of the row of shelves behind him. Richie laughed in response. “I’m serious Richie, pick it up.”

“Are you gonna kick lil’ ol’ me out, Mister Stanley?” Richie spoke in his Southern Belle voice, pouting his lip and fluttering his eyelashes. “All I wanted to do was share fluids, Mister Stanley. Don’t be mad!”

Stan visibly grimaced at Richie, moreso at the terrible accent than the words he was saying. “Actually I can.”

“Share fluids?”

“Kick you out. Out you go. See you at school Richie.”

Stan began pushing Richie to the door while Richie just allowed Stan to manoeuvre him. “You can’t kick me out! I work here!”
Stan stopped in his tracks, hands still touching Richie’s shoulders. He leaned slightly closer to him, maybe only by an inch. “What did you just say?”

Richie grinned at Stan, as if he was showing off a prize. “I have an interview tomorrow. I’ll win him over with my good looks and charm, easy.”

Stan briefly considered quitting. The thought of putting up with Richie Tozier’s mouth and obnoxious touching for now 7 days a week made Stan wonder if he could pull off a homicide.

Richie noticed Stan pausing and wrapped his arm tight around Stan’s shoulders. “I know, Stanny-boy, it’s hard to contain the excitement, but please - don’t cry! I promise that there’s enough of me to go around - and I mean plenty.”

Stan shrugged off Richie’s arm. “I peed beside you in the urinal last week. I know that’s not true.”

“Have you been replaying us peeing together in your head at night? When no one else is around? Say it ain’t so Stan! You like me! You really, really like me!”

Stan took a calming breath and turned back round to go back to work.

“See you next Saturday!” Richie yelled as Stan walked away.

“Mister Denton hates you after you drove your bike through the doors last year. No way he’d hire you.” Stan quipped before disappearing out back.

Bill looked up from Georgie, “I m-mean, he’s n-n-not wrong.”

Richie blew a raspberry at Bill. “Georgie, you do it too.” And as commanded, Georgie blew a raspberry at Bill, who started tickling him.

“Now can I get some actual fucking service around here?” Richie demanded, Bill didn’t even have to ask what he needed. He nodded his head as he went to go make two rounds of pancakes. He ruffled Georgie’s dusty blonde hair and followed Stan’s departure.

Richie didn’t actually think he’d get the job. Mr.Denton actually did hate him. Just because he broke a single window that one time! And then once more after that, but he insists that it was
Eddie's fault for daring him to kick a football through an open window and that wasn't actually open. It was worth a shot, Bill never complains and Stan doesn't mind working there. Eddie complains but he complains about everything. Plus, it means he gets to annoy Stan every day.

He smiled. He loved the disgruntled look on Stan's face everytime he said something that irritated him. Or the way that Stan would give him that trademark deadpan look. He was the easiest to get a reaction from, but his reactions were so subtle and that's why Richie loved them.

Georgie started to blow bubbles in his milk. Richie gave Bill’s brother a pat on the back.

He really can't wait to nail this interview. (Or at least that's what he keeps telling himself)
I'm dyslexic and I haven't written in 2 years, so I apologise if it isn't great. But practise makes perfect I suppose, and who better to practise on than Stozer x

II

One Month Later.

The cold Autumn afternoon was quiet - much to be expected in this weather. It was an almost supernatural bitter wind which cut through the team members on their way to work, and judging by the frost build-up on the front door - it was due to stay the rest of the weekend.

Mike - who now works alongside Bill after Stan realised the only thing Bill didn’t burn was pancakes - had been late, the foreign country roads froze up worse overnight and Mike had to walk his bike for a mile until he had got onto the populated roads where the dozens of cars had slowly lifted the ice. It was understandable - Stan would rather Mike be late than drop his eggs (which Mike continued to donate to the Diner every weekend) or even worse, hurt himself.

Slowly, but surely, the entire Saturday gang had begun to arrive at work. Bill following Stan by half an hour. Mike and Beverly (after her first Saturday shift Stan had put her on every weekend after that. She was a fantastic worker and the customers loved her) arrived at eight. Ben and Eddie arrived at nine. Eddie continued to do dishes, even though he almost had a breakdown a few days prior because he had touched someone’s chewing gum. Ben helped Beverly out front, and even refused breaks if she needed someone to help wait tables.

Then there was Richie. Who was also meant to start at nine, but Stan doesn’t think he can recall a day yet where Richie was any less than fifteen minutes late. And sure enough, today wasn’t any different. Richie had bounced through the doors at eleven, after 2 hours he had barely done any work. He didn’t seem to be overly bothered about anything besides showing off his new sneakers. (They were ugly.)

Stan was trying to fill in wastage reports (Bill tried to cook hash browns and almost set the smoke alarm off), which was proving to be a more difficult task than usual because beside him, Richie was squeezing washing up liquid into Eddie’s sink, making a 2 - foot wall of foam.
Stan had a headache, and his name was Richie Tozier.

“Ha-ha! Eddie, look, there’s almost enough suds for your mom to use to shave her legs.” Richie’s voice was like sandpaper.

“Dude, stop! This is gonna take ages to rinse. And my mom waxes, you know that.” Eddie complained, desperately trying to grab the washing up liquid out of Richie’s hands. Eddie, however, had barely grown an inch (or so it seemed) from they were thirteen. Richie had grown considerably, he was now taller than everyone except Stan.

“Oh, I know she waxes, I’ve seen it up close. Tell your future little brother that I’m sorry I can’t pay child support, too busy pimping.”

“Dude, that’s disgusting. Plus, child support comes out of a direct deposit, asshole.”

Richie dropped the bottle into the sink, causing a splash of hot soapy water to wave over the sink and wash Eddie’s apron and goloshes. Maybe they weren’t such a bad call after all. Stan stared at the puddle of water which had soaked the floor under Eddie. Richie turned around and caught Stan’s eye. He gave a cheesy grin.

Stan continued to stare directly into Richie’s coke-bottled eyes. It was almost like a battle of dominance, which was ridiculous. Stan was clearly in the dominant role, I mean - he was the supervisor. Not that Richie cared, he didn’t treat Stan any differently in work than he did at school, he carried no concept of a work/home barrier. Anything someone said in work, he would carry with him home. Stan recalled when he didn’t speak to Bill for three days because Bill had told him to stop being lazy and do some work during a rush hour. Stan didn’t really get it, they work to support a business and provide good customer service, having disputes with each other in work was inevitable, all of the Loser’s Club (as they had dubbed themselves) had different personalities and different approaches to work. Stan didn’t see a reason not to leave it at the door. Regardless, Richie was in work - work which Stan took great pride in - and he will do his job as he is being paid $3/hour to do.

“Richie, please clean that up. The last thing we need is someone falling and cracking their head open.”

Richie looked down at the puddle, then back to Stan. “I’m the only one who comes near Eddie because he has AIDs.”

“Good, maybe if you slip it will knock some sense into you.” Stan quipped as took his pen back.
from the counter and continued to try to calculate how much money was lost by letting Bill cook. Stan heard a short slapping sound, followed by a yelp from Richie along with a string of explicites. Stan ignored it, choosing to do his work.

If twenty hash browns were thrown out, at sixty cents each - that’s $12. Plus the bottle of milk Richie crashed into on his bike this morning - $12.80, then the pancakes Bill had sneezed on, $13.80. Stan put the biro in between his lips to free his hands as he rustled through the binder looking for the wastage from the last week. His brow furrowed as he read the wastage from Thursday. $45?! How the hell did they manage to waste $45 worth of food? He began to recalculate all which was written down, in a desperate assumption that someone had made a mathematical muck-up. Stan had a habit of sticking his tongue out or sucking his cheek when he was concentrating, in lieu of his cheek he absent-mindedly began to suck the pen. He faintly recognized movement out of the corner of his eyes. It was Mike bringing Eddie more dishes, stopping to wipe up the mess Richie had made.

Stan let out a smile of triumph. Someone had made a mistake and the wastage wasn’t nearly as high. He made a mental note to go back and double check the wastage as far back as he could, lord knows how their accounts didn’t notice it. He quickly, but neatly, corrected the maths and changed the subtotal - still letting the pen rest between his lips. It wasn’t until he moved the paper up from the counter to put it back into its folder did he notice Richie staring at him. Not the staring that Ben usually follows Beverly with, more alike to how your eyes fixate on something as your mind wanders, and it isn’t until minutes later that you realize you’ve been staring at someone.

He waited several moments to see if Richie would notice, but he didn’t. He just continued staring with eyes fixated on Stan’s chin. “Is there something on my face?” The underlying tone was ultimately ‘can I help you, Tozier?’

Stan could almost see the point where Richie had stopped dissociating as he had moved back about half an inch in surprise. Richie sloppily fixed his glasses - which weren’t that overly askew to begin with, Stan noted. “Yeah, jizz from that pen if you keep giving it all that attention.”

Stan went to snipe back, but Richie had skittered off towards Bill to pull at his apron - untying the bow and letting his apron fall loose, before spinning out the front to help Ben and Bev serve. Bill was carrying a tray of freshly baked peach pie from the oven, and he gingerly tried to step over the trails of his apron. Stan set his pen atop of the folder he was working with and made a beeline for Bill after Bill almost tripped on his apron with a shout. “Hold still.” Stan made delicate work of re-tying the apron. It felt strange tying a bow from the front now, after doing his own so many cold mornings. Stan used his own apron as oven mitts and took the pie off Bill when he was done tying it. “T-thanks Stan.” Bill traced the bow on the back of his apron. It was firm and unmoving. “W-when did we start doing p-peach pie?” Bill asked curiously, his head leaning to one side the way that it does.

“Oh, Mom had some leftover Peaches from Rosh Hashanah. They were just going to be binned,
so…” Stan had trailed off. Feeling somewhat uncomfortable that Bill had asked. Stan could cook, and bake, and sew. His Mother firmly believed in order to be a well-rounded person it was important for him to develop both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ hobbies and skills. He enjoyed baking with his mother, in fact, it was some of his most cherished memories growing up. But he’s not nine anymore, he should be doing more exciting things on a Friday night than making a peach pie for work the next morning.

Bill’s eyes lit up in amazement. “You made t-this? It smells am-amazing. It looks so much b-better than that cheap frozen s-sh-shit.” Stan moved his eyes off Bill, looking out to the front of house instead. “C-can we taste it, I mean, we sh-should know what it t-tastes like before serving it, r-r-right Mike?”

Mike looked up from frying fries and nodded. “If Stan doesn’t mind, of course.” He sent a reassuring smile to Stan, who straightened his back and nodded.

“Fine, but only one slice. Between everyone, not each.” He sent a warning look to Bill, who was probably thinking about bringing a slice home to Georgie. Stan would allow him, of course, but Georgie would more than likely stop by to meet Bill and cycle home with him. Stan would give him a slice then. Stan lowered the plate onto a clear counter out of the line of sight from the customers. He walked over to beside Bill’s prep area and pulled a sharp butcher’s knife from the wooden knife block.

Mike lifted the fries and left them in the basket, allowing the grease to drip out back into the fryers, and made his way over to Bill and Stan. Stan used his apron to hold the hot plate in place as he made eight almost exactly equal slices into the pastry.

“I’ll go get a p-plate.” Bill jogged over to grab an immaculate white plate, peaking Eddie’s interest from a stained coffee pot. “Here, I got forks t-too.” Bill gently lowered the plate and the forks onto the counter. Stan pierced one with his fork, they reminded him of the hors-d’oeuvres his mother had made for his Bar Mitzvah.

He looked around to realise that not only had Eddie joined the gathering, but everyone had their eyes glued on the pie. “Um -” he really didn’t know what to say.

“You have to try it first, I m-mean. It’s yours!” Bill smiled using his hands to usher the fork closer to Stan.

“I get that, but do you all have to watch? I never considered eating a spectator event.” And with that said, they shrugged and all joined Stan in having a taste of his own baked creation. It was a strange feeling, knowing people were eating what you made. It felt almost personal, Stan had a temptation to slap the forks out of their mouths before they took a bite. That would be ridiculous though, of course.
Eddie wasn’t a massive fan of peach in the first place, so Stan didn’t think much of it when he screwed his nose up and shook his head. Bill and Mike, however, loved it. Bill made a weird groaning noise that Richie would probably make a crude comment about. Mike just took a heavy breath, as if preparing himself to recount the taste.

“St-st-stan! This is s-so good. It’s like, fifty thousand t-times better than the ones at the b-bakery on R-Richmond Street.” Stan could feel his heart begin to swell the way it does when you’re happy. Bill’s family had exclusively bought their Sunday dessert from that bakery since as long as Bill could remember. Stan could remember joining Bill several times, but he never really was one for sweets. Usually, he just picked up a fresh loaf of bread.

Mike nodded in heavy agreement. “I used to deliver eggs there, Mrs.Dotts always gave me a slice of something for the road.” He patted Bill on the shoulder. “I gotta agree, this is good stuff. Like, money-making good.”

Bill called in the rest of the group to taste. Their reactions were much the same, except Beverly had never had fresh pie before, only one from the supermarket - she was blown away.

Richie took the biggest piece between the three and chewed it obnoxiously close to Stan’s ear. Stan was waiting patiently for what he could only anticipate as being irritating feedback. Richie’s head nodded as he ate it, making an obscene parody of the noises Bill was making earlier. Stan rolled his eyes. Richie swallowed loudly and threw his hands up into the air.

“Hallelujah, boys and girl! The messiah has returned in the form of Stanley Uris. Who knew Jesus would reincarnate as a Jew after his Jewwy demise?” Richie praised into the ceiling, wrapping an arm tight around Stan’s neck.

Stan shoved the boy away, “Don’t call Jesus - or anything for that matter - ‘Jewwy’. It sounds a toddler trying to say ‘Jerry’, also it’s offensive to my culture.”

“Go cry into your Yakuza.”

“Yamaka - and you were there when Bowers and their gang of underachievers threw it into the sewer. Also, shut up.”

Richie looked up in thought for a moment before clapping loudly. “Don’t you all have work to do? Ten-hut soldiers!”

The group shuffled away, probably wanting to get as far away from Richie’s loud army-colonel impersonation as possible. Stan began to collect the dirty forks, before Richie grabbed his forearm. “Dude what the hell-”
“I need your help.”

Stan stared quizzically at Richie’s change of tone. It threw him off and left him feeling uneasy. “With what?”

“It’s my Mom’s birthday, I blew this week’s paycheck on cigarettes and the arcade, also I owed Eddie money.”

Stan snorted, “You owe all of us money.” He pointed out.

Richie waved his hand in the air in a dismissive manner. “Yeah, I’ll get to it, Mom. I need you to show me how to bake a cake, or a pie or a fucking doughnut or something.”

Stan looked down at the pie and back up to Richie. “That good, huh?”

“Dude shut the fuck up, it was a solid ten out of ten, and I can’t even lie about it to annoy you, that’s how good it was. Please?” Richie raised his eyebrows and held his hands together, like a child begging. “I’ll jerk you off, Mr.Uris? For extra credit?”

Stan inwardly grimaced at that. Moreseo the use of ‘Mr.Uris’ than the offer to jerk him off. “I already have your sister for that.”

Richie laughed loudly, clapping Stan on the shoulder, making him stumble slightly. “Boom! Stan the Man hits us with another good one! I’ll see you after work, bring what we need!” And with that, Richie was off, heading towards the back door, a cigarette already in his mouth to take an unauthorized smoke break. Beverly followed him, it was almost as if they were on a nicotine timer.

Stan stood there, the realisation dawning on him that Richie had just invited him over to his house, without really giving him an option. Stan tries to remember the last time anyone apart from Bill was at Richie’s house. He can’t, so he starts making a mental list of what to bring to Richie’s that night.

Richie better actually fucking help make his own mother’s cake or else Stan might just cook him along with it.
Richie’s house was neater than he expected. He was aware that Richie’s parents weren’t home a lot, so with Richie being the only head of house for the majority of the time, he had expected the place to be a mess. Instead of tripping over piles of shoes and discarded coats at the front entrance, he stepped cautiously onto a clean rug and past a pair of converse neatly lined beside each other. They were white and black respectively. The carpet was slightly damp in some places and smelt of a sterile hospital softly masked by a mix of citrus fruits and … Stan sniffed again, he had definitely smelt this smell before. He stood there for a moment, wracking his brain before moving off again picturing how strange it would look if Richie had walked in to see him sniffing his hallway. He was carrying a large mixing bowl his arms, the bike ride over had been tedious as the bowl was too big to fit into his backpack alone, nevermind with everything else he had to bring with him. The clinking of the glass tupperware Stan had in his back clinked as Stan walked. The sound must’ve alerted Richie of his presence, as his goggle-eyed head peered through what Stan assumed was the entrance to the kitchen. Stan had knocked, but perhaps knocking by belting his elbow into the door because he couldn’t free a hand while carrying all this stuff was either too quiet for Richie to hear, or was mistaken for the house settling. To be fair, Stan had called Richie to let him know he was on his way and Richie told him to let himself in while Richie took a nap and would wake up to a gorgeous three tiered cake. Stan told him to get fucked.

“Roll up ladies and gentleman, next up into the kitchen is a Mister Stanley Uris!” Richie mock-presented. He cupped his hands around his mouth and made a whisper-shout to imitate a booming crowd. “Standing at five foot ten, weighing a whopping ninety-nine pounds, eyes as steely blue and dreamy as Harrison Ford our hero is up against the one, the only…” Richie paused for suspense. Stan was not suspenseful. “Richie Tozier’s kitchen!”

“Meh, that one needs work. Hold the door open for me so I can set this down. It’s heavier than it looks.” Stan took steps towards the double glass doors, Richie opened the door from inside and held it open, giving an exaggerated bow and curtsy.

“Anything for you, oh master Chef.” His tone then fell back to normal. “Put the bag wherever. I would say sorry about the mess, but I’m not really.”

Stan stepped past Richie, keeping an eye on his hands as he passed through the threshold. The last time Richie held a door open for him he had smacked Stan’s ass. Hard. Stan dropped the mop bucket he was carrying in surprise and he made Richie clean it up. He winced thinking about it, he
had eggs in this bag.

Thankfully Richie’s hands didn’t wander any farther than to close the door behind them and Stan was left without sexual assault. For now. For now? Stan was worried what kind of torture Richie would later impose upon him, he was in Richie’s domain after all. Stan was doing him a favour, though. If Richie got too overbearing or he got to eat too much cake batter that it went to his head, Stan could just stop making the cake which he was so gracious enough to bake for Richie. And by that he means help Richie bake. Yes, it will be a joint effort.

Richie’s kitchen was fairly messy. There were cups and plates piled up into the sink - some looked as though they had been sitting there for a while. Is that porridge or mashed potatoes? A few cupboard doors lay open, threatening to clip the side of Stan’s head, he closed them as he walked past them. A few tell-tale jars of Richie’s breakfasts and late night lunches sat beside a chopping board covered in crumbs. Stan noted that unlike the front entrance, a dirty pair of black slip-ons lay haphazardly beside the table along with a crinkled pair of shorts. Did Richie really just come home and strip while making a sandwich? I guess when you basically live alone there’s no one to witness your indecency. Stan set the large mixing bowl on a clutter-free section of the small kitchen and began unloading the Tupperware filled with preciously measured ingredients from his backpack. He had considered not pre-measuring the ingredient, but figured it would be more straightforward if he did. Imagining Richie with a bag of icing sugar could have gave Stan nightmares, so that may have been a contributing factor.

Richie stalked over and stood, as usual, slightly too close to Stan. Maybe Stan had a bigger area of personal space than what Richie was used to, or maybe Richie did it to annoy him. Either way, Stan shifted slightly to be a more socially acceptable distance from his friend. His nose had caught a quick whiff of that smell from the hallway again. It smelt too strong to be body-spray, but not as perfumed as cologne.

“So, what are you making my wonderful Mommy for her birthday?” Richie peered into the boxes, as if a tub of flour would be a clue.

“ We are making Victoria sponge cake, since when I rang to ask you what she liked, you didn’t answer.”

“I did answer!”

“Roast beef Sunday dinner isn’t a flavour combination I could work into a cake.”

“That’s quittin’ talk, Uris. Slap some gravy into a muffin and there you have it. Happy Birthday, Maggie!”
Stan rolled his eyes. “Here, put this in the freezer, it’s too soft.” Stan handed Richie over a stick of butter, cut into the weight that they would need.

“I can think of better ways to get it up than that, Frosty. But whatever floats your goats I guess.” Richie grabbed the butter and threw it into the freezer, mimicking playing basketball.

“Boats, you mean. Why would goats float?”

“Well, look what happened to the Titanic. Boats aren’t too great either.”

Stan rolled his eyes and pre-heated the oven. He shifted his bag off his shoulders and moved it to Richie’s kitchen table. He began adding ingredients into the bowl, while Richie’s eyes lazily followed his hands. Somehow, Richie already had flour on his gaudy Hawaiian shirt. The sight of the floury patch pressured Stan into get his apron from his bag, Richie’s eyes stalked him, like he was calculating Stan’s every move.

“I’m putting on my apron.” Stan felt the need to justify his actions.

“And where’s mine?”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “I know for a fact you have plenty of aprons. I’ve given you three new ones this month alone. I doubt you’ve lost them.”

Richie looked at him as if he had just said the most ridiculous thing. “If I didn’t lose them, how come I can’t find them?”

“Have you cleaned your room at all in the past month?”

“I call it organized chaos. Sorry we can’t all be OCD, Mr. Perfect.”

Stan rolled his eyes as he raised the neck of the apron over his head, using his left hand to keep his yarmulke in place.
“Crack four eggs into an empty bowl and don’t get any shells in.” Stan commanded.

Richie did just that, after searching around in a dusty cupboard for a bowl. “Now what Captain?”

Stan tied the back of his apron in a perfected bow. “Beat the eggs, I doubt you have a whisk, just use a fork.”

“I don’t normally use a fork to beat eggs, if you know what I mean.”

Stan stared blankly.

“You know, like eggs.”

“You’re thinking of the hymen. You need to whisk harder, you’re not getting enough air in.”

Richie looked at him through the side of his glasses, a strange look that made Stan feel slightly intrusive.

“How would you know?”

“I’ve been making this cake since I was nine. The eggs should be a pale yellow and fro—”

“About the hymen. Didn’t take you as a womanizer, Stanny boy. But who can resist those curly locks, am I right ladies?” Richie made a high five motion to the empty space to his right.

“We sit together in Biology. You copied my homework on female anatomy last week because you were too busy cramming for Chem to spend five minutes labelling a diagram.”

Richie stopped staring and stared at the wall opposite in deep thought, hopefully not thinking that deeply about female anatomy. Richie barked a laugh. “Oh yeah. Who can forget the vulva?!”
Stan grimaced. “Please stop talking.”

Stan added the now perfectly beat eggs into the large bowl, instructing Richie to mix it gently until it’s just mixed. Not too much or the cake will go tough because the gluten will have been worked to much. He started to explain to Richie the importance of properly mixing the cake in great detail as he got the now less-melted butter from the freezer.

Richie pretended to listen, nodding his head while watching Stan lean into the freezer. Stan smiled, he was happy that Richie was listening one of his ‘boring science’ speeches. He didn’t think it was very boring, Stan actually thought it was really interesting the difference that simply adding in an ingredient slightly too quick or too warm could make.

As soon as Stan instructed Richie to mix, it became apparent that Richie was overestimating how much force was required, as almost instantly he was greeted with a huge blob of batter on his flowery shirt. He promptly dropped the fork and stepped back, afraid that the bowl might decide to spit at him again.

“Stan… this is my favourite shirt…” Richie frowned, almost comically.

“Is it ruined?”

“Not if i wash it before it dries.” He pulled at the shirt, assessing it for any further damage.

“Damn.”

Richie shot him the finger before swiftly jogging out the door, pulling the shirt off before he even exited the kitchen. Stan’s eyes lingered where Richie’s bare shoulders were. It reminded him of when they used to go swimming in the quarry. He remembers holding those freckled shoulders, water droplets cascading from Richie’s hair into the crevices between Stan’s fingers, while attempting to drown Richie for pulling his underwear down while he was swimming. Richie had soft shoulders.

Stan began cleaning up globs of batter with a roll of kitchen roll which was sitting beside the sink. He wished he could disinfect the area, it involved raw eggs. Not that Richie would really care. He wound up the dirty sheet into a ball and placed it inside the egg carton, which Richie had put the egg shells back into. Stan didn’t want raw egg sitting out for long, too much risk of cross-contamination. He reached under the sink to where he assumed the bin would be, and opened the
The kitchen rang out with the sound of maybe a dozen or two glass bottles clanging against the harsh linoleum floor. Stan initially panicked, thinking that a bottle had smashed, but he mistook the sound of a bottle breaking into pieces and the shards cascading to the floor with the small landslide of bottles. Stan dropped to his knees to begin picking them up, before stopping as his eyes skimmed the labels. They were mostly beer. All the same brand. Two bottles of what was once whiskey had fell too. Stan lowered himself to peer into the cupboard and sure enough, there sat at least 5 large empty bottles of whiskey, which had been pushed to the back. Underneath several bottles which hadn’t spilled out, Stan could make out some dishcloths and washing up liquid. Stan frowned. Why the hell was there so much alcohol in this cupboard? He picked up a stray whiskey bottle and began to read it. Fifty-five percentage. From what Stan remembers from Bill’s last birthday party (they were all wasted after four beers) that’s hell of a lot. Were these Richie’s? Surely if Richie drank this much, Stan would know by now. Right? He’d have hangovers in school or when they were in work. Besides, Richie could barely hold back a beer, nevermind all this.

“Hey good lookin’ what you got c-” Richie, who had barged through the door, had fell silent for a split second upon his eyes meeting the mess. Stan met his eyes and barely had time to blink before Richie shot over and began stuffing the bottles back in. He looked angry, as he threw the beer bottles back into the cupboard with too much force. Stan thought he heard one break, actually break this time. Stan gently placed the bottle he had been examining back in, before Richie had a chance to grab it from him. Richie glared angrily at the bottle Stan had placed back, as though they had an unwritten term of agreement and the bottle had just broke it. Stan’s heart didn’t know if it should beat too fast, or slow down, so it settled for both and Stan felt like his heart was gonna fall out of his chest.

Richie closed the cupboard and just stared at it for a moment, Stan noticed Richie was sitting barely an inch away from the cracked eggs and batter-covered towel. If Richie chose to sit down from sitting on his knees, he’d surely sit on it. Stan gingerly leaned over, pushing the carton away from Richie’s possible line of movement. This had meant leaning over Richie, and he could feel his messy black hair tickling his neck. He retreated slightly, but not completely, he could feel his own curls fall against Richie’s hair as he moved. His eyes darted to Richie’s as soon as he knew he could’ve seen the boys face. Stan knew what had happened. He wasn’t one to make assumptions, but he read the situation enough to know he shouldn’t ask. As he moved further back, perhaps only a foot away from the other boy’s face he could feel a force make him pause. He wouldn’t have paused of his own accord, he’s too close. This is his personal space and Richie is sitting in it, looking almost frightened in anger. Like when you finally stand up for yourself against your parent, knowing you’ll get in trouble, but you’re too angry to stop yourself. Stan had never seen these emotions painted on his face, he admits, regrettably, that he never really thought of Richie as someone who could feel such a complex tide of emotions. There was an unspoken silence between them for several moments. Neither of them moving, Stan continued to watch Richie like a hawk, looking for any sign that he could move away, or speak.

Richie had made several noises over the course of a minute or two, which sounded like the start of
a sentence which he hadn’t thought to finish. Richie rubbed his eyes in frustration, displacing his
glasses. Stan moved back, and let out a breath that he had been holding, in fear that even something
small like breathing too loudly would interrupt what Richie was trying to say.

“Do I really need to go into it?” Richie asked to the ceiling, he moved to sit against the cupboard
that had betrayed him.

Stan looked at the cupboard, then to Richie. “I mean, kinda. A brewery's worth of alcohol just
came out from underneath your kitchen sink.”

Richie sighed, to the ceiling again. “Can’t you just put two and two together then we can leave this
conversation.”

“If your sink has a drinking problem you should probably address it.”

Richie let out a breath of air, the ghosts of laughter. Stan smirked as Richie shot him a look,
followed by a thumbs up. “Good one, Stan the man.”

The kitchen fell back into silence. Stan moved to lean his back against the cupboard beside Richie.
Their two postures were so different, they almost looked comical. Stan’s head rested on his knees,
his brown loafers pointing straight forward while Richie sagged beside him, his legs apart and dirty
socks pointing to the Gods. He looked like a wax figure who’d been left in the sun slightly too
long.

“My mom’s not home much.” Stan nodded, he knew this, but he could tell this was the start of a
conversation. “Neither is Dad either, not that I give a shit.” Richie seethed his words, Stan didn’t
know much about his family life, but he had always read between the lines of Richie avoiding any
mention of family that it wasn’t great. “Mom just...drinks a lot. All the time, Stan. She’s not always
drunk or anything, well she’s gotten worse lately but… fuck, she always had a drink in her hand,
but she could put herself to bed and remember how to lock the doors and she’d be up in time to get
me up for school and go to work. It worked, I mean she wasn’t a great mother, when she was far
gone she’d …” Richie picked at the skin at the side of his nails, watching his own fingers with
intent. “She’d not be great. When I was in second grade I drew our family portrait with her holding
a bottle of beer instead of my hand, for fuck’s sake.”

Stan was watching Richie’s face carefully. Taking in this moment as if it would be a moment
which would grant him life or death. He stored every word Richie said into his head. Richie started
to jiggle his leg, Stan knew he was craving a cigarette. Stan didn’t like it when Richie smoked
around him, so Richie usually didn’t.
“I’m sorry, this is stupid. I sound like such a faggot crying about my Mommy issues.” Richie wiped at his eyes again, Stan didn’t notice any wetness, and suspected Richie was trying to wipe away moisture as it came.

“So you wanting to fuck Eddie’s Mom is all just a big roundabout Oedipus complex?” Stan was so used to Richie providing comedic commentary, Richie being down isn’t something he’s ever considered happening. He figured the situation needed lightening up though, before one of them takes the smashed bottle from the cupboards and slits their wrists with it.

Richie let out a shallow but honest laugh. “Probably, but me and your Mom? Pure fiery unhinged passion.”

Stan knocked shoulders with him, and Richie retorted as well. He reached into his jeans and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, taking one into his mouth directly from the packet. He gave Stan a look to ask if it was alright, and Stan nodded. Richie needed this right now. He can figure out how to get the smell of smoke out of his shirt later. Richie hopped up and lit his cigarette on the gas-fired hob.

“I know I don’t need to say it, but this is between us, ok?”

Stan nodded. “You didn’t need to say it, Richie.”

Richie sucked on the cigarette, letting the smoke flow out of his words as he spoke. “It wouldn’t be fair not telling you after telling Bill. I’d feel guilty for feeling like I had to ask Bill not to speak if I didn’t have to ask you.”

Stan blinked, partly because Richie accidentally blew smoke into his eye. “You… you told Bill?” A part of him feels upset that he wasn’t the only one Richie had told, he felt cheated that Richie would disclose such a personal secret to their other friend. Stan felt bad, he shouldn’t feel special, he shouldn’t feel as though he and only he should be privy to Richie’s personal tragic backstory. Yet, he did.

Richie took a long drag, letting the smoke sit in his lungs a few moments longer than normal before he blew out, watching the smoke disappear into the air. “Yeah, It’s Big Bill y’know. You feel bad keeping anything for him.” Stan nodded, he understood, Bill had a way about him, that by keeping a secret from him, that by keeping a secret from him, no matter how little involvement is on Bill’s behalf, you’re still riddled with guilt for not telling him. “I didn’t get much of a choice. In case you couldn’t tell - I don’t exactly boast about this shit. He was staying over for the first time since we were probably…” Richie trailed off and tapped his finger against his thigh. “About nine? Eight or nine. It was two years ago, after your thirteenth birthday party, I told Bill he could stay at mine because I live closer
and it was getting dark. And right as we were about to fall asleep, Mom falls into my room, thinking it was hers.” He let out a sad laugh. “Bill was scared shitless because Mom was yelling at us to get out of her room, it took a while, but I got her to bed. It killed me because afterwards Bill would barely look at me. I don’t know if he was embarrassed, or guilty or pitied me or whatever. But it fucking hurt.” Richie tapped off the ash onto the floor. “I liked Bill, a lot, I was head over heels infatuated with him, and the first night we’d have a sleepover in ages without having Georgie creep in at midnight, I had all these moments planned out in my head. We’d kiss, maybe we’d confess our feelings, maybe I’d give him a blowjob. Then turn of a coin, he wouldn't look at me for a week.”

Stan sat in shock at what he was hearing. Richie liked Bill? Stan was replaying every interaction he watched Bill and Richie have over the past few years. He felt like he’d been hit with a concussion. What the hell was going on? Did Bill know? Were they secretly dating? Are they secretly dating?

Richie stubbed out the butt of his cigarette on the floor, leaving a faint black mark. “It’s okay though, he knows. He’s cool with it. It was a while ago.”

Stan shot him a look, Stan had no idea what kind of look it was, but apparently Richie did, he laughed and patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry Stanny boy. I like my dick uncut, so you don’t have to worry.”

Stan elbowed him in the stomach, making Richie cough. “Don’t be such a dick.” Richie laughed as he rubbed where Stan’s elbow had been. “Wait, you’re gay? The man who talks about fucking all the chicks and their mothers, is a homosexual?” Stan wasn’t shocked, it was Richie Tozier they were talking about - who knows what curveball that boy is gonna throw next.

“Don’t worry, there’s enough of the Tozier Train to go around. Now stopping at both male and female stations, buy your ticket early though - the waiting list is almost as long as my dick!”

Stan rolled his eyes so hard he felt his optic nerve burn. “I’m not bringing up the urinal again.”

Stan got off the dirty floor and held a hand out to Richie. “Let’s finish this cake before any more secrets get exposed.”

Richie smirked and jumped up, looking brighter in the eyes. “Hold onto your yahtzee, it’s gonna be intense.”

Stan hit Richie with a wooden spoon. “It’s a yarmulke, you dick.”
It took thirty-five more minutes, and by the time they were done curfew had long been in place, but they had finished it. It was a work of art. Perfectly golden and spongy, with silky cream and some of Mike’s mother’s homemade jam she had given out to all of the group. It was sweet, the jam gave it just the right amount of bitter to compliment the sweet. Not that the boys knew, they couldn’t have any. Richie was overjoyed, jumping up and down like a child in victory, “I’m a better cook than Bill!” Stan decided not to point out that it was his recipe and the only thing Richie did was mix the ingredients - and lick the spoon, to Stan’s horror.

Stan placed the cake delicately in a decorative box, so it wouldn’t take in any weird tastes and smells that are more than likely making home in Richie’s fridge. Richie smiled at Stan when all is done, and all is left to do is give it to his Mom when she gets home from work the next day.

Richie wrapped his arm around Stan’s shoulder, and Stan lets him. “We did good. But I am fucking starving.”

“I’m not making you food, Richie.”

Richie threw his hands up in the air. “Then what kind of wife are you?!”

Stan rolled his eyes and began to pack his things into his bag, ready to head home. He had work in the morning and it was already - Stan checked his watch - 21:04. Fuck. Stan picked up the pace, not even bothering to put the lids on his Tupperware before placing it in his bag. His Mom’s gonna freak if he’s not home soon, he was meant to be home two hours ago. Richie sashayed over to the table, where Stan was having a small freak-out. He rest his head on his hands and bent over.

“Where you goin’ in such a rush, sweet-pea?” Richie drawled in his Southern Belle voice - Richie had began to recognize it as Stan’s favourite, a more accurate wording would probably be least-hated.

“I have to get home, it’s late. My parents are gonna freak.” Stan suddenly smelt the smoke from Richie’s earlier cigarette on his collar. “Richie, I smell like smoke! What gets out smoke?” He began to lift his shirt, smelling it all over.

“You can borrow some of my clothes, it’s no big deal.” Richie was staring absentmindedly at his exposed stomach, zoning out again more than likely. Stan almost died at the vision of him walking around in one of Richie’s ugly Hawaiian shirts. He pulled his longest curl down to his nose and gave it a sniff, he recalls Beverly complaining that smoke sticks to your hair, especially if it’s thick
- and she was right. “Fuck - it’s in my hair too.”

Richie shrugged. “Just stay over, we’ve shared a bed before.”

Stan recalled back to one of their many sleepovers. Stan had got the short straw and Richie had got kicked onto the floor not even an hour after lights out. The smell of smoke attacked his senses again. Stan looked over to see Richie lighting another cigarette.

“Dude what the fuck?!”

Richie gave him an almost cheshire cat-like smile. “Well you just have to stay now, no chance of getting smoke out of your hair.” He blew smoke into Stan’s face and Stan swatted the cigarette out of Richie’s hand.

“You’re a premium-level dick, do you know that?”

Richie grinned as he pulled Stan out of the kitchen, cigarette bouncing softly between his lips. “Yeah I know. But a slumber party, Stan!”

And with that, Stan had laughed a genuine laugh. Not that Richie had said anything particularly funny or got seriously injured in anyway. But he was having fun, genuine boyish fun, clambering up the stairs, fighting each other on who gets to shower first and Richie attempting to give Stan the ugliest pajamas he could find. Stan was having so much fun, he forgot to call his Mother until 22:35. He laughed at his own forgetfulness and hung up the phone after calming his mother, going back to trying to wrestle his yarmulke out of Richie’s hands.
Stan checked the red illuminated numbers of his watch, the bright LED lights hurt his tired eyes. [01:40].

Stan groaned as he shifted slightly in Richie’s bed, trying not to wake the sleeping figure next to him - who was currently splayed out like a starfish, forcing Stan to grapple onto the edge of the bed before he was pushed into the mountain of dirty clothes and comic books which was Richie Tozier's bedroom floor. Stan couldn’t sleep. Normally he was asleep in his pristine white bed by ten o’clock, but not tonight, because tonight he wasn’t sleeping in his familiar abode - he was bunking with a hoarder.

Stan was exhausted - the soft glow of the stars peering through Richie’s half-closed curtains were burning his eyes, feeling as though the moon is mocking him for the restless night. Stan had never had difficulty sleeping with one of the Loser’s before. Eddie’s room was always fairly clean anyway but Bill always spent the day before hosting a sleepover cleaning the house if he knew Stan was attending. Stan wasn’t as bad anymore, he takes his medication and he can deal with small things like Bill’s posters being slightly lopsided, or Eddie’s pill bottles being arranged alphabetically instead of by size, or even the way Richie’s glasses were never quite sitting on his face right. Stan suspected he had sat on them and never bothered to get them fixed.

But this situation, even with the medication - was driving Stan crazy. He was itching to clean Richie’s room just so he could sleep. Stan tried to take his eyes off the glass of soda Richie had left teetering on the edge of the desk, or the open closet door, which showed clothes thrown in, with no hangers and Stan thinks he can make an outline of a shoe sitting on top of all Richie’s clothes. Stan could feel his hands were beginning to fidget, picking at the pair of ugly Christmas pyjamas Richie had given him to sleep in.

No, he’s fine. Stan is fine. He just needs to wash his face and he’ll be fine to go back to bed. He just needs a minute out of this… hellhole.

Stan lifted the duvet off his body tenderly, trying to keep it as motionless as possible to avoid waking Richie - the duvet which didn’t have a cover - and he stepped onto the floor. Well, onto a notebook which had been permanently crinkled beyond usability. Stan tried to navigate Richie’s horde of junk - not junk, Stan knew that some of this stuff was probably of great importance to Richie, which is why he was being so delicate with his footwork - only to step on an upturned plug from Richie’s stupid fucking lava lamp, which didn’t even fucking work. Stan made an agonized
noise in the back of his throat as he rubbed the sole of his foot. He hobbled out of Richie’s room and into the bathroom to wash his face.

Stan pulled on the shaving light to examine his face in the mirror. His eyes were already beginning to form bags and he had a pimple developing under his lip - the joys of puberty. Stan splashed the arctic cold water onto his face, the shock of the cold water lifted his mind from Richie’s room for a moment, and he felt cleaner. Stan rubbed his face dry with his shirt and went to switch off the light before he noticed something in the corner of his eye.

Reflected in the mirror, was a framed photo of Richie from when he was probably around six. Stan turned around and picked it off the shelf, bring it towards the light to get a better look. Richie looked much the same - a pair of buck teeth, glasses and a mess of black hair, Stan felt warm. He remembered this day, this was the first day where him, Bill, Richie and Eddie were all in the same class. Stan wonders what would’ve happened if one of them had been in the other class, what if Stan was put in the other class and never met his friends? Stan decided to focus back to the picture. Richie was sitting beside a thin, pale boy with such rounded cheeks that he looked almost like he was having an allergy attack. The boy reminded Stan of Georgie, they looked almost identical. Almost as if they were … brothers. Stan closed his eyes and took a patient breath, it’s Bill. Of course it’s Bill - who else would it be?! Bill’s arms were wrapped tightly around Richie’s neck, and Richie’s head was leaning against the mop of Bill’s hair. Stan snorted, such children. Stan, even at such a young age wouldn’t have taken such a photo, he would’ve stood up straight with a modest smile - nowadays wasn't much different, but his smile wasn’t painted anymore.

Stan traces the edge of the frame softly with his finger as he tries to recount how many photos exist of just him and Richie. He puts the photo back where it was. He couldn’t think of any. He made his way back to the room, feeling slightly calmed.

Stan watched the floor with concentration as he avoided stepping on any other rogue items, he hastily stepped over a pair of Richie’s tighty-whities. Stan’s hands ghosted over the duvet to find the corner - only to trace into a cloud of tangled hair. For some reason, Stan’s hand stopped in its place, maybe because he hadn’t been this close to his lifelong friend in years, or maybe it was because it felt exactly how Stan imagined - coarse, thick and most definitely unbrushed. Or maybe it was because a pair of half-lidded eyes were staring back at him. Yes, that was probably it.

“Stanley?” Richie’s voice was deep and gravelly. Stan almost had to look around him to make sure that the voice had, in fact, been Richie’s. “What’s wrong?” Richie had begun to move back over to his own side of the bed. Stan’s hand fell to the mattress.

“Nothing, Richie. I just went to the bathroom.”

“If you wanted to jerk off-” Richie yawned “you could’ve just woken me up.”
Stan huffed a laugh. “Why? Just to watch?”

“Never seen a jew dick before. Wonder what it looks like without all that foreskin.”

Stan shoved Richie farther over the bed and softly got under the blankets. Richie’s socked foot was softly kicking against Stan’s as Richie closed his eyes. Stan’s eyes were fixated on Richie’s hair. It needs to be brushed so badly that it hurts.

Stan laid on his back for what felt like hours, with Richie breathing practically into his armpit, but the red glowing lights on his watch told him that it had only been eight minutes. The only sound in the room was Richie’s heavy breathing, he was a mouth breather - Stan recalled with contempt - and the soft buzzing of Richie’s digital alarm clock on his bedside locker. The buzzing was loud and the moon was far too bright.

Richie shifted in his sleep, turning more to lie on his stomach, Richie’s arm moved and found a place over Stan’s abdomen. Richie’s fingers were twitching beside his nipple. That wasn’t bothering Stan, what was bothering Stan was that he could feel Richie’s mane of hair against his arm. His unkempt, unbrushed, peninsula of hair. Stan’s disorder hasn’t been this bad in years, but Richie hadn’t expected Stan to stay over, so Stan can’t fault Richie for the state of his room. Stan could hear the kitchen clock ticking like a countdown. The light from the moon twisted around Richie’s floor, showing off all of the socks and candy wrappers and crumpled up pages of homework, presenting them to Stan like a cat showing off its kill.

Richie rubbed his head against Stan’s tensed arm and Stan has had it. Stan jerked his arm away and resumed his earlier position of teetering off the edge of the bed in an attempt to get as far away from Richie as he could. The sharp motion of Stan moving away must’ve stirred Richie from his attempt to fall back asleep as Richie groaned.

“What’s wrong? Go to sleep.” Richie grumbled from the pillow.

It would be so easy, just press his head into the pillow. Stan’s stronger than Richie, he could keep him there, hold him down until he passes out. Richie has no idea how infuriating his hair is. How offensive it is. Stan could feel the straw-like texture all over his body. The knots of Richie’s hair wrapped around his Adam’s apple and threatened to squeeze. Stan couldn’t get it off.

“Your hair, Richie.”

Richie turned to look up at Stan. “My hair.”
“Yes, Richie. Your fucking hair!” Stan sat up straight in the bed, hands clenched. “Your hair is so messy and you obviously haven’t brushed it in ages. Years probably. Do you even use conditioner?! No, of course you don’t I’d be shocked if you even used shampoo. Your hair is so coarse with knots and I can feel them on me, rubbing up against my neck and my arms and my legs and your room is so fucking messy and your lava lamp.” Stan began finding it very difficult to get oxygen into his lungs, he was breathing shallow breaths and he could feel perspiration beading in his armpits.

“Oh - oh fuck, okay Stan, it’s ok.” Richie kicked the blankets off his legs as soon as he noticed Stan’s voice begin to break in a close encounter with hysteria. He pushed the blankets off Stan too, letting the cool air soothe him.

“-and your homework, it’s everywhere and I can’t see the floor and there’s - a shoe, Richie there’s a shoe in your closet, on the clothes. That’s not where it goes and the tacks in your posters are all red except the bottom right one on Freddy Krueger it’s green, it’s green, green isn’t your favourite colour yours is red, but your walls are blue and it doesn’t match your carpet but I can’t see your carpet because your room is too fucking messy.”

Stan could feel his heart racing and he couldn’t breathe, the knots of Richie’s hair were squeezing his lungs now and constricting his chest. The moonlight pierced his eyes like daggers and Richie’s hands rubbing circles on his back felt so soft, so distant that it might’ve been a dream.

“Ohkay, Stan come on. Move, we’re going, you’re fine I promise.” Stan could feel Richie grabbing his forearms and pulling him off the bed. Stan wasn’t sure what was happening, all he could focus on was his lungs. His other senses were a distant memory. He wonders if this is how Eddie feels every time he has an asthma or an anxiety attack, does he spiral into this dream world too? Richie’s hands were like fire on Stan’s icy arms and it burned. Where is Richie going? Is he leaving? No, of course he’s not. He’s holding onto the clammy forearm and dragging Stan out of the room. No, we’re not in the room, we’re in the hallway. Stan didn’t remember Richie leading him down the stairs. Stan faintly heard the grandfather clock in the living room chime, it echoed around his head like the beat of a drum. Stan could feel Richie’s hair squeezing his face, suffocating him even more. Stan tried to get it off, clawing at his face with his perfectly manicured nails.

“Stan! Stan stop it! Please, don’t you’re going to hurt yourself.” Richie had grabbed Stan’s hands and held them tight. Stan’s hands were in Richie’s hands. There was no hair on his face it had faded from existence when Richie’s voiced had pierced into it. “Hey, you’re fine, Stan. You’re fine. You’re in the living room it’s ok.” Richie gently pushed Stan into a sitting position on the sofa.

Stan tried to focus his eyes onto Richie, who was crouched on the floor in front of him, but he couldn’t move them. There was a stain on the coffee table. It was glaring at him, threatening him. “The coffee… the table. Richie it’s got a stain, you need - you need- a cloth. No… I don’t know what gets out…stains on varnished…wood.” Stan didn’t speak. Or at least it didn’t feel like he did.
He heard the words on the inside of his ear, but he didn’t feel them leave his throat.

Richie took off his shirt and folded it as neatly and as quickly as he could over the stain, Stan’s eyes slowly met his. Richie’s glasses weren’t wonky. Richie’s hair was… gone? No, not gone, Richie was wearing a hat. It looked like one of Bill’s baseball team caps.

“Yeah, see. No hair, okay? Now you need to breathe, Stan. You know how to do the exercise, the one you make Eddie do?”

Stan nodded. He remembers.

“Okay, that’s good. You’re going to do that, okay?”

Stan did it. He breathed. Richie was rubbing circles into Stan’s thighs with his thumbs. It was warm, it didn’t burn.

Stan breathed for several moments as his lungs slowly filled with oxygen, and he slowly tip-toed back into lucidity. (The red LED lights on Stan’s watch had said that it had been twelve minutes).

“Okay, you’re okay Stan. You good?” Richie moved his head to catch Stan’s eyes, which were flickering around the room to take in his surroundings. Stan’s eyes stood to a halt when he saw Richie, crouched in front of him with hands gently rubbing his thighs. He just nodded, he wasn’t sure he could trust his voice.

“Do you want me to bring you home?” Richie’s voice was soft, Stan didn’t like it. He shook his head. “Okay, do you want me to make the bed in the spare room?” Stan shook his head again.

Richie sighed and took Stan’s wrists into the palm of his hands. “What do you need me to do? I’m not good at this shit, Stan. I need you to tell me what you need.”

Stan stared blankly at Richie for several moments. The words escaped his mouth without permission. “Brush your hair, please.”

Stan’s voice was so brittle that Richie had almost missed it, but he didn’t. Just because his sight is gone to shit doesn’t mean his hearing is. He nodded and patted the pad of his pointer finger softly against Stan’s hand. “Okay.”
He left Stan. Stan was exhausted now, but mostly he was embarrassed. He hadn’t had an attack like that in years, he had almost ruled out the possibility of having one ever again. He was such a nuisance, Richie had invited him over to help and he just ended up causing a scene over what? His hair? Stan put his head in his hands and groaned. He felt like he was eight all over again, crying and sobbing over his peas touching his carrots. The tone Richie had used, he was so soft and gentle, as if Stan would just shatter under his tongue, and Stan loathed it. He wasn’t fragile or weak, he had been brought up for so long being treated like a porcelain doll by his family, he didn’t need his friends treating him like that too.

Stan always appreciated Richie for that reason, he never went easy on Stan. When Stan was struggling with his faith, Richie went even harder with the ‘jew-jokes’. When Stan had failed his first ever class (physics), Richie poked and prodded at his intellect with jokes. Stan had told him to fuck off the majority of the time, but the contrast Richie gave to everyone else’s reaction was like nicotine. Stan needed Richie’s bite when everyone else was cooing him. Richie always took it too far, and sure - sometimes it annoyed Stan, and sometimes Richie’s jokes actually hurt people’s feelings. But Stan appreciated that Richie wasn’t worried about treating people softly. He wasn’t afraid of crossing boundaries, he tackled boundaries to the ground and spat in its mouth.

Stan heard the soft padded footsteps of Richie coming down the hall, and not shortly after did Richie appear in front of him with - *holy hell.*

“Is that better?” Richie asked, modelling his hair.

Stan, uncharacteristically - burst out laughing. He laughed so hard his sides ached and his throat was raw. Richie stood, not knowing whether to be deeply concerned because his friend may have just lost his mind, or to be overjoyed that Stan is laughing at something he’s done. Richie’s contradicting emotions were plastered on his face and that only made Stan laugh harder. “You - you look like you stuck your f-finger in a fucking electrical socket.”

Stan was entirely correct, Richie’s hair had gone frizzy after it had been brushed, it stuck out in hundreds of directions, it looked as though his hair was trying to get as far away from Richie as it possibly could while still being attached.

Richie tilted his head at him. “Isn’t that what you’re meant to do?”

Stan’s laughter broke into sharp broken squeals as his vocal cords began to fail. Richie laughed with him, but not nearly as much.

It took a few moments for Stan to settle down, he was red-faced and had a dopey smile on his face that he couldn’t wipe off. Richie sat beside him, their shoulders brushing against each other anytime they fidgeted.
Richie turned his head to look at Stan, and the movement caught Stan’s eyes. Stan didn’t like the sad look on Richie’s face. He knew that this was going to be a thing. It didn’t need to be a thing. It’s happened before, it just so happened that it happened again.

“Stan, what were you thinking about?” Richie bit his lip, not just bit. Gnawed, like biting through his lip would make this conversation less painful.

Stan sat back into the sofa. Richie had shared his dirty laundry with him, so it’s only fair. “I just—your hair was so messy, Richie. I was tired and it was just too much—”

“No not that.” Richie waved his hand dismissively.

“Then what?”

“What were you thinking of when you jerked off earlier?”

Stan rolled his eyes, but a smile painted his entire face. “Thought about drowning you, watching the life leave your eyes.”

A smile danced dangerously across Richie’s lips. “Wow, didn’t take you as the kinky kind, Stan. Want to cut off my head and fuck my corpse?”

Stan got off the sofa. “I’m sleeping outside. Bye Richie.” He waved as he left the living room, making a motion for the front door, waiting for Richie’s reaction. He didn’t get one he was expecting.

Richie grabbed Stan’s arm and pulled him into a hug. It was painful as Richie had twisted his arm in the process, but it was tight. Richie held onto Stan’s form so tight, Stan wondered if Richie thought he would try to wriggle out. He didn’t. He let Richie hold him, and he ran his fingers through Richie’s combed hair.

“What is it, Richie?” Stan spoke softly.

Richie’s head moved into Stan’s hands. “I haven’t seen that happen in so long, it freaked me out. I
“thought you were gonna explode or something.”

“I don’t think I would explode.”

“I thought you would, all because you can’t handle a bit of dirty underwear, you queer.”

Stan slapped Richie’s head. “You’re not one to be calling people queer, Richard.”

Richie moved his mouth beside Stan’s ear. Stan’s entire body shuddered as he could feel Richie’s breath coast his earlobe. “Call me Richard again and see what happens, tiger.” Then Richie licked Stan’s entire ear and Stan pushed him off.

“You’re disgusting.” He used his pyjama shirt to clean his ear of Richie’s saliva. “I’m going to sleep, you better put a shirt on before coming to bed.”

“Why, can’t handle all of this?” Richie flexed. Nothing else flexed with him.

“I think Georgie has more muscles than you.” Richie huffed and retreated to the living room to get his t-shirt. Stan made his way back into Richie’s bedroom. Stan noticed that there was less junk on the floor that there was earlier.

Stan crawled into bed and shortly after he felt Richie flop ungracefully beside him. They both sat in silence to get some well-needed rest before work. Out of the corner of Stan’s eye, just before his heavy eyelids fell shut for the night, he noticed all the tacks on the Freddy Krueger poster were red.

Stan and Richie were fast asleep when Richie wrapped his arm around Stan’s waist, and Stan wriggled closer.
Sunday morning was cold this day in Derry. Much chillier it usually was, even at five in the morning. Frost licked the edge of Richie Tozier’s bedroom window as the sun continued to sleep below the horizon. Stan could feel the heavy sheet of cold nip at his exposed feet, as he stirs from his short slumber.

[05.32]

The red LED lights buzzed at Stan, calling for his attention. Stan’s eyes fluttered open, reading the time and reading it again hoping that he had read it wrong the first time. But no, he had read it right and it was time to get up and get ready for work.

Stan tried to keep his weary eyes open, which was proving more difficult that Stan was used to. Getting up at five was draining enough most mornings, but with a brutal concoction of few hours sleep and being mentally spent from the antics of last night - he was running on empty. As his body began to melt into the world of the waking, he felt a warmth on his back, a warmth which wrapped around his body like a circuit. He could feel the coldness lick at his face and he briefly considered staying in bed with this warmth a little longer. He felt something move around his stomach, softly tracing along his naval.

Stan knew deep down that Richie had began spooning Stan at some point during the night, but a part of him concluded that if he didn’t look behind him and didn’t have any visual proof, then he was blissfully unaware of who’s warm body was holding him.

Because apparently, watching Richie’s chewed-up fingers tracing circles into his stomach wasn’t proof enough. Stan watched - half paying attention, half looking just for the sake of looking - Richie’s fingers make lazy movements, it was almost ticklish, but the traces were so gentle that Stan could barely feel it. Stan, as gentle as a feather, lifted Richie’s arm off his stomach and delicately got out of bed.

He began tugging off the offensively bright pink pyjamas Richie had gave him and folded the night-shirt neatly on the bed. He began the search for one of Richie’s shirts to borrow for work - he
knew Richie wouldn’t mind - even though he’d probably not even notice it was gone in the first place. He began to search through Richie’s traumatising closet for a shirt but was stopped by the sound of Richie groaning ineligibility.

“All you awake?” Stan whispered.

Richie let out an animalistic noise while stretching from under the covers. “Yes. What time is it?”

“Just after half five. I need to get going, I’m borrowing a shirt.”

Richie made an affirmative grunt and turned back over. Stan eventually found a plain grey t-shirt hidden in the corner of the wardrobe, and he pulled it on. His arms were covered in goosebumps and he was shivering furiously. Stan quietly got ready and packed his things, he would have preferred to shower before he left, but he didn’t have time.

When he left Richie’s house, he had done so quietly and so swiftly, that when Richie turned back over to talk to him, he was gone. Richie felt the cold a little harsher then.

Stan was finishing up filling in delivery forms when Bill walked in, his hair was slightly windswept and he was making a beeline to the oven to warm his hands, which were burning red from the cold. He had knocked the temperature gauge slightly in his rush. He gave Stan a friendly greeting and the two conversed for a while about a new movie playing in the Aladdin next weekend.

“We should go see it.”

“Yeah.” Stan agreed. Not really making any intentions to see the new adaptation of the same recycled comedy movie that he had already seen seven times this year. No, he wasn’t a huge fan of comedy, he mentioned that to Bill.

“That’s fine, S-Stan. I’ll ask R-R-Richie instead. N-no point wasting money on a m-movie you don’t like.”

Stan nodded. He’d ask Richie. Bill and Richie have been best friends from kindergarten, it wasn’t really a surprise that Bill had Richie in mind. Stan found himself slightly irritated, and he didn’t exactly know why. There was a rage kindling in his stomach and he couldn’t put his finger on it. He shook it off and went back to work, filling oil into the fryers for Mike.

The next few hours weren’t overly eventful, Richie was late - as usual. Stan continued doing work,
he served coffee, he fixed a wobbly chair, he watched Beverly flirt with a flustered Ben. His day was normal, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary happened. Yet, Stan felt like vibrating in annoyance. There was something wrong and he couldn’t place it. He wanted to pull his hair out and slam his head into the wall, it’s bad enough being annoyed, but it’s a thousand times worse when you don’t know why the fuck you’re so wound up.

Apparently, Stan had a stormy face, according to Beverly, she had mentioned it while refilling the coffee beans. She popped her gum and it rang out like a bullet.

“No I don’t.”

“Yes you do, you look like someone pissed in your cornflakes.” She absent-mindedly rolled her earring between her finger. “What’s up? Sunday blues?”

“No, I just couldn’t find my yarmulke this morning.” Stan replied, not really giving much effort into the conversation.

“You misplaced it?”

“Yes.”


Stan was getting more and more pissed off. “Bev, drop it. I just lost it okay? I don’t see why it’s such a big deal.”

Beverly’s smile fell from her face and twisted into a look of concern. She stopped what she was doing and looked around briefly before opening her mouth. “Are you okay? You’ve been weird all morning, Bill’s noticed it too.”

Stan rubbed his eyes, of course Bill noticed it. Normally Bill wouldn’t notice if a car had smashed into his bedroom and broke his neck, but of course he noticed Stan was slightly irritated today. Stan could hear the sound of Beverly chewing her gum in his stomach, it was driving him crazy. He curled his fists into a ball to compose himself. “I didn’t sleep well last night.” His tone was short and he intended it to be the end of the conversation, and thankfully Beverly had picked that up.
Beverly nodded solemnly, respecting his space and went to serve a customer who had taken a seat at the bar. If Stan were a smoker, he would have needed a cigarette. But he doesn’t smoke, so he made a beeline for the back door and sat in the smoking area, he held his face in his hands as his leg bounced up and down.

There were cigarette butts scattered haphazardly on the ground, and looking at them - some of which had rings of red or pink around the lip made Stan want to kick them out of his view. The longer he stared at them, the more irrationally irritated he became, until the thought - which by all logic, should have been his first thought when he woke up, but for some reason, it wasn’t - hit him.

He hadn’t taken his medication this morning.

Stan’s heart dropped in panic. He hadn’t missed a pill since the day they were prescribed to him by a grim-looking man in a grim-looking office. He took one with a cup of coffee and two slices of lightly buttered toast every morning, for the past half a dozen years or so. Stan’s head filled with images of Bill’s windswept hair, the oven temperature which had been knocked to 191, Beverly loudly popping gum, some of it had stuck to her lip and stayed there. Ben had his name tag upside down, Eddie’s pill box rattled in his fanny pack every time he moved.

Stan didn’t think he was going to have another attack, but he didn’t even want to chance it - after all - he had thought that last night, too. So he sat there, in the cold, the icy wind cutting into his skin as he breathed.

In, 1…..2…..3
Out, 1….2….3

Rinse and repeat until you no longer want to rip your own eyeballs out. And it was in the middle of these breathing exercises that he had been ripped out of his own head by a loud crash and an unceremonious “Fucking hell, well that hurt.”

Stan wanted Richie over here. He didn’t know why, but he did. Richie calmed him last night, he can calm him now. Even though he most definitely doesn’t need Richie Tozier’s help, he would just prefer it than being alone in the cold.

“Richie,” Stan called over, forcing his voice to sound as flat as possible.

Richie popped his head round the corner, his elbow was bleeding and he had leaves stuck to the side of his face. “Hey, how was the walk of shame?”
Stan didn’t know what to say, he hadn’t really planned out a conversation. He just wanted Richie to sit with him for a while.

Richie picked a leaf off his face and watched it as it was picked up by the wind. “Hey, nice shirt. I practically own you now if you’re wearing my clothes, Staniel.”

Stan sat back into the chair, bringing his knees together to appear more composed. “You’ll get it back tomorrow.”

Richie pulled a cigarette out of the box from his pocket and his face lit up, as if Stan had reminded him of something. “Oh yeah, here,” Richie rummaged in his backpack and pulled out Stan’s shirt from last night. “Washed and everything for you.”

Stan looked at him dubiously. Washed and dried in a matter of hours? In this weather. He was doubtful, but nonetheless, he took the shirt off the boy. It smelt like Richie had smelt last night.

“Did you spray cologne on it?” Stan held it up to his nose, the smell of smoke was gone, at least. He hoped that it was gone from his hair as well.

Richie shook his head as he lit the cigarette, it took multiple tries with the wind snuffing out the flame. “No, why?”

“It smells like…” You. “Cologne, or something. Smell it.”

Richie walked forward a few steps and pushed his face onto the fabric. “Oh no, that’s Febreze.”

Stan blinked at him. “You...Febrezed yourself? Last night, you Febrezed yourself?”

Richie shrugged. “Times are tough, we’re going through a recession and the polar bears are dying.”

Stan folded his shirt into his lap. “We’re not in a recession.”
Richie looked around as breathed smoke out of his nose, not seeming to care he was hours late for work. Stan didn’t particularly care either.

“What are you doing out here anyway? It’s fucking freezing and you’re walking around in a t-shirt like you’re David Hasselhoff or some shit.”

Stan shrugged and squinted up at Richie, the low winter sun was harsh on his eyes. “I’m just not feeling too great. Just needed some fresh air.”

Richie gulped and looked at his cigarette, choosing to continue the last few drags before adding it to the collection of butts on the ground. “Well, my good fellow! Doctor Tozier on the case! I think our little pippins needs some urgent attention.” Richie’s terrible English impression almost made Stan laugh at how bad it was. “I think I might have just the thing to fix up our young patient!”

Richie pulled a familiar rattling tube from his bag and threw it into Stan’s lap. Stan stared at it for a few fleeting seconds before touching it, just to make sure that it was real. It was as if Richie read his mind.

Stan immediately popped the lid and took one of the small, blue pills. He usually found himself staring at the tiny pill in his hand, wondering in awe how such a little thing could change his life, manipulate his emotions. Fix him, even. He dry swallowed the pill with ease and carefully placed the bottle into his folded shirt.

“Did you break into my house to bring me my pills?” Stan was… well, he didn’t know what. He was happy that Richie would do that, but he was embarrassed that Richie felt the need to. He felt warm, incredibly grateful that Richie even thought about his medication, nevermind cycling ten minutes in the opposite direction to get them.

Richie’s coke-bottled eyes stared back at him. “It’s not technically breaking in.”

“Technically?”

“Your bedroom window was unlocked.”

“My room’s on the second floor.”

“I’m used to climbing into your Mom’s room so I scuttled up with ease.”
Stan stroked the collar of the shirt in his arms. Staring at Richie in silence for a moment, Richie waiting for a reaction that wasn’t going to come. Stan decided he should go back to work, he felt better now. He walked towards the back door, but stopped to give Richie’s shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Thanks Richie, I actually really needed them today.”

Stan went to lift his hand, but it was stopped by Richie’s own hand squeezing his. Richie opened his mouth to say something, but no words came. Stan’s hand was released and he walked towards the back door.

“Your yogini is still at mine, I’ll bring it over to the Synagogue after work.” Richie called, before the door closed behind Stan.

“You know it’s a yarmulke.” He replied, not knowing if Richie would hear it or not.

Stan felt a little lighter on his feet.

It was almost 3 pm - which meant that it was almost time for Stan to go home. Stan couldn’t wait - Richie had been particularly annoying today, following Stan around - untying his apron, “accidentally” getting maple syrup over his clothes, popping gum loudly and angrily at him after Stan mentioned that his breath stank. In fact, Richie had almost exclusively bothered Stan today - with the exclusion of pouring a cup of water down Eddie’s goloshes. (Eddie walked to the store to buy new socks). And now, Richie had dramatically fallen over his shoelace -which Stan had mentioned to him multiple times, was untied - and sent two dozen eggs spiralling towards the ground, because he was too busy pulling silly faces at Stan to look where he was going.

“Richie, for fuck’s sake.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“You were holding it, and you tripped over your shoelace.”
“It is your responsibility as Supervisor to ensure we are all working in a safe work environment - and you failed, Stan.”

Stan folded his arms amongst an entire pallet of cracked eggs. The yolks were staining Richie’s pristine white sneakers - serves him right.

“The only thing I failed in was not killing you when I had the chance.”

“And Physics,” Riche noted.

“And Physics.”

Richie and Stan were having a stand-off. Neither of them believed that the puddle of egg on the floor was their fault, and neither were making a move to clean it. The egg began to creep into the cracks of the floor, where Stan knew that it would stay for years. They stood bickering for what might’ve been another ten minutes before Bill decided to intervene.

“H-hey, it’s okay. Me and R-R-Richie will clean it up. Stan, j-just get us the mop will you?” Bill slid into the conversation smoothly, like satin slipping off the skin. He put his hand on Richie’s shoulder and squeezed when Richie went to retort. It was as if Bill had complete control over Richie, like a ventriloquist and his puppet. Stan’s eyes caught the quick glance the two made to each other - and the small, almost undetectable lifting of the corner of Bill’s mouth. Bill ushered Richie to his knees and they began to lift eggshells with an unspoken routine. Their hands accidentally brushed against each other, Richie moved his hands away like a shot had been fired, Bill didn’t appear to notice, and if he had - he didn’t seem to care.

Stan left quickly, shoes almost skidding in the eggs as he went to the cleaning cupboard to get the mop. He closed the door behind him as he struggled to look for a mop head that wasn’t falling to pieces. He filled a steel bucket with optimistically lukewarm water and began to search for disinfectant - it was raw egg after all. He was pushed off into the closet while Bill and Richie got to be out in the open, laughing and having that unique bond that Stan never got to have. Sure, he and Richie were close, but it wasn’t a proper friendship. He wouldn’t make plans with Richie alone or ring him when he needs help like he can with Bill or Eddie. He then wondered, with pain in his heart, if his friends thought of him that way too?

Sure they’d ring him for homework help, they used to ring Richie until Richie began purposely giving everyone the wrong answers. Stan felt pretty lonely then, realising that he could never be the go-to-friend like Bill was for him. Even though he considered Bill his best friend, he knew it wasn’t mutual and Stan wasn’t going to lie, it kind of hurt. In fact, Richie and Bill were probably
mutual best friends - if that was all they were. Stan’s face twists as he thinks about Bill and Richie’s “Non-Virgins Only” sleepovers, as they had been dubbed, which was almost laughably appropriately now. It doesn’t particularly make Stan want to laugh, though.

Stan tried his best to banish the thought from his head as he left the closet. Stan didn’t think that they were dating, no - he knew Bill wasn’t the type of person to be into boys. Stan wondered, well what type of person is then? He returned to Bill and Richie whispering to each other, faces so close and so relaxed that for a split world-shocking moment Stan thought they were kissing. Richie caught his eyes and immediately the whispers capsized into a particularly violent coughing fit, inches from Bill’s face. This made Bill scuttle back and kick Richie out of his breathing space.

“D-dude! Yuh-you coughed in my fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-“

“Face?” Stan interjected.

“I w-was going to say ‘fucking face’ b-but thanks.”

Richie continues to cough his guts out in the corner. Stan watches hopefully.

“Any more stutters and I think you would’ve technically been beatboxing,” Stan commented as Bill went over to give Richie a hard wallop on the back.

Richie jumped up to his feet almost immediately and yowled. “Holy fuck Bill, what fucking steroids have you been taking. I think you knocked out at least six vertebrae.”

Stan began mopping up the remaining spillage as Bill laughed at Richie. His ears perked up when he heard them talking in a slightly lowered voice, indicating that Stan wasn’t part of this conversation. He listened in anyways.

“Do you want to come see that new movie with me?” Bill asked.

“A date? Sounds good, bring the condoms - I left all mine in your mom’s room, so…” Bill laughed after elbowing Richie in the side. Stan tried not to notice how relaxed and natural their connection was.

When he was with Richie he wasn’t relaxed, he was always on guard for a stupid joke or jab or for
Richie to take his yarmulke and play frisbee with it. He couldn’t talk about any stupid thing with Richie, they didn’t have that much in common and sometimes it was almost a chore trying to hold a long conversation as it trailed off into an awkward silence, where even Richie would be sitting twiddling his thumbs. Stan clenched his jaw as he heard Richie and Bill bantering in the background.

*Ten more minutes.*

Stan was mopping particularly violently at a particular spot on the floor when Richie commented, “Damn, if that’s the way you work a mop - I’d love to see you work a pole.” The comment lacked the usual bite Richie’s jeering comments usually had, Stan chose not to respond, just shooting him a dirty look as he continued working. He noticed that Bill was gone, probably away to talk to Beverly.

“Playing hard to get?” Richie clicked his tongue, “But honey, you’re already falling for me - you’re wearing my clothes and everything.”

Stan flicked the mop at Richie, sending droplets of dirty water at him.

“Hey! You’re making me wet!”

“Funny, I didn’t hear your mother complaining about that last night.” Stan’s face of forced confusion added to his delivery, and Richie lost it.

He roared and laughed and wiped away fake tears, fist-pumping the air with a shout of triumph, “Stan the man gets off on a good one!” He brought Stan into a bone-crushing hug and jumped up and down. “The operation was a success! The stick from your rectal cavity has been removed!”

Richie leaned into Stan’s ear and delicately pushed a curl behind Stan’s ear. Richie’s hands felt almost like an extension of himself with the ease and softness of his touch. “Want me to insert it again?” He repeated the action from the night before of leaving a slobbery trail along Stan’s ear - and like before, Stan shoved him away and wiped his ear furiously.

“No funny, Richie.” Stan was trying not to laugh, not because it was funny, but because Richie was lying against the counter, crippled over in laughter which began to sound more like desperate wailing than laughs.
Stan couldn’t explain why he felt happier when Richie laughed like that, or why his heart suddenly felt like it had caught a fever, but he felt too content to worry too much about it.
Stan waited patiently outside the Synagogue for his friends. It was early evening and the sky was greying with the night. Temple was over and he was standing outside the backdoor, bike leaning against him as he waited for his friends, like he did every Sunday. He had pulled an oversized grey jumper that his Gran had knitted for him last Hanukkah over his dress-clothes he wore to temple. His Father never liked him going out in them, but he hadn’t got them dirty yet so Stan didn’t really see an issue.

He wasn’t impatient, Stan just waited - looking up at the stars and trying to recall as many constellations as he could, wondering what it would be like to see the Earth from that distance. He could hear the familiar sounds of laughter and talking begin to float in from the distance, he climbed onto his bike so he could join the army of his friends without making them stop.

Bill was leading, shouting something to Mike who was to his right, who was laughing and looking at Eddie, who was scowling at both of them and pedalling with such force that Stan was afraid he might go over the handlebars. His eyes caught Richie’s who waved furiously at him, before wobbling and almost knocking over Ben, who had Beverly sitting on his handlebars.

Richie fixed his glasses before shouting something at Ben, who went bright red - it made Bev give Richie the finger. Stan didn’t really want to know what Richie had said, but it was more than likely a dig about Ben’s crush on Beverly. Stan kicked his bike stand up before slowly pedalling to join the mass of bikes which were throwing greetings to him as they passed by.

Stan joined at the end, keeping his distance from Richie who appeared to think he was playing bumper cars, trying to swerve into people. He swerved into Bill and Bill pushed him away, causing Richie to cycle face-first into a tree. Everyone laughed at him while he rubbed his nose and gave Bill the finger. Stan laughed a bit harder than he probably should have, Richie gave him the finger too. Richie jumped back on his bike and rode beside Stan, pulling faces at him every chance he could.

They slowed down as they turned into the almost hidden entrance to the quarry, going slowly to avoid crashing into trees or hedges, they were basically walking through a forest after all. The dirt was skittering up onto Eddie’s brand new jeans - which he proceeded to complain about for what
seemed like hours.

“Eddie, I’m nuh-not carrying you again,” Bill announced, making Eddie’s face go red as he sped up and stomped down the hill.

They all reminisced over Bill carrying Eddie through the quarry. It was last year, when Eddie broke his arm and he was in a bulky cast. His shoes were slipping on the ice and after almost falling about six times, Bill had rolled his eyes and lifted Eddie over his shoulder. Eddie garbled out a string of swears and begged to be put down, Bill ignored his requests and held his legs to stop him kicking. When Bill had put Eddie down at their previously favourite spot beside the river, Eddie’s face was beetroot red and he was repeatedly telling Richie to fuck off every time Richie opened his mouth.

They walked their bikes to their usual clearing and let them drop to the ground. Stan kicked his stand up and stood his bike up, because he wasn’t a monster. This clearing had become their new usual spot, it was overlooking the river and was so densely packed with trees and wild bushes, that it was almost impossible to see into it from the outside. Bev had stumbled across it one day while taking a stroll with Ben, it had been since christened, ‘The Marsh’, which Ben had suggested, since Beverly was the one who found it. The only visible opening was between two aging oak trees, which led to a cliff which looked over a particularly deep part of the river. The ‘cliff’ was maybe only ten feet tall, but it was tall enough to dive off in the summer. Every summer Bill would carve away at the dirt to try to make a ladder to climb back up and every summer it wouldn’t work and whoever took the chance with Bill’s landscaping skills would fall back into the water.

Bill began discussing with Mike whether they should light the fire pit, Mike had said it was cold, so yeah - but it would be difficult to find dry enough wood in this weather. Mike unfolded the picnic blanket he always brought from the basket in his bike and laid it beside the soon to be blazing fire pit.

Stan and Eddie made a beeline for the blanket and sat down, neither wanting to sit on the dirty ground. Bev and Richie were standing by the oak trees, lighting up a pair of cigarettes and arguing about something or other. Probably movies, Richie had been on a Die Hard craze, and Beverly always argued that it wasn’t a Christmas movie. Richie always argued back, ‘ Yes it is! It’s set at Christmas, therefore it’s a Christmas movie, Bev!’

Stan didn’t think it was a Christmas movie, but he’d never seen it so he refused to get involved, no matter how many times Beverly asked him to back her up.

He thinks he sees Bill and Mike creeping off out of the Marsh over the hedge that Richie had accidentally cycled into a few weeks ago, which had ended up being the easiest point of entry and exit. Probably to get wood for the fire, Mike was brilliant at all the outdoors stuff, Stan was too, since he was in the boy scouts - but that didn’t mean he liked it, so he always sat back while Bill followed Mike’s instructions.
Even with his jumper on, it was pretty cold. He probably should’ve brought a scarf like Eddie had. But then again, Eddie was bundled up, looking like he was going off on an Antarctic expedition. Stan can hardly fault Eddie, considering he was sitting tying his shoelace with ease while Stan’s teeth were almost clattering from the cold. He gave a quick glance over to Richie, who was wearing shorts and a long sleeved-shirt with a dog eating an apple on it. He doubted Richie even sensed the cold at all.

Ben was showing Eddie his mixtapes, Eddie was carefully scanning each and every song title and commenting on them. Stan was vaguely paying attention too, but this wasn’t really his style of music so he didn’t have much of an opinion on the songs Ben had picked for Beverly’s mixtape but he nodded and told Ben they looked great anyway. Eddie was interrupted from talking to Ben about Duran Duran by Richie shouting for him.

“Hey, Eddie, get over here I have something really cool to show you!”

“Richie, I swear to God if you show me your belly button lint again I will end you.”

Richie scoffed, “No, I swear! Come here quick, before it’s gone.”

“If it’s a bug I’m not coming over.”

“No, it’s my boner, Eddie, come give it a tickle!”

Eddie sighed a swear under his breath and got up, moving around Bill and Mike who had just re-entered the Marsh with hands full of almost-dry moss and sticks. Mike moved with Bill to set up the fire, Beverly offering them her lighter. Stan watched as Mike’s expert hands crafted a bed of moss, building the sticks on top of it, like a Native American teepee sitting on a hill.

“Richie, what the fuck, get off!” Eddie screeched, causing everyone’s heads to snap to the scene of Richie trying to push Eddie into the river, while Eddie was clawing at Richie’s arms and grabbing onto his shirt to stop himself falling.

“Richie, s-stop, it’s c-cold out.” Bill had scolded, but his face looked anything but scolding. He was stifling a laugh and tried to hide his face from Eddie, who was looking around in panic, eyes pleading for help.

Richie laughs around his cigarette as he managed to release himself from Eddie’s grip and Eddie let out an animalistic yell before plummeting into the water. Bill sighed as he tenderly tried to inch
his way down into the river to give Eddie a hand up.

“Richie, he’s guh-guh-gonna kill you.”

“You can only hope, young one.” Richie’s eyes fell on Stan, who was sitting on his own as Ben and Mike went to get more sticks for the fire, which now was needed to be burning bright and hot to stop Eddie getting hypothermia. Richie marched over, flicking his half-smoked cigarette off to the side before lying beside Stan, so close that his only slightly knotted hair had splayed out on his neatly ironed black slacks.

“Did you see that?”

Stan looked down to Richie, who was looking up at him, waiting for an answer. “You throwing Eddie into a freezing cold river? Yes, Richie, I saw. We all saw and we all agree that you’re a dick.”

“Hey! That’s not true, right Bev?”

Bev shook her head, “It was kind of a dick move.”

“Well, Bill thought it was funny. He’s the kind of friend I need in my life, someone who will encourage me, not berate me for my personality. I can’t help it if I’m a dick! It’s who I am, and you, as my friends, should accept that.”

Stan rolled his eyes as he softly gave Richie a slap to the head. “I don’t think we need to accept bullying someone the size of an eight-year-old as part of a personality quirk.”

Richie scoffed, “He was asking for it.”

“By doing what? Sitting quietly and minding his own business?”

“Exactly!”

Stan scoffed in response, his eyes caught a soaking wet Eddie being lead through the bushes back into the Marsh by Bill, Mike and Ben. He looked as if he was being walked to his deathbed by three reapers, his lips were almost blue and he was shaking profusely.
Stan ushered himself away from the fire, making a space for Eddie, who sat beside him with a *plop*. Eddie was soaking the blanket, not that anyone really took notice. Water dripped off his eyelashes and fell down his face, he shook his hair with his hands to dry to dislodge as much water as he could.

“Richie you’re a fucking asshole.”

“Awww, Eddie don’t be so grumpy. You know you love me.”

“No. Fuck off, I’m mad at you. I’m gonna catch hypothermia and die and it will be all your fault.”

“You know, sitting in wet clothes is gonna make you sicker.” Eddie’s face paled, “You should probably strip.”

“Richie leave him alone, you’re freaking him out! Look at his face, he looks like he’s about to faint.” Beverly began petting over Eddie, trying to reassure him that he wasn’t going to get sick.

“Actually, Richie’s kind of right.” Stan piped up, Beverly shot him a glare, as if he was lying. “You should probably get into some dry clothes, the wet ones will just make you colder.”

Eddie nodded, knowing Stan wouldn’t lie, taking off his scarf, which had appeared to double in weight by the sound it made when he dropped it onto a rock beside him. Beverly helped him unbutton his giant coat, his fingers were shaking too much to even try to do it himself.

It wasn’t long before he had began to pull off his t-shirt, which was hidden under four other layers of clothing. Bill had shrugged off his flannel shirt from underneath his jacket and gave it to Bev, who helped Eddie button it up. Mike donated his denim jacket, and much to Eddie’s mortification, Bev had slipped off the leggings she was wearing under her skirt and let Eddie wrangle his wet legs into the skin-hugging fabric.

Richie had donated his glasses, since he was already wearing the bare minimum. Eddie smacked his glasses out of his hands and no one helped Richie look for them. It took him five minutes and they were covered in mud.

After about ten minutes of everyone fussing over Eddie, colour began to flow back into his cheeks and he stopped shivering. It wasn’t long before he was back to the world of the living. Bill was still fretting over him, acting like a mother hen.
“Richie, did you b-b-bring cocoa or tea or a-anything in your thermo today?” Bill asked while Richie was rubbing the dirt off his glasses with the apple on his shirt. Stan winced at the sight of a giant smudge of mud spread on his previously clean shirt.

“Nah, we had nothing in the house today, sorry kid.”

“Wait, so you didn’t bring anything?!” Eddie complained, glaring at Richie.

“You always bring the fuh-fuh-food on a Sunday, Ruh-Richie.”

Richie raised his hands defensively after sliding his mostly clean glasses onto his face, “All I had in the fridge was butter and raw onions, so if you all want to go back to mine and raid the luxuries of the Tozier refrigerator, then be my guest.”

Bill sighed, exchanging a look of disappointment with Eddie before digging into his pocket and procuring a crumpled $5 bill. “Here, go and buh-buy something, h-hot if you can. Bring Stuh-Stan.”

Stan nodded as he glanced at his watch, “It’s late, I should probably get going now anyway.”

Bill shrugged, with a small grin playing on his face. “It’s late, who know what kuh-kuh-kind of trouble Richie cuh-could get into? You should go with h-him to the store at least.”

Stan’s face deadpanned. “So I’m babysitting Richie? Because I don’t do that enough at work?”

Richie jumped up and took the crumpled note from Bill’s hand and began pulling at Stan’s arm, “C’mon, Dad told us to go, Stan, get off your ass.”

Stan gave Bill a look that could kill, before getting up and giving Richie a small shove towards their bikes. Bill just smiled back at Stan, “Th-thanks guys! See you at school, Stan.”

Stan waved his hands in farewell to his friends, some he would see tomorrow morning in school, some he wouldn’t see until tomorrow evening, at the same location.
Stan walked his bike out of the dense trees and back onto the suburban roads of Derry town, Richie talking excitedly in his ear about what he was going to buy.

“You’re not going to get a pineapple upside-down cake at eight o’clock on a Sunday night, Richie. Everywhere is closed.”

Richie frowned as he pedalled down the main street, “So we’re gonna have to go to the twenty-four hour?” He scrunched his face up. “That place sucks though, the owner is such a creep - did you know he made a pass on Beverly last week?”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah, right - we were cutting class - don’t give me that look it was only Bio - anyway, we were cutting class and we went to buy some smokes -”

Richie began retelling the tale, right up until their bikes skidded to a halt outside said creepy-man’s store, Richie hopped off to walk in, looking back when he realized Stan hadn’t shifted.

“I’m not going in.”

“He’s not gonna make a pass on you. Don’t flatter yourself.”

Stan shook his head. “Not happening.”

Richie rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically as he marched into the store. He came out barely two minutes later with a paper bag full of sugary snacks, probably. Richie tossed the bag into the basket in the front of Stan’s bike and lifted his own bike from the pavement.

Stan was just about to cycle off before Richie’s voice made him halt. “Shit, I still have your Yogi Bear at my house. I just looked at the empty space on the back of your head and realised I forgot to bring it to you before temple or whatever you call it.”

“You’re not even trying to get it right, are you?”

“Nope. We’ll go get it on the way there.”
Stan shrugged, “Okay, as long as it doesn’t take you an hour to find it, Mom’s pretty annoyed at me for not coming home last night.”

Richie stuck his tongue out and began pedalling down the orange-lit roads. Trees seemed to fly past as they pedalled down to Richie’s house, which wasn’t that much of a diversion - it was maybe an extra five minutes onto their journey.

It wasn’t long until Stan was stood inside Richie’s bedroom while Richie looked through the drawer in his bedside locker.

Richie’s room was actually clean. Like, not just tidy, but clean. His mirror had even been polished. Stan stood in awe as he inspected the floor, that he could see! All of Richie’s comics had been neatly stacked on his desk, and his trashcan had been emptied and his closet, oh his closet was closed. It wasn’t spilling out clothes, you could actually close the door. Richie noticed Stan looking around the room in awe.

“Yeah, Eddie offered to clean it.”

“Offered?” Stan was doubtful.

“In exchange for a blowjob. You’d be surprised what people would do for one from me, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Do you want to find out, then?” Richie winked at Stan, fluttering his eyelashes from behind his glasses.

“Have you found it yet?” Stan sighed.

Richie nodded and threw the round hat at Stan, who caught it in one hand. “Yeah, I was gonna use it as a frisbee, but I thought it would work better as a jerk-off sock.”

“Shut the fuck up. Does your Mom have hairpins? Dad already thinks I’ve lost this, so if I came home without it again he’d probably lecture me on the importance of keeping track of my belongings.”
“Oh, Mom loved the cake, by the way. She ate nearly half of it on her own today.” Richie smiled, “She went to the liquor store and only brought home one case of beer, so it must’ve been out of this world.” Richie ruffled Stan’s hair in thanks, and Stan batted his hand away out of habit, but he was smiling.

“Hairpins?”

Richie nodded enthusiastically, “I will fetch them for you, my dearest master. Do not strain yourself! I will rub your feet for you too.” Richie bounced off out of the room and into what Stan assumed, was his mother’s room.

Stan sat on the bed and waited for Richie to return, softly tracing the edge of his yarmulke as he looked around the room. He had spent quite a lot of time in Richie’s room this weekend, it was starting to feel familiar, like he was meant to be here. Stan felt comfortable in Richie’s room, even comfortable talking to Richie himself. The conversation didn’t feel forced tonight, it was light, topics flowed easily and swiftly through their words and Stan felt pretty happy listening to Richie’s stories tonight.

Richie came parading through the door, carrying a palm-sized silver tin, which rattled when he walked. “What did you think of that voice? It’s a new one I’m trying out, so be kind.”

Stan took the tray off Richie in a nod of thanks and opened it to a dozen or so bobby pins. “It’s definitely not your best, but it has potential, especially for Bill.”

“Yeah, for when Bill’s being super bossy,” Richie started attempting to imitate Bill, “D-do that Richie, do this. Don’t puh-pull my pants down again! Puh-please stop being so hot, you’re muh-making me develop a fuh-fever.”

Stan snorted as he placed a triad of pins into his mouth, as he set upon beginning to pin the yarmulke into this hair. “That wasn’t very good.” He commented out of the side of his mouth.

Richie didn’t respond, he was too busy staring at the bobby pins which were delicately placed between Stan’s lips. He was probably grossed out that Stan had put them in his mouth, but it wasn’t technically in his mouth, Stan was just holding them with his lips.

Stan sat in concentration as he attempted to open the pins enough to slide it into his hair, but it was near impossible. It kept slipping out of his thumb just as he was about to clip it in, he let out a sound of frustration, which made Richie jump.
“Jesus Christ, chill out. Here, I’ll put it in there’s no need to turn into the Terminator.”

Richie took the bobby pins out of Stan’s mouth a little forcefully, accidentally brushing his hand against his lips. He stood up and told Stan to spin around on the bed, so his back was facing Richie.

Richie pinned Stan’s yarmulke into his curls, only stabbing him in the scalp once or twice. Stan couldn’t see how it looked, but it felt like it was in the right place, so he didn’t comment. Besides, he’d be taking it off in less than an hour when he would be going to bed, so it didn’t really matter if it was perfect.

Stan could feel the yarmulke pinned securely on the back of his head, yet he could still feel Richie’s fingers going through his curls and fiddling with certain strands of hair. Perhaps he was fixing Stan’s hair. So Stan stayed put for another few minutes, while Richie played with Stan’s hair in an almost trance-like fashion before they both agreed it was time to move out.

Out of the corner of Stan’s eye when he was leaving the house, following Richie, he noticed his half-eaten cake on the kitchen counter. He smiled to himself and left the house, the cold wind biting his face as he walked towards his bike.

“I’ll walk you home.”

Stan looked at him quizzically. “Why?”

Richie looked offended, “Because I’m a gentleman, Stan.”

Stan had no real reason to retort, it was Richie’s own time he was wasting, so he murmured a soft ‘Okay’ and began cycling home.

They were laughing at a story Richie was telling about Bill falling flat on his face in Gym the other week, blood pouring out of his nose as he swore at the ground. Stan was glad Richie didn’t try to swerve into him because he doubted that he would be able to steer away in time to avoid a collision.

They talked and laughed together underneath the orange glow of the mostly functioning streetlights, hair being thrown backwards by the cool wind. Stan could feel the wind penetrate the small holes in between each stitch of his jumper. It felt refreshing.
Stan pulled up at his house five minutes later, and gave Richie the bag of food from his basket, wondering how he was going to cycle back to the Marsh one-handed. He parked his Bike by the letterbox and made his way to the front door, the porch light had made Stan almost glow through Richie’s glasses and just as Stan had begun to turn the door handle, Richie had yelled out, without really meaning to.

“Stan!”

Stan blinked, head shooting back to Richie. “What?”

Richie looked like a fish out of water, mouth opening and closing and eyes wide. Stan wondered why he would shout if he had nothing to say. But he did, Richie in fact, had a lot to say, he just wasn’t sure how to put them into words, so he did the best that he could.

“You’re my best friend.” Richie scrunched his eyes up as soon as he said it. That was the best that he could do.

Stan blinked. Feeling doubt ripple in his stomach. “No, I thought Bill was your best friend.”

“Well, he is but… you’re my best-best friend. Like if I had to rank all of you, which I do every time someone crosses me - just to let you know, for the next time you don’t laugh at my jokes - you’d be number one. Bill would be number two, Beverly was number three, but after that dirty look earlier, she’s being demoted to number four so… congrats to Mike, I guess.”

Stan let his hand fall off the front door and he stood on his porch, looking at Richie. “What led you to that… conclusion?”

Richie’s face fell, he tried to hide it but Stan noticed it, “I mean, it’s cool if I’m not in your top three, that’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

Stan brushed a stray curl out of his eyes, “No, I just mean, why?”

Richie tilted his head in confusion, “Why?”

“Yeah.”
Richie leaned back on his bike and took a deep breath and let a long whistle out, “Well, if you want me to list everything you’ve ever done or said that bumped you up that list I *can*. But it would take like fuckin’ twenty years and it’s a school night so…”

Stan nodded, a lump was in his throat and he couldn’t quite make it go away.

“But uh… I guess it’s just as simple as you’re a pretty cool guy. Well not *cool*. Definitely not *cool*. But, you’re a good friend and I like you. I like you being my friend. Because we’re friends.”

Stan couldn’t help the smile that snuck up onto his face, and he couldn’t quite help the bubbling feeling in his stomach. “Yeah, I think you’re my best friend too.”

Richie coughed and hid a small smile. “Good.”

They stayed like that for a few moments longer, Stan almost feeling dizzy and Richie awkwardly scuffing his shoes against the pavement, swatting at mosquitos every time the tried to invade his personal space.

Stan couldn’t quite feel the cold as harsh as he could earlier and he began wishing he didn’t have to come home. He has a best friend, which is a pretty new development in his life, which is probably why his stomach feels so strange. It felt the same way it had when he had his first kiss with Lucy Braxton, which Stan supposed meant he was *really* happy to have proper best friend.

“Well um…” Richie had started, holding the paper bag tight on his lap, he must’ve really wanted to keep that food safe, Stan didn’t think he needed to hold it that tight. “The sexual tension here is too much…. so, if you want a booty call you know where I’ll be.”

Richie waved with one hand, as he fumbled his way down the street, swaying dangerously and almost knocking over the neighbour’s trash cans. Stan waved back, before quickly moving through the house and up to his perfectly kept bedroom.

When he got into bed, all he could think about was Richie.

But, to the embarrassment of Stan the next morning, it seemed that Richie stayed on his mind all
night, even in his dreams.
“Fuck...Richie,” Stan moaned into the darkness, it was pitch black and Stan couldn’t see a thing, he couldn’t see Richie’s hands pawing at his erection or Richie’s mouth attacking his neck but he could feel it and every time Richie touched him, volts of electricity would fire to his crotch and it was making him so hot, “Please...”

Richie’s hand stopped flirting with Stan through his underwear and Stan felt Richie let out a small laugh against his neck, the feeling of air washing over where Richie had previously been biting and sucking like an animal on the verge of starvation made a shiver run down Stan’s spine. Stan felt like he was going to melt, he had never been this horny in his life, with Richie’s hands ghosting every inch of his body, fingers softly trailing down his sides and over his nipples and thumbs gently stroking Stan’s hips. Stan wonders if Richie would grab them when he was fucking him? Holding his hips in place to stop him moving away. Stan groaned at the thought of waking up with bruises in the shape of hands on his hips, like a brand. A brand which proudly proclaims ‘property of Richie Tozier’.

“Please what?” Richie nipped at Stan’s neck again - just above his collar bone this time and Stan writhed under him, wanting - no - needing Richie. Stan wanted something to happen, not just Richie rubbing his cock through his underwear, the fabric was practically soaking with pre-come and Stan could see the pink of his head through his no longer opaque white briefs. He grinded up into Richie’s hovering hand, trying to show Richie what he needed. “No, I want you to say it, I don’t know what grinding into my hand like a bitch in heat means.”

Stan groaned and pulled Richie closer, their bare chests colliding in a sweaty mess. “Anything. Please. Anything Richie, I need - oh!” Stan’s almost frantic begging, which had tumbled out of his mouth like a river blasting through a dam, had been interrupted by Richie’s hand snaking under his briefs and grabbing his cock. Stan felt his tongue choke on the words as Richie began to stroke him at an achingly slow pace. His fingers were calculating and precise, Stan doesn’t want to imagine how many times Richie has jerked himself off to achieve that level of expertise. Maybe he jerked off thinking about Stan? The thought of Richie coming with Stan’s name on his breath and his own breathless, shaking body on his mind made Stan’s heart rate increase even more - Stan didn’t think that was possible but with Richie’s body - which generated the heat of a nuclear reactor at rest - was hot and heavy above him, pressing over his body and trapping him into the mattress, it was enough to threaten a heart attack. The thought was soon shoved to the back of his head when Richie started stroking faster and gripping him tighter, twisting his wrist at the base and twisting it back at the head.
Stan was so close, his mouth fell open and a slurry of words and moans. Richie held his thighs, which twitched in his hand as he could feel the rush building, only maybe five seconds away from his high to come crashing down in a flurry of euphoria. That was of course, until Richie slid his hand out of Stan’s underwear and held his knee in place, keeping Stan’s legs spread as they had been.

“R-Richie, what are you-”

“Trust me, Stanley.” And Stan did, as Richie lowered himself into the space between Stan’s legs and began kissing his thighs - starting beside his kneecap. The kisses were gentle, but not innocent. They were like poison, small, tender kisses bled onto Stan’s thighs and they made Stan’s breathing hitch. Stan thread his fingers into Richie’s nest of hair and held onto it tight, Richie’s hair was the only thing keeping him grounded and if he let go, let his hand fall to the mattress then all he would have to focus on is the soft kisses and occasional nip that Richie was tracing up the privacy of the inside of his thighs and he would probably come by the time Richie got to the space just beside his crotch.

Stan let out a loud, unashamed moan when Richie began sucking on a sensitive part of his inner thighs, it was too much. All the blood was rushing to Stan’s dick and he was so hard he could cry. He felt tears prickle his eyes and he pulled Richie’s hair - but that only seemed to encourage him, as he began to make a mirror of the bruise he had left on Stan’s other thigh.

Stan was panting and gasping for air like he had never experienced before - not even after cross-country in Gym. A layer of sweat coated his body, which normally would repulse him, but Stan was too far gone to care. “Richie… please, I can’t do this anymore.”

Richie lifted his head from his new hickey and rested it on his propped up leg. His fingers kept tracing it though, like he was admiring an art piece, delicately and fleetingly. “Want me to make you feel good? I can make you feel good, Stan.”

Stan nodded furiously in response, “Please,”

“Want me to blow you? Do you want your cock in my mouth? Do you want me to lick you and suck the cum right out of you,.” Stan groaned in anticipation as Richie moved his lips to his dick, breath catching on the wet fabric, “or, do you want to fuck my mouth? Grab my hair like you were doing and shutting me up the right way, by shoving your dick down past my tonsils.”

The blankets twisted under Stan’s fisting hands, almost ripping holes in the fabric with his nails as he just begged for Richie to suck him off, please, just put your mouth on my dick, please Richie,
please.

Stan’s briefs were slowly pulled down past his knees and Stan had to awkwardly shuffle to get them past his ankles with Richie sitting between his legs, unmoving. Richie mouthed at Stan’s dick, giving it short licks and wet kisses as Stan’s thighs shook beside his ears. Stan’s entire body was shaking, in fact, he was vibrating with arousal and he was so on the edge that he knew he would more than likely come within a minute of Richie taking him into his mouth.

Richie kissed from his balls right up to the head, swirling his tongue around the head as if it was an ice-cream beginning to melt. Stan let out a cry which sounded like he had been wounded when Richie, in one swift motion, took all of Stan into his mouth with ease. Stan moaned and cried freely and without will as Richie moved up and down on his cock, hands firmly holding Stan’s hips down as Stan’s hips tried to follow Richie’s lips every time he came up for air.

Richie licked long, wet strips on the underside of Stan’s cock and left sharp bites on his hips, before bringing his mouth back to the main course of action, and swiftly sinking. He took Stan’s length with relative ease, Stan felt Richie gag slightly when he forced himself down further on Stan, his dick passing his tonsils and Stan had never felt heat like this in his life. He was only in Richie’s throat for a second before Richie lifted himself back off, but it had felt like Stan had died and gone to heaven for those few moments.

Richie repeated this action several times, and Stan was left a quivering, incoherent mess. Stan couldn’t even string a coherent thought together with his dick in Richie’s throat, nevermind a sentence. So he breathed out curses in between loud moans and whimpers but a pair of dexterous fingers had soon cut through the moans and pressed on the bottom lip of Stan’s open mouth. Stan immediately took Richie’s fingers into his mouth and sucked, moving his tongue around the digits as if he was looking for buried treasure, he had barely noticed when Richie took his mouth off his dick completely to watch Stan take his fingers and enthusiastically bob on them as he sucked and licked at the digits inside his mouth.

“Stan.” Richie said, breathlessly, his own erection straining in his boxers, “I’m going to fuck you senseless.”
Stan crashed his hand down to mute the incessant noise which had jerked him out of his sleep, he rolled over and switched the light on and began his normal morning routine for school.

He made his bed, had a shower, got breakfast, brushed his teeth. It was in the middle of brushing his teeth, mouth frothing with foam when the thought struck him so powerfully and so suddenly that it had almost winded him.

_He had a sex dream about Richie Tozier._

The toothbrush dropped out of his hand and clattered in the sink. This was most definitely not good.

Stan was sitting at one of the booths at the Waterfront Diner, head buried in a Physics textbook and hand meticulously writing notes in his tall, almost microscopic handwriting. The page was filled with numbers and letters which he didn’t understand, his head was reeling at the thought of this test in a few days. If he didn’t learn three weeks worth of information on longitudinal waves in two days, then he would most certainly fail. He really couldn’t afford to fail another Physics test, his grade was already trailing limply behind all his others at a low C.

He re-read his notes and tried to gather any sense from them and failed. He pinched his nose and closed his textbook, deciding to work on some Spanish homework instead. Surely a break would help clear his head from numbers. He was in the middle of translating the long paragraph he had been assigned when a school bag was fired into the seat in front of him, he knew it was Richie’s not because Richie had asked him to meet up with him after school, but because the bag wasn’t even slightly closed and a flurry of pens and lonely pages fluttered through the air, one of Richie’s many scented erasers landed on Stan’s homework. It was shaped like a turtle.

“Did you like my dramatic entrance?” Richie hopped into the seat opposite Stan, who winced when Richie’s ass made home right on top of what looked like a part of Richie’s English essay. He remembered Richie begging Bill to write it for him in lunch today. Stan found it difficult to wrap his head around how Richie could find anything in the mess of his bag, Richie called it ‘organized chaos’, but Stan had his doubts.

“Your eraser collection is everywhere.” Richie’s eyes flicked to the ground and he quickly got to his knees and began picking up multiple colourful erasers. He worked his way under the table and Stan could feel his hair tickling at the hem of his shorts.
“Phew! I almost lost my favourite, my pumpkin-scented pumpkin, where would I be without you, little buddy?” Stan winced when he heard a sloppy kissing sound from under the table. Stan’s thankful he didn’t have to watch Richie kiss the eraser which was probably caked in dust now, Richie should be thankful too, because if Stan had witnessed that he would have no other option than to kick Richie in the face.

Richie clambered up from under the table and rested his head on his hands, staring at Stan. Stan ignored him for several minutes before the eyes drilling into his head became too much to bear. “Yes?”

Richie replied before Stan even finished, “I have a question.”

“What?”

“Is it called Jew-Jitsu because it is the art of the Hebrew hands of fury?”

“No, it’s spelt entirely differently and it’s Japanese - although some people argue that it can be traced to Indian monks,” Stan said, not looking up from his homework.

“How the hell do you know so much about martial arts? Have you been taking self-defense classes or some shit?”

“No, Richie. Some people just know things. Are you going to do any homework? Meeting up after school was your idea.”

Richie flipped through the menu, even though he knew it off by heart. “Um, actually I wanted to share a romantic meal but someone had to bring academics into it, way to make a guy soft, Stan.” Richie spit out the word ‘academic’ as if it was mud hiding behind his teeth.

Richie’s dick sure wasn’t soft last night. Remember? He was grinding on your leg and making those noises you liked so much.

Stan rubbed at his neck and whatever retort he had to Richie’s comment died in his mouth. Not of natural causes, it was gunned down by the images of last night’s dream that plagued his brain. Richie flopped the menu back down on the table and stared out the window, tapping a tune that Stan could almost pinpoint as Queen. The sky was beginning to grow dim and the sun lay low,
bathing the ground in an ocean of orange for the last hour or two of its presence before dipping below the horizon at the early hour of six o’clock. Richie, had, of course, been half an hour late - Stan had expected this but couldn’t bring himself to show up any later than ten minutes early.

They sat in silence for a while, Stan getting the majority of his homework done, even with Richie trying to initiate a game of footsie to distract him. Richie, staring out the window, tapping his fingers and looking out at the sky the same way Stan was looking at his Physics textbook - with trepidation and with the signs of an internal battle. The soft neon lights from inside the store painted all of the pages on the table a medley of purples and pinks. The sight brought Stan’s mind back to when him, Bill, Eddie and Richie would all cram into a booth and stay until it was dark, playing board games and writing their Christmas lists for Santa over milkshakes and fries. Richie always dipped the fries into his milkshake - he managed to bring Bill over to the dark side a few months ago, but at least Eddie still had his wits about him. Once when they were barely eleven years old, a few months after they had discovered the Waterfront, they had started a game of monopoly (Richie insisted that Stan play as his naturally allocated role as the bank, Stan kicked him in the shin) that drew on for hours, when they began to pack up, Mr. Denton had told them to leave everything as it were, and they could return tomorrow and play it, ever since then the Diner had been like a home away from home. The neon lights always made Stan feel at ease, like coming back to your bedroom after being in an unfamiliar place. The lights even bled onto Richie’s face, pinching it with soft hues of purple.

Just like how Richie’s teeth pinched purple into your thighs, you were shaking and even crying for it, you remember.

Stan dated his homework and carefully put it back into his bag, giving in to the beckoning calls of his Physics textbook. As much as he hated studying, he knew he had to - especially if he wanted to pass. The movement seemed to catch Richie’s attention as he began to kick his legs under the table, “So what are we doing now, my boy?”

“I am studying for a test, you will continue to stare quietly out the window and give me some peace and quiet so I can concentrate.”

Richie put his fist under his chin in a mockery of the Thinking Man pose, “Hmm... seems false, don’t think that’s going to happen. Let me lay it out for you-” he began gesturing with his hands, spreading them out as if he was assuming a threatening mob-boss position, “I am going to order us food, using my own money because I am a charitable soul who looks out for those less fortunate than himself. Then, we are going to eat said food and we will have fun and be great pals.”

“Richie, this test is important, I need to study,” Stan said, opening up the textbook and turning back to his notes from earlier, but still maintaining eye contact with Richie.
Richie waved his hand in the air in response, “Just cheat, that old crow wouldn’t even notice if you dyed your hair green.”

“I’m not cheating, Richie.”

“What kind of Jew are you?”

Stan shot him a dirty look and Richie flopped dramatically against the seat, defeated, “I guess I, the known charitable genius of Derry, will help you bump your sad little grade up.” Stan looked at him, unconvinced, “Hey! You know I get straight A’s - don’t give me that look. I only ask for one thing in return, uno pequeña favore.”

Stan stared Richie down, weighing up the options of failing Physics vs. owing Richie Tozier a favour - which after Richie had made Beverly paint his entire body blue for Halloween - Stan knew that was a dangerous game. On the other hand, an F amongst proud A’s would be quite the blemish on his report card and although he knew that he could potentially pass this test with his own hard work, it was a gamble. Stan reckoned the risks outweighed the reward, so he gave Richie a defeated nod.

“Okay - but I want to know what you need from me first. I don’t want a repeat of Halloween, Beverly’s costume was ruined.” Richie fist the air in triumph and grabbed Stan’s hand to fist the air with him. Stan rolled his eyes but it was endearing.

“Great! I’ll get the food, then you can listen to my master plan while sucking on a good thick milkshake - just the way you like it.” Richie gave Stan a wink before jumping out of the booth and bouncing to the bar, practically vibrating with energy. Meanwhile, Stan was sitting slack-jawed in his seat.

“Fuck Stan, I can feel your dick through your pants…” Richie was grinding down on him, rolling his hips in teasingly slow circles and rubbing their clothed erections together, “It’s so hard… I bet you have a big cock, Stan. Such a good little Rabbi’s son - I bet you rub one out every night thinking of me squirming on your thick cock. Do you think about fucking me, Stanley? Do you fuck me slow and gentle, leaving me hovering on the edge for hours, teasing me and drawing it out long and slow? Do you make love to me? Do you kiss me and tell me how much you love me riding your cock? Telling me how good I look bouncing on you. No… I bet you think about fucking me hard, making me scream while I scratch your back into a bleeding mess.”

“Stan?! Hello, are you in there or have you finally lost it? Oh ma lawd! Mister Stanley is gawn... what ever will we do withawt our hansome man?”
Stan didn’t even notice Richie coming back over until he was about four inches away from his face and speaking in his Southern Belle voice. Stan knew he was blushing, he could feel the heat in his face but that was the least of his worries because he could feel the blood rushing to his crotch. Of all people he could’ve had a sex dream about - it had to be Richie. It made sense, Stan desperately defended, Richie was the last person he talked to last night and when his hormones went into overdrive in the nighttime, they just picked the last face he had seen and the last voice he had heard. Yeah, that makes sense. If he had talked to Mike last before bed, he would’ve had a …..dream about Mike. It was all relative. As comforting as that conclusion is, it didn’t help Stan’s erection go away.

Stan swatted Richie away from his face, “I’m fine - I just smelled your B.O as you were walking past and it gave me a mild concussion.” Richie let out a loud laugh in response, clapping Stan on the shoulder so hard that it jostled him.

“Stan gets off on a good one!” He laughed again, more of a cackle this time. Richie then dropped himself back into the seat, bringing his hands behind his head, “So this favour…”

Stan’s head dropped into his hands, not feeling any optimism with Richie’s tone of voice, “Please, get it over with.”

“It’s Beverly’s birthday on December 4th.”

“Okay?”

“She’s never had a birthday party before.”

How could Beverly not have had a birthday party, she’s been on this Earth nearly sixteen years and has never celebrated a birthday? “What do you mean?”

“I mean nadda, Stan. Zilch. No balloons, no presents, no punching people in the face to get to the cake -”

“Only you did that Richie, stop trying to project your messed up psyche onto innocent individuals.”

“I’m going to keep pushing it until it happens. No, but she’s never had anything. Last she remembers was her eighth birthday and her Mom bought her a dress and a cake, that’s the extent of her Birthday celebrations. It’s like her family are fucking Jehovies or something!”
Stan frowned, he didn’t know much about Beverly’s life, she kept it pretty much under wraps apart from an odd comment about her Father, who seemed to be an over controlling parent at the least. Stan’s best memories with his friends were usually at someone’s birthday - when you’re hopped up on juice and candy, everything was exciting. Stan nodded at Richie.

“Okay, I’m in - what do you need?”

Richie lifted a notebook out of his bag and opened to a page labelled ‘TOP SECRET PARTY FOR BEVERLY’S SWEET 16TH’. The page had multiple people’s handwriting on it - Stan suspects he got Ben and Bill to weigh in on the matter. It was littered with ideas, Stan stifled a small laugh when his eyes found ‘bill strip teases?’ in Richie’s writing followed by a ‘absolutely not.’ by Bill’s chicken scratch lettering. Stan didn’t think anyone would want to see that.

“Her birthday falls on a Saturday, which is fate. I basically have everything I need, I’m getting booze, Bill’s bringing snacks, Mike’s acting as a chauffeur, Eddie is bringing decorations, Ben insisted on being DJ - I tried to stop him, Stan, I really did. Now, what I need from you, my boy, besides your undivided attention, is your home.”

“My home?”

“Well as vintage as street parties are, I don’t think Derry is ready for that kind of throwback.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Staaaaaaaan,” Richie whined.

“I can’t just kick my parents out of the house, Richie!”

“Ah-hah! Bill is one step ahead of you, he has booked a table for four at Viscount’s restaurant for his parents and your sexy familia will join them for Bill’s Mom’s promotion or something - I don’t know I didn’t really pay attention to that bit, all I know is that your parents are gonna be gone until the next morning.”

Stan fiddled with the pen he had on his hand, “I don’t know, I barely trust any of you in my house as it is, nevermind under the influence of alcohol.”
“And copious amounts of drugs.”

“No.”

“Fine! No drugs, just you welcoming us into your home and looking after us and making sure we don’t break anything too valuable?”

Stan dragged his hand down his face, “Fine. As long as no one throws up on anything.”

Richie put his hand over his heart, “You have my word.”

Stan doubted Richie would go through any kind of effort to prevent someone vomiting on Stan’s living room rug, in fact, Richie would probably make Eddie a wild concoction for the sole purpose of trying to get him to puke.

The waitress presented their order and they small-talked for a while, she had practically watched them grow up, after all, and with a ruffle of Richie’s hair she was off again. Richie had ordered a plate of unsalted fries and a vanilla milkshake for Stan, and a double bacon cheeseburger with a chocolate milkshake for himself.

“Let’s get this other shit out of the way,” Richie said, swivelling Stan’s handwritten notes around so he could read them. “See, this is why you’re struggling, you’re doing it all wrong!”

Stan’s eyebrows furrowed at the accusations, “No, I’m copying the textbook.”

“Exactly! Those fuckers don’t have the dolliest what they’re talking about. They probably piss out half of these equations, here - like look at this one,” Richie grabbed one of Stan’s pens and used it to point to a long equation, “You can take out like, half that shit and get the same answer - forget about those brackets they’re bullshit -”

Richie went through all of Stan’s notes and wrote down better and easier ways to do the equations, even giving him rhymes and songs to remember them by. It took the better part of two hours and their food had long been eaten. Stan appreciated Richie’s help, Stan knew Richie hated helping people with their homework because that’s all people used to use him for. Yet here he was, patiently explaining the difference between transverse and longitudinal waves to Stan, not leaving any question unanswered or any problem unsolved.
When Stan waved Richie off as he rode home, he felt confident that he would get an A.

Stan parked his bike outside the diner. It was 8:00pm on a Thursday night. The wind was cool and the clouds weighed heavy in the sky. Stan carried a large cake tin in his arms through the front door.

Tonight was a night that Richie was working, Stan remembered because Richie groaned about how much he hates the cleandown shift. Today was also the day, that Stan got his grade back from his Physics test, and he nailed it. He got an A+ and the teacher had called him into the room, asking if he had cheated. Stan of course, would never cheat and he was affronted that she thought he had. Nonetheless, It had managed to bump his grade up to a breath away from a B and knowing that had given Stan a newfound confidence in the class, if he could do it once, he could do it again.

Stan couldn’t find Richie at first, he wasn’t cleaning the coffee machine or stocking up the sugar packets. So Stan checked out back, he wasn’t cleaning the griddle or the oven - and Stan didn’t even bother to check to see if he was cleaning the dishwasher. So Stan walked out the back door and into the smoking area, where Richie was standing with a cigarette between his fingers, staring up at the sky.

“You shouldn’t be out here.”

“JESUS FUCKING CHRI- Stan, what the fuck, dude?!” Richie had jumped in the air and let out a scream, flinging his half-smoked cigarette somewhere West. “It’s fine, it’s not like I almost had a heart attack or anything.” He said in response to Stan laughing, almost keeling over at Richie’s reaction.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Would you like a change of pants?”

“Fuck off, what are you doing here? You doing random spot-checks on me now?”

Stan shook his head, “Can we go inside, it’s cold.” Richie shrugged and followed him back inside.

Richie perched himself on the counter, swinging his legs and looking at the tin in Stan’s hand.

“I brought you something,” Stan felt his face heating up, he wasn’t used to giving gifts, it felt almost too intimate and it made his hands start to go clammy. “It’s uh - a thank-you gift. I got an
A+ in that test the other day, and as reluctant as I am to say it - it was thanks to you, so I baked you something.” Stan gestured to the cake almost violently, wanting this exchange to be as swift and painless as possible. Much to his dismay, Richie’s face lit up and he jumped off the counter - walking right past the cake.

“You got an A?!” Richie asked, his smile was spread clumsily on his face.

“Well, an A+, so I suppose.”

Richie grabbed both of Stan’s hands and held them in the air and cheered, bringing Stan into a victory dance. They circled each other as Richie chanted words of victory and celebration into the empty diner. Even though they were the only people there, the amount of energy that Richie was making felt as though Stan was at a disco, and he couldn’t help but give in to Richie’s antics and dance along with him.

Richie let out another cheer when Stan started hopping with him and Stan laughed. Richie grabbed both of Stan's cheeks in his hands, Stan’s mouth was slightly squished.

Stan stopped dancing and so did Richie, Richie moved closer to Stan’s face. Stan’s hands were sweating and his heart rate was through the roof, he had never been in a situation like this, with Richie’s face inching towards him so slowly that Stan started to wonder if the passage of time itself had slowed down with him. But no, the soft ticking of the clock led Stan to believe that time was passing normally, but why did it feel so slow.

Richie’s mouth was so close to his face now, he could feel the ghost of his breath along his lips, Richie’s lips stealing all of Stan’s oxygen from his lungs, like a reaper sucking the soul out of him.

Richie’s lips traced the underside of Stan’s erection as he slowly pumped two fingers, which had been well lubed by Stan’s enthusiastic sucking, in and out of him. At first, the thought of Richie fingering him had disgusted him, but for some reason, the words never left his mouth. So here he was, writhing under Richie’s fingers in a beautiful mix of pain and pleasure, moaning to the ceiling with blasphemy breaking out of his lips. Richie started pumping his fingers into Stan faster and harder until Stan was breathing out moans which were only a few decibels short of screams, his breathing matching the pace of Richie’s fingers. Richie let out a short laugh before taking his cock into his mouth, forcing himself down until his nose was buried in Stan’s short pubes.

“Holy fuck! Rich...Richie... Richie please....” Stan didn’t know what he was begging for with such wanton need, but when Richie added another finger, Stan felt like his entire world had shifted on its axis as his nails dug into Richie’s scalp.
Stan gulped, a lump in his throat as the dream rushed back into his head, he hadn’t thought of the dream in days and it reared its ugly head again.

Richie moved closer before propping himself up on his tiptoes and placing a kiss to Stan’s forehead, “I’m proud of you.”

Stan tried to clear the lump from his throat and shuffled back from Richie, leaving a good distance between them. Stan tried to will the blood away from his crotch. Think of Grandma, think of Grandma.

Richie moved his attention to the tin, tracing his finger around the rim, before opening the lid with some amount of difficulty. The lid popped off anyway and Richie was left staring into the tin while a great big smile grew on his face, “Is this pineapple upside-down cake?”

Stan nodded, “You didn’t get any on Sunday.”

Richie laughed and closed the lid, bringing Stan into a side-hug and nestling his hair into Stan’s neck. “If I would’ve known you were gonna bake me stuff, I would’ve married you long ago, Stanley.”

“Shut up and get back to work, trashmouth.”

Richie laughed and punched Stan’s shoulder, Stan managed to dodge in the nick of time and avoided the punch, Richie always had a habit of misjudging his strength and knocking the wind out of Stan.

Stan’s face was still burning red when he was leaving and his stomach was fluttering right up until he went to sleep. He didn’t understand why his stomach was doing flips when Richie moved close to him, or when Richie pressed a soft kiss to his forehead, but his stomach had been filled with hornets rather than butterflies, they were buzzing so much that Stan was almost in pain. Stan silently cuddled into a pillow beside him, resting his head on top of it and stared at the wall.

Stan didn’t fall into sleep until long past midnight, if you asked him what had kept him up, he would’ve said he didn’t know. Stan knew though, he knew that the butterflies were more violent than his first kiss, he knew that they meant something and he spent all night trying to figure out what they meant.
Everything was going to plan, or at least according to Richie who was currently arguing with Ben over his music choices. Stan was almost taken aback by the organisation skills Richie had presented when it came to getting everything set up in such a short amount of time, his parents had only left an hour beforehand and Beverly was due any minute now. Eddie had overestimated the amount of balloons that were needed - Richie however had insisted that all of them were to be used, so Stan and Bill - being the tallest - had spent the better part of an hour tacking balloons to the wooden skirting on the ceiling. They were planning to use Helium, so they wouldn’t have to use tacks but Eddie refused and began listing off all the types of cancers related to the inhalation of Helium and Richie lay defeated under Eddie’s wrath.

Stan carefully stepped over a puddle of balloons which had been left ‘for dramatics’ on the kitchen floor. There was nothing dramatic about a kitchen, Stan had thought but nonetheless, Richie was the Lieutenant in this operation and Stan pretty much gave him free reign of his house - after removing all breakable ornaments from the space and covering the seats in a plastic lining - and Richie was doing great. He had all the snacks laid out on the kitchen table, the candles were going to be lit as far away from the alcohol as possible and the lights were dimmed, but not so dim that you couldn’t see people’s features - but dim enough that Richie’s light-up sneakers were bouncing bright lights across the floor.

Above the archway which connects the living-room to the kitchen hung an obviously homemade banner with ‘Happy Sweet Sixteenth, Beverly!’ written in black marker. The writing was slightly lopsided but Stan didn’t cast it much of a second thought. A few pictures of Beverly and the rest of his friends were taped to the wooden supports for the archway, Stan hoped that the tack from the tape didn’t take off any of the varnish. Most people wouldn’t notice if there was a small line of exposed wood peeking out behind the varnish, but Stanley’s parents were much like himself in the fact that they were rather pedantic, they knew their home and knew exactly the way things should be. Stan traced his hand over a picture Bill had taken on his Polaroid camera. Stan, Beverly and Richie were skipping stones down at a particularly deep part of the Quarry and Richie had been over-enthusiastic in his throwing, and slipped on a patch of algae and fell right into the water. The photo captured Richie’s sour expression and Stan and Beverly laughing at him, stones falling from their hands and almost slipping into the water themselves. Pinned underneath was another one, labelled ‘July 6th’ - clearly a sunny day, Bev lying on the grass in one of Mike’s fields, with Mike braiding daisies into her hair. Her hair was shorter then, she had grown into the short haircut well and although it was a shock when she had cut it, no one could imagine Beverly with long hair anymore. Stan smiled fondly, that was the day Mike needed help with silage - a grueling task that they all agreed to help him with, since his Grandpa was getting on in the years. Even Georgie had come down to ‘help’ - which ended up translating to Richie dragging Georgie off to pet all the animals.
There were easily a dozen more photos all including Beverly, even the picture Bill had taken for her ‘Employee of the Month’ poster in the Diner and a picture of her sharing a smoke with Richie during Halloween night, covered in paint. Stan inspected them all with care - making sure he didn't tousle them too much that they'd fall. He appreciated Bill bringing his camera, although he always groaned when Bill insisted they all take a photo, Stan knew that in time, he’d appreciate the pictures - even the ones of himself - like the way he is appreciating these ones.

It was in the middle of examining a picture of Beverly giving the camera the finger, there was a red solo cup gently nudged against the back of his hand.

“Here, you deserve a drink.” Mike insisted gently, Stan waved his hands.

“I’m staying sober, Mike. I don’t want anything broken but thanks for the offer. You should give it to Richie, he’s still arguing with Ben and I think he brought up one of Ben’s boy bands so things might get ugly.”

Mike laughed and dropped the cup into Stan’s hand, “I’m the designated driver for tonight, I’ll make sure no one gets up to any badness.” He stopped himself and looked at Richie, who was trying to do a handstand - presumably to make a point to Ben, as he was red-faced and shouting while doing it, “Well, not too much badness.”

Stan nodded as he took a small sip of the liquid, it was cider, “Thanks Mike, I’ll not get too drunk.”

Mike laughed, “I’m not expecting anything out of the usual, don’t worry.”

Stan nodded and took another drink, staring out of the window in thought. Richie assured him that everything was going to plan but it didn’t feel right. He felt as though there was something missing and it was toying with him. He went through the checklist and everything was there; the spare bedroom was made in case someone passed out, the bathroom was cleaned, the glasses have been replaced with solo cups, Beverly’s cake is sitting on the island counter, the porch light is on, the thermostat is set at a comfortable 72 degrees and is set to turn off at 1:00am. He couldn’t think of anything that was missing and yet he still had a nagging feeling like something was wrong, that something wouldn’t go right and Beverly wouldn’t enjoy it.

Maybe it was her gift, Stan didn’t know her exact dress size but he bought her a dark blue pinafore and it looked as though it would fit - and he knew she had a pair of blue converse so he wasn’t afraid of it not matching her wardrobe. Maybe she wouldn’t wear it - Stan had never seen her wear a pinafore before, except her brown one from years ago.
“You alright?” Mike’s voice was littered with concern, but his face was soft as always, “You look a little spooked.”

Stan sighed, “Yeah, it’s nothing.”

“If your trouble leaves your mouth it leaves your head, you know.”

“I’m just worried Beverly isn’t going to like it. What if there’s a reason she doesn’t celebrate her birthday and we trigger something she had intentionally swept under the rug?”

“Like a bad memory?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, I think the only way to fix that is to make good memories about her birthday. To overshadow the bad ones.”

“That makes sense. What if she wants it quiet, though? A quiet night in instead of a party.”

Mike raised an eyebrow at him, “Have you ever known our Bev to want a quiet night in?”

Stan chuckled, many memories being called to attention, “You’re right. Remember that time she and Richie climbed out of your window and tried to ride your horse?”

Mike’s face lit up, “Yeah, and the horse was so spooked we couldn’t ride her for two weeks, Eddie made them apologize to Grandpa.”

They laughed about the horse for a while, exchanging memories, before Richie piped up from behind them, “Hey! What did you losers get Bev for her birthday? I got her an axe.” His chest was pushed out in a show of pride.

Stan almost dropped his cup, “An axe?! Richie, why did you get her an axe? In fact, more
importantly - who sold you an axe?"

“I had to cycle to the next town over to get it, I went to seven different stores in Derry, and no one would sell me one!”

“Yeah, because everyone in Derry knows that the first thing you’d do with an axe is accidentally cut your fingers off,” Mike said.

“Michael, I am disappointed.” Richie said incredulously, “Remember that time, four score and many years ago, that I cut a log for you?”

“It took you ten minutes to cut one log and you dislocated your thumb,” Stan said flatly.

Richie scoffed, “Kids these days don’t appreciate hard work.”

“Guys! I see her bike! Everyone get down!” Eddie shouted from the kitchen, and they all took their places as Eddie rushed to switch off the lights. Richie and Stan rushed towards the same location - behind Stan’s loveseat. There wasn’t a lot of room for the two boys, admittedly they were the tallest of all their friends - but it didn’t bother either of them enough to move. Stan was peering off to the side of the couch to watch for Beverly’s shadow. Stan could feel Richie’s warm breath tickling under his collar as Richie leaned forward, vibrating in excitement and wanting to be the first one to jump up at her. It wasn’t moments later that Stan watched Beverly’s shadow ghost over the room as she walked past the porch light and knocked on the back door twice. Stan had told her to use the back door - most people did, after all. The front door was really only for formalities. After no answer the door knob tentatively twisted open and the door slowly creaked open into the darkened room. Before she even got the chance to announce her presence, the light was switched on and Beverly was encapsulated in confetti from party poppers.

A strong chorus of ‘SURPRISE’ rang out as everyone jumped from their hiding spots, Richie jumped on Stan’s toe and made him curse and push him off - bumping slightly into Ben, who was too busy staring at Beverly with wonder to even notice. Beverly looked shocked initially, with the sudden noise and movement but she quickly embraced the situation and began laughing as she looked at the decorations and the presents - many of which were poorly wrapped, not for lack of care - which were piled up on the kitchen counter.

“You’re all fucking losers.” She laughed as she brought Eddie, who was standing within grabbing distance, into a tight hug and gave him a kiss in his hair as she made a beeline to the kitchen counter, where Bill was waving her over.

“What is the birthday girl’s drink of choice?”
Beverly took the bottle of vodka from his arm and winked, before taking a straight swig - resulting in loud cheering from Richie and Bill, “Anything and everything.” Her voice sounded gravelly from the burning in her throat, but her face hadn’t flinched. Stan, who sometimes found it difficult to drink beer, wondered how she could drink liquid akin to gasoline without a twitch.

Everyone, including Stan himself crowded into the kitchen to give their Birthday wishes over drinks, Beverly’s face was flushed at being the center of attention but she was smiling and laughing and even trying to get Eddie to take a shot of tequila with her - he didn’t, mumbling about liver disease and took a sip of his soda. Stan’s worries slowly melted away and he finished off his cider without realising, until Richie handed him another cup with a wink. The wink, which only Stan had caught, made his face break out in a smile and his cheeks flush, both of which he hid behind the mouth of the cup as he took a drink. Stan stood with Richie as he played barman, making Ben a fruity cocktail as requested and Ben almost spitting it out because of how terrible it was, Richie just laughed and told Ben to get stuck in. Surprisingly, after a few minutes Eddie came to Richie with a request.

“Richie I want a drink.”

Richie and Stan looked up from their conversation with wide eyes, unbelieving that those very words had come out of Eddie’s mouth. His eyebrows were furrowed and his arms were crossed in an attempt to appear broader than he actually was, it was almost comical. Stan and Richie exchanged a look, neither particularly wanting to challenge Eddie, although he was only five foot and a bit, he had a lot of fight in him and when Eddie went off, he went off. Richie took a gulp and stood up straight, fixing his glasses.

“Sure big guy, what’ll it be?”

Eddie stared at Richie for several moments, “Uhh…” he was almost wide-eyed, like a deer caught in the headlights, but not wanting to look inexperienced, even though everyone who was attending knew that Eddie very rarely drank, “Whatever you think.”

Richie gave an obnoxious ‘aww’ at Eddie and began searching through the row of liquor he brought - Stan briefly wondered why he required four different brands of vodka but decided that it was best not to ask questions. Richie poured a handful of different drinks into a cup and presented it with a flourish, “A mai tai for my guy.”

Eddie gingerly took the cup, giving it a sniff before downing it, to both Stan and Richie’s horror.

“Um, Eddie…” Richie tried to lower the cup but his hand was slapped away.
Eddie threw the empty cup to the ground and wiped some remaining pink off his lips, “That was disgusting, make me another one.”

“That… wasn’t really a drink to down, that’s a cocktail - you don’t down cocktails.” Richie was met with a glare and he quickly went to fix another mai-tai, with a lot fewer spirits in it that the previous one, Stan noted.

“Eddie I thought you were worried about liver disease?” Stan said, as Eddie peered over Richie’s shoulder to watch him make his drink.

“I’m making an executive decision not to think about that right now.”

“Atta man! Die young like the rest of us, fall at your peak.” Richie cheered, handing Eddie his drink, “Now sip this one, otherwise you’ll be sick and I’m sure as hell not cleaning up your barf.”

Eddie’s eyes widened momentarily before he nodded and moved to the living room, slowly sipping his drink while he talked to Bill, who was handing out presents to Beverly. Stan and Richie watched Beverly’s reactions from the kitchen, her face lit up when she opened Stan’s present. She gave him a thumbs up and a flurried ‘thank you!’ before being very gingerly handed the axe, which was unwrapped bar a bow on the iron head and a jagged ‘love Richie’ carved into the handle. She gave it a few practice swings, which were more violent than necessary before Mike managed to wrestle it out of her hands and he opened the back door and threw it into the yard, knowing no one would be bothered to put their shoes back on to go get it.

The following few hours were a flurry of lights, sounds and dancing - Ben played music that everyone loved but would later object to the accusation, Bill and Mike danced - Bill, despite having a dozen beers in his system, was the much better dancer. Eddie had only had two more drinks, but was fairly buzzed, as was everyone else. Stan had drunk slightly more than intended but luckily he had paced himself and he wasn’t nearly in the same state as Beverly, who was dancing and singing loudly, stumbling over her own feet without a care in the world, which is what Stan intended. He wanted Beverly to let loose for her sixteenth birthday.

Richie had pulled him to the centre of the living room, brushing everyone to the side and told Ben to change the song. Stan blinked for a few moments in confusion and asked Richie what was going on. Richie shook his head and told Stan to shush. Richie stretched out his arms and legs as if preparing for a marathon while Ben fumbled the new cassette tape into the boombox. Stan tried not to laugh as his favourite guilty-pleasure song began to fill the room, he failed though, when Eddie grumbled, “Fucking Cyndi Lauper, for real?”.

Richie belted out the lyrics as though there was no one else in the room, “I came home, in the
He pointed at Stan to finish the verse, and Stan scoffed and rolled his eyes but with the drink making his confidence and his inhibitions were slowly being phased from his mind, Stan belted out the next verse, throwing his hands in the air and accidentally splashing some cider onto the floor, “The phone rings, in the middle of the night, my Father yells what you gonna do with your life,”

Richie laughed and joined him for the remainder of the second verse, Stan was an excellent singer and he usually was the one who sang in temple when required but he didn’t like to show off. Richie however, sounded more akin to a car driving over a series of cats - no one seemed to mind though as they waited for Richie and Stan to finish the verse before everyone - even Eddie - sang along for the rest of the song.

Richie and Stan still remained centrefold and Stan jumped in place to the beat while Richie’s arms and legs seized in what Stan assumed was Richie’s dance moves. Beverly was laughing and pulling Ben to dance, he mumbled something about being the DJ but let himself be pulled in by Beverly, who held his hands as she danced wildly. Stan momentarily scanned the room for any drinks which could have been spilled, but thankfully Mike had been moving cups out of the way as everyone got drunker and wanted to dance with more avidity.

The song finished and Stan finished his drink while Richie chanted some drinking chant he’d picked up from God knows where and Stan ordered Richie to get him another drink, who bowed and scurried off - popping several of the balloons he had left on the floor. Stan briefly wondered if he was drunker than he had initially thought, so he moved his fingers, recalled some bird names and their origins and tried to clear his head. He admitted, he was slightly more drunk than he intended to be at the start of the night, but he wasn’t making a fool of himself or losing track of what was happening. He was just, buzzed, he still had his wits and his sense, but he was just… more confident. More at ease with the space his body and personality took up. Stan knew in the back of his head, that he should probably call it quits on the drinking, before he gets worse - but just as the thought entertained his head he watched Mike grab the drink out of Eddie’s hand and switched it with Bill’s - who had been drinking triple vodka and blackcurrants the past hour, Eddie probably would have puked if he had accidentally taken a swig. Watching Mike take control and look after all his friends made him feel at ease, and he knew he could trust Mike enough to have another drink or four.

He went to ask Richie where his drink was, but he caught the tail end of Richie walking out the back door with a cigarette in his lips, he was without his shoes so Stan knew he wasn’t leaving. Not that he would have any reason to think he was leaving. So Stan sighed and made an effort to step over the balloons and pour himself another cider but he was stopped in his tracks by a hand on his arm. He noticed the chipped nail polish and the freckles which rode from her hands the whole way up to her neck but most importantly he noticed a lazy but genuine smile on Beverly’s face, it made him feel even happier than he already was.
“Stan, I need…. Um… I need to…talk! I need to talk to you. No, not here, um… the hall? Yeah, the hallway! Let’s go!” Beverly didn’t really give him much of an option as she pulled him through the balloons and past Bill trying to hoist Eddie over his shoulders, for some reason. Bill was probably the most wasted out of them all, Stan faintly wonders how he was going to manage work tomorrow.

Beverly dragged them into the hallway and closed the door behind them, giving them a faint veil of privacy. She looked Stan up and down, as if calculating what she was going to say next and Stan shifted slightly under her gaze. She slowly grabbed his hand and held it there, not doing anything with it, just holding it softly, like one would hold a toddler’s hand.

“Stan, thank you soooo much for all this.”

Stan blinked, “Wait, Bev-“

“No, let me finish. Don’t be modest. I’ve never really had any of … this . Not just a birthday party and presents, but I’ve never had a proper group of friends that I’ve felt at home with. I know we’re only ‘work friends’ but I don’t care, I love all of you so much. I love having something to look forward to in the morning, even if it’s going to fucking work. Imagine that? Being excited to go to work.” She laughed, Stan couldn’t pinpoint if it was a happy one or not, so he stayed silent, “The only friend I ever had abandoned me over a stupid rumour, and I know she knew it wasn’t true - like she was looking any excuse to drop me. I know you guys wouldn’t do that though, I feel … wanted, you know? And that’s a pretty fuckin’ new feeling for me - oh wait that came out more dramatic than I intended. Fuck, well, what I mean is that I know you all care about me - even if you all have different ways of showing it. When I’m in a bad mood Richie will offer me a cigarette and nothing more or nothing less, Bill will give me a hug and let me rant to him, and Ben - oh our Ben - he just … talks, he probably doesn’t even notice that he’s helping, but he’ll just talk about whatever school project he’s doing or whatever movie he saw last and it just is so soothing. Stan, but this?”, she gestured around, pointing at a stray balloon, “this is more than I ever could’ve expected.”

“Beverly, it wasn’t anything to do with m-“

“Shut up, Stan.”

Stan wasn’t really sure how the next position came to be, but by the time he blinked, Beverly’s lips were on his and she was softly cupping his face. Her soft fingers traced down his cheeks until they fell to his shoulders. Her lips weren’t soft like he’d heard Ben fantasizing about one day - they were chapped, dry and firm. He felt as though the thought was doing a dishonour to Beverly’s femininity but he couldn’t help it. She was beautiful, yes. She had a strong personality that was a stream leading into a waterfall, unintimidating and gentle at first glance but suddenly you’re being thrown into the riptide and riding the currents. She was a great friend, but that’s the thing. That’s
all she was. Her lips on his felt like putting a belt on baggy pyjama bottoms - it makes logical sense - belts hold up pants, even pyjama ones. But it felt wrong, it may make logical sense but it didn’t nothing to calm his morals.

With that thought, he moved away, holding Beverly’s shoulders. He glanced around to make sure that Ben hadn’t seen, Stan was certain it would kill him. “Beverly, I didn’t plan this, Richie did. I just hosted it - don’t give the credit to me.”

She looked at him with eyes wide and her hands clasped over her mouth, before letting out a surprised laugh, “Richie? No way! He’s such a puke, though!”

Stan nodded and gave her shoulder a curt pat before turning to leave, as he turned to leave a flicker of light from the window caught his eyes. A cigarette bud went shooting to the ground as the figure - which Stan could only name to be Richie, swiftly got up and moved from the window, a storm of lights following his footsteps. He was only out of Stan’s sight for a moment before he came through the front door, face like a storm.

“Richie! We were just talking about you - hahaha - that sounded mean, not in a bad way! Just about how you’re the best for throwing a party for me. A party! How cool is that!” She laughed again and swayed into Stan slightly, who held her up while touching her as little as possible.

Richie gave Beverly a smile, a smile which Stan, even in his slightly inebriated state could recognize instantly as fake, “No problem Bevvie,” and without so much of a glance, he walked back into the party, the sudden volume of music when Richie opened the door just made the hallway seem even more desolate with its absence.

“I - I have to pee, real bad.” Beverly groaned, Stan nodded and led her to the bathroom, keeping the door slightly ajar in case anything happened.

After walking Beverly back into the party, Stan froze with the sight he met while walking into the kitchen in search of a soda. On the island counter stood a row of shots, six of them, with Richie’s hand circling the first one. Richie’s eyes immediately shot up to meet Stan’s and with an almost delirious smile, he lifted the shot glass to his face and tipped the clear liquid into his mouth. His body shuddered slightly as the taste met his tongue, and Stan felt himself shuddering too as Richie’s hand fell to the next shot and repeated the action. Stan felt as if the acidic liquid was being poured down his own throat as it began to ache. Stan looked around owlishly, to see if anyone else noticed how out of character this was for Richie, but no. He was the only one - even Mike was preoccupied with trying to get Bill to put Eddie down. Richie smoked and Richie drank, but Richie never got drunk. He never understood why until the previous weekend, Stan knew Richie didn’t want to end up like his Mother, and it sent an aching pain to his chest when Richie necked a third shot.
Stan couldn’t help but speak out, since no one else was even casting an eye in their direction, too preoccupied with their own antics, “Richie, cool it. It’s only ten o’clock, you’re going to pass out before midnight at this rate.”

Richie looked him directly in the eyes and took the final two shots without even blinking.

He couldn’t explain why Richie taking a row of shots for the explicit reason to get plastered made his chest tighten and his body feel cold, he should be encouraging it. It’s a birthday party and Richie wouldn’t be out of place if he was drunk, in fact, he would fit in a lot better after these shots. Something about Richie taking the fourth and fifth in rapid succession - with one in each hand made Stan want to leave, made him want to turn his back or close his eyes - and the cheer Richie let out after completing his own marathon of schnapps felt like a cry of defeat rather than victory, or maybe that was just the sound of his throat burning.

For whatever reason, Richie skidded off to jump at Bill, who crumpled to the ground instantly which resulted in a wrestling match. It looked a lot more like two fish flopping on a fishing deck but Stan watched lamely anyway as Bill limply tried to hit Richie in the face - catching his neck instead. The two scrapped for a while until Stan got bored of having to tell Richie to stop biting and he went off to grab the can of soda he intended to get minutes earlier. Stan hadn’t turned his back twenty seconds when Richie’s hands steered him away from the comforting plastic bottles of soda and towards the heavy glass bottle of alcohol.

“Richie, what are you doing?”

“Showing you a good time Stan, drink up, buddy.” Richie tried to hand Stan a full bottle of vodka and waved it under his nose, the smell of disinfectant was so strong it almost burnt his nostrils and Stan grabbed it out of Richie’s hand and softly put it back where it belonged. “Boo, don’t be a party pooper. Have another cider at least, ma’am.”

“I’m not drinking anymore, I’ve had too many as it is.”

Richie rolled his eyes, “There’s no such thing.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Well, not tonight there isn’t! C’mon, take the stick out of your ass for one night. Your soul won’t even leak out or anything - promise!”
Stan gave Richie a soft kick to the shin at the insult, he realised that he had a small window of opportunity and the retaliation died in his throat in exchange for a compromise, “Fine but only if you stick to soda for the next few hours.”

Richie swayed from side to side, weighing his options, “Fine, it’s a deal - I’ll make you a Bill Denbrough special, then.”

“What? Richie - no.”

“Too late! I’m pouring the vodka!”

“Riche - put it down.”

“Oh no! I accidentally put in too much, whoops!”

“Riche, I’m not afraid to choke you.”

Richie handed him the violent concoction and smiled out of the corner of his mouth, “Promise?”

Stan yanked the drink out of Richie’s hand, glaring at him as he took a swig of it. He tried his best not to let his disgust show on his face, it truly was a drink for animals. Stan briefly wondered what was wrong with Bill for this to be his drink of choice, but he didn’t get a chance to wonder for long before Richie was pulling him out the back door with a pack of cigarettes in his other hand.

The door shut behind them, the music muffled behind the door. It felt almost like stepping into a different planet, where the moon was bright and the air was like ice - cutting into Stan’s bare forearms and making him shiver. Stan watched Richie slide onto the grass, not seeming to care that it was damp, “I don’t remember me saying I would join you in the freezing cold for a smoke.”

Richie blinked several times at his lighter - trying to remember how to use it. The cold air had hit him hard - and the alcohol only pumped harder through his veins. Stan watched Richie whine as he tried flicking his lighter for a minute before Stan took the lighter out of Richie’s hands, “Hold still,” Stan crouched down to kneel beside him, holding his spare hand to Richie’s cheek, blocking the wind as he flicked his thumb down the striker wheel onto the fuel lever, a bright yellow flame instantly brushing against the tip of Richie’s cigarette. The reflection of the flame bounced off Richie’s glasses and made his face light up in a warm light. Richie sucked and within seconds his
cigarette was successfully lit - he let out a cheer and a breath of smoke drifted into the wind.

“I knew I didn’t need to ask - you’re still here aren’t you?” Richie grinned around his cigarette, cheeks raising his glasses up his face by a few centimetres.

Stan took a drink again - he wasn’t particularly thirsty, Stan didn’t take a drink just so the cup would hide his smile, why would he? “Shut up, Richie.” He mumbled.

Richie took a drag and let his wrist lazily sit on his upright knee, smiling into the sky with a face of delirium. “Stan…”

“Yes, Richie?”

“I have something to tell you… but it’s a -” Richie quickly looked around, as if someone had crept up on them to listen to their conversation, “it’s a secret.”

Stan nodded and decided to indulge in whatever nonsense was going to flow out of Richie’s mouth. They had only been outside a minute and the cold air had really played an effect on Richie’s sobriety (or lack thereof). “Go on.”

Richie laughed, “I know that you’re a -” Richie broke out into a fit of laughter - almost stubbing out his cigarette on his jeans, he began his sentence again, but only falling into the same fit of laughter. Stan sat patiently, his face like a statue, which only made Richie laugh even more. “Womanizer!”

Stan’s face twisted in confusion, “A what? Did you just call me a womanizer?”

“Y-yeah!” Richie laughed and somehow managed to take a drag between his giggle fits. “I always thought Mike would be the first one to bed a girl - besides me of course.”

Stan looked away from Richie, “I don’t understand what you mean, also if you mean sex - please just say ‘sex’.”

Richie barked out a short laugh before rolling his bottom lip between his teeth. Richie delicately
placed his cigarette on the grass, trying to avoid it getting damp before clumsily clambering onto Stan’s very own lap. Stan, who was a big fan of personal space began pushing Richie off but it was too late, Richie went dead weight and refused to budge for all Stan’s strength.

“I saw you kissing Beverly.”

Stan froze, even ceasing the actions of breathing for a few moments - he froze the way one would when their parents walk in on them doing something they *definitely* shouldn’t be doing. Stan wasn’t sure why he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and he tripped over his own tongue trying to explain what had happened to Richie before he gets the wrong idea.

“Shhh -” Richie placed a finger over Stan’s lips, which made him flinch long enough for Richie to speak over his words, “It’s fiiiiiiine. You don’t even gotta worry about it. Listen..” Richie firmly grasped the back of Stan’s head and brought their foreheads together, “You two are great for each other. I don’t know how long it’s been a thing or whatever but I hope she is what you need, Stan.”

Stan tried to move his head back but it only resulted in Richie dipping his head onto Stan’s shoulder, who let out a huff. His glasses were jabbing into his collarbone and he tried to jerk Richie’s head off his shoulder to no avail.

“Richie-”

“Best friends don’t keep secrets from each other, Stan. I even told you when I had my first wet dream, in great detail - even down to her cup size.”

“I really didn’t ask, though.”

“But I cared enough to tell you! And it was a small thing, but you wouldn’t even tell me a big thing! You keep big secrets from your best friend. That's preeeeetty shitty, Stan.”

“I didn’t ki-”

“No! Stan! You didn’t!” Richie whipped his head up to meet Stan’s eyes, Richie’s glasses were fogged up and Stan couldn’t even meet his eyes properly, he assumed Richie could barely see his face. “Beverly is your best friend now! I can’t believe I’ve been dumped to the side. I’m going to go drown my sorrows because my main man doesn’t even appreciate me and he just drops me… like a plate.”
“I’m actually lost in what this conversation is about.”

Richie huffed and went to slap Stan’s head, but missed and stumbled heavily in Stan’s lap - Stan quickly shot his hands out to Richie’s hips to stabilize him.

“I’m just telling you about how you’ve replaced me!”

“Richie -” Richie opened his mouth to speak, but Stan slapped a hand over his mouth and glared at him, “Let me speak, asshole. I didn’t kiss Beverly - she kissed me. I’m not dating Beverly nor do I want to date Beverly - so no, I’m not abandoning you, you’re still my best friend and you’re sitting outside crying in my lap over nothing.”

“Bmm beev lomphs tu?”

Stan grimaced and whipped his hand off Richie’s mouth, wiping the spit off on Richie’s t-shirt. Richie blinked at Stan, awaiting a response.

“I think we both know that I didn’t quite catch that.”

Richie dramatically huffed and rolled his eyes, “I said; but Bev likes you.”

“You’ve lost me. Where did you draw that conclusion?”

“Well she kissed you! Duh!”

Stan wondered for a moment, Richie wasn’t wrong, she did kiss him. But she also kissed Eddie on the hair, she’s kissed everyone’s cheeks and foreheads many times sober, Beverly wasn’t one to hold back on the kisses and Stan really didn’t think it was too far of a reach to say that with a lot of alcohol in her system, she kisses people on the mouths too. Stan may not have been the best at noticing people’s affections towards him - but he was fairly certain that Beverly didn’t harbour any feelings of the sort towards him.

“That was a platonic kiss, I’m sure.”

“What’s that?”
“Platonic means intimate but not romantic or sexual.”

“I get straight A’s I know what fuckin’...platonic means. How can you kiss platonically? That doesn’t make sense. That’s like… having platonic sex or casually sucking Bill’s dick as a friend, though.”

Stan shrugged, “I guess if you can kiss someone on the forehead platonically, you can kiss them on the mouth platonically too.”

Richie shifted in his lap, staring at him with wide eyes - his glasses were no longer fogged up - Richie was twisting Stan’s shirt in his hands, twisting tightly, then untwisting. A rapid pattern which was going to crease the fabric but before Stan had the chance to tell Richie to stop, the boy had surged forward and stole the words straight from his lips.

Richie moved his lips against Stan’s for a moment - while Stan, who’s eyes were wide open - moved to tell Richie to stop. At this moment, however, Richie had used it as an opportunity to slip his tongue in and explore Stan’s mouth. Stan froze - not out of shock or surprise - he just forgot how to move for a minute, in fact, the only thing that could move was his tongue as it traced Richie’s movements with such need that it had taken Stan aback.

Richie scooted himself closer into Stan’s lap and sighed into his mouth, a sigh of pleasure? Relief? Stan wasn’t sure - all he was sure about right now was that Richie was moving on top of his crotch and it wasn’t doing much to ease the images of the dirty dream that had plagued him all week, Stan found that in his inebriated state, he didn’t mind all too much and his hands found themselves in Richie’s hair - it had been combed, Stan noticed - holding Richie’s head to keep him from moving away. It was when Stan’s tongue had found its way into Richie’s mouth did Richie pull away - face flushed and pupils blown.

Neither of them moved for what felt like an eternity, Stan’s hands were still in Richie’s hair and Richie was still sitting directly on top of Stan’s growing erection, Stan could only pray that Richie didn’t notice it. If it weren’t for a loud bang that came from inside the house to startle them, they might have stayed like that all night. But they didn’t and Richie moved off Stan’s lap and picked his cigarette off the ground, relighting it on his own this time with shaking hands.

“So platonic kissing is a thing?” Richie asked from behind his cigarette. He glanced at Stan in trepidation.

Stan swallowed thickly and nodded, taking a drink of his almost forgotten vodka blackcurrant, “Yes, I suppose it is.”
This may seem like a filler but as slow as it seemed, it has a purpose!
sorry for taking fckin... 40 years to update x

Stan wasn’t sure if anyone was alive today. His friends/co-workers may be moving, but lifelessly - as if their bodies are being dragged along the stage by a lazy puppeteer. Bill was definitely in the worst shape, not only having the least sleep - since he kept insisting on walking three miles to get a Chinese at three in the morning, but Bill had the most to drink. Stan knew for sure that Bill wasn’t even close to being sober when he stumbled through the door at 7:35 - late but thankfully Mike had drove him in and started his shift early. Stan considered sending Bill home only an hour later when he almost poured the pancake batter into the fryer’s boiling oil instead of the griddle.

Stan took a table’s order from Mike’s hands and rushed out the doors to deliver them - it was an oddly busy day. It’s not often that the Diner is packed out - but for whatever ungodly reason - it was full of families today, with complicated orders and dietary restrictions that even Mike’s patience was wearing thin. Normally, Stan would consider a rush of patronage a good thing - more money means better equipment, ingredients and better Christmas bonuses. Today wasn’t a normal day though. Everyone was barely holding their contents of their stomachs, the last time Stan saw Eddie was an hour ago, he was leaning over the bin shaking with Ben gently patting his pack, gesturing a glass of water to him. Beverly hadn’t even turned up - but it was her birthday, so Stan just marked it down as an authorized absence and kept quiet, hoping his boss wouldn’t enquire too much.

Mike was rushing around making sure everyone had enough water and painkillers to help them through what could possibly be the longest shift of their life. Stan himself wasn’t overly unwell - sure, he was tired and a little nauseated at the sight of food but besides that, he felt fine. That roughly translated to Stan and Ben (who had only had a beer and a fruity cocktail by persuasion of Richie) doing the majority of the work out front. It wasn’t easy, given that they were short staffed and the staff that they did have were basically walking zombies. Richie had offered to help but Stan insisted that he help Mike and Bill - even if he did prove to be more of a hazard than a help, Mike would appreciate someone looking after Bill while he cooked up the orders.

Stan - much like everyone else - wasn’t in a particularly good mood, they weren’t expecting this rush and therefore they weren’t prepared for it. Stan had spent a generous twenty minutes on the phone with the company that supplies their coffee beans, requesting an order as soon as possible as they had went through four times as much coffee as usual and were running down to the last bag. The woman on the phone wasn’t giving him much wriggle room with it - telling him that they would deliver on Wednesday, as usual. He tried arguing - in the most polite and respectful way possible - to move the delivery closer but it was a no-go and Stan knew that they would disappoint the few regulars that they had by the lack of coffee. Richie had suggested to just use instant - ‘it all
tastes like shit anyway’. Stan began to think that might be the only solution.

It seemed like such a insignificant thing - running out of coffee beans, but it really was a burden he now had on his shoulders - having to ring his boss and try to come up with a solution before having to turn away customers.

Stan was in the middle of making a pot of tea for the table who’s food he had just delivered when Richie piped up behind him, “Hey, do you think I can make Eddie barf by showing him my bacne?”

Stan pushed past him to grab a saucer for the milk, “If Eddie vomits he’ll have to go home - self-inflicted or not and he won’t be back in for forty-eight hours.”

Richie picked at a food stain on his very much dirty apron, “It’ll be funny though, he hates puking. I think he’d rather lie in bed sick for a month than vomit as much as an ounce.”

“Don’t even try it, not today Richie - look how busy we are.” Stan gestured to the row of people sitting at the bar area, usually there would only be a trucker or two making a pitstop, but today Stan had to get the extra stools from the back store to reach the demand of patrons.

Richie shrugged, “Sure thing, boss,” and went back to helping Mike, who Stan saw through the windows on the swinging doors was desperately trying to tray up more bacon into the oven before they ran out - which would cause nothing less than utter pandemonium.

Stan delivered the teapot to his table, a pretty nuclear family of four. He did the usual spiel that he’s said out of work several times out of habit.

“Is everything okay for you?” He asked with his lilted customer service voice - his voice broke in the middle of the sentence and he felt his cheeks glow a little in embarrassment. The Mother nodded, not meeting his eyes for more than a second before going back to helping her child cut up their pancakes - which were egg-free - Stan wasn’t sure how Mike pulled that off but they looked amazing. He recognised the children - he’s pretty sure this is the family of one of the evening workers, he remembers seeing the toddler running around, followed by one of his staff members trying to get their little sister under control. He nodded and fixed his apron, turning to leave the family in peace when he caught their other child, a pretty round boy probably around eight ogling their gumball machine - to which Richie has a lifetime ban after eating $7 worth of candy in one day which resulted in him puking technicolour into Eddie’s sink - who also began puking.

Stan met his eyes and squatted so he was at eye-level, he noticed the boy was eating a bowl of fruit and his mother was watching Stan with sharp eyes - like a bear warning animals around their cub,
“Would you like one?”

The boy’s eyes lit up and he shot his head to his Mom and Dad, not even waiting for a response before nodding, “Yes please, Mr. Stanley!”

“Well, maybe if you finish your breakfast, Mommy and Daddy will let you have one - and I’ll get you one for free, okay?” Stan patted the boy on the shoulder to seal the deal and he almost lost his balance at the sound of the metal-legged chair being pushed against the linoleum floor. He quickly stood up to the Mother lifting the toddler from her chair and grabbing the other boy’s hand to jerk him from his chair. She knocked over a glass of milk which began to spill all over the floor and began to crawl towards her handbag. Stan moved to pick it up before it was ruined - and the woman let go of her son and slapped his hand out of the way, yanking her bag off the floor.

“Last time I was here an effeminate boy tried to lure my boy into eating candy, making childish jokes with him and giving him a free brownie.” The boy looked down at the ground, eyes brimming with tears and his face glowing red, “I know what my older son says about him - that Tozier child. It’s sick that anyone would let someone like that around children.”

The entire diner was watching them now, the commotion drawing a lot of attention in such a small space. Some were trying to hide their interest, choosing to watch them through the mirror rather than blatantly staring. The majority were sat there, coffee halfway to their mouths watching this free show of entertainment. Stan couldn’t help feeling as though he was under a microscope - he wanted to rush to Richie’s defense but he was in work - he couldn’t cuss out the customer like he wanted to. That not only would potentially get him fired, but it would put his own sexuality up for discussion - which it isn’t. He’s a Rabbi’s son - a rumour of him being gay - or even being friends with someone people were convinced was of that persuasion - would not just damage his own life - his entire family and his Father’s career would be in jeopardy. Stan tried to ground himself as he had to tread this situation delicately - it was pretty difficult considering he was sweating more than he ever has in his entire life.

“It’s customary for us to offer children a gumball from the machine - anyone of us would had offered it but I apologise if it has made you or your family uncomfortable or doubted that our motivation is anything other than to provide you with a pleasant experience.” He saw Ben give a thumbs up from the corner of his eye, and he let out a shaky breath as subtle as he possibly could.

Her face didn’t shift for a single moment, she didn’t want to hear any of it - she wasn’t looking for any sort of conflict resolution, “Consider this his notice. He won’t be coming into work tonight or ever again. I don’t want that boy turning my boy into a queer, and I bet once word gets out about his persuasion - you’ll find yourself with no staff and no customers. No one wants their child to be a target.” She spat the words out as if it was beneath her to even do so, and she dragged her children out of the Diner, her husband - who hadn’t seemed to even notice the commotion, finished his tea before following her out, dropping a $5 bill on the table.

Stan watched them leave, unmoving before realising everyone’s gaze was focused on him. He quickly gave the $5 to Ben - who was at the till - and began wiping up the mess with a clean rag -
the milk had made the egg-free pancakes soggy. He realised he couldn’t clean with all the plates on the table, so he balanced all four plates and the tea pot on his arms and expertly moved between tables and out to the back. He hadn’t realised he was almost having a panic attack until he was out of the public eye. He quickly set the food down beside Eddie, who took a glance at the food before groaning and holding his head above the bin. He hadn’t even noticed that Richie was loading the dishwasher until he spoke, startling him slightly.

“You alright, captain?”

Stan nodded but he knew that for Richie it wasn’t even a little bit convincing. His eyes weren’t focused on anything in particular and his hands were fidgeting with his apron, creating small creases which Stan knew would annoy him later.

Richie frowned and looked over to Eddie, who had his face buried in his hands. He moved over to Stan and walked him into the walk-in fridge, somehow unnoticed by Mike and Bill. The cold air pricked at Stan’s face and brought him out of his head a little as he began to wipe at his arms - which had been covered in milk from carrying the plates. He hadn’t even noticed.

“What happened? Did someone sneeze on you or something?”

Stan rubbed his eyes and shook his head, trying to relieve some of the stress he knew that his face was carrying, “Had an incident with a customer.”

“Okay? Did she call you ugly? It’s okay Stan - you know we all think you’re the prettiest girl on the whole playground!”

“Funny.”

Richie leaned up against the shelf, almost knocking over a carton of eggs, “What’s the issue then?”

“Her kid works here - I think it’s Gary, you know the kid with the lip ring, he works nights.” Stan didn’t really want to tell Richie the gory details, it took a lot for Richie’s feelings to be hurt but hearing someone speak about you like that couldn’t be easy, “She quit on his behalf.”

Richie pulled a face, “She couldn’t wait until tomorrow? He was gonna let me borrow his Indiana Jones boxset. Fuck - now I’m going to have to rent it.”
Stan gave a half hearted smile and moved to open the door, he had to go back and clean the mess - Ben couldn’t run the place on his own no matter how competent he was. Richie wasn’t having any of it, however, and quickly moved himself between Stan and the door, blocking his way out, “Richie, it’s busy I need to go back out -”

“No, you’re going to stand here and either tell me what happened or get pneumonia and die.”

“So it’s between leaving this mortal realm and talking to you? Geez, don’t make it so tempting.”

“Fuck off, you’d miss me in hell.”

“Jews don’t have a concept of hell.”

Richie tilted his head, “So I’m going to heaven?”

“You’re not Jewish.” Stan replied.

“Can I convert?” Richie looked seriously interested, which made Stan roll his eyes.

“You’ll have to get your dick cut off.”

Richie physically recoiled, “Okay no, let’s stop that conversation right there! Tell me what happened ASAP so I can get out of here and away from that image as quick as me and my massive dong can.”

Stan straightened out his hat and shook his head, trying to get past Richie, “Richie, I don’t have time -”

Richie grabbed Stan’s arms suddenly, as if it was life or death, “Is it my fault?” Richie’s face was serious, angry almost - Stan could sense that he was starting to feel frustrated with him dodging all his questions. Stan couldn’t really wrap his head around what Richie was asking him.

“What? What do you mean?”

“Have I made you upset or stressed out? Has anything I’ve done in the past … I don’t know - twenty-four hours fucked with your head.”
“Um… yes? Fucking with people is kind of your main personality trait. It’s not as quirky as you think.” Stan knew what Richie was talking about, he was asking him if he regretted what happened last night. Stan knew that other people might have found it … weird. But it was platonic - lots of people do it, it’s not an uncommon practice, according to Beverly at least.

“Stan, I swear to God, I will piss in your bedsheets.”

“No! Okay! The customer, that woman - started going on about how you’re queer and dirty and trying to lure her fucking… kid into homosexuality. Gary must’ve told her and God - what if he tells people in school? We get pushed around enough. It’s shit, Richie. I wanted to defend you but I couldn’t! Not in front of everyone, and people would think I’m that way inclined and that would ruin our family, our temple, our congregation.”

“You’re upset over that?” Richie laughed, Stan punched him in the arm. “Sorry! It’s just - Stan, I really couldn’t give the littlest shit what people say about me. It’d be difficult to be ‘that way inclined’ if I didn’t have thick skin. Besides, I did hit on Gary a bit so I guess this on me, huh?”

Stan rubbed his eyes, “I felt bad, though. I should’ve defended your honour.”

“My what?!” Richie wrapped an arm around Stan’s shoulders, “My dearest Prince is defending thine Bisexual honour! ‘Let the Tozier boy touch boobies and balls! Or thou shalt feel thine wrath!’”

“You’re a jerk, you know that?” Stan smiled, shrugging his hand off his shoulders.

“You’re favourite jerk, though!” Richie planted a kiss on Stan’s cheek before darting out of the walk-in, almost colliding with Mike, who was carrying a box of frozen burgers.

Stan softly wiped the trace of saliva Richie had left on his cheek, and stepped to the side to let Mike in. He washed his hands and got back to work, the stress had been lifted off his shoulders and he worked until it was time to clock out. There were no further issues that day. Richie and Stan decided to go back to Stan’s to help clean his room, Stan had woke up late for work and had to hide all the evidence of the party in his room, which was giving him a headache just thinking about.
“Can you recycle candy wrappers?” Richie held up a small piece of pink bubblegum wrapper, no bigger than his finger.

“No, it’s usually coated with a thin layer of plastic.”

“Isn’t plastic recyclable?”

“Yeah, but not that one - or at least when it’s been added onto paper. I think.”

Richie nodded and tossed the paper into one of the bin bags, the other, which was to be used for recycling - was sitting by Stan, who sifting through a ridiculously huge pile of bottles, throwing the empty vodka and beer bottles into the recycling bin. “Beverly really enjoyed the party, huh?”

Richie smirked as he pulled on the elastic strap of a small white bra, shooting it at Stan like a rubber band.

Stan peeled the bra off his shoulder with disgust and folded it, leaning over the bin bag to set it neatly on his pillow. “Yeah, I think she left in a hurry, she left her jacket and purse here too,” Stan glanced over at her waterproof jacket, which was folded neatly on his bed. Not that it had been left like that, Stan had picked it off of his floor and folded it after making his bed. He treated other people’s items with respect.

“Reckon your parents coming home spooked her?”

“Probably, she didn’t expect them to come home to get ready for work and rushed out, or at least that what it looks like.”

“Think she went out the window?”

“No, only you do that.”

Richie shrugged, “She would though.”

Stan thought about it for a moment before replying, yes - Beverly probably would. Both her and Richie are as reckless as each other.
Stan dumped an avalanche of beer and cider cans into the bin bag, which resulted in a wince from Richie, who wasn’t expecting the noise. They continued cleaning in peace, Stan methodologically moving from one area to another, picking up cans and bottles and food wrappers and putting them in one of the two bin bags. Next he would check the area for any stickiness, if any soda had spilt on his carpet he would have to steam it - which would prove difficult as the steamer is very loud and there’s no way he would be finished steaming the carpet when his parents got home - even if they were working late tonight. Next, he would pick up any small debris, such as confetti or chips - he wasn't just going to let the vacuum take the brute force - what was he, a monster who wanted a broken filter? Then he would dust, then if applicable, varnish. He wouldn’t go as far as to disinfect, there was no need - although he knew all too well that Eddie would disagree. There’s a reason Stan didn’t even attempt to ask Eddie for assistance.

He glanced over at Richie who - quite frankly - was all over the place. He picked up a crinkled paper bag and shoved it into the wrong bin bag. Then he would move more cans and debris out of the way to dust, then going back to somewhere else that had caught his attention. Richie seemed to find the concept of focusing on one thing at a time foreign, like a toddler just running around the room touching as many things as possible. Stan just shook it off, it was better than nothing.

Stan had let Richie clock out at the same time as him, despite Richie’s shift not being near finished, which caused a mild uproar from Eddie, who looked like he was in the second stage of decomposition. Richie just threw a weiner at him and told him to ‘stick it where the sun don’t shine, buddy,’. A HR nightmare, granted, but Eddie visibly paled and went back to his work, shaking his head at a burnt pan and scrubbing it furiously. Stan presumed he was probably imagining scrubbing Richie’s smug smile off of his face. He’s been there.

They cycled home together, Stan’s dirty apron (Richie insisted it hadn’t even been worn, despite Stan pointing out the ink marks around the pocket) folded neatly in his backpack, alongside his spare apron and the keys to the Diner. Richie kept his apron on for the ride home, the string at the back almost getting caught in the wheel several times. The heavy winter sun threatened to blind them as they cycled down the winding avenues and backstreets Stan had led them, but they had got there - noses bright red and a lot of shivering beneath their coats, but they had got there.

They hadn’t talked much on the way over, Richie did his usual trying to swerve into Stan, but besides that, there wasn’t all that much discussion happening. Richie noticed, but Richie always noticed when there was silence, he always felt an almost compulsive need to fill it.

“So…” Richie’s voice cracked slightly, “Gary’s Mom really did piss in your cornflakes, huh?”

Stan groaned and rubbed his eyes, “Ugh, Richie - I just wanna forget about it.”

Richie shrugged and moved a full bottle of some bright neon liquid out of his way as he scavenged for more empty cans, “I get it though, rude customers can be absolute badgers. Badgers R Us, badger central, breaker-breaker we have a code 4-24 badger breakout - please respond.”
Stan looked up at him in confusion, “Badgers?”

“Yeah like… dickheads, annoying cunts - you get it.” Stan threw a rolled up pair of socks at Richie’s face, it hit his face and fell to the ground unceremoniously.

“No using the C-word in the house, you ‘badger’.”

“Oh, sorry your majesty. Holy place of the Lord, is it?”

“He’s always watching, you know. You’re never safe.”

“Smite me.” Richie kicked the socks back over to Stan, who picked them up and delicately placed them back into his drawer. They were red socks, so they had to go between his black socks and his orange socks. He shifted a few pairs of black socks over to make room so that it would be aligned right, “You should’ve just kicked her out, save the arguing.”

“I couldn’t just kick her out, Richie.”

“I would’ve.”

“Which is why you haven’t got promoted.”

“Fuck off, the world isn’t ready for my unreal management skills. The world would be cowering at my feet, CEOs would be slitting their wrists in fear of losing their companies to me. I’ll be the world’s first ever trillionaire.”

“World’s first ever famous loudmouth.”

“Shut up, that’s Gary’s Mom.”

“She’s not famous though.”

“She’s our most famous fussy customer. Mike loves seeing her coming.”
“Our famed bit-terrible person more like.”

“Bitch? Were you going to say bitch?”

Stan flipped Richie the finger and went back to tying off the bin bag he’d filled. Richie huffed and let go of his bag, it hitting the floor with a heavy sound of glass. He found his way to Stan and dropped himself behind him, so they were sitting back-to-back. The warmth from Richie’s back bled into him a little, it was almost therapeutic. Stan could hear the faint noise of a fingernail on tin. It echoed around the room, seeming to bounce on the walls.

“You get too hyped up about what people say, you know.”

Stan’s back straightened, “And how do you suppose that?”

“You’ve been walking around like someone just gutted your cat all day. Just because some square was being a bitch. You’re gonna meet a buncha rude-ass fuckers in your life, Stan - no point being all mopey and woe-is-me when you do.”

“You’re the only rude-ass fucker I know.”

“Har-har-har,” Richie sarcastically retorted, “I’m being serious. Why you gotta let someone like that put you in a mood?”

Stan sighed and relaxed into Richie, hiking his knees up and resting his elbows on them, “It’s just - I don’t know - she was so unnecessarily hostile it was unnerving -”

“I know like who the fuck cares if your kid gets diabetes! Let him have the candy!” Richie fisted the air.

“What I was going to say,” Richie lowered his arm, “she was so hostile about you. About the very thought of her son being near someone who’s gay. She spat it out as if she was talking about a criminal or a pedofile - like with that amount of putrid hatred, I just can’t understand it. I get that some people find it unnatural - hell it is unnatural - but so are radios, and planes and cars and no one has problems with those. No one actively hates them or thinks they’re the work of sin.”
“She probably thought she was talking about a paedophile, to be fair.” Stan heard the pop and fizz of Richie opening a can.

“Did you just open a beer?” Stan felt Richie nod his head, his messy hair tickling the back of Stan’s neck, “What do you mean?”

Richie swallowed the mouthful of beer and tapped on his can nonchalantly, as if this was a conversation he needed to put little thought into, “Gay people usually are pedos, that’s what they think, at least. Probably thought we were fattening up her kid because I simply just cannot resist some glorious love handles.”

“People don’t really think that though, it’s not the thirties anymore.” Stan held a little doubt in his voice.

Richie let out a laugh, not necessarily sour but not particularly sweet either, “I’ve been called it dozens of times. Oh, little sheltered one, you have a lot to learn about the cruel mistress we call society.” Stan glanced over at Richie, who was taking another drink of his beer. His movement must’ve caught Richie’s eyes as he lifted his attention from his drink to Stan. “Do you want one? It’s five o’clock somewhere my man. Unless yer en Eireland! It’s alwaes foive o’clack there so it is!”

“If I say yes will you promise to not do that God-awful accent again?” Richie laughed and reached across to a can of beer which had been abandoned by his dresser. Probably from Stan hurriedly clearing out the kitchen and dumping it on his bedroom floor before he was late for work. Richie worked his finger under the ring and popped it open, handing it to Stan.

The pair sat in silence for a moment, in the midst of a half-tidy, half-messy room with the wind dancing through the room every so-often and sending a shiver down the boys’ spines.

“There’s no need to get your knickers in a twist about it, Stan. Really.” Stan sighed and nodded, he knew he was being a little overly sensitive about the entire situation but the way the woman was so overtly disgusted by the thought of someone who was gay or that way inclined was making his stomach sink every time he thought about it. He was a religious man for the most part, sure. And he recognizes that in Leviticus it’s recognized as a sin, but only God and servants of God can judge. Stan has no authority to judge anyone for their sins and neither do the awful people of Derry. “I’m used to it by now. Hell, why do you think this handsome and charismatic devil wound up with you sad sack of losers?”

Stan took a small drink and shrugged, “Always assumed it was because you are the personification of tackiness. Do people at school really know about it?”
Richie shrugged, “At school? Those assholes barely know how to wipe the shit off their own asscheeks nevermind knowing anything about me. They hear rumours and they think a lot of things. Just so happened that this rumour wasn’t completely wrong - not that I’m telling them that.”

“I suppose they do always call us a bunch of queers…”

Richie laughed, “Yeah, I got my head flushed in the toilets outside Gym one day because I said one of the guys off the basketball team had good form.”

“You know what good form is?”

“Not a fucking notion, his ass just looked great.” Stan and Richie had a chuckle at that. Stan felt oddly at ease in his messy room, with Richie’s hair tickling his neck.

“Hey, Richie?” Richie made a grunt in response, grabbing for another beer, “Want to watch a movie?” Richie made another grunt, a happier grunt.

So Stan stuck on a movie while he and Richie finished up the cleaning, it only took about twenty minutes but by then they were both ready to relax. They were lying on the bed, the TV tilted on the dresser so they could see it from their viewpoint on Stan’s single bed. Richie wanted to lie on the floor, but Stan pointed out to him, why would he have a bed if not to lie on? The floor was spotless, all of Stan’s possessions were in their rightful spots and the house had been vacuumed. Richie had taken care in ensuring that the bin bags were in the wheelie bins and that there was definitely no stray cans laying around the house.

There was only one problem, which Richie had been so keen on pointing out, there was still a fair bit of alcohol left. About a dozen cans of beer, a couple stray ciders and a half bottle of what appeared to be an expensive brand of tequila. Richie stares at the collection, longingly throughout a good portion of the movie. Stan rolled his eyes, “You’re not having another. You’ve already had two.”

Richie fell into the bed in a huff, “You’re not my real Dad!”

Stan gave in and reached down for a beer for Richie and a cider for himself - he recognized that this wasn’t something that he would normally do, in fact, Stan wasn’t really one for partaking in drinking at all, but he figured that after a day like that he deserved it. Not to mention that the quicker that this alcohol is gone - the better. Stan knew that Richie wouldn’t take it home as his
Mom would probably indulge herself. Stan kind of assumed it was best not to ask - if Richie could’ve taken it home, he would’ve.

Stan watches Richie for a moment, gulping down his drink as if it was the last one he would ever have, dribbles of beer running down his chin and dripping onto his creased t-shirt. His hair was in disarray and his glasses were crooked - as usual. Stan looked at Richie, his messy clothes, his mismatched socks and was expecting himself to have a need to fix it. He was waiting for his mind to try and force him to brush out Richie’s hair and fix his glasses and basically just change his entire outfit, but no. Not today, at least. Today Richie’s wonky glasses were merely as they were - wonky. His mismatched socks were nothing more and nothing less as a bold fashion statement. And the beer running down his chin? Just plain gross.

Stan looked around his room, his door wasn’t just closed right and he could spot a dirty smudge of god-knows-what on his doorknob. The string on his curtain was wrapped around itself and swung left and right with the breeze from his open window. He looked down at Richie’s shoes which were placed delicately beside his bed, the laces were tied wrong and they were facing the bed, not the door. All these things Stan had noticed, but he had to look for them. He found himself seeking out a reason to be irritated, but there was none - because even though all these ticks would have normally sent his mind crazy. He just took them as is. He knew they were there and the existed in the same way the moon does - you can look at it, and see that it exists, but it does nothing more and nothing less than that. Without the moon, we would be simply that, without the moon. The dirt on the doorknob or Richie’s shoes are nothing more than that, just what they are - existing the way that they were meant to.

Stan felt relaxed, for the first time in a while. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was toying with his head. Or maybe it was Richie, who was so content in being unperfect that Stan could stare in awe at him for a week. Stan realised it was beginning to get dark, which meant that it was coming time for Richie to return home before it was impossible to see clearly. The thought of being in his home - which had been previously full of his friends laughing and dancing and having fun - alone made him feel almost scared. He had been left home alone when his parents were working late many times before, but since he had a taste of companionship on those nights, it felt almost too bitter to let them go.

“Richie, do you want to stay over tonight?” The words were out of his mouth before he had really even thought about them. He didn’t really need to though, Richie was always a welcome addition to the Uris household.

“Sure, let’s get hammered.” Well, that wasn't exactly what Stan had in mind, but if needs must.

“Sure, I’m not taking any tequila though.”

“Cool, double tequila shots for Stan, got it.” Richie nodded as he jumped off the bed and waltzed to the kitchen, as if Stan’s home was as familiar as his own. Stan thinks back to the times that his parents had invited Richie over for dinner after the boys were out playing all day. He always
wondered why they only ever invited Richie over for dinner - maybe his parents had been more observant of his friend’s homelife than he ever had. The small inkling of guilt was soon washed away when Richie came back into the room with two shot glasses in hand.

He poured them both a shot of tequila and he had hit is back before Stan had even had the chance to smell his own, he really wasn’t a fan of tequila at all - or any spirits at that, but Richie had already downed his - and Stan wasn’t going to break the tit-for-tat rule. So he knocked the shot back and swallowed it as quickly as possible, trying to get the liquid out of his mouth as quickly as possible. He coughed as his throat burned. “That was disgusting. How do people actually like this stuff?”

Richie laughed at Stan’s reaction and mocked him before grabbing himself another beer, “I don’t think anyone actually enjoys drinking it. It’s like coffee - all the adults have basically peer-pressured themselves into thinking it’s good because it’s a thing adults drink.”

Stan scrunched his face up, “Coffee is pretty gross.”

Richie nodded, taking a swig of his beer and putting his attention back to the movie. Stan wasn’t even sure what part of the movie they were at, his attention had been all over the place for the past while. All he knew was, after a good ten minutes or so, he began to feel the familiar lightheadedness that he had felt last night. He only had two drinks though, surely he can’t be feeling the effects of alcohol already?

“You up for another shot, my guy? I know you pretend to hate this alcohol stuff but I know you secretly live for it.” Richie hadn’t even gave Stan time to respond before he was pouring another shot and Stan didn’t even have time to conceptualize what was happening before he swallowed the shot. He just took whatever Richie gave him to drink without question. He swiped a bit of the clear liquid off his lip and hissed as it burnt a papercut he never even knew he had.

“Richie - I think I’m drunk?”

Richie stared at Stan as if he had grown an extra head before his face twisted into somewhere between shock and horror, “Please, tell me you had breakfast this morning because I know for a fact you were too busy for your lunch break today.”

Stan thought for a moment before shaking his head, “No I woke up late.” The world seemed to continue to move slightly after shaking his head.
Richie dragged his hand down his face, before handing Stan back his half-empty can of cider, “That’s your last drink of the night, you lightweight. I’m going to order pizza to help sober you up while I have a smoke before you puke all over the beautiful carpet I spent thirty-five years cleaning. Capice?”

“G-got it.” Stan took the drink and relaxed into the pillow, trying to focus on the blurry moving people on the TV as Richie, clearly a little tipsy himself, clambered over him to get to the house phone in the kitchen. Stan could hear soft *thud* followed by Richie cursing and calling the coffee table a lot of names. Stan cradled his lukewarm cider as he heard Richie give the pizza order down the phone, listing off Stan’s address with as much ease as Stan.

It wasn’t moments later when Richie bounced back onto Stan’s bed, a smoky air following him. “You were quick,” Stan noted, words slurring slightly.

“I realised I still had enough tequila left for a couple more shots and what sort of fool am I to pass that up, Stan?”

“I guess a pretty big - uhhhhhh- fool.”

“Good attempt there, bravo.” Richie remarked as he lifted the tequila and took a shot directly from the bottle, Stan watched in a mix of horror and amusement - surely Richie was going to puke. Richie hissed as he took the final shot, and Stan swore he saw him gag a bit before he grabbed the cider out of Stan’s loose grip and took a swig of that, swirling it around in his mouth. Richie groaned as Stan told him to put the bottle in the recycling bin - which had already been taken outside. He did as he was instructed, and came back with a red face and less stability in his step. What was it about going out in the cold that made your alcohol hit you like a train?

They lay there for several minutes, Richie draped over Stan’s legs and Stan sinking into the pillows, watching the movie. Stan could see Richie swaying every so often, trying to keep his head balanced on his hand - or maybe it was Stan that was swaying. Either way, someone in this room is most definitely not sober.

The sky was pitch black and there was no sound bar the soft revving of cars driving past and the so familiar static sound of Stan’s hand-me-down television. The movie was coming to a close soon, if Stan remembers right. He wonders briefly what they were going to watch next before giving up on the train of thought - Richie would surely pick something half decent. Stan felt Richie squirming over his legs for a moment before laying still. Stan assumed that Richie was just trying to get comfy on top of Stan’s bony knees. That was until Richie had repeated the action about five more times and Stan finally barked out, “What are you squirming so much for?!?”
To Stan’s surprise, Richie shot up like a rocket and looked him dead in the eyes. Stan straightened up in the pillows, wondering what was up with Richie, but he fell back into the pillows when Richie grabbed his face and drove their lips together for the second time that weekend. Stan’s heart starting speeding in his chest as Richie slowly worked their lips together - and after Richie was sure Stan wasn’t going to pull away, he climbed on top of his best friend and held his face, his pinky finger occasionally making contact with his eyebrow.

Stan, although in a state of shock, couldn’t help the fact that he was working his lips alongside Richie’s and instinctively pushing his body up to get closer to him. He felt the softness of Richie’s tongue pass into his mouth and he couldn’t help but give in to Richie’s mouth. The feeling of Richie’s mouth on his, and the closeness of their bodies made Stan’s arms break out in goosebumps. The dizzyingly violent taste of tequila bounced between their tongues and the taste of cheap cigarettes only ceased as a reminder to who Stan was kissing. If the feeling of Richie’s hair tickling his face, or Richie’s fucking knee an inch away from his crotch wasn’t enough - the taste of Richie was dancing along his tongue and into his stomach - not like a fire or a flame - more akin to the soft amber glow of a cigarette.

As Richie moved into Stan - pushing him further into the mattress - Stan could almost push dirty thoughts from his head. Almost. He found himself grabbing onto Richie’s creased shirt for dear life - as if the shirt itself was stealing the oxygen from his lungs. He traced his hands up to Richie’s collarbone and with a touch as delicate as a feather - danced his pointer finger along it. It felt oddly intimate - the knots that were winding in Stan’s stomach only tightened - he was afraid he might choke.

Stan was ripped almost violently from his internal fixation on his best friend, when he felt a soft, tentative nip at his lip. It wasn’t sharp or particularly painful - but it was something. It was a gateway into something a lot darker, a lot drunker and a lot of things that he and Richie were not. Best friends don’t bite each other like that. They don’t leave bruises or anything like that.

Stan jerked from Richie’s mouth and held the spot Richie had toyed with under his finger, looking down at the space - or lack thereof - between him and Richie.

“H-hey, Richie?” Stan’s voice cracked a little unexpectedly and he cringed inwardly at how nervous he sounded.

“What?”

“This isn’t going to make things weird, right?” Richie sat up a bit so he could focus a little better on Stan’s face. Stan could feel his face prickling with heat - he could only imagine that his face was glowing red, which didn’t really help his impression of trying to look cool and collected, “Like - we’re best friends. This isn’t weird at all?”
Richie tilted his head to the side, “Making out with your bro? Nah, totally cool. Best way to spend an afternoon if I’m honest.” Richie caught a glimpse of the utterly unamused Stan and rolled his eyes dramatically, “Listen - simple science. If you make out with me - just for kicks, funsies - whatever - then when you go to make out with someone you actually care about, a girl or girlfriend situation, then you’ll not completely suck. Do you hear the gospel I’m preaching?”

Stan wasn’t completely convinced, “We’re drunk.” Stan murmured, meeting a face of confusion on Richie’s face, “People do weird stuff all the time drunk. It doesn’t mean anything, people shove fireworks up their ass when they’re drunk - it doesn’t make a face on their character though.” Richie stared blankly at Stan for a moment, almost as if he was looking to say something - he didn’t though. He just fixed his glasses and moved back onto his heels, as if to move off of Stan. Stan held him in place though, fingers catching the loop of his baggy jeans.

“I - uh - I mean,” Stan coughed, having a little difficulty finding his words, “We don’t have to stop.”

And like that, Richie moved swiftly back into Stan’s mouth - as if any longer away from it would have physically hurt him. They moved together with a little more confidence, their mouths clashing with a little more force, and small breathy noises escaping into the room from their open mouthed-kisses in harmony with the static of the VHS tape needing to be rewinded. Stan slipped his tongue inside Richie’s mouth and felt Richie’s lips move slightly into the form of a smile, before grabbing Stan’s face with a certain authoritative glee that Stan didn’t dare object to.

He could feel what he could only deduce to be Richie’s boner pressing against his own groin - not intentionally, or so he thinks. Richie isn’t grinding on him or humping him or anything, he’s just moving through Stan’s mouth and brain like a cunning snake, slipping through him and toying with his head. Stan could feel the whispers of his first and only wet dream licking at his consciousness.

He could almost feel Richie sucking marks into his skin and toying with him, playing with him in such lewd ways that he blushes to think that his mind even conjured up the image. He felt an urge for it, to feel Richie against him. It was natural - of course - he was in the midst of puberty with someone lying on top of him - what else would his hormones do?

In his mind, Stan knew he wanted more than that - he wanted to feel intimate with his best friend in a way that would only make sense to him and Richie. No one else on earth had a friendship as inconsistent and riveting as them, and Stan wanted everyone to know. He and Richie weren’t like everyone else - they balanced each other in such a perfect way that Stan knew that it had been nothing short of fate - a cruel fate, albeit when Richie was in a mischievous way, but they seemed to dance around each other perfectly in harmony without any need for choreography.
Stan groaned into Richie’s mouth as he moved his body closer to Stan, the two were almost moulding together at this point - and both of them were nothing more than hormonal messes, needing the touch of each other liked frenzied starved dogs. They were grinding into each other - hoping that the other wouldn't notice, doing anything to relieve the ball of tension in their stomachs. Stan gripped at Richie’s hair and prayed to God to turn a blind eye on his current sinning.

Stan couldn’t take it anymore - he needed more than kissing, his body was on fire in a way that he had never experienced before. Without something more, Stan felt as though he was going to faint.

“R-Richie, I need-”

And as Stan’s luck would have it, the doorbell rang throughout the empty home - cutting through the two boys’ moans and exertion. Richie blinked at the closed door, almost as though he had forgotten where he was. He fixed his glasses and attempted to tame his hair, as if Stan’s desperate grappling hadn’t made it frizzy beyond redemption.

“Pizza, it’s the pizza.” Richie laughed, “Cockblocked by pizza - not sure how I feel about that one, to be honest. It’s difficult to be disappointed by pizza.”

Stan nodded, not really relating. He kind of wanted to ring the pizza boy’s neck. Hormones sure are a wild ride, huh.
Winter break had officially started in Derry and everyone was happy to be out of class, even if Stan’s backpack is almost bursting apart at the seams. The pair of boys cycled casually down the back roads of Derry - going down the main street would be quicker, but there’s more freedom in letting your bike freewheel down an empty road - not having swerve to avoid hitting cars and pedestrians - a freedom that even Stan, who was gently squeezing the brakes on his handlebars, couldn’t fault.

They were meant to join the rest of their friends going to the Diner, celebrating over milkshakes and fries that they survived another semester. However, Richie had somehow found himself in detention for two hours after school, and since he and Stan had made plans to head back to Richie’s once it started to get dark, Stan had found himself spending the first two hours of Winter break in the library doing Math, waiting for his best friend.

Richie was running his mouth about some teacher giving him extra work over Christmas - Stan watched with amusement as he swerved carelessly around fire hydrants, swerving on and off the pavement, his tyres taking the brute force of the impact. If Stan didn’t know any better, he would be bemused as to how Richie hadn’t yet crashed into something or fell off his bike. That was one of Richie’s hidden talents - cycling proficiency. Richie had a lot of hidden talents, Stan had noticed since they began spending more time together. School work in general - but that was hardly hidden. He was a natural musician, being able to sing in-key and on the right notes was second nature to him - he usually sang badly though, if nothing else but to annoy those who had to hear him. He was good at diffusing difficult conversations and filling silences. Usually by acting a dick and making fun of people. Even if it made people more upset, it moved the topic of conversation to him - meaning he had more control over it. Richie may be a bit of a jerk - but he was smart.

Above all though, he was good kissing. Not just good, fucking great at it. Stan’s bike wobbled under him as he briefly lost balance thinking about it. In fact, much like his bike, Stan’s legs had been wobbling all day. They do every time he and Richie makes plans alone, because it always leads to having beer and making out for hours upon end. Stan himself didn’t even know if he made plans with Richie because he knew that this would happen, or if he just did it because he liked hanging out with his best friend - but either way - his leg bounced up and down the entire time he was waiting on Richie to get out of detention. He wouldn’t say that to Richie though, especially since he usually chastises Richie for the action himself.

They were going to Richie’s to watch Indiana Jones - again. Stan swears that he sees Harrison Ford in his sleep.
Since Bev’s birthday, they’ve met up at each other’s houses almost every weekend - alcohol was never mentioned, but it was always there. Endless amounts from Richie’s house crept into Stan’s bedroom and down his throat, almost without him noticing. Every time they drank, they drank a little too much, and every time they drank a little too much - they found themselves with each other’s tongues down their throats. Stan always looks forward to that. It’s fun, it’s stupid and immature for two boys to play around like that - but it’s innocent fun. Plus, better doing it with his best friend than with a girl - that would just get messy (both figurative and literally). Plus, Stan wasn’t sure if he could control himself as much with a girl - in movies when the guy and the girl get together they can’t get enough of each other, and even if they don’t like each other they always end up having sex. Stan knew the implications and quite frankly, doesn’t want anyone getting pregnant.

They rolled up to Richie’s house, bikes swerving slightly on the icy driveway and made their way up to Richie’s room, where Richie had a new poster tacked up to his wall - replacing his faded Freddy Kruger one. The poster was simply an enlarged version of the Raiders of the Lost Ark VHS cover, Indiana in the forefront, whip raised above his head and a somewhat flirtatious smile on his face. Stan moved his eyes down the poster - eyes lingering on Harrison Ford’s exposed pec for a moment longer than he felt comfortable with. It’s natural though, he’s an attractive guy.

Stan rearranged a couple of things on Richie’s bedside table - partly because the half-empty glass of water teetering on the edge was giving him unbridled amounts of anxiety and partly because he didn’t want to spend a second longer looking at Harrison Ford’s broad shoulders and toned muscles.

Richie got the video starting and sped downstairs to fetch food and drink before the movie started. Stan unzipped his duffel coat and folded it onto Richie’s desk chair - leaving him in a sweater. Stan hated this sweater, it was always itchy - but Bill had gotten it for him one year for Hanukkah and it felt wrong not to wear it during the winter.

He carefully slipped off his shoes and set them beside the bed, facing to the door. He adjusted Richie’s dirty sneakers to mirror his own. What kind of person has their shoes facing their bed? It just doesn’t make sense.

Richie came blundering up the stairs with half a bottle of white wine and a selection of chips. Stan cocked his head at the wine bottle and grabbed a pack of Lays out of Richie’s arms, “That’s not as much as you normally bring,” It was nothing more than a comment, but Richie jumped to his own defence nonetheless.

“Well maybe if someone didn’t drink all my beer like it was water, we would have more.” Richie jumped on the bed, letting the packets of chips fall around them like a shower of potential obesity.
Stan rolled his eyes, “You drink more than I do.”

“But yet, you get drunk more than I do. Funny how that works, huh?”

Stan elbowed him and told him to just “put on the stupid movie”.

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They were at the point in the movie where Indiana shoots a bad guy in Cairo in front of a crowd of people - Richie says something about the scene into his mouth. Stan really didn’t give Richie’s hair too much of a sharp tug to give him the hint. When Richie didn’t take the hint and kept muttering facts to Stan in between gasps for breath, Stan pushed Richie’s chest and separated him from his mouth.

“Richie, shut up about Indiana Jones when we’re making out.”

Richie sat up straight and toyed with the hem of Stan’s jumper, “I thought you would like me talking about Harrison Ford?”

“Not when we’re making out Richie, no. I don’t have a weird obsession with him like you do, anyway.”

Richie moved down to take Stan into his mouth again momentarily, sucking on his bottom lip, earning a keening sound from Stan. “As if you don’t stare at Indiana Jones like he’s the last meal you want to eat.”

Stan let out a breathy groan as Richie started gently sucking and biting his neck, sending surges of need through his body, “I don’t - ohhh - I’m straight.” Stan breathed out, pulling Richie closer to his neck.

Richie let out a breathy laugh against his ear, “Oh yeah, forgot about that.” He punctuated the end of his sentence by rubbing his knee up against Stan’s crotch.

“Richie,” Stan groaned and his back arched, which only increased the pressure on his crotch. He pulled Richie down to his mouth for a feverish kiss, tongues dancing with each other as they panted hot and heavy into the other’s mouth. Stan felt different, there was only enough wine for a glass each and Stan didn’t even feel a little buzzed.
There was no blurriness or fogginess that he was used to, he was perfectly aware of what was happening and he knew that they were both very much sober. Yet, Richie didn’t mention it. Richie made the first move like always - but sober - and he took Stan’s lips against his own - sober - and is now grinding against Stan sober. Stan groaned against Richie as he pulled at his lip with his teeth, a sting of pain only adding to the lust coursing through his body right now.

Richie practically collapsed onto him and continued grinding into Stan through their jeans, his head resting right beside Stan’s - their hair mending together in a sea of blonde curls and dark knots. Stan felt the urge to kiss the expanse of neck that Richie was all but flaunting in front of him, so he did, and Richie’s movement stuttered as he let out a quiet gasp. Stan kissed up and down his neck softly, but after hearing Richie’s small gasps and feeling his movements stutter, Stan became desperate for the sound, evolving to messy, open-mouthed kisses that left traces of saliva.

“Fuuuuuck, Stan.” Richie moaned as Stan chanced a small, almost fleeting bit of suction. Stan caught a shudder as Richie moaned out his name, his erection throbbing painfully in his jeans. Stan bit down on Richie’s neck to suppress a groan of his own, which only caused Richie to swear and thrust up into Stan with even more need.

Stan let out a quiet laugh against Richie’s neck at that - feeling almost proud that he was able to make Richie sound as needy as he does. Richie sat up again at that, eyes blown as his glasses lay abandoned on the pillow, “What are you laughing at?”

“Just that you sound like a girl.”

Richie looked amused, “I sound like a girl? You’ve been moaning like a girl all evening.” Stan’s face turned pink and he fingered the spots that Richie had been biting on not minutes beforehand.
“No I haven’t!”

“Yes you have, just let me have this victory, Stan. I have like a month’s worth of blue balls right now.”

Stan cocked his head, Richie’s eyes ghosted along his pale neck, which was undoubtedly littered with small bruises. “What do you mean?”

Richie straddled Stan’s hips and thrusted, making Stan keen into him, “It means,” thrust, “that I want,” thrust, “to fuck” thrust. Stan felt a moan fall from is throat at the words, his body forcing him to follow with Richie’s movements.

“Richie - ahhh- we can’t,” Stan panted and pulled Richie down for a forceful kiss, not even realising the serious amounts of mixed signals he was giving his best friend as he licked into Richie’s mouth as if it would fulfil the burning need inside him.

“Why not?” Richie panted into his mouth, “Why not, Stan? We’ve been doing this for weeks, you can’t tell me that you don’t want more.”

“More? Ah- I don’t need more.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed more, I asked if you wanted more.”

Stan swallowed his groan as Richie traced his earlobe with his tongue, dizzying him, “I don’t - holy shit,” Stan moaned louder than he would like to admit when Richie squeezed the outline of his erection, tracing his hands over it, “I don’t - ah - I don’t know.”

“Can I suck your dick? It feels huge, I wanna taste it.” Richie asked, sounding almost hypnotised by the feeling of squeezing Stan through his jeans - he groaned and muttered something under his breath before moving to undo a button. Stan just sat and watched as Richie undid his jeans with hungry eyes, his own jaw hanging open as he gulps for air, but when Richie wraps his fingers around Stan’s belt loops and moves to pull, Stan grapples for his hands.

“No.” Stan almost whispers, voice wavering and unsteady, “I - I can’t.”
Richie didn’t take his eyes off Stan’s groin, but moved to plant open-mouthed kisses just above Stan’s waistband, “Tell me why.”

Stan stops for a moment, and Richie’s hair is tickling his stomach, he swallows the thick, sweat-laced air and thinks that his mouth feels very dry all of a sudden, “I’m not gay.”

“Never said you were.”

“But -”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want me to suck your dick. Look me in the eyes and tell me that you wouldn’t be disappointed if we stopped right now.”

Stan glances down to Richie - who is holding onto the belt loops for dear life, his eyes are blown with lust and he has an expression on his face that makes Stan just want to moan by looking at it. A face of desperation, need, lust, confidence. A face painted in so many emotions which, somehow this matters, is Richie’s face.

Stan scrambles for words, his mouth moving through the motions of beginning to speak, but falling short. He can’t stop now. There’s no way they can stop now - Stan needs more. He feels in his gut that he should stop, he knows that he should. But by God, if he stops now he might just die.

He softly nodded his head and without hesitation, before Stan had even finished the motion, Richie ripped Stan’s jeans from his waist, and Stan lifted himself off the bed a little to help Richie take off the jeans without damaging them. With a wince, Stan watched Richie throw them to the floor, almost angrily.

Richie paused for a second and stared at Stan’s groin, his erection was defined, straining against the fabric of his boxer briefs. Richie groaned as he moved closer, gently tracing the outline of it with eyes of hunger. Stan let out a breathy moan beneath him, causing him to meet Stan’s eyes again. “It - it feels different without jeans - SHIT,” Richie grabbed his erection firmly and gave it a tentative squeeze - eyes trained on Stan.

“Take the boxers off.” Stan didn’t even argue, he sat up and pulled his boxers off, not even caring that he kicked them off onto the floor, “And the jumper. I don’t want to look at that ugly fucking thing anymore - it’s killing my boner.”
Stan looked down at his maroon and blue striped jumper and frowned, “Bill got it for me.” But he took it off nonetheless, watching it fall to the floor as he was left in nothing but a shirt which had already been partially unbuttoned when Richie wanted to attack his neck.

Stan began to feel a little self-conscious as Richie just stared at his cock, not moving. Maybe Richie was regretting this, maybe he snapped out of his senses and realised that this isn’t really platonic sex. Is there even such a thing? He’d have to ask Beverly.

Richie let out a low *fuck* and traced Stan’s erection with his hand - making Stan squirm - it was so intense in comparison to the senseless grinding through jeans. “Richie -” Before Stan even had a chance to continue, Richie opened his mouth and took half of Stan’s length into his mouth, sucking softly and exploring the underside of his cock with his tongue.

“Fuck! Richie - oh my *God.*”

Richie moaned as he gingerly bobbed shallowly up and down, testing the waters - and his gag reflex as he slowly moved further and further down Stan, until Stan could feel him gagging on his cock. When Richie quickly surfaced for air, the look on his face could’ve sent Stan straight to the afterlife. His face was red and his eyes were half-closed and looked almost concussed, but his mouth - *oh his mouth* - was puckered in the perfect shape to fit Stan’s dick - and was almost dripping with saliva, a small trail of it connecting his lips. He looked completely infatuated with Stan’s cock, which made it throb.

Richie must’ve noticed that, as he took a shallow gulp before jumping back onto Stan’s length - this time moving further down until Stan felt his head hit the back of his throat - the muscles constricting against his head, making him let out a long groan. His breaths were coming out in pants and he could see his chest rapidly rising and falling in his peripheral vision as he watched Richie grind unwittingly into the mattress as he sucked Stan off within an inch of his life.

Richie bobbed up and down, sucking in pulses, making Stan cry out and grip tightly onto the mess of black hair, pulling only slightly. Richie didn’t seem to mind as he groaned and fell still on his dick.

Stan waited for a couple of moments for something to happen, for Richie to start sucking or licking again but it didn’t come. He looked down at Richie who was looking up at him expectantly, waiting for Stan to do something. Stan didn’t know why he had stopped, and Richie obviously read this from his face as he rolled his eyes and twisted his arm around so his hand lay atop the hand Stan had threaded in his hair - and pushed, forcing his head down a little on his cock. He repeated this a couple times before Stan made a choking-gasping sound - like the sound someone makes when they inhale a bit of water right before they start coughing.
“You - Richie, you want me to.”

Richie nodded as furiously as he could with a dick in his mouth. Stan groaned as Richie’s hand moved away to rest them on Stan’s thighs. Stan let out a short breath as he slowly moved Richie’s head down his cock, until he felt his head flush at his throat. He moved Richie’s head up and down his length before Richie started to get antsy and began fidgeting. Stan winced as Richie glared up at him and let his teeth graze his head. Stan pushed Richie’s head down a little harder and faster than before - earning a muffled groan from Richie.

Oh.

Stan slowly lifted himself off the bed until he was sitting on his knees, Richie’s mouth still sucking lightly at Stan’s cock.

“Okay, uh - I’m gonna do it now.” Stan breathed steadily, not wanting to push Richie’s limits or hurt him, but Richie just raised an eyebrow almost impatiently. Stan didn’t think he had much of a right to look so huffy with his mouth stretched around his dick.

Stan pulled back until he head of his cock was just barely dancing on Richie’s lips, then he fucked into his mouth in one swift movement. Richie groaned beneath him and grabbed Stan’s ass, pushing him in further. Stan let out a startled moan as he felt his head breach through the muscles in Richie’s throat and in a flush of pleasure he forced Richie’s head as far as it would go - until Richie’s nose was pressed against his crotch.

“Holy shit, ahhh - God, your throat Richie - it feels so - ahh - so fucking tight.” Richie let out a deep groan which vibrated down his cock - making him shudder and pull out of Richie’s mouth to let Richie gasp for air. Richie caught his breath and was back on Stan’s cock in a heartbeat - Stan wasn’t going to argue as he pushed back into Richie’s throat with a whine. He reached around and felt down Richie’s throat - feeling his cock through the skin. He moved ever so slightly in his mouth and followed it with his hand. Fuck that’s pretty impressive.

Richie popped off Stan’s dick and sloppily kissed and mouthed at his head while he caught his breath, “Y’know, I did just want to suck your dick - but I’m so horny that if you don’t put this thing inside my ass in the next two minutes I’ll kill you,” Richie stretched over to the bedside table and rustled around in the drawers until he pulled out a small tube of - what Stan assumes - is lube. Richie quickly shunted off his clothes and was left wearing nothing but a pair of mismatched socks.
Stan watched Richie breathlessly as he coated his own fingers with lube and went back to sucking at Stan lazily, while he inserted a lubed finger into himself. Stan was having difficulties holding himself back from fucking into Richie’s mouth at the sight. His best friend, naked, a sheen of sweat coating his body, on his knees with his mouth on Stan’s dick and his fingers up his own ass, was a sight that he may never be able to wipe from his brain - and the following thought worries him even more - he might not even want to.

Richie groaned and breathed heavily as he worked himself open with his fingers, Stan felt almost dizzy as the thought hit him, *I’m going to fuck my best friend.* He felt dirty, disgusting and not just because he smelt of sweat and sex, but because he couldn’t think any reasons to stop. He didn’t want to stop. The lines between platonic and sexual were beginning to blur too much for his comfort. Which is why he convinces himself that, sure he might be watching his best friend fuck his ass with his fingers in preparation for his dick, but if he backs out now - that means Stan no longer recognizes what’s going on as platonic, which would mean that all these thoughts he’s been having and all the need he’s been having has been sexual - not platonic feelings and being able to comfortably fool around mixed with hormones. Which isn’t true because Stan isn’t gay, or bisexual - he doesn’t like guys at all. He can’t.

So that’s it, Stan gets motioned by Richie that he’s ready and Richie lies down, legs spread obscenely as he rubs the remaining lube on his hands onto Stan’s dick. Stan slowly circles his dick around Richie’s rim and slowly pushes in. He meets some resistance, but with a little more force, Richie’s rim unfolds onto Stan’s cock and grapples onto it. Stan groaned, Richie’s ass was so tight - it felt better than anything Stan has ever felt before - masturbation will never be enough after this. Richie breath shakens as Stan pushes, but when Stan slows to a stop Richie ushers him to ‘just get the fuck inside me right now.’

Stan lets out a groan as he bottoms out in Richie and lowers himself to rest his head on the crook of Richie’s neck. Their chests rose in unison as they both panted with the intense feeling of each other. Richie groaned as Stan softly kissed his neck - something Stan himself was surprised he did. It felt … almost wrong to do when they were having sex. Oddly intimate for the situation that they were in, so with that, Stan raised himself back up and held onto Richie’s knees for purchase as he slowly fucked into Richie.

Richie groaned as Stan moved inside him - God Stan felt so big inside him, Richie felt like he was being fucking impaled on Stan’s dick. And he wasn’t afraid to moan those words in between Stan’s long, slow thrusts.

Stan’s hips stuttered as Richie groaned out about his cock and how good it feels, and Stan wasn’t sure how much longer he could take with Richie’s ass closing on his dick like this. Stan thrust a little faster and Richie groaned into the thick air, “Fuck me like you mean it.”

“Well I can hardly have sex with you like I *don’t* mean it, can I?”
“Well, that’s what it fucking feels like, stop being such a bitch and fuck my ass.”

Richie bit down on a groan as Stan glared at him and thrust roughly into him, “Shut up, Richie,” Stan increased his pace until he was fucking Richie fast enough to have Richie arching off the bed.

“Fuck! God - ugh - is this where ah - I say make me?”

Stan tackled Richie’s lips with his own and fucked into him faster, Richie moaned with wanton into his mouth as they licked hungrily at each other, Stan felt his body move faster than he intended to allow it - and Richie let out long moans and whines as Stan lifted off his mouth.

“Staahn - I’m close, fuck I’m so close - God.” Richie wrapped a hand around his dick and jerked himself off feverishly as Stan watched, moving back to watch Richie wriggle around, flushed and fucked as he jerks himself off. It was enough to make Stan’s dick pulse - and Richie’s ass to flex in response, doubling the pressure on Stan’s dick, “God, Richie - I’m gonna come.”

Richie groaned as the speed of the jerks on his cock increased and he began to fuck back onto Stan’s length, “Fuck I’m close,”

Stan moved down to take Richie’s member out of his own hands and attempted to match his pace of his thrusts to the pace of him fucking into Richie - as Richie moaned and twisted his hands into the bedsheets, fucking up into Stan’s hand then fucking back down onto his cock - he was in an endless cycle of pleasure and it wasn’t long until he started fucking into Stan’s hand almost furiously. Richie let out a deep, guttural moan as he came over Stan’s fingers, some spurting onto his chest.

When Richie came, his muscles contracted and Stan bit onto his lip as Richie’s ass sucked him in over the course of his orgasm, and Stan fucked hard into him - only making Richie moan even loader as Stan pounded into his orgasm. Richie reached up and grabbed Stan’s curls, pulling his head to the side as he bit harshly into his neck and sucked around it. The intense feeling of Richie sucking on his throat like a calf starved for milk pushed him over the edge as he stuttered in his thrusts and spent himself inside Richie, hair sticking to his forehead and Richie wrapped around him like a vice.

Stan flopped onto Richie and waited a couple moments before slowly pulling himself out of Richie, who hissed sharply as Stan pulled out, “Fuck, that hurts.”
Stan gave him a half-smile, “Sorry.”

They wordlessly cleaned themselves with wet wipes and got dressed again, Stan buttoning up his shirt and wincing as it choked the hickey that Richie had left. He’ll be wearing scarves for a while by the looks of it.

Richie reached over to open the windows - it was freezing outside but the air in the bedroom was hot and thick with sex. They both sat as far away from each other that they could on a single bed and watched the remaining 10 minutes or so of the movie. It wasn’t until the credits began to roll that Richie sighed and turned off the TV using the remote.

“So, uh….” Richie scratched his neck, “We had sex.”

Stan let out a heavy breath and slowly closed his eyes, “Yes.” He said thickly, “We did.”

“Did you - uh - was it good?”

Stan hesitated, “Yes. Was it good for you?”

Richie nodded, “Yeah,” he said with a sort of faraway look on his face, “yeah it was.”

Stan nodded as well, “I don’t like boys.”

Richie picked up a packet of Lays which had been fucked to the floor at some point and opened them, “I never said you did.”

“Okay - good. This was just … for fun.”

“Of course. No homo.”

“Yeah, okay, good.”

They sat in silence for a couple more minutes as Richie ate chips and slid his glasses back onto his face, before laughing, “I couldn’t see a fucking thing by the way.”
Stan looked a little relieved, “Good. Then you can pretend I was Harrison Ford.”

Richie looked up at his poster and gave it a flirtatious wink and painted his face in one of adoration, “I didn’t actually, but I sure will next time.”

Next time?

“Anyway, I got a new NES game, wanna play it?”

Stan nodded, trying his best not to look like a deer caught in the headlights.

Next time?!

Chapter End Notes

anyway stans not gay guys
bill is a mediator

Chapter Notes

Thank you so so so much for everyone's patience. It has been over a year from I wrote the last chapter for this - for reasons I have no real reason to go into. I know that a lot of people have been wondering where the next chapter is, and if I was going to finish it. The answer was no - i listed this as unfinished, wrote it off from my head before I read through everyones comments.

I was crying in my bedroom with how NICE everyone was, how patient everyone was and how much everyone loved this weird little sloppily thrown together, mismatched disaster of a fic. I love you all so so so so much and I thank you all for your unwavering support.

Please be patient as the next few chapters may be a bit choppy, it's been a long long time since I wrote for IT and I may need sometime to get used to the characters again :)

Do you want fries with that? is back babie :)
the pace of his thrusts, letting a keening groan escape into Richie’s mouth, feeling the way Richie tightened around him. Richie let out a broken curse, voice strained and arched his back into Stan, fucking back onto him with earnest.

Stan thought carefully about the previous week - trying his best to compare the moans and violent reactions of Richie - laid sprawled out on the bed, writhing with Stan’s dick up his ass - with the gentle, almost rose-tinted feminine breaths of passion from one of Bill’s stupid romance movies. Stan found himself grimacing at the thought. They were always fucking terrible. Terrible, but granted Stan with a vague understanding that what he and Richie did was different, it wasn’t sexual or romantic at all. It was just as they had said, fun.

Stan forcibly shook the train of thought from his head as he focused on work. He overcomplicates things, or so his friends say.

The Diner was no busier than usual, having two or three orders coming through every couple of minutes. The casual steadiness was nice, giving him and his friends enough to keep them busy - or in Richie’s case - out of trouble, without overwhelming them. Beverly and Ben were kept just busy enough to keep them out the front, which Stan is sure that Ben is secretly glad of, getting a chance to talk to Beverly without Beverly skirting out to talk to Bill or Mike - not for any particular reason other than Beverly likes talking to everyone. Although Eddie usually ushers her away when she starts to describe the customers whose lips were wrapped around the forks he was cleaning.

Stan was currently busying himself by writing next week’s rota. Which thankfully, was much simpler now that the kid with the piercings had ‘quit’, since the only part-timers who were employed were all currently working. Although, it did mean that each of them had to pick up an extra night shift a week in his place which admittedly, meant their nightly trips to the Marsh were always on member down, but they managed to adjust alright.

He popped his head out through the red swing-door to catch Beverly, who was organising some notes in the cash register. She was watching Ben with a sort of dopey expression, as he wiped down a fairly clean-looking table near the door. Stan felt as though he was somewhat intruding, as he usually does when he interrupts a conversation - verbal or not. So he coughed, and Beverly turned her smile to his direction.

“Hey, I was meant to catch you earlier - but you were busy talking to Bill.” She said, folding over a wad of twenties and slipping them into the drawer.

“Oh?”
“We’re out of band-aids.” She had this sort of knowing smile tugging at her lips and with great reluctance, Stan sighed.

“Richie tried juggling the vegetable knives again?” Beverly responded with a half laugh and a roll of the eyes. “Sometimes I wonder how he gets himself dressed in the morning, honestly.”

Richie - who had a strange tendency to appear whenever he’s being spoken about - walked out through the swing door, jostling Stan, who was half in the door, in the process, carrying a plate of pancakes and setting it down in front of a rather unimpressed looking trucker, who barely waited until the plate was set down before stabbing his fork into the food. Stan glanced down at the half a dozen plasters stuck around Richie’s fingertips and he couldn’t help but follow Richie’s hands down to his thighs and - oh my God - Richie was wearing his shorts inside out.

Beverly must have noticed it too and grabbed Stan’s arm and squeezed - *don’t say anything* - and he didn’t, just held the door open for Richie as he bowed and made his exit at the two. “I think I spoke too soon. How long do you think it’ll be before he spills coffee on his legs?”

Beverly dropped her hand and snorted, shaking her head, “It’s like fifty degrees in here how is he not freezing?”

Stan handed over the clipboard he was holding to Beverly, who began to fill her name into some of the blank spaces of the table. “He’s a nuclear reactor - he never gets cold, he sleeps without a shirt on some nights with the *window open*. In the *Winter*. I believe he has advanced brain-rot.”

Beverly paused for a split second, “You have a lot of sleepovers?”

Stan blinked, oh - probably shouldn’t have mentioned that. Not that it’s a big deal, friends have sleepovers all the time - it’s not like he has anything to hide. Well, within reason. “We used to have sleepovers all the time - before we started working here - now between work, school and the marsh I think if I had to look at any of you anymore I would blow my brains out.”

“Hey!” She said it lightly, clearly finding it more amusing than rude.

“We don’t have any classes together. You, Ben and Mike are exempt from my previous statement.”

“Not true, we have Gym together.”
Stan rolled his eyes as he took the clipboard she presented back to him, “Yes, we converse so much in Gym, between stopping Richie from pulling Bill’s shorts down, stopping Bill trying to break a Tennis racquet over Richie’s head and shoving Eddie’s aspirator in his mouth every two minutes, I always have plenty of time to stop you for a leisurely chat over the fence.”

She laughed and turned back to the cash drawer, eyes falling straight back to Ben, who was now fiddling about with the jukebox. Stan was tempted to tell him that no, they haven’t got any New Kid on the Block added yet, Ben, but there’s only so many times a man can have that conversation before he loses his mind, so he decides against it and moves back into the kitchen - setting the clipboard on a space beside Bill, who was staring intently at a frying egg.

“Stare at that egg any longer Big Bill and you’ll fertilize it!” Richie barks out, appearing from nowhere as he usually does and poking Bill in the ribs, earning himself a smack in the shoulder from Bill’s spatula.

“Don’t puh-poke me - you know it hu-hurts!” Bill tried to look upset, but Bill was terrible at controlling his face and his mouth twitched a little as he battled a smile.

“It only hurts cuz you’re so skinny.” Richie rubbed his shoulder dramatically.

“No! Your fingers are just b-b-boney.”

“You’re both technically right.” Stan pointed out. Richie scoffed and knocked Bill’s hat to the floor as he moved past Stan, shouldering him as he went past. Stan pulled a face and rubbed his shoulders - even his shoulders were boney.

Bill picked up his hat and set his attention to the clipboard, sending the egg what could only be construed as threatening glances every so often as he all but carved his name into the sheet in his unnecessarily heavy chicken scratch. “Do you th-think I’m too skinny, M-Mike?”

Mike made a nuh-uh type of low noise from the fryers, “You’re a stud, man.”

Bill glowed at the praise, everyone, including Bill himself ignoring the obvious glaring lie. Somewhere from the direction of the fridge Stan heard Richie sing the opening to Scat Man, replacing Scat with Stud. No one made any notice to him, except a small groan from Eddie when Richie starting scatting.
Bill waved the clipboard at Stan, who took it from him and managed to catch a glimpse at the griddle. “You’re burning your egg there, stud.” Bill’s face dropped into a scowl as he spun round and started scraping the blackening egg off of the surface, swearing at it in anger. Stan doesn’t understand how, but anything Bill keeps his eye off seemingly burns in seconds. At first they blamed Richie, thinking he would turn the temperature up when Bill’s back was turned - turns out Bill just has bad luck. This usually meant Bill would just stand and glower at whatever he was frying, tongue stuck up out of his lip in concentration. Richie would say if Bill concentrated that much in Math then maybe he wouldn’t be failing, Bill usually lobbed his spatula at him, wordlessly pulling another from the large pocket of his apron.

Stan moved away, purposely avoiding making eye contact with the black char left on the griddle - it usually burned into his skull until he would go over with a wire scouring pad and scrub it clean - burning his fingers in the process. Whenever Bill sees him moving over to his station after that particular incident, Bill moves his body in front of the griddle, an almost guilty smile on his face, like a child hiding Mommy’s favourite mug behind his back after seeing how far he could drop it before it broke.

He asked Eddie if he wanted to work any nights next week - Eddie was a fifty fifty shot - depending on how he felt. See, there was no cook come evening time, so usually it was just coffee - maybe the odd sweet treat from the display cabinet but there was usually little to do besides cleaning. The prospect didn’t bother Eddie - except the risk of having to touch the dirty coins from a dirty trucker’s hands. He would rant about how many particles of excrement have been discovered to live on coins, and how 99% of one dollar bills have traces of cocaine on them - that means it’s been up someone’s nose guys.

This week, Eddie barely let Stan finish his question before deadlining a hard no. Stan side-stepped a small puddle of bubbles that he has begun to just expect whenever Richie slinks his way over to Eddie, and made his way to the fridge - where he could hear Richie still scatting. Stan groaned into himself, preparing his mind for Richie. He tapped the handle of the fridge six times before opening it, hardly recognising that he had done it.

The cool air of the fridge blushed his cheeks almost immediately, and there Richie was stood, balancing several stacked tins of buttermilk on his finger, wobbling around trying to balance the teetering tower, wearing inside out black basketball shorts and a grey t-shirt which looked a size too small for him, clinging onto his shoulders. Stan assumes he stole it from Bill, who seems to come in complaining every other week about losing the shirts he wears to work.

Stan closed the door behind him, to keep the fridge at 35 degrees, as per regulation. He taps the handle six times after he closes it. He opens his mouth but before he even begins to form a sentence, Richie raises his free hand to silence him, swaying in the opposite direction to counteract the motions of the tins.
“Staniel, I am extremely busy - this better be important.”

“Don’t call me that - I’m completing next week’s rota, what evenings do you want me to put you down for?”

“I thought I said it better be important, and this” Richie waggled a finger at him, “doesn’t fit the bill.”

“I can tell you what does fit the Bill though,” Stan taps the pen six times against the paper as Richie accidentally kicks a box, edging it every so slightly into an angled position. Stan found it difficult to tear his eyes away from it.

“Pray tell.”

“That shirt you’re wearing.”

Richie swears as he overbalances himself too much, and the tins clatter to the floor. “Aw fuck, almost beat my record.” Richie gives Stan a look that Stan knows is a prompt for Stan to ask him how long his stupid record is. He doesn’t. Richie makes a face to himself and picks up the tins, one is dinted, Stan notes. “Well, one of Georgie’s shirts could fit Bill so that doesn’t really add a notch to your belt.”

That’s a fair point. Bill is an estimate of three inches wide and thirty-seven feet tall, well - five foot eight - but in the middle of a growth spurt, which if the constant complaining about the pains in legs are to go by, is set to send him shooting.

“What shifts, Richie?”

“Well, tell me what’s left and we can work from there, pardner.”

Stan grimaced at the voice - and also at all the tins not being rotated so the front text and the dusty-coloured orange label sits front.

Monday:  Bev (5pm - close)
Tuesday: bill (5pm - close)
Wednesday: bill (5pm - close)
Thursday: Bev (5pm - close)
Friday:
Saturday: Ben (12pm-close) | Stanley (6.30-3.30) | Bill (7-4) | Mike (8-5) | Eddie (9-5) | Beverly (9-5 please) | Richie (9-5)
Sunday: Bev (12pm - close) | Stanley (6.30-3.30) | Bill (7-4) | Mike (8-5) | Eddie (9-5) | Ben (9-5) | Richie (9-5)

Stan reads Richie the rota and Richie contemplates it for a moment before fixing his glasses and taking the clipboard and pen from Stan’s hands. “How come Beverly always gets first dibs, is she giving her supervisor … sexual favours?” He winked suggestively at Stan and wiggled his hips a little. Previously, Stan would have thought nothing of it, but the sight makes Stan think back to Richie’s hips wiggling to adjust to Stan being full flush inside him made his mouth turn to cotton.

“Shut up, Richie.”

Richie quickly scrawled his name down and pressed the back of the clipboard into Stan’s chest, pushing until he was walking Stan into the door of the fridge. Stan’s eye caught the smudge of ink on the fleshy part of Richie’s hand - he was left handed so Richie usually had ink markings there during class, but he usually washed them off when he was at the bathroom. The black smudge stayed fixated on his mind even as Richie opened the door behind him, almost sending Stan sprawling to the floor. He managed to regain his balance, as Richie cackled at him.

He didn’t tap the door handle.

Stan knew this wasn’t significant. A door handle didn’t need to be tapped six times before it was opened and closed, it’s redundant and time consuming and sure, before he got his meds he would have cried for hours into his Mother’s shoulder about it, convinced something terrible was going to happen. He’s better now, he knows better. So that leads Stan to ponder, why was he pushing Richie back into the freezer and furiously tapping on the door.

Six times for Richie opening it.

Six times for Stan closing it.

Six times to open it again.
Stan felt ridiculous doing it, a strange heaviness in his belly of embarrassment - he wasn’t quite sure what was causing this particular tick to come back and to be honest, it was worrying. He made a note to call his Doctor on Monday.

“Is that morse code? Who are you signaling, Stanny-boy.”

 Fuck, he was almost done, too. With Richie’s interruption he has to start again, “Richie, shut up for a minute - just don’t talk or say anything.” He continued tapping, and Richie - who had his hand raised to his brow in a salute - stayed dutifully silent until the tapping ceased and Stan sighed in relief as he opened the door.

Stan waited for Richie to walk out after him and tapped six more times before closing it. He moved the clipboard back into the shelf near Eddie - top shelf of all the clean plates and such was reserved for the paperwork and rotas. Not that Eddie knew - he couldn’t reach it.

Stan went to move to go over to the Kitchen area, to make his way out the front and make sure everything was running smoothly but came face-to-face with Richie, who seemed to be looking at him rather strangely.

“What are you-”

“Why are you acting so weird?”

Stan scratched at his wrist, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” He said, moving around Richie and through the kitchen, barely getting to the red swing-door before Richie was putting on the bow of his apron. “Get off, you’ll mess up the knot.” He tried to slap Richie’s hands away - hands which have a smear of ink on the flesh.

“Why were you tapping the door like that? Were you having a minor epileptic fit or something?”

“Richie.” Stan warned, trying to pry Richie off of him. Richie lowered his grip on his apron, but Stan didn’t move away, rather he turned around to face the boy in question, hands folded behind his back, gently scratching at his wrist.
“I’m just wondering why the stick up your butt is deeper than usual today, that’s all.” He had the audacity to twist his voice into one of genuine concern. Stan itched his wrist quicker, he needed to move his fingers. Then, suddenly, without reason and without prompt, the world got very overwhelming all of a sudden.

Richie absentmindedly tousled his hair, as he does sometimes. Only, Stan could feel the knots, he could see Richie’s fingers catching them and tugging a little. Stan could feel Richie’s straw-like hair all over him, again. He could smell the faint smell of cigarettes masked with Febreze overpowering his nose and making him choke. The sizzling of the boiling oil to the right of Stan bled into his ears and he tugged on his earlobe to dislodge the sound from his head.

Stan’s head was blistering, why was everything so much all of a sudden.

“Earth to Stanley? Hellloooooo? Oh my gawd - we’ve lost him, Bill!” Richie’s accent smoothed over his head like acid, Stan slapped Richie’s smudged hand out of his face and tried to breathe around Richie’s smell. “Geez Louise, what the hell is wrong with you, you look like you’re gonna spew.”

“Riche. Leave me alone.” Stan choked out, Richie must have taken what Stan was saying somewhat seriously, because he stepped back a little out of Stan’s personal space but didn’t leave. Richie wasn’t wrong, Stan’s stomach was twisting and knotting every time Stan noticed something that made his skin itch. One of Bill’s shoelaces is untied, the clock is hanging off-centre on the wall, Mike had a black mark on the back of his otherwise white t-shirt, Richie was wearing mismatched black socks - his right one had a ribbed lip, the left one was more of a blue-black than the inky black of the other. The ink stain on Richie’s hand, the box in the fridge being left lopsided, jutting out over the perfect squares of tile, the buttermilk tins not being lined up. Every single thing Stan seemed to look at made him want to peel his skin off.

“Were you too busy jackin’ it to take your meds this morning?” Richie asked, before slapping himself on the forehead in a mock- duh moment, “I knew I shouldn’t have watched those Indiana Jones movies with you last week, you always get so heated seeing Indy - ugh but who can blame you, those biceps just call out to you.”

“I don’t have a crush on Harrison Ford.” Or any guy for that matter. He bit his lip and clawed a little at his sleeve.

“Oh! Is it me then? Because I definitely remember you getting pret-ty heated last weekend about someone.”
Bill’s voice stuttered for a second - Stan hadn’t even noticed he was listening, but thank God, Bill was going to tell Richie to shut his mouth before Stan stuffs it with breadrolls, “No one wuh-wuh-wuh-wants you to stick their dick in you, Rich, I swuh-swear.”

Not quite the diversion that Stan was hoping for but thanks for the help, Bill. Richie eyed Stan up like a dog eyeing up a steak, “Oh no, you haven’t heard?” Richie sing-songed, it pinched Stan’s ears. “Our Stan is a pitcher! See, Bill, I even put it in baseball lingo for you - anything to help the cogs grind in that empty head of yours. Yes, our little, innocent Stan, loves nothing more than to go for a quick cave exploration under the sheets.”

Stan felt his resolve snap, like Bill accidentally snapping his ‘shatterproof’ ruler in half to test its claims, “Just because you take it up the ass, Richie, doesn’t mean we want to hear about that shit all the time. I know you think it’s funny, or cute or whatever but it’s not. It’s gross, and I don’t want people in the Synagogue talking about me even more when they overhear you saying shit like that - if they find out I’m friends with a queer I’ll be fucking killed, are you really that self-centered that you can’t get that?” The words seethed out of Stan before he even had a chance to stop them. As soon as they were out of his mouth he regretted them, but he stitched his lips shut and stood his ground.

Richie’s face took the shape of an injured puppy before he let out a laugh which sounded so forced Stan was surprised he didn’t choke on it. “Better than convincing myself I’m not a queer with my dick in a guy’s throat, like some people.” Richie didn’t say it in an accusatory way, but Stan knew what Richie was getting at, he just said it in such a way that Stan didn’t receive any questioning glances.

Stan opened his mouth to reply before he felt Ben’s firm grip on his shoulder, he noticed one on Richie as well. “I th-think we should ta-take a breather.” Stan didn’t need to be told twice before he shook Bill’s hand off his shoulder took himself to the smoking area. It was freezing and he didn’t have a coat but he didn’t care, he came out half out of spite because he knew Richie would be dying for a cigarette, and half because being outside usually helps to calm him down.

Stan tapped a fast tune into the inside of his wrist, stinging the slightly tender flesh that he had been scratching at. The cigarettes littered around him were burning into his flesh, so Stan looked away. Breathe.

Stan forced his staggered breath through the movements he had coaxed Eddie with so many times before, breathing deep and slow, trying to calm the sharp staggered breaths that had his lungs burning with the sharpness of the cold air.
He was angry. He directed that anger at Richie - because it was Richie who had made him mad, surely. Richie had absolutely no right to say shit like that to him. Richie knew what they were doing, he had initiated it that night, with cigarette smoke in his lungs and six shots in his belly - so why was Richie suddenly being all bitchy about it? Stan couldn’t understand, they were having fun, they were messing around and spending time together in such a distinct way. Richie and Stan’s connection was special, Stan knew that much, I mean - he wouldn’t dream of making out with Eddie on top of his perfectly made baby blue bed sheets, or bucking up against Bill and breathing breathy groans into his mouth, or laughing as Beverly accidentally brains herself on Stan’s headboard as he bottoms out. Stan’s face involuntarily twitches - thinking about Beverly like that made his stomach twist in discomfort.

He found himself replaying that thought, he has too much respect for Beverly to think about her like that, imagining her sprawled out, so dirty and open like Richie had been felt wrong. Stan feels dirty. Rightly so - Beverly is one of his best friends and picturing her in such a position feels inherently misogynistic in a way. He isn’t sure why.

He finds himself quickly shaking the thoughts from his head, fingers dancing up and down his arms as he folds into himself to try and warm himself up from the cold. He loved Richie, of course he loved Richie, Richie was his best friend and that was a title that as juvenile as it may seem, Stan takes seriously. He and Richie have a connection, a special one that makes Stan’s stomach twist and turn whenever he thinks too much about it - their bond is so special, so definitively them that Stan finds a little pride in the way he and Richie spend their evenings together, whispering moans into each other and grinding against each other with laughter and moans on their lips, the best way to practice for whatever girl Stan may find himself with, and for whatever girl or boy Richie finds himself with too.

The thought makes his gut lurch so violently he almost falls off the plastic chair.

Richie was using him as a trial run before he falls into bed with someone else. Stan, of course, was doing this as well - but the thought barely ghosted his mind as the turning of his stomach moved up to his chest. Richie was essentially using him. Their heavy make-out sessions, with Stan whispering for Richie to stop making stupid fucking jokes were under the pretense that it was all, ultimately, for someone else. Someone that Richie would kiss with the ghost of all those nights with Stan and the person would be none the wiser. The thought made Stan feel ill, he felt his chest ache.

They would stop, then. If Richie finds someone they would have to stop. Stan doesn’t want to admit that he doesn’t want to stop. He likes what he and Richie had, he likes the secret whispers and quiet breathy moans that they braid together under the covers of Richie’s bed. He likes it, he loves it. Of course he likes it, he’s relieving sexual tension and he’s doing it with his best friend. There’s nothing in that which Stan doesn’t like. Richie’s dick is maybe, inconvenient, Stan thinks, nodding to himself. It would be better if Richie was a girl.
He finds his stomach growing sicker and sicker by the minute.

No, he’s been through this already. Richie being a boy means there’s no risk for pregnancy, there’s no risk for … feelings getting involved - it’s actually better that Richie is a boy - since Richie knows how to kiss and pull on his Adam’s apple perfectly, knows how to grind with just enough pressure to hurt a little bit, knows how to twist his wrist at the right part under his head that makes Stan grapple for purchase on the sheets. Stan breathes through the blood pumping through him. Which definitely is not pumping down south at the pictures of Richie mouthing on his cock flood his vision.

Then it’s not his cock. Richie is grappling a faceless body, moaning and writing under a stranger, crying out in desperate breaths into someone else’s mouth. Punching moans out like he’s getting paid for it, fists curling in his hair, in his sheets, around the stranger’s shoulders. Stan feels his face flush with anger. Stan wants to scrub at his skin, he feels dirty, he feels used. Stan doesn’t spend nights tangling his legs with Richie, grinding until he feels tears prick his eyes, just to be thrown to the side when Richie finds some random John to keep his bed warm.

Stan doesn’t dwell on the thought that pushes through his head that maybe he only wants Richie to himself. He wants them to keep their nights of fun exclusive to each other forever. The thought is too much for Stanley to wrap his head around, so he promptly ignores it and imagines it never crossed his mind at all.

Chapter End Notes

once again i thank every single one of you who ever clicked on this, ever kudosed and especially to every single comment. I love you all so much and you all have no clue how much your comments have inspired me and are ultimately what pushed me over the edge into writing again.

please comment and leave kudos if you enjoy it, have a wonderful day and i love you all.

(my tumblr is dumbrella-academy)
The quiet blanket of darkness shrouded the quarry, enveloping the group of teenagers in their own bubble, untouched by the universe. The fire that Mike had managed to get blazing, even with the dampness of Winter settling in every tree branch and log, had set a warm glow around the Marsh, the light from the flames gently bouncing off the thick forest that surrounded them. Their own little pocket of Derry that was just for them.

The little clearing of the Marsh had quickly become the group’s usual hang-out-spot, so much so that all of them - bar Ben, who was working - had biked through the frosted streets of the town, trekked down through iced leaves and mud, with only a pair of flashlights between them and the moon peeking from behind the trees to guide their way (not that they needed it, they knew the area surrounding the Quarry and Marsh like the back of their hand). It was cold, being December, but none of them had ever queried their collective decision to sit in the great outdoors - all too fond of their time spent there to ever really contest it.

So there they were sat, a group of somewhat misfit teenagers all bundled up in thick coats and scarves and whatnot - thankfully the thickness of the forest around them managed to keep some of the heat from the fire from completely dissipating into the air, and their coats were thick enough to fend off any shivers or teeth chattering they would have. Stan noted that even Richie had forgone his usual outfit of shorts and t-shirt for a frayed pair of jeans that rose high on his ankles - clearly he had dug them from the pits of his closet - and a heavy knit sweater that hung off of his frame so much that Stan had originally mistaken it for a blanket at first.

Richie was sat on the ground, opposite where Eddie and Stan were sitting on the soft fabric of the camping loveseat that Mike had adorned them with one evening after helping his Uncle clear out their garage. Previously, they had all sat on the cold ground, or fought over the log which allowed their pants to avoid the worst of the mud and moss stains - there hadn’t really been much of a fight in reality, just some light-hearted complaints as Eddie and Stan claimed their seats, sat close as to not fall off, shoulders usually pressed together.

The camping couch had been the first addition, a mossy green fold-out seat, that had definitely seen better days. It came with small holes in the arms, netted in mesh to hold drinks presumably, Stan
usually pulls off his wool mittens and folds them in it instead, hating the way the fabric rubs against his wrists - which were burning more than usual tonight, after Stan scratching at his left one earlier in an effort to calm his need to skirt around and fix everything.

The next addition had been a plain white plastic deck chair, small splinters running through the back and a couple of strange stains that didn’t quite rub out under Eddie’s furious scrubbing with disinfectant wipes. Richie refused to tell anyone where he found it. He stole it from his neighbour’s front yard after they ran over his bike in their shitty pickup truck, he had told Stan later. Stan doubted they would even notice it was gone. Ben had procured two camping chairs from his parents, who were happy enough to part with them, they were in better shape than the one that Eddie and Stan shared, but they were smaller - only fitting one person at a time. Sometimes Stan or Eddie would sit in those, but today they had sat down together, enjoying each other’s company.

In total there were five seats for their rag-tag group to sit on, or seven if the large log was included. Richie still maintained the ground was way better, being ‘one with nature and all that shit’. Stan knew he just liked to pick tufts of grass from the ground - which is exactly what he was doing now, tugging at the cold grass and plucking it out of the ground, letting it fall onto a small pile on the thick plaid blanket that Bill had rolled out for him.

Richie was in an animated discussion with Bill, who was sifting through his beaten up backpack, while Richie was fiddling with the grass in a pointed effort not to meet eyes with Stan, who was watching the two with a twinge of a headache in his forehead. Stan wasn’t sure why he was staring at Richie with such venomosity - he wanted Richie to know he was mad at him, but with the way Richie shifted to face Bill made Stan painfully aware that Richie could tell he was mad at him, and was purposely avoiding him. Stan clutched his thermos in his hands, feeling the ridges of the handle ache into his fingers a little.

Eddie eyed him up from under his thick wooly hat that was so large on his small head it kept falling over his eyes, his knees up to his chest, holding his tiny hot water bottle into his stomach - an attempt to ward off hypothermia, which his Mother had told him he would catch if he so much as left the house during Winter. “What’s the matter with you?” Eddie quipped, sounding mildly annoyed which everyone had grown to accept was just the way Eddie’s voice sounds, holding no real contempt.

“What? Why do you ask?”

“You’re about to geiser your fucking chicken soup.”

Stan forcibly relaxed his hold and turned to meet Eddie’s eyes, not that he could see anything more than a row of small dark lashes from the bottom of his eyes, “It’s tomato soup.”
Eddie mumbled a whatever and changed to topic of conversation to criticism of Bill’s choice of snacks for this evening.

“Are you fucking kidding, you know I can’t eat that much sugar! I’ll go into sugar overload or whatever and fall into a diabetic coma - are you trying to fucking kill me, Bill?”

Bill laughed as he laid out the crackers and chocolate on his blanket, “I duh-don’t think that’s how it works. Besides, you’re not even duh-duh-diabetic.”

“Yes I am, I can’t eat much sugar - don’t you remember when all I had in my lunchbox in fucking elementary school was a cheese sandwich and sliced cucumber - I wasn’t even allowed an apple because it sent my sugar levels up!”

“Juh-just try it?” Bill pleaded, stabbing a marshmallow onto what looked to be a piece of barbeque equipment, Bill must have noticed Eddie eyeing the tool with disgust because he quickly followed up, “I washed it and it’s duh-disinfected.”

Eddie opened his mouth in another complaint, slapping Bill’s outstretched arm away as he tried to poke Eddie with the marshmallow.

“You didn’t seem all that concerned with sugar when you were knocking back cocktails like a stripper in Vegas.”

“Yes, dickweed and then I passed out.”

“Puh-pretty sure that wuh-was more the alcohol’s fault than the sh-sugar.”

“That’s a lie!” Eddie flustered, stumbling over his words as he does when he gets agitated. Beverly laughed from between Richie and Stan, perched with her legs crossed in the stolen chair. Eddie turned with a sharp, “What!”

“Eddie, you probably don’t even remember climbing up Richie like a monkey.” She said and judging by Richie’s face - he didn’t either. Beverly laughed again at Richie, “Oh my God - Bill definitely took a picture - I think he took about a hundred.”
Eddie’s face fumed a violent pink, “I didn’t do that.”

“Awww, Eds! You couldn’t keep your hands off me, just wanted to climb me like a tree you little devil, don’t worry - if you wanted my bananas all you had to do was ask.” Bill laughed and elbowed Richie lightly, “Ow - shit - I don’t want to hear you complaining about me being boney, Big Bill - I feel like I just got stabbed in the ribs.” Bill elbowed him again.

“You wuh-were asking Stan what it felt like to be tuh-tuh-tall, then you just stuh-starting climbing Richie, to guh-get onto his shu-shu-shu-shoulders.”

“You ended up hitting your head on the doorframe and started crying, then passed out like three minutes later.” Mike finished for Bill, who had started to choke on his words as he tried to bristle down laughter.

Stan could hardly remember that, replaying it in his head was like watching TV from ten feet underwater, but he found himself biting his own laughter at the mental image nonetheless.

“I fucking hate you all. Give me the stupid marshmallow and shut the fuck up.”

Bill handed everyone out their marshmallows, all but Eddie and Stan getting theirs pierced onto a clean-enough looking stick, clearly snapped off from a tree. Stan wasn’t overly partial to sweet things, but he toasted his marshmallow nonetheless. Mike was telling Bill all about a baby lamb he had helped be born, pretending not to find it amusing when Eddie blanched and grew a little green at the details, while Bill looked at him in awe, his face interested and completely drawn into everything he was hearing. Bill never had anything but love for his friends painted across his face, Stan briefly thinks that whatever girl Bill ends up falling in love with just might be the most loved girl on the planet. His eyes flicker to where Richie was lying sideways on the log, fully leaning on Bill and conversing erratically with Beverly about some show they had both been keeping up to date with, his cigarette leaving trails of orange amber in the air as he wildly gestured, almost burning himself a couple of times.

Stan feels slightly out of place, sitting where he was, because for the last week or two - ever since he and Richie had began sneaking beer and wine and all sorts into their bedrooms and kissing behind the secrecy of their closed doors - they had sat beside each other. It had earned a look from Eddie as Stan gestured Richie onto the foldable double seat, but nothing was said as Eddie sat on one of the single fold-out chairs, rubbing it with a disinfectant wipe before sitting down. Stan feels slightly lost without Richie shouldering him to encourage him into a conversation, or slinging an arm obnoxiously around his shoulder to draw Stan into whatever shitty monologue he was doing. His eyes followed Richie’s cigarette and he found himself tasting the nicotine from Richie’s breath.
He swallowed as the thoughts of Richie’s dirty cigarette breath panting into his own started swimming through his head. He tried to roll the tension from his shoulders as he imagines Richie panting his dirty cigarette breath into someone else’s mouth.

Richie catches his eye for a moment, his mouth stuttered a little around his story before he furrowed his brows and made a point of looking away from Stan. It didn’t help Stan get any less mad at him.

Stan was finding himself brewing over the incident that had happened at work, the very thing causing the current tension between the two. When Stan returned from outside to continue work, Richie just sailed past him with a cigarette dangling from his lips without looking at him. In fact, Richie hadn’t looked at Stan the rest of the shift. It made Stan livid. It wasn’t enough that Richie was using him as a practice fuck, but Richie was trying to drag his name through the mud just because he’s getting pissy about everything.

“Well, I think we see why Stan never does any of the cooking.” Eddie’s voice snapped Stan out of his trance, he had been staring at Richie - who had looked up at the noise and gave him a strange look. Stan’s marshmallow was burnt - to put it lightly - to shit.

“I’ll remember that when it’s my turn to bring the snacks,” Stan said, scraping the burnt food off of his prong against a rock in the fire pit, wincing at the long white strings of sugar that connected the two - it reminds him of when him and Richie pull apart after kissing and their lips are joined by a string of their mixed saliva. Gross.

Not gross.

Stan’s stomach twisted as Richie let out a loud “OOOOOOOOOO - Eddie’s favourite chocolate brownies? Withheld!”

Stan usually baked his own goods to bring down, it relaxed him and it gave him something to busy his hands with. His friends have tried his food enough between Stan bringing in something to sell in the dessert counter every weekend, to him whipping up some pastries or cakes to bring down to the Marsh. And true to Richie’s statement - Eddie was borderline obsessed with Stan’s brownies - always moaning obscenely when he ate, much to the joy of Riche and the exasperation of literally everyone else. Somehow his ‘diabetes’ was always forgotten about those days.
“Aw, your Mom’s a bitch? Sorry to hear Eds - but hey! Look on the bright side, she can’t be any more of a bitch than Stan.”

“Beverly - we know you’re not a slut - or whatever those assholes in your class call you. That title goes to Richie.”
“Hey, Stan - wanna show us how much of your dick the Rabbi cut off?”

“Stop molesting Mike - none of us know how many STD’s you’re carrying.”

“If that stick up your ass was any deeper it would be tickling your prostate.”

“No, I don’t think those are jokes, Eddie. I think Richie is just truly that desperate that he would fuck anything with legs at this point.”

“Do you guys reckon that Rabbi’s diddle kids the same way priests do? Maybe that’s why Stan’s such a frigid.”

The two quipped back and forth, raising the occasional look of shock from Bill or Eddie - who had known the two for so long that they knew when both Richie and Stan had overstepped the unspoken line in the sand. They said nothing, however - just shooting curious glances at the two and continuing the conversation along its way.

It wasn’t until Richie made comments about the small string of bruises on Stan’s neck that Stan had desperately tried to cover during the week that Stan had decided he had taken enough of this petty back-and-forth bullshit. He’s had enough of Richie painting him as something he’s not, enough of Richie being bitchy, enough of Richie saying shit just to get a reaction out of him and his friends. It wasn’t fucking fair.

So he had stood up, grabbed Richie’s arm mid-smoke and pulled him out of the clearing, out of the Marsh and downhill, just far enough that the wind wouldn’t carry their voices and concealed enough in the trees that they would muffle them too. Richie had tried to tug his arm free and remain seated, but Stan threatened to dislocate his shoulder and he followed suit with a look of displeasure.

Stan all but threw Richie’s arm out of his hand when they reached what Stan deemed a good enough place to talk. Richie looked offendedly at his arm, rubbing it gently and not meeting Stan’s eyes.

“What is your fucking problem.” Stan seethed.

Richie had the decency to look somewhat sheepish as he backed himself into a tree and laid his
weight against it, trying to shrink a little under Stan’s eyes, which were sharp and small, squinting at Richie with anger. Richie didn’t respond but he had the look on his face of wanting to say something, but deciding against it.

“Richie, you can’t push my buttons all day, embarrass me, point out my fucking hickeys to my friends - which, by the way, none of them had even noticed - only to decide to stop the trash talk when I’m asking you why. Asking you why you’re acting so weird about everything all of a sudden.”

Stan stopped himself before he went any further. Not looking to rant at Richie anymore than he just wanted Richie to stop being weird. All this aggression and spite was coming out of left field, and between Stan trying to deal with the sinking feeling in his chest every time he thinks about Richie moving on, to the clutching of his stomach he gets whenever he thinks of Richie in ways that no one else has seen him and with the addiction he’s found himself within Richie’s mouth - it was leaving him stressed and worn thin. His disorder had fed into the stress and he found himself sleepless most nights because he could swear the gentle ticking of his watch fell out of beat every twenty-three seconds. He was confused, he was upset, he was angry and he just wanted his best friend to be there with him, side-by-side like they had been.

Richie cricked his neck a little, making Stan cringe when it made a cracking sound. Richie stays silent for a moment, but the look on his face makes Stan let him - Richie looks like he’s mulling over his words, opening his mouth every so often just to close it and start the process again.

It was rare that Richie really thought before he spoke.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I was just messing around.” Richie looked like he didn’t even try to believe his words.

“Don’t bullshit me, Rich.” Richie’s eyes flickered to Stan’s at the nickname, prompting him to pull out another cigarette - having lost his previous one when Stan yanked his arm a little too hard and he had to drop it to regain balance. “You - you can’t just decide to start lying to me now.”

Richie struggled to get a flame from his lighter, twisting his body against the wind a little to catch a pocket of still air. “What am I lying about, then?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t get it.” Richie took a drag, face relaxing with the rush of nicotine.
Stan moved closer towards him, only maybe four feet between them now. He could see the tobacco curling as it burned in his cigarette. “Stop it. I’m not going to play this game - I’m not playing cat and mouse with you so that you can skirt around the topic and confuse me into dropping it.” Richie shot him a look, “Don’t look at me like that - you know that I understand how you work. I know that you’d love to pretend not to know what I’m talking about, dodge my questions until I get frustrated and then you feed into it, making comments and being a trashmouth until I walk away. I know your game plan, Rich and you know me well enough to know I won’t play it.”

Richie’s face bled from a look of shock into a small smile. A gentle smile that comes naturally to your face when you’re content, like when you step into a particularly warm patch or sunlight, or when you smell something that reminds you of a good memory, or when you’re sifting through old photos of you and your friends. A small smile that isn’t overly conscious or prominent on the features, but a comfort nonetheless.

“Of course you do.” Richie looked at Stan with an atypical softness, Stan felt like he was under a microscope for a moment, “I just - uh,” Richie trailed off, taking a drag of his cigarette and blinking in thought, “It’s just messing with me a little, us going from two innocent little church boys who want to do nothing more than make their Mommys proud to fuckin’ like rabbits in heat. Forgive me for getting a little whiplash, Staniel.”

Stan’s face heated a little, “We had sex once.”

Richie laughed and winked, taking another drag - for dramatics probably.

“I- is that the issue?” Stan’s stomach had started to hurt a bit, “We can stop. You didn’t have to get all defensive and bitchy about it, all you had to do was say, Rich.”

Richie almost choked on the smoke in his lungs, “No! No, we uh - we don’t need to stop.” He eyed Stan with a little uncertainty, “Unless you do?”

Stan shook his head, toeing the ground with his thick winter ankle boots, “Not really. It’s fun, right?” Stan met Richie’s eyes then, and they both felt a small smirk creep onto their faces before Stan quickly looked away, his face heating up - God it’s cold, no wonder his face is heating up.

“Yeah, it is.”
Stan cleared his throat, “But - why are you getting weird about it, then? It was your bright idea,
dumbass.” Richie shrugged, relaxing into the tree, “Hey - don’t get complacent, Richie. We’re not done.”

“I told you why I was acting out, now let’s kiss and make up.”

“No - I want you to apologize.”

Richie blinked, hand falling from where he had gone to grab Stan’s arm. “What for?”

Stan took a deep breath, “For calling me gay in front of my friends, Richie.”

Richie’s jaw clenched a little, his words were spoken forcefully, like he was trying his best to force
them out of his throat, “Oh I didn’t realize being gay was so disgusting -”

“Don’t be a dick about it. You know what would happen if rumors spread, Richie. I’m not just
some kid, hell, I’m not even just some Jewish kid - I’m the Rabbi’s son. This fucking town hates us
enough, what do you think they’ll do if they find out the Rabbi’s son is gay? What do you think all
the higher ups in the Synagogue will think? It would ruin us.”

Richie bit his tongue, “But you’re not gay, right?”

“Obviously.” Stan’s fingers dug into his forearms.

“Obviously.” Richie said, a sardonic smile on his face. “So, what? Do you think one of our friends
is going to go spread around Derry a rumor that you like dick? Does that fit the script of this little
fantasy movie you’ve got playing in your head?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“No! I don’t, Stan. Because you’re the one getting so paranoid at the fucking horror that any of our
friends might possibly think you’re gay. I don’t care if you like dick or not - and neither do they -
do you really think Big Bill is going to give a fucking hoot if you start swinging for the other
team? Hell, Bill probably wouldn’t even bat an eye if you got down and started giving him a
fucking handy - he would just give you a great ol’ pat on the back for being _ever so brave._”

Stan stepped closer to Richie and gave him a light shove, “Stop it.”

Richie glared and flicked his cigarette off to the side, barely half smoked, “Stop what? Telling you the truth? The truth that not a single one of us will give a shit if you’re gay, if I’m gay - if fucking _Mike’s horse_ is gay - the only person that has an issue with it is you.” Richie stabbed a finger into the center of Stan’s chest.

“I’m not gay, and I don’t hate gays, either. The reason it irritates me is because it’s _gross._ I don’t like you fucking talking about me and sex at all. Keep our fucking sex life out of your trashmouth and in the bedroom.”

Richie moved his finger from a point and just … rested his palm on Stan’s chest. “Ha - like it’s our dirty little secret, Stanley?”

Stan’s chest tightened at that, a flush of heat washing over him so fast it made him a little dizzy, he found himself shifting slightly closer towards Richie without really realizing it. “Yuh-yeah.” He choked around the word, his voice cracking. Thanks a lot, puberty.

Richie seemed to catch onto that, a knowing smirk creeping onto his face. The same smile Richie usually shoots Stan after he locks his bedroom door, creeping over to Stan who’s sitting patiently on his bed and leaving Stan all but ravaged in a matter of minutes. Shirt collar unbuttoned down to his chest, lips swollen from gentle tugs and light bites, neck sheening with saliva - and sometimes light peppers of blue and black - if Stan was particularly inebriated either from the alcohol or the _need_ coursing through his veins.

Stan barely had a moment to stall himself before Richie grabbed his coat, pulling him forward to crash into his mouth. Stan immediately becoming pliant under Richie’s mouth, following his movements and moving in tangent with him as though it was a dance they had rehearsed for months on end. Richie pulled away soon after pulling Stan forward, _too soon._

“Is this okay?”

Stan found himself moving towards Richie in impulse, lips _just_ brushing against Richie’s every time he lets out a short puff of breath. “Huh?” Great contribution, Stanley. Stellar performance.

Richie kissed into him lightly, a smile ghosting his lips, “We’re one-hundred percent sober. Does
that not bother you?"

“Didn’t last time.”

Richie paused for a moment, a sentence clearly dancing on his lips before he swallowed it, taking Stan’s mouth in the process, “Alright.”

They kissed for a while, open-mouthed with Richie sucking on Stan’s bottom lip every now and again, the cold air nipping at the wetness of their lips, Richie’s hands still grappled in the front of Stan’s coat - as if Stan would melt away into the icy ground if he let go. Stan doesn’t think he could move away from Richie if God himself pulled at him. A tongue would occasionally trace Stan’s lips - which he would open - only for Richie to trace his lips again and go back to dancing his lips over Stan. *Fucking tease.*

“You like this being a dirty little secret, huh?” Richie said, words murmured into Stan’s mouth - who let out a groan in response, “You like running around with your best friend in secret?”

Stan groaned a little louder as Richie pulled away only to move to kiss along his jaw, working his way from Stan’s chin to his ear, before pausing and burying his head into Stan’s temple. Stan could feel him mumbling something into his skin, but Richie just shook his head when Stan asked what it was. The thought was pushed out of Stan’s head when Richie gave a firm kiss to his temple - making Stan’s stomach twist heavily.

Then he imagined it. Them touching, mouths wet against each other, Richie clutching onto Stan’s coat and face buried in Stan’s hair. Everything - but instead of Stan it was someone else and the twisting in his stomach turned into lurching, a hollow almost painful feeling. He twisted his head, shaking Richie off his temple - who frowned at him through his stupid coke-bottle glasses.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Stan knew it was ridiculous, selfish even, to bring up. He had no right to feel like Richie owed him anything, he knew that this was for fun, that it was just a bit of fooling around for whoever their future partners may be. Stan briefly wonders how much of this could be applied to a woman. He shook the thought.

Richie looked unimpressed, “Don’t make me repeat your big spiel about you knowing when I’m lying back to you - because I will. Well, not word for word, cuz, to be honest, I wasn’t really paying *that* much attention - but the same sentiment, yeah?”
Sten just stared at Richie, trying to fumble over words in his head, trying to gather all the rogue thoughts in his head and staple them into a cohesive sentence, with Richie’s stupid fucking face half an inch away.

“It’s just uh -” Stan stopped himself, not quite knowing why he started with nothing to say. Richie made a ‘go on’ motion with his hand, “It’s stupid.”

“I know you are but what am I?” Stan pinched his neck roughly, “Ow - who pinches a neck what the fuck - sorry, go on.”

“No.”

Richie looked amused and painted a stupid puppy-dog look on his face, “But what about us being friends? Friends don’t keep secrets…”

“I’ll tell you under the conditions that you never do that again.”

“Deal.”

“I just - it feels weird that we’re doing … this stuff,” He gestured between their mouths, “and someday we’ll be doing it with other people. It’s just a bit strange to think about.”

Richie looked somewhere between aghast and intrigued, “Like… a threesome?”

Stan briefly wonders if the coroner would believe Richie just choked himself to death. Yes, officer - he just wrapped his own around his neck and choked himself to death right in front of me! I have no idea how he did it. “No. Like with our future girlfriends. Or uh - boyfriend, I guess.”

Richie looked crestfallen for a moment, a strange look ghosting over his face that Stan had never seen before. It made him look much older - an appearance of seriousness and the face of someone who was far too tired for someone so young slowly took over his features. Stan didn’t move his eyes off of Richie’s face even as his friend slowly rose a hand to his face, resting his palm on his face. It was so light, Stan wondered if Richie was actually touching him at all or if it was his imagination - yet it was the most definable feeling that Stan had felt all evening. More than the
harsh cold, more than the biting anger, more than the open mouthed-kisses and Richie murmuring into his mouth.

“I don’t think I could have anyone after you—” Richie shut his mouth closed, so quickly that his teeth clinked together, Stan just blinked, “You’re my best friend.” He settled with. Stan’s heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest and lie in a heap on the dirty ground.

“You’re my best friend too, Richie.” *Even if you are a jackass.*

Richie stared at Stan, in the same expression he sees Beverly staring after Ben with, or Bill after Georgie. Without leaving room for argument, it was a look of pure, unadulterated love. Stan’s heart was beating in his fucking guts when Richie placed the most gentle kiss in the world on Stan’s mouth.

“Then that’s enough for me.” Richie said it as though it was final. Like the final piece of the universe had just been slotted into place, planets aligning and stars burning and supernovas beaming, as though that single sentence was enough to stabilize everything that had happened, a final explanation and final prescription to Stan’s worries. It just made Stan’s stomach ache even worse.

Richie parted, the look wiped off his by face now, replaced with a neutral expression, if not with a little tug upwards of the lips. He tugged on Stan’s arm - parallel with how Stan had pulled on Richie’s not minutes before. Richie was laughing as he tugged Stan through the trees - almost slipping and sending them sprawling down the hill, never once loosening his grip on Stan’s arm until they made their way back to the Marsh, to be met with questioning glances.

Richie waved it off with a joke about Stan beating him up, evading the questions at hand, covering up the truth with a grin and walking effortlessly into a separate conversation. Stan thinks he’s very good at that.

Despite Richie’s loud laughter ringing out at Eddie as Mike tries to place a daisy chain on his head, while Eddie desperately tried to shake him off, there was something off about Richie. An air of sadness floated around him, his shoulders didn’t jump as much as they usually did when he laughed, his fingers constantly around a cigarette, consistently filling his lungs up with smoke without a second thought, his spare hand faintly fidgeting with the hem of his massive jumper. Richie could fool everyone else - but not Stan.

Stan briefly sees the flash of Bill’s camera, but he ignored it - the picture of Eddie with a daisy crown and a huffy face will no doubt be catered into his hands in a couple of minutes. He continues
to watch Richie - who Stan had decided - is much more of an enigma than he first appears.

Stan can’t help but shake the feeling that their conversation only left him with more questions than answers, and that it had been little more than a thin sheet of wallpaper spread over a growing expanse of mildew, a cheapshot temporary cover-up of a deeper seeded issue. Stan can’t quite shake the feeling of his heart fluttering every time Richie does much of anything.

He spends the rest of the night wishing he could kiss that smudge of chocolate on the corner of his mouth off. Company be damned.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so so so much for taking time out of your day to read this little part of my life.  
Please consider leaving a comment and leaving a kudos if you enjoyed :)

academia is not a nut bill

Chapter Notes

thank you all for reading - the continued support really does mean a lot and i am trying to finally get an end-game plan in place for this fic :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As predicted, Richie's heartwarming statement, as authentic as it may have been - had not been the fix-it-all that they had both hoped it would be. Christmas had passed for the majority of the losers, with Beverly, Eddie and Ben having spent it outside of town with their extended family, Mike with his Grandfather, Bill with his family (everyone would blitz to Bill’s house as soon as they could after Christmas to sift through all the sweet photos Bill would take of Georgie every year) and Richie with his Mom. Hannukah had came and passed for the Uris’ too - nothing over the Holidays had felt any different than they had last year.

Yet, Stan couldn’t help the feeling of disappointment at that. He had no real cause to feel as though this holiday period should have been any different - he had the same friends, the same family, the same traditions - there was nothing new or unordinary that would have made Stan expect a change in dynamic. They had broke up for school as usual, with Bill and Eddie waiting for him to clear his desk, with Beverly waiting at the gates - standing side by side with Ben, with Richie pedaling harshly to the Marsh an hour later than the rest of his friends to complain about getting detention on the last day of term, again. They spent the evening of their last day of term in the Marsh - hot water bottles cradled into their stomachs as they laughed at Bill trying to beat Mike in an arm wrestling competition, filling their stomachs with sugary food and hot drinks, sitting close together and exchanging their Secret Santa gifts before parting ways for the night, wishing the three friends who would not return until after Christmas well.

The usual course of the holiday period had come and gone, filled with gifts and friends and cold ice frosting his window, hours spent in Temple and the gentle burning of the Menorah from the living room. Yet, for the first time - Stan felt somewhat underwhelmed. For reasons unbeknownst to him, he had expected different, something more, something new. It was a heavy, poignant notion that Stan could never quite shake, always feeling murmurs of anticipation under his skin as he continued with the mundane annual activities of the holidays, never truly feeling those needs fulfilled.

It was as though there was an elephant in the room, an elephant that Stan was oblivious to - feeling its weight and the shift in the air as it lingers, but never quite being able to see it. Walking around its path, staring at it and knowing that there is something strange taking up space around him, like feeling someone’s eyes on the back of your head, an instinctive gnawing in your gut that something’s not quite right. And yet, it remains invisible.
Stan suspected - no - accepted - that it was probably Richie’s fault - as most of his dilemmas tend to be. Having a best friend like Richie Tozier was like being told to plant a seed to grow a fish, and Stan usually would make it work.

The wayward drifting of his mind was causing him some distress, his mind flickering between subjects which could potentially be causing this particularly strange feeling of more. His brain would play thoughts and theories like a videotape, and Stan could never quite press pause. These little plays would differ in reasons behind his stress, playing randomly over the Holidays like a Documentary series jigsaw puzzle.

The first time that he had had a flash of an image, an image that made the strange gnawing in his stomach and boredom in his chest disappear, was when he was helping his Mother bake gingerbread cookies for the local Church’s midnight mass. An act of solidarity in respect for different religions had been an important lesson his parents had passed to him, respect other people - even if they’re a little different. But only a little different, his mind usually reminded him - he never quite fully understood what that meant for himself, but it always left him with a sinking feeling in his gut.

He was icing the cookies, drawing little santa outfits with neat black outlines while his mother was preparing another batch behind him. It was routine every Christmas Eve, him and his Mother would bake while his Father would be in his study, doing Rabbi business that Stan never really had the interest to understand. It was the same as every year, the familiar vinyl of some artist from the seventies filled the air and his Mother hummed along, and after a little encouragement, Stan would sing along with her.

These memories with his Mother were cherished, baking with her had always been such a calming and constructive bonding experience when he was young, too young for running out with his friends by himself, too young to understand why he had to flick the light switch on four times, too young to understand why none of the other kids in his class cried when the teacher switched the color of ink halfway through marking his homework. But old enough to laugh when his Mom sang out of pitch, old enough to reach the top of the kitchen counter to mix frosting, old enough to appreciate his Mom washing flour off of her hands before patting the crown of his head and kissing his forehead.

And yet, it felt bland. It felt incomplete. Stan at first, had wondered if they had forgotten to add an ingredient, or forgot to grease the tray, or forgot to wash their hands. But they hadn’t forgotten anything - Stan was just wearing a heavy cape of uncertainty. He double checked everything, triple checked even and everything turned out as he had predicted - fine.

Then why did he feel like something was missing? An integral part of this scene was missing, yet had never really been there in the first place.
He accidentally gave Santa a black gash across his abdomen when the image of Richie standing beside him, flour dusting his ugly Hawaiian shirt and smudges of frosting speckled on his face breached his mind, smiling at him with a glint in his eye as he frosted a sloppy phallic shape onto his ginger-bread man.

Stan barely registered that he had ruined the cookie, eyes staring at the black frosting cutting through the red, whilst not seeing it at all.

Why had Richie just popped into his head? Standing beside him, smiling and laughing with his Mom - fidgeting in tune to the song his Mom was humming under her breath and kicking Stan’s plimsolls with his dirty socks in an effort to get Stan to sing along too.

Stan set the piping bag down, coming to the realization that he had been squeezing it and some frosting had spilled over his hand, souring it black. His Mother continued humming, not even noticing that anything had gone astray, her back to Stan and happily beating ingredients into the bowl. The clock on the wall continued to tick, which had began to echo in Stan’s head. The streetlight opposite and two to the left of their house had continued to flicker, the stuttering orange glow had seemed like flames licking Stan’s face as he felt his cheeks heat up. All had continued on in the household, not even the ever unreliable record player stuttered over a lyric.

Yet Stan could have sworn his blood had stopped pumping for a moment when he imagined the flickering amber of the streetlight reflecting off of his best friend’s glasses.

He missed his best friend, since they were both dutifully studying for their exams, they found little time to spend with each other outside of work over the course of the last two weeks. The realization dawned on him. That’s it! He wished Richie was here because he hadn’t seen him in a while - there’s no need to overthink it. Stan could have laughed at himself - always getting worked up over nothing.

Stan left the kitchen twenty minutes later, cookies unfinished because none of his lines were perfect enough and the black frosting stained his fingers and he was worried he would try to peel his fingertips off. He tapped his bedroom door handle six times when he opened it and six times again when he closed it.

It had sent Stan’s brain into overdrive, he noticed every misalignment, every missed beat, anything that was a hair out of place - Stan noticed it. He was in the living room when he noticed something that made his stomach curl - a small stain of red on the sofa, just on the corner where it meets the floor. His mind briefly travels back to Eddie viciously downing a cocktail, sending half of it
cascading down his face and spotting his baby pink t-shirt in droplets of red. Stan can’t recall if it was a Cosmopolitan or a Bloody Mary, or just a random concoction of liqueurs and mixers poured into a pint glass, Richie claimed it made it less gay and Eddie gave him the finger and took it nonetheless.

He scrubbed at it for three hours, mixing cleaning fluids and chemicals and couldn’t focus on anything except the stain - which was about the size of a sunflower seed. It clouded his vision and made his head spin, and it wasn’t until he had managed to return the spot to its proper feather-grey that he had felt the chemical burns on his fingers.

He became hyper-focused on making everything right. Maybe if he fixed everything - the strange feeling would go away. He polished door knobs, dusted the ceiling, sorted their pantry alphabetically - no, by size - no, by colour - no, by expiration date - no by item - no by food group - no by calorie content - no by -

Stan locked himself in his perfect bedroom for the remainder of the day. Staring at the bottle of pills on his bedside table, willing them to do their job better.

Richie would have been able to calm him down before he had the chance to throw up his breakfast.

Then, he was eating dinner with his parents - looking down at his food (peas next to the corn, potatoes on the opposite side of the plate, chicken in the middle) and not much else - his need to fix everything hadn’t gotten better, and he knew it would pass - or something would distract him and it would be okay again. He just needed to eat his dinner, then go back to his perfect baby blue bedroom and read over his study notes.

His eyes quickly flickered to his Father’s when he spoke - asking a perfectly normal question about Stan’s studies, which Stan answered. His eyes flickered around the table and the feeling was back, weighing on his stomach. It felt a little like grief - he thought. The ache of losing someone, of being robbed of something and having to adjust to a world empty of an entire person.

He didn’t finish his dinner.

When Stan had looked over all of his notes, he was feeling a little more relaxed. He knew it all. English, Math, Chemistry, Biology, History - he could continue, but all of his subjects, he was going to get a perfect grade. A perfect, unblemished streak of A’s on his report card. Just imagining a tidy column of ‘A’s made Stan’s lungs breathe a little easier.
Too bad he was going to break the streak with Physics. The worst subject in the entire fucking world, so Stan had thought. A valid opinion, considering it was the only class that Stan struggled immensely with. Sure, he struggled a little in English, disliking how little order there was - how things were not so easily put away in little boxes - that wasn’t to say he didn’t like it, because he did. He loved how people could craft magic with their words, using wistful, airy words to lift the tone, sentences floating like feathers in a gentle breeze, guided by a long beautiful prose. Or using sharp, curt words to seethe out meaning, carving emotions into the page. There was so much creativity in it - and Bill had spent enough hours of his life ranting to Stan about it that it was impossible not to like it.

But Physics was just awful. It was simply a class Stan couldn’t understand. The potential it had to ruin a perfect streak of tidy letters made Stan want to rip its study notes to shreds and throw his textbook out of his window and into the snow for the raccoons. They would probably find better use of it that he would.

Stan’s eye caught the little bird-shaped eraser that was perched on the shelf opposite his desk, beside a picture Bill had taken. Stan and Eddie were sitting on a bench - the bench outside Marlo’s Ice-Cream Parlour in Bangor - a fairly secluded street lined with colourful stores and sidewalks free of gum. Eddie’s hand was raised in front of his face, shielding his eyes from the sunlight, Stan was sitting beside him, about a foot apart with his ankles crossed and hands perched on his knees, mouth caught in a happy grin at the camera. Except, he wasn’t smiling for the camera at all - he had seen Richie (who had detention for calling the teacher a ‘loveless hooch’ - if he remembers right - meaning he had been the last to arrive on their day out) stepping off of the bus, waving madly at him through the crowd of pensioners, his glasses slipping down his nose in the movement.

Stan couldn’t help the small smile that made its way on his face. He loved that photo - in fact, it was the only photo of himself that he had ever displayed in his room. And he did so proudly.

He quite liked the tingling feeling he got in his stomach every time he looked at it, even if it did distract him from his notes on Radioactivity.

With the strange, foreboding feeling that had settled deep in Stan’s gut over the holidays, it was almost a relief to wake up in the pitch black of a Derry morning and cycle through the snow into work. They hadn’t been closed over the holidays, but Stan had missed out on one of his weekend shifts with Hanukkah, sitting dutifully with his family instead.

Not to mention, he missed his friends. He really missed them. He loved his parents, don’t get me
wrong, but spending over a week with no one except your parents would drive any teenager up the walls. He had been holed up between his home and the Synagogue, mostly spending his time either studying or cleaning - no - fixing.

Stan couldn’t help but think about those tiny pills as he opened the Diner, rolling up the shutters and switching on the ovens and such. Those tiny white pills, kept neatly on the back left side of his bedside locker in their orange tub with the white lid, had seemed to be little more than a part of his breakfast as of late, not really seeming to actually calm his disorder as much as it should. Of course, these pills didn’t cure him - they would never cure him - they just made it a little easier to bear, or at least that’s what his Doctor said. And who was Stan to doubt a medical professional?

As Stan spent an extra ten minutes out of his morning to rotate every item in the walk-in refrigerator for their labels to face outwards, like the most perfect little Supermarket aisle - Stan couldn’t help but find himself wondering if his disorder was getting worse, if the pills were barely numbing the worst of it.

Worrying about it makes it worse.

His Doctor had told him that too, when he was nine years old and cried his eyes out when he was told he was ill, that he had a disorder that made him different. And different, of course, was bad.

Different is what made Henry Bowers scrub snow in his face until his cheeks bled at just thirteen, his yamaka stuffed into his schoolbag in shame. Different is what made the class snigger at every stutter during Bill’s presentations. Different is what made Beverly sit in the bathroom stalls, stubbing her cigarette out on the SLUT carved beside her name. Different is what left Ben with Henry Bowers’ initials scarred into the fat of his stomach. Different is why eyes and whispers followed Mike as he dared to exist with dark skin in Derry. Different is why Eddie had to scrub his body until it was red raw after being shoved into a trash can. Different is why that Tozier boy was bad news.

Different was bad, and Stan was different enough with being Jewish - he didn’t need any other reason to get bullied. So anything that made him different was hidden, concealed as best as it could be - maybe whispered in the Marsh between friends, maybe joked about and hinted at, maybe not even needing to be mentioned because his friends all knew him well enough to just know some things.

So Stan tried to swallow his worries, busying himself with the routine of work, filling in temperature records, getting the tables and chairs set up, even picking out a song to listen to from the jukebox as he fills the coffee machine with beans. It was a David Bowie type of morning, he decided.
He definitely didn’t keep checking the clock, waiting for Richie to come in. Much like how Richie definitely didn’t practically burst through the door at eight-fifty-five, hair looking more bird-nest-like than the last time Stan had seen him, and an almost manic look in his eyes.

The entire kitchen stood still in shock, staring at Richie as if Jesus himself had walked through those doors. Which had a much higher chance of happening than Richie Tozier showing up for work on time.

Bill had dropped a pancake on the floor mid-flip with the noise of the door slamming against the wall, and Eddie had let out a definitely not at all girlish squeal, dropping a plate in the sink and splashing himself with suds. And Stan, definitely did not find himself grinning ear to ear as he stacked a pile of dirty dishes beside Eddie, meeting Richie’s eyes and wishing there was less than ten feet between them.

That space didn’t last long, however, as Richie let out a loud, “Stan the man!” before wrapping him in a tight hug, squeezing him and lifting him off the ground.

“Ritchie, put me down!”

Richie just laughed and squeezed tighter, burying his head in Stan’s shoulder, “Don’t be such a pussy - you missed being encased in my strong, manly arms, Staniel.”

Stan heard Eddie snort. “I absolutely did not. Put me down, asshole.”

Richie complied, ruffling Stan’s hair in the process - slightly sending his Yamaka askew, which Stan immediately fixed. “I never thought I’d see a day where you showed up to work on time. The rapture must be coming.”

“Hell yeah it is! Us all kickin’ it with angels and shit.” Richie said, fist punching the air.

“No, you’re definitely going to Hell,” Stan said.

“I thought Jews didn’t ‘believe’ in Hell,” Richie replied, hitching his voice up in mockery.
“We don’t, but I’m willing to turn my back on Judaism if it means I don’t have to spend the remainder of eternity with you in my ear.” Despite his words, the grin hadn’t quite left his face, in fact, his entire body felt a little bit lighter.

Stan’s face flushed a little at Richie - who was standing so close to Stan that he could see the pores on his face, and the light, barely-there dusting of freckles on his cheeks. They were a lot more noticeable in Summer, littering Richie’s face with caramel-coloured dots over his cheeks and on the bridge of his nose. Richie always complained that they looked like he had shit on his face, but Stan quietly disagreed. During Winter however, they were barely noticeable, easily looked over as just a trick of the lighting - but Stan always knew to look closer.

Richie was staring at him like a child giddy for candy, rising up and down on his toes, glasses shifting on his nose with the movement. His eyes were brightly locked on Stan’s face, darting over his features as if he was committing them to memory. Richie’s eyes darted to the expanse of his neck and Stan shivered.

He had missed his Best Friend.

With Richie storming in, the slightly off-beat ticking of Eddie’s watch hadn’t seemed as loud anymore, and the water stain on the wall behind the shelves didn’t burn a hold in Stan’s gut. Bill’s wrinkled apron, Beverly’s uneven lipstick, Ben’s unhemmed pants, Mike’s muddy shoes - they had all been burning under his skin all morning, and they still were - but maybe just not as much. Richie’s whirlwind hair, mismatched socks, wrinkled apron, wonky glasses, his smile which seemed to sprawl more to the left of his face - it all seemed to dull the need to fix everything else. The need to obsessively comb over Richie and fix him made everything else seem a lot more manageable.

Stan’s train of thought was interrupted by a bright flash and a familiar clicking noise. Bill really did bring that stupid camera everywhere. It wasn’t stupid at all, in fact, Stan loved seeing Bill’s photo collections. Stan did not, however, like Bill constantly whining about needing new film rolls because he took thirty-seven pictures of a turtle he found in the quarry.

“Geez, Bill - if you’re going to try and fucking blind us, at least give us a little warning so we can pose seductively for your dirty little photo albums. I bet you have a dirty little black box full of naughty pictures of us in our underwear - or sleeping. God, Bill - you’re one sick pervert, do you know that?”

Bill laughed as he lowered his camera, shaking the paper that came out, “Beep-beep, Richie. I wuh-wuh-wanted photographic puh-proof that you actually came to wuh-work on time for once.”
Richie shot him the finger and slapped his arm around Stan’s shoulders, dragging him flush into his side. Stan felt his stomach turn a little - maybe he was getting ill, he forced. “Boss-man never complains about me being late, sure you don’t?”

“I literally complain every single time.”

Richie looked affronted at that, “That’s it - no more nude photoshoots, Bill! You had your chance and you blew it.” Bill shook his head at that, “And Stan - you are on thin fucking ice, if it weren’t for that handsome little face and those angelic little Jewish curls, you’d be in the same boat as Bill.” He squeezed Stan a little tighter, and if Stan felt his thumb rubbing his shoulder a little he ignored it. Even if it was all he could feel oh my god.

Stan’s response died on his tongue as he stammered a little, how did Richie always manage to render Stan into a moron. It has become increasingly harder to quip back at Richie like he used to do so easily, he would hardly have to think before landing an insult back at Richie who would look little less than absolutely elated. But now, ha, now Stan finds himself with a twisted stomach, red searing his face and his brain trying to piece together clumsy sentences.

“Oh my God - the stutter is contagious. Jesus Christ, we’re all gonna sound like the worst fucking beatbox crew in history.” Richie said, giving Stan a light smack on his shoulder before peeling away - Stan definitely did not have to root his feet onto the tiled floor to prevent himself following Richie’s heat.

Stan barely registered Eddie’s yelling at Richie to ‘no, fuck off - get the fuck away from the soap - I’m serious you’re such a fucking sleaze go suck a dick’ before, sure enough, like clockwork - there was a mass of bubbles rising out of the sink and onto the floor. Stan couldn’t help the fond smile that crept up on his face as he hit the back of Richie’s head with a spatula that he had picked up off of the pile of dirty dishes he had carried out moments beforehand.

“Just because you actually came in on time for once doesn’t mean you can goof off - the coffee grounds need to be emptied if you’re short of something productive to be doing,” Stan said, trying to rescue a now fairly damp Eddie.

Richie swore on impact and dropped the dish soap into the sink, causing a splash of suds to further drench Eddie’s clothes - even giving him a little soap mustache.

“Alright, Mom. ” Richie droned, slumping away to the front, not before stealing a strawberry with a
wink off of the plate of waffles that Bill was constructing.

“You cuh-could have at least tuh-took the fucking plate out with you,” Bill muttered, following him out with the plate to hand over to one of the trio out on server duty.

Stan couldn’t help but love his friends, they were irritating, loud, messy and there was only a select few that Stan would let his parents meet, (he always wondered how Richie made that list), but they were truly, all-in-all his family.

Which is probably why he spent the next five minutes waiting outside of the bathroom for Eddie to dry off, standing straight, parallel to the wall with his arms folded lazily, checking his watch every now and again. It hadn’t been long before Richie came looking for his favourite little spaghetti-monster to annoy, only to find is other favourite little yakuza to annoy. Stan told him it was a Yamaka - and Richie didn’t miss a beat before joining him on the wall, leaning against it with his hand in his pocket and the other scratching lazily at his face, rubbing his nose where his glasses rested.

Stan wasn’t expecting many moments of silence before Richie spoke, so he was waiting patiently to deal with whatever nonsense Richie would no doubt start spitting. Which, of course, he did.

“Say, darlin’, what’s a purdy girl lak you doin’ in a place lak this, huh?” Richie said, his cowboy-twang in full effect. It was one of his better ones. He had turned his body so he was leaning with one arm, facing Stan.

“Eddie is trying to dry his shirt under the hand-dryer.”

“Oh, I hate to be the jealous type - but I don’ like sharin’ - ‘specially not a fine piece lak you, Mister.” He moved a little closer, “Say, why don’ we jus’ run off - jus’ the two of us? Leave tha’ little pint-size here, think about it, won’t you? Jus’ me an’ you, runnin’ off into tha sunset, startin’ up a farm in tha country - jus’ findin’ company in each other. Doesn’t that sound nice, Mister Stanley?”

Stan hummed in thought, “I don’t know. Sounds like a big risk, and I hardly know you.”

Richie’s face elated with glee for a moment when Stan fed into the bit, before quickly morphing into a look of melancholy, his bottom lip sticking out and he made pleading motions with his interlocked hands, “Oh, Mister Stanley - I’ll give you whatever you wan’, I’ll do anythin’! Soon as
I set my eyes on you - I knew I had to ‘ave you! Gosh…” Richie began fanning himself, “With those gor-gus curls an’ those soft, carin’ eyes. You’re so tall an’ strong lookin’ - I bet you could jus’ pick me up an’ toss me around like -”

“BEEP FUCKING BEEP RICHIE.” Eddie’s desperate yell made both Stan and Richie pause before sharing a look and bursting into giggles. Richie laughing loudly and slapping his knee, catching Stan’s arm in the recoil. Stan laughed behind his fist, biting the flesh of his fingers to try and stop himself.

Eddie stomped out of the bathroom, t-shirt still sticking heavily to his tiny frame - despite being in the early stages of his growth spurt - he was still only about five-foot-two. No wonder he tried to climb Richie at Beverly’s birthday. The thought made Stan accidentally snort - which made him and Richie both laugh even harder.

“You two are fucking weird. I need to go get another shirt this is soaking wet and I’m going to get pneumonia.”

“Fucking pneumonia - you’re not going to get pneumonia, Eds you’re not a grumpy old man yelling at kids to ‘ get off my damn lawn!’ just yet.” Richie wiped a tear from behind his glasses.

“This is your fault so shut up - and do you even know how many people die of pneumonia every year in America alone? It’s a lot! Anyone can get it and I’m especially vulnerable because I have allergies and diabetes and-”

“You have literally zero of those things.” Richie said.

“Shut up - and most people don’t even know they’ve contracted pneumonia until it’s too late and I am sorry if I don’t want us all to be gathered together over my fucking grave this day next week!”

“Do they even make coffins that small?” Stan asked, sending Richie into a fresh wave of hysterics, slapping his leg - then slapping Stan’s leg.

“You both are fucking terrible, I’m going to get a new shirt.”

Richie choked on his laughter and hoisted Eddie by his armpits when he turned his back to walk away, earning himself several furious kicks to the shin. “No, Eds - wait - stop fucking kicking you little Gremlin, who fed you after midnight - please wait, I have a shirt you can wear.”
Eddie stilled and Richie dropped him back to his feet. Eddie turned around with a heated face and stood there expectantly, with his arms crossed. There were a few moments of silence then Eddie huffed out a “Well?”

Richard jumped to action, moving past the bathroom and into the small room they were meant to take their breaks in - but usually, they just walked around the kitchen eating their plate of food and talking to each other. So, the room was usually filled with bags and coats and other miscellaneous items that they needed to be stored during their shift.

Richie sifted through his backpack, sending scraps of paper and rogue pages from textbooks flying onto the floor. Stan went to speak but was cut off by Richie, who knew what Stan was going to say before he even got a chance to, “Organised. Chaos. Stanley.”

Stan shut his mouth and rolled his eyes to Eddie, who kicked the back of Richie’s shoe, “I don’t want any of your gross smelly gym clothes, Richie.”

Richie pulled a soft yellow shirt out of his bag, which was surprisingly - folded and looked clean, in fact - it looked brand new. He turned around and held the front of it to his chest, “First of all - I have overactive sweat glands and it’s bullying to make fun of me and I’m going to go home and cry into my pillow and write sad poems about it into my diary.” Richie faked wiping tears with the shirt, “Two - my sweat doesn’t smell - it’s my man-musk and the ladies find it irresistible.” Eddie gagged at that. “And three - this is your Secret Santa present!”

Eddie looked at Richie in confusion, “You already gave it to me - the stupid fucking gemstone thing.”

“A bedazzler, Eddie.” Stan supplied, resulting in a light shoulder from Eddie.

“Nah, I just really wanted to see if you would pretend to like it to make me feel good about myself.”

“I told you I hated it and I hated you.”

“You’re going to give me a boner with all this dirty talk, Eds.” Richie winked.
“Don’t fucking call me that,” Eddie groaned loudly, taking the shirt out of Richie’s outstretched hands and walking back to the bathroom - the lock clicking heavily in place.

Stan shook his head at Richie, who was laughing quietly into the crook of his arm, bent over the pathetic table that was supplied for them. Ben set his backpack on it a couple of weeks ago and it crumpled. Thankfully Eddie and Mike had managed to somewhat salvage it - although Stan reckoned the table legs were more duct tape than anything else at this point.

“Someday he is actually going to kill you, you do know that right?” Stan said, arms crossed. His tone was flat - but he could never quite keep a straight face when Richie laughed. Because Richie’s laugh was a roulette. Some days it’s loud and boisterous, some days it’s soft and more air than much else, some days he cackles - his voice cracking and breaking with every bark, some days he screeches - long and harsh and like fingernails on a chalkboard. This particular laugh was a quiet one, the type of laugh that makes your belly jump and your shoulders shake, with only little small whimpering escaping from his mouth.

Richie’s laugh usually made Stan’s stomach flutter with it - as if his laugh is so contagious it makes Stan’s organs laugh along with him.

“Fuck, if you think he’s gonna kill me now - wait until he puts on the shirt.”

“What did you do?”

“No - no! It’s nothing bad, I swear - although I was tempted to get him a pair of his favourite little red short-shorts with ‘skies out, thighs out’ printed on the ass - but I think I’m saving that for our baby boy’s sweet sixteenth.”

“You’re terrible.”

Richie looked at Stan fondly, uncurling himself from the table - which groaned a little in protest, “Yeah, I know - but you love it.”

Stan’s stomach tightened a bit - because he did - he loved Richie pushing people’s buttons, he loved his pranks and how Richie was never anxious for the repercussions of his shenanigans - because with their friends, at least, there were none. The list of things that Richie could do to permanently ruin any of their friendships was very, very small.
And a very underrated aspect of being friends with Richie Tozier, is that he always cheered you up. People assume Richie is a loud trashmouth - which he is - but he’s a lot more. Richie helped Stan with his attack, tried desperately to fix things in his room that he didn’t even understood needed to be fixed, Richie would talk loud and make wild comments when Bill’s stutter would get really bad, diverting everyone’s attention. He would pull pranks, make stupid jokes, fall over, or make his stupid voices - anything he could to make his friends laugh when they needed a little help to remember how.

Stan truly loved him. Deeply and wholly. He wonders if this is how Richie and Bill felt? Or even Bill and Georgie? The pure admiration he felt for Richie was something he thought seldom about, because it was unquestioned. Was this what it was like to have a brother?

Stan doubted that brothers wanted to kiss one another, but that’s neither here nor there.

Stan’s train of thought was interrupted with the sound of the latch of the bathroom door opening, and the familiar squeak of the door being pushed open. Stan hardly paid it much attention, but Richie’s head shot up light lightening - a wide grin on his face.

He shot up and grabbed Stan’s hand, not even pausing before pulling him out of the room and down the narrow hallway. Less like the harsh pulling that Stan had mirrored before they split up for Winter break - more like a child pulling their parent around a zoo - pointing at all the fascinating animals that they knew so much about. It was slow, but firm. And Richie’s hand slotted into Stan’s so easy, it almost seemed like they had practiced it. Maybe they should, Stan wonders - it feels grounding, Stan could almost not focus on the sight in front of him when they entered the kitchen.

Almost.

Richie had stopped dead in the doorway, Stan hovering behind him - peering over his shoulder like some type of curly-haired parrot. Eddie was standing beside his sink, looking huffier than he had earlier, and with Bill giggling softly as he shook the sheet that printed out of his camera, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Eddie was not the most willing model.

Usually, Eddie was pretty indifferent to being the subject of Bill’s wannabe photography skills. Unlike Richie, who usually pulled faces and Bev and Mike who would smile brightly - Eddie acted as if it wasn’t there at all. Which did usually result in some very nice candid shots. However, Eddie was complaining at Bill this time, arms crossed tightly across his chest.

“C’mon, Eddie - don’t hide your wonderful present - I spent good money on that, you know,”
Richie said, which resulted in a heavy glare from the boy in question.

“It’s not even a good shirt it itches like hell.”

“I had the same issue after sleeping with your Mom.” He moved with his free hand for a high five from Stan, who justifiably lowered it without even needing to look.

Eddie shot him the finger from his crossed arms. Stan sighed in exasperation, “Eddie please just give Richie what he wants so we can all go back to work.”

“Geez Stan, if you want to watch me give Eds a good time all you had to do was ask, babe.” Richie punctuated with a wink and a roll of the hips - which had caught Stan’s hips on the backward roll. Stan forced his blood to stay away from his face, trying not to flush. Stan looked pleadingly at Eddie, who looked ill all of a sudden, his face had paled and he swallowed thickly around a sentence, deciding not to say anything.

He did uncross his arms, showing off the pale yellow shirt with an aspirator graphic on it, which was admittedly, a little funny. What was even funnier was the bold cursive writing under it which read ‘it ain’t easy bein’ wheezy’.

Richie whooped beside him and cheered, shouting compliments Eddie’s way - who had just rolled his eyes and turned to go back to work, mumbling under his breath about something.

It wasn’t until Richie pulled away to go empty the coffee grounds like he was told to that Stan had even realized they were still holding hands. He became accustomed to it so quickly he hadn’t noticed. He had certainly noticed when his hand felt rather cold afterward.

The next few hours had gone without a problem, it was unusually quiet and Bill and Mike had taken turns to see who could flip a pancake the highest without it breaking - the answer was a unanimous ‘neither’. Beverly had been dancing to the jukebox with Richie - just out of eyesight of any customers in the store. There was one, the same Polish lady that seems to come back often. Stan avoided her - she still gives him the creeps.

The only thing really worth mentioning over the lunch hours had been when Ben dropped a stack of freshly washed coffee mugs. He was staring at Beverly, who was chatting happily with the
Polish lady, caught in a laugh when Ben had walked out. He had been so infatuated with her that he had tripped over Richie - who was lying flat on his back on the floor for some reason - and sent the mugs flying. Everyone had rushed out at the noise, quickly pulling both boys from the ground and Bill hastily sweeping up the shards of perfect white porcelain. And when Eddie started ranting in Stan’s ear about AIDS and Richie bleeding from a couple of small cuts on his arms, Stan had dragged Richie into the back hall - getting the first aid kit from the shelf in the kitchen while Richie stared after him, digging around in his pocket.

When Stan turned back around, Riche sent him a wink and a ‘come on’ gesture as he pushed through the back door and disappeared with a pack of shitty gas station cigarettes in his hand.

Stan followed him without hesitation, not even pausing to slip on his coat. It seemed to be a trend, blindly following Richie. Trusting the boy with wonky glasses who tried to juggle knives without a moment’s hesitation. Stan briefly wonders if that’s a wise decision, thinking back to the times he sat with Richie in Eddie’s upstairs bathroom, watching Eddie’s delicate hands wipe blood from Richie’s nose with a face twisted in concern but lips sealed tightly shut. He doesn’t think about it again, he doesn’t need to know why he trusts Richie - just like he doesn’t need to understand how the cells in his body work - they work whether you understand or not.

Richie was already sitting in the tough plastic seat, smiling at Stan through the cigarette in his mouth. Stan closed the door shut behind him and moved to his friend, waiting for him to finish his cigarette before going any closer, not wanting the smell to linger on his clothes.

“He gets his knickers in a fucking twist about me getting AIDS - yet he’s yet to say boo about me smoking. Why do you think that is?” Richie asked after taking a drag, the smoke filling out after his words - disappearing into the light, but sharply cold breeze. Stan wrapped his arms around himself and tucked his hands under his armpits, resting the first aid box between his feet.

Richie noticed this, “Do you want my coat?”

Stan stared at Richie’s frame - in particular, his bare arms, “You’re not wearing a coat.”

“Do you want my … shirt?”

“Yes.”

Richie shrugged and began to lift his T-shirt off, before being cut off by Stan, “Oh my God please
“keep your shirt on.”

Richie flicked his ash aggressively at Stan, “Watch what you wish for then, big guy.” Barely missing a beat, Richie continued, “Maybe Eddie has a smoking fetish. Some people find it really sexy.”

Stan mulled it over a little, picturing attractive women with cigarettes in their hands before grimacing, “No - can’t say I see the appeal in yellow teeth.”

Richie gasped and brought his hand up to feel his teeth, accidentally stubbing his cigarette on the lens of his glasses, “My teeth aren’t yellow!”

Stan bit back a laugh at Richie’s face, a clearly exaggerated huff painted on it, it reminded Stan somewhat of Eddie, “Not yet,” Stan winced a little when Richie rubbed the blackened ash off of his glasses with his t-shirt. Richie had nice teeth, so Stan thought. They were a little big in his mouth, made him look a little like a beaver - but it was endearing.

“Do you think Ben is gonna write a soppy little gay fuckin’ poem about how sorry he is that he brutally injured me?” Richie laughed, no malice in his voice.

Something about the sentence made Stan’s stomach hitch, but he didn’t entertain it. “I think Beverly is the only one privy to that.”

Richie shook his head as he sucked on his cigarette, “Nuh-uh - he wrote Bill one for Secret Santa - he wouldn’t let me read it but I’m willing to bet he talking about how strong and powerful and god damn sexy Daddy Billiam is.”

“Please don’t ever say that again.”

“Which part?”

Stan contemplated for a moment, “Yeah, none of it.”

Richie laughed, Stan liked making Richie laugh. They let silence wash over them for a bit, not
feeling any discomfort in it at all. They were happy enough in each other’s company to sit comfortably in silence for hours - but Richie liked to talk.

“Not be a big ol’ fucking nerd or anything, but how is your studying going? Last year you almost took a fucking stroke from stressing yourself out.”

Stan winced internally at the memory, he had been very stressed out last year, and he had ended up being outlandishly rude to his friends - snapping at them and ditching plans in favour of studying. He apologized and they graciously accepted, but not without Beverly threatening to beat him up if he let himself get that stressed again. After their last exam - they had gone to the Diner - as tradition, and played some stupid board game until it grew late. Stan thinks it was Sorry! - but all he remembers is Beverly and Eddie exchanging in a heated argument over the rules (Stan had read the rules, they were both wrong - but the entertainment was enough to keep him quiet as he sipped his milkshake). They had eaten and laughed and even danced a little as the evening progressed - the waitress had given each of them a milkshake on the house to reward them for finishing their exams.

“Why are you giving us free milkshakes? We could have all failed them, you know. You could be accidentally encouraging our poor academia.” Richie had asked.

“Isn’t ah-ah-acadamia a nuh-nut?”

“Bill, you are so lucky you’re pretty.” Richie patted Bill’s face and it left a streak of cream from his shake.

Stan thought for a moment before answering, “Well, I’ve had little else to do - I’m pretty confident I’m going to get A’s in everything, none of it is difficult this year, I’ve been using coloured card this year which has helped.”

Richie nodded, “You really being brave using coloured cards?”

Stan scoffed, “I’m not nine anymore, I can handle my study notes being more than one colour - I won’t have a mental breakdown over it again, so don’t be waiting for it.”

Richie stubbed his cigarette on the ground and stomped on it, the embers flickering across the cement, “You gonna pass Physics?” He had a knowing smile on his face.
“Yes.”

“But…….” Richie encouraged, seeming to take glee in the fact Stan isn’t naturally a straight-A student like he is.

“But Physics will probably be little more than a pass if I’m honest.”

Richie was practically vibrating in his seat at this point, and Stan moved to pull the chair beside Richie until it was facing him - giving Stan better leverage at Richie’s cuts.

“Aren’t you going to ask your sexy, charming tutor for help?”

Stan sat down and scooted towards Richie, their knees knocking against each other. “Sure, have you seen him?” Him? That was a strange blunder - but of course Richie was referencing himself, so it was only natural for Stan to instinctively use the same pronouns.

“Haha! Look at you being a big funny man, you trying to take my place?” Richie presented his arms to Stan, who held his forearm gently over his thighs, Richie leaning forward a little at the pull.

“You say that as if it would be difficult.” Stan picked the first aid kit up and set it on his lap, telling Richie to keep it steady with his hand while he looked through it, “There are some shards in your arm, I’m going to pull them out.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Probably.”

Stan procured the tweezers and set out a couple of bandages and some antibacterial wipes, setting them carefully on his lap. He put the first aid kit back on the ground and leant forward.

“If I cry will you tell everyone that I was really brave?” Richie winced as Stan began to pull out a shard, “Holy shit, warn a guy!”
Stan let the shard fall to the ground and paced his fingers up and down Richie’s arm, ghosting his fingers softly over the handful of small cuts on his arms to feel for any other shards. He let his fingers drift up and down his friend’s arm a little longer than he should have. Richie’s skin wasn’t as soft as his own, it was dry - but warm. Richie was always warm. An unyielding ball of heat no matter what temperature it was.

In fact, Stan was sitting out in the dead of Winter, in a long-sleeved top and pants, shivering and trying his hardest to not shake so much when he was digging in Richie’s arm, meanwhile, Richie was sat in a thin grey t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants and didn’t seem affected by it in the slightest. Stan swears that Richie could live in the Arctic circle with just a jumper and a pair of bitchin’ rain boots.

Richie had a vague number of freckles smattered over his arms. Stan fought down a blush when he remembered he had them pretty much everywhere.

“My Mom isn’t home this weekend, if you want to do it?”

Stan spluttered and dropped the tweezers, zoning in on Richie’s face.

“Well, I didn’t mean to do it, but I’m extremely flattered that that is where your mind went, Stanley. We’ll make a pervert out of you yet.” Richie sighs thoughtfully for a moment, “It’s always the good church boys, isn’t it.”

“I don’t go to church.”

“Whatever, it’s shit anyway. I meant, my Mom isn’t home this weekend - I can help you study Physics. It worked pretty well last time if I do say so myself.” Richie keened, batting his eyelashes at Stan, seeking confirmation that he was, indeed, a good boy. Stan thinks Richie is a mix between a Border Collie and a Jack Russell.

He laughs to himself at the image, finding it quite funny and ignoring the questioning look from his friend. “I’ll have to ask my Mom when I get home, but yeah - that would help. I’m going to go ahead and assume you’ll want me to bring some type of sugary snacks over?”

Richie nodded and let Stan wipe over his warm with those stupid disinfectant wipes that smelt like Eddie’s bathroom. “I’m so glad you know me - Beverly has the nerve to invite me to her home -
Stan carefully wiped away the bits of jelly-like dots of blood from the cuts, the blood clotting fairly quickly which thankfully means Richie might just be able to keep his limb. He said as much and Richie laughed. “Doesn’t Beverly let you bum her cigarettes?”

“Uh, yeah - and she bums mine too. That’s what smoking buddies do.”

“Richie, I watched you put a cigarette in your mouth and chew it because Beverly asked for your last one.”

“I was proving a point.”

“A point? What point? That you’re a dumbass?”

“I’m not really sure - but whatever it was I think I proved it.”

“Maybe I won’t come over - you’re in an especially trashmouth mood today,” Stan said, no weight in his voice at all as he began to dot Richie’s skin with band-aids, smoothing them softly against his skin.

“You should be honoured you’re even invited. Between you and Big Bill, it’s a five-star, VIP only, exclusive club, and yet you both still treat me like I’m dirt. Dirt, I say!”

“That is strange.” Stan said, non-committedly - focusing more on gently tracing Richie’s arm as he lowers the band-aid onto his skin.

“Well, you’re the only two who have made me cream my pants so that’s the bar you have to reach.”

Stan’s knee jerked painfully into Richie’s when he almost fell from his seat in shock, “What?”

“Huh? Oh - no, I didn’t fool around with Big Billiam - although I’ve always wondered if he lives with no snacks.”
up to his nickname -“

“Beep-beep, Richie.”

“ Anyway, I was like twelve and horny as fuck and Bill is a strapping young fellow, anyone can see that. Nothin’ wrong with creaming your shorts about it - is there Staniel?”

Stan just sort of opened and closed his mouth like a fish, not really being sure what he could possibly say in response to that but he settled with, “I’m leaving now.”

And he did, him and Richie both returned to work, trying their best to keep themselves entertained for the remainder of the day.

The day went by fairly quickly, despite the slow stream of customers - which Stan reckons is the most rewarding part about working with your best friends, they were never bored in each other's company. Bill and Beverly had tried to reenact their school play from Eighth Grade, Beverly remembered more of her lines than Bill, who mostly just lamented about how uncomfortable those little green tights had been. Mike managed to sneak a picture of the two when they were taking an exaggerated bow, Bill’s hat tipping to the floor in the sharp and deep bow he took.

Ben asked Stan about a bird he had seen perched outside the Diner, picking furiously at a small spread of fries that someone had left in the parking lot. It was a Robin and he and Ben sat by the window for a good twenty minutes, as Stan went into as much detail as he could remember about the bird. Richie had, of course, bombarded the two and pulled them away from their booth, showing them the Chessboard he had found in the depths of the store cupboard.

Stan stood back as everyone laughed at Richie threatening to beat their asses at it. Stood proudly behind Richie, leaning over with his hands on his knees peering over Richie’s shoulder as Richie easily destroyed every single one of them. Richie reached his arm behind him and patted Stan on the face every time he got Checkmate. Stan could only pretend to hate it the first couple of times.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading! please consider leaving a kudos or comment if you enjoyed and have a great day everyone
Sure enough, Stan’s mother had let him stay at Richies with a kiss on his forehead and a promise to call her if he needed her. Stan had responded with the usual recital of ‘yes, Mom of course. I love you too.’ and adjusted his backpack before kicking the stand of his bike up and pedalling across the milky dusk of Derry, taking all the shortcuts he had imprinted in the back of his skull by now, from all the times he would bike to Richie’s to wait patiently on the cracked pavement with flowers and weeds struggling through it outside of his house.

His textbooks and study notes thumped heavily against his back as he cycled with a small bounce over the curb to make his way around the old distillery, now barely recognisable as much of a building at all, with crumbling walls and caved-in ceilings fenced off with a tall chain link fence. Stan breathed through his mouth as he went past, Beverly had said that a lot of the older teenagers of Derry claimed it as their hang-out spot, smoking marajuana - or mary-jane or whatever people call it - it seems that every day there’s a new slang-term that Stan has to learn. Stan feels a little superior - their spot in the Marsh was way better, he thought, and a lot safer he noted as broken glass from a murky-looking bottle crunched under his tyre. He could only imagine Richie pulling Eddie or Beverly around the distillery, picking up rusty chains and pretending to be Indiana Jones while whipping the heavy chain around, probably causing himself some sort of injury no doubt. Stan wondered how a person could be so reckless with their own safety, thinking back to Richie’s band-aid covered fingers.

Stan cursed as the bottle crunched under his bike, and made an effort to stop his mind wandering any further as he swerved to avoid the debris surrounding the large fence. The ride to Richie’s home wasn’t long, necessarily - Richie was only about a mile away from Stan’s home, and the shortcut shaved a few precious minutes off the journey. Stan made his way back onto the main street, pedaling past the pet store, then the chemist, then the print store, then the candy store. The candy store. He back pedaled on his bike and made a quick pit-stop to pick up a jawbreaker for Richie, handing over a pair of silver coins in exchange for a ball speckled in primary colours. He didn’t think to pick up anything for himself until he was at the end of the street, he didn’t crave anything sweet enough to cause him to backpedal a second time.

He arrived at Richie’s shortly after the hazy fog of dusk had been replaced with a warm sort of blue. The type of light darkness that calls for camping, for sitting outside with a blanket wrapped
around your shoulders and a cup of cocoa, for leaving your window open while listening to some
old record you don’t know the name of, yet seems to carry some semblance of nostalgia as you
watch the odd car drive down slowly the main street. It won’t be long until the soft, inviting blue
will darken to a midnight sky, a sky you know that if you see - you’ve been out long past your
curfew, Stan had listened to many lectures from his parents because of it to know that familiar tone
of blue by now.

Stan dismounted his bike and walked it up the gravel path to the front door of the Tozier
household, walking past the telltale tracks of trodden grass beside him which led to Richie’s bike -
lying haphazardly half-supported by the wall. Stan kicked his stand up and lined his bike beside
Richie’s. Stan let out a breathy laugh at the difference between the two bikes - they looked like a
postercard for the do’s and don’ts of proper bicycle care.

Stan walked around empty plant pots and made his way to the front door. His palms were sweaty as
he noticed the sheen his palm had left on the door handle. There was nothing nerve-wracking about
entering Richie’s house. It was quiet and calm, unlike the Denbrough household which usually had
the soft sounds of Mrs. Denbrough’s piano music drifting through the air and the muffled sounds
of Georgie playing from the living room. Richie’s home was tidy, not in the ‘we have a strict chore
schedule and we care about how our home is presented’ way, more like there was no one really in
the house to make a mess. Sure it was tidy, but Stan doubts there had been anything to tidy in
months, judging by the thick layer of dusk that covered the small table in the entrance way. Stan
felt comforted at the sight of Richie’s muddy sneakers toed off aimlessly underneath the table. The
mud hadn’t even dried yet.

Stan called his arrival through the home as he tapped the doorknob six times before closing it
behind him. He shifted a little in place, resting his thumbs underneath the straps of his backpack to
relieve a bit of the pressure that was digging into his shoulders. Why did they make school
textbooks so heavy?

Stan stopped the movements of his thumb rubbing his aching flesh as a loud thump followed by an
even louder string of cursing served as his welcome into the house. “Richie?” Stan called out, not
waiting for his reply before making his way towards the staircase.

“Yeah, just come on up - FUCK - I’m just finishing something up.”

Stan made his way up the stairs and across the landing, avoiding the floorboards that he knew that
creaked and walked towards the shut door of Richie’s room. Ignoring the ‘ATTITUDE CITY: DO
NOT ENTER’ sign, he opened the door with six dutiful taps and almost found himself walking
back out to the landing to double-check he had, in fact, entered the correct room. Stan shouldered
his backpack onto the ground, not even caring to make sure it landed upright as he walked into the
center of Richie’s room trying to take it in.
It was tidy. Almost as tidy as Stan’s own room.

All the stray papers and pens and little toys and general oddities that covered the surfaces of Richie’s dresser and shelves were gone. Instead, all of Richie’s pens - six identical black Bic pens - sprouted from a pencil holder on his shelf. His comic books were no longer littered on the ground, instead, they were lined up along the shelf with a Lego spaceship that Stan guessed Georgie had made for him acting as a bookend. His sheets looked soft and clean, and his bed - oh my God - Richie had made his bed. Stan brushed his fingers over the taught grey bedcovers. Plain grey with plain white pillows. Stan never thought he would see the day where he would see a made bed in Richie Tozier’s room. Imagining Richie trying to put on a fitted sheet with his gangly limbs made his heart swell a little.

The floor was spotless, not even a discarded sock was to be seen - probably all of them disposed of in the laundry hamper Richie had set beside his dresser.

It looked like a hotel room, the floor was spotless, the carpet was clean - he still had his posters tacked to the wall with red thumbtacks but - oh.

Richie’s walls were painted an inoffensive dark shade of red. They weren’t red before, and it had always bugged Stan for a reason he was never able to place. Maybe it was because it never matched the rest of his furniture, or maybe it was because it didn’t match his carpet, or maybe it was because the first thing Richie had said to him when he was sitting alone on the playground with apple slices and a cheese sandwich was, ‘Hi! I’m Richard, the teacher said I should make some friends and you don’t have any yet. I like dinosaurs and superhero comics and my favourite colour is red. Ok! Now it’s your turn!’ And yet, Richie’s walls were not red, they were a faded sort of green that clearly hadn’t been touched up in easily a decade.

There were some droplets of dried paint speckled into the fabric of the carpet and a smudge of a pinky-colour which Stan deduced meant Richie had tried to rub it out of the carpet before realising that he was only making it worse. Richie caught him looking at it and shifted the waste bucket to cover it.

Stan could hardly collect his thoughts, nevermind spit them out of his mouth, thankfully Richie had sensed this - having a knack for knowing when to jump into conversations, “Now you can sleep over whenever you want without crying like a little baby,” there was no bite in his words and he plopped himself on the bed, lying back with his feet still planted on the carpet.

“I don’t remember the last time I saw your floor,” Stan said, not moving.
“Yeah, I can clean up good - but you can suck my dick if you think I’m taking down my Indiana Jones poster, I don’t care if he doesn’t match the color scheme or whatever, he stays and you can cry about it all you want. Don’t make me choose between you or this poster because I know how easily your feelings are hurt and I really don’t want to deal with that.”

“I know better than to come between you and Indiana, who am I to try and break that connection?”

“Fuck, I wish you’d come between me and Indiana.”

Stan was surprised at the laugh that escaped his mouth, “Beep-beep, Richie. Don’t be gross.”

Richie said nothing, lying on his bed looking rather pleased with himself that he had made Stan laugh - making Stan laugh was always a cause for internal celebration and it always made Richie’s chest swell with pride because making Stan laugh was rare. It was like finding the Golden Ticket and Richie definitely didn’t get big-headed over the fact that he made Stan laugh more than any of the other Losers did.

Stan - whose shock had worn off by now - decided to join Richie. The bed looked a lot more inviting now that it looked like a real human slept there - with a duvet cover and pillowcases and everything. He sat himself criss-cross applesauce with his back resting against the headboard. Richie had knocked his knees into him as he walked past and Stan had kicked Richie’s foot in response. It was natural and Stan could feel some of the stress he’d been feeling over the holidays physically lift off his shoulders just by sitting in his friend’s company, watching Richie try to clean his glasses on his faded Wham! T-shirt, his tongue sticking out in concentration, those ever so light freckles no longer blocked by those coke-bottle glasses.

It’s always a little strange seeing Richie without his glasses, Richie had approached him on the playground all those years ago with bug-like eyes and glasses so heavy they kept slipping off his nose. Seeing Richie with normal-sized eyes seemed so odd in comparison to the Richie he had grown up with, in fact, the only time he routinely sees Richie without glasses is when they’re fooling around - Richie usually slips them off when things start to get heated and Stan feels the heavy rims pressing into his cheekbones and orbital bone and everywhere.

Stan’s eyes flicker from Richie’s dark eyes, which seemed to permanently be redder than most due to the sheer amount of time Richie spends in the arcade, down to the small bit of belly exposed as Richie used the hem of his shirt to clean his glasses - which he seems to be taking his sweet time doing. Stan is almost embarrassed by himself for honing in on the pale flesh of his stomach so quickly, even more so at his incapacity to pull his eyes away. He’s acting like a horny teenager, he thinks as he imagines Richie slowly pulling his shirt up more and more of the pale skin of his stomach until he pulls it right off.
You are a horny teenager - all teenagers are, his mind supplies. He strongly disagrees and shook the thought from his head. To prove his mind wrong, he forces his eyes from Richie’s stomach to somewhere else. That somewhere else just happened to be Richie’s mouth - or specifically, Richie’s tongue - which was no longer poking out of his mouth, rather it was pulling the hem of his shirt into his mouth as he sucked on it, the visible moisture bleeding through the fabric made Stan twitch. It was equally disgusting as it was… not disgusting. Disgusting when Richie spits on the ground to clear the cigarette taste from his mouth - not so disgusting when Stan’s neck is sheening with saliva from Richie mouthing at it like he was committing the taste of Stan’s neck to memory.

I’m here to study.

Yes, to study. Stan, with unadmitted reluctance, tore his eyes from Richie’s mouth and chose to stare non-committedly at the parts of Richie’s room he hadn’t really inspected yet, he briefly thought about pulling Richie’s shirt from his mouth and replacing it with his own lips, but the usual thoughts of heavy tongues and hot panting didn’t follow - and for some reason the lack of those thoughts made Stan’s stomach trip over itself and he tapped his middle finger against the back of his hand in patterns of six out of nervous habit.

“So, what topics did you want help with?”

“Huh?” Stan said, as eloquent as he is, he caught himself, “I just made flashcards for the parts I have trouble remembering. In terms of topics as a whole - radiation in particular I have trouble with, as well as some core components of thermal physics. Thermodynamics is going to be a big part of this exam, so I’d prefer it if we could start there.”

Richie let out a groaning noise as he stretched and sat up, his back making some unsavoury popping noises that made Stan wince, “Righti-o then, let’s get going young Stanley - we’re losing valuable daylight.” He moved his upper body off the bed to stretch to pull Stan’s bag up onto the bed. It creased the bed. Stan tapped a little faster.

Richie pulled out one of the textbooks he recognised, not even having to check the table of contents as he thumbed the textbook until he opened it on the chapter he was looking for. Richie twisted himself so he was sitting mirrored to how Stan was, Richie’s bare knees brushing against Stan’s khakis. The textbook was flipped so that Stan could read it as Richie began explaining some core concepts, pointing to a couple of the diagrams and gesturing over the book. Richie didn’t even seem to pause for thought as he rambled on, Stan was barely listening - too busy staring at the way Richie’s eyes flickered around the page like lightning, how despite the fact he was pointing at diagrams, he never actually touched the page because he knows Stan hates the little prints of oil that stick to the glossy pages.

It was a weekend night, Richie would usually be at the arcade, bouncing with excitement at the machines as he regained his spot on the leaderboard for the third time this month, a bag of candy
and a bottle of soda by his side. But he was here, helping Stan study over a subject that he knew like the back of his hand - like he knows mostly everything like the back of his hand - even though he would always complain to Stan during lunch or work about everyone constantly asking him for help studying. He hated it, Stan remembered. He hated people asking him for copies of his notes or for his assignments to ‘compare’ his against their own.

Yet, despite this, Richie had offered, with nothing but invitation and eagerness in his voice. He had invited Stan over to help him, despite all the places he would rather be. Stan found himself staring at Richie’s mouth every now and again, his chest aching with something he can only describe as a critical need to press their lips together. Which was fine, a fairly frequent need that was no longer alien to Stan. They were no strangers to kissing, open-mouthed and panting heavily with wanton need had graced many of his dreams - but that was it, wasn’t it? Stan didn’t feel the need to ravage Richie’s mouth like he usually did, he didn’t feel any particular need to leave hot open-mouthed kisses down Richie’s neck and past his collarbones. No, he felt a burning, overwhelming pull to lean over and close the gap, and then get right back into studying, as if nothing had really happened at all.

He hadn’t noticed he was scratching at his hand until Richie had smacked his hand with the textbook, “What’re you doing? Digging for gold? Stop that!”

Stan pulled his hand back, cradling it to his chest - it hadn’t hurt, “Don’t hit me with the textbook. Am I going to absorb the information through my skin, dumbass?”

Richie pulled the book back and opened it again, only to shut it close with a heavy sound a few moments later. He rubbed his nose under his glasses before adjusting them - they were still wonky - and taking a moment to seemingly collect his thoughts, “I don’t know what’s been going on, and usually I just leave it y’know - you don’t like people meddling in your business but-” He took a short pause, “just be honest, just tell me what’s going on and then I’ll leave it! I swear, I’ll let you wash your hands forty times and let you scratch your hand to shit, and hell - you can tap Mozart’s entire sixth symphony onto the bathroom doorknob before you take a leak for all I care. I know sometimes your - uh -”

“Disorder.” Stan said.

“Yeah - your disorder - it gets overwhelming and I know that it gets worse when you’re not taking your meds… you are taking your meds, right?”

“I always take my meds, Rich. I would hardly be able to leave the house if I didn’t.”
Richie sucked his teeth, not seeming overly happy with Stan’s answer, “Then why have you been acting all -” He jittered his fingers over Stan’s hands - frantically tapping the pads of his fingers, “recently? You’ve been buggin’ out. At first I thought you just kept popping boners because I was around and I completely understand -” Richie’s voice softened, “but it’s not that is it?”

Stan shook his head, “It’s just stress, Rich. It gets worse when I’m stressed, you know that. Remember exam season last year when I made Mike re-write his entire History essay because he had switched from one black pen to another black pen half-way through and the different shades of black made me snap my pencil in half?”

Richie snorted a little at the memory, “So it’s exams? That’s it?”

“Yes?” Stan looked at Richie, “You don’t seem convinced, what do you want me to say?”

“Huh? No, exams, yeah. I get it. I was just worried about it is all - you know how it is - you fucked your way right into my heart and now I’m all invested in your life and all. I wish I could complain but the sex is just so good. ”

Stan took the textbook from between their laps and hit Richie over the head with it.

“Stop it or you’re not getting your candy.”

“Candy?!?”

The next couple of hours had passed as it should between two best friends, the curtains closed and Richie’s lava lamp casting a faint pink glow over the sides of the boys’ faces from the bedside table. Richie had been happily licking and sucking at the jawbreaker and Stan had smiled a genuine smile when Richie had grabbed it out of his hand and tried to not be as grateful as he was. The type of smile that shines from your chest onto your face, a smile you hardly feel.

Some hours later when Stan’s watch had read 8.02 they changed into their pyjamas - well, Stan changed into his pyjamas. Well, Richie’s pyjamas - a pair of grey plaid bottoms and a matching plain grey t-shirt that hung off Stan like a wet paper bag - he suspected they had originally belonged to Mike at some point. Richie was wearing a faded T-shirt with the logo of some shitty beer he had found in the middle of the Quarry some summer or two ago that he had - for some reason unbeknownst to anyone else - decided to keep, and a pair of boxer briefs.
They had dutifully continued studying, reading through paragraph and paragraph with Richie explaining them, then simplifying them, then making diagrams in sharpie on the back pages of Stan’s notebook paper, even making up a song or two when Stan still didn’t get it, ‘It’s only thermodynamics it’s not fucking rocket science, Stanley meet me half-way here’.

Sure enough, the sky had burned from the welcome light dust of nighttime into the deep darkness, not that they had noticed, currently lying on their stomachs, arms and shoulders pressed together as Richie quizzed Stan for the fifth time, one of Richie’s vinyls playing softly, just loud enough to hear the words but not loud enough for it to be distracting. Stan had crossed his ankle with Richie’s at some point and they bobbed their legs back and forth, connected at the ankle. Richie was squinting at a flashcard - a pink one - complaining about the stupid fucking pink lava lamp, I can’t read shit why did you get pink fucking cards. Stan had simply chuckled in response, handing Richie a different card.

As time flew by - both of them having more fun than they would ever care to admit as Richie impersonated their greying physics teacher with a shrill voice that he had to scrunch his nose up to execute - it had seemed like a flash until suddenly the red glow of his digital watch had told him it was almost midnight. In hindsight, he had felt himself getting tired, his eyes growing heavy and his brain foggy but studying with Richie had felt more like a game than anything else, and when he got something wrong he was left trying to hold his smile in his mouth as Richie ‘ranted’ at him for wasting my precious fucking time, I’m serious Stanley - I give up my fucking weekend and you can’t even answer one fucking question? This is a fucking nightmare.

The two packed away Stan’s things and gathered them all into his bag, Richie pulling Stan out of the room when he began to get frustrated that there was an ink smudge on the side of one of his textbooks and he was moments away from throwing it at the nearest window. Richie had hoisted him from under the armpits and dragged him out of the room, kicking his door shut behind him with his heels and practically shoved Stan into the bathroom.

“Brush your teeth, you get so fucking cranky when you’re tired and unless you’re going to put that energy into good use, I’m sure as hell not dealing with you being a prissy diva tonight.”

Stan just pulled a face and closed the bathroom door, flipping on the light before closing it completely. He set about washing his face and brushing his teeth with the blue toothbrush that had somehow made a place alongside Richie’s, his eyes instinctively going to the photograph of Richie and Bill that he had examined so closely before. He blinked, his toothbrush faulting in his mouth and accidentally stabbing himself in the gums - there was a photo there, in the small black frame as it had been before but - no, it must be a trick of the light. Stan washed the froth from his mouth and moved to the photo.
It was a different photo.

He faltered as he looked at it. Not daring to pick it up. A picture from summer, Stan and Richie were sitting on the edge of the cliff of the quarry, their backs to the camera and a sheen covering their backs and hair flat to their heads from swimming. Stan was looking over the cliff, but Richie - Richie was staring at him, with his glasses pushed up into his hair - the sun was probably blinding him anyway - with a grin spread wide on his face. A genuine one, not the fake one Richie does to make other people smile at his voices out of sympathy, or the smile he does to punctuate a dirty comment. The face looks eerily similar to the doting glances Ben sends Beverly whenever she laughs a little too loud, or makes a joke a little too crude.

Even under the glass of the frame, the picture was heavily dog-eared and frayed at the sides.

Stan stared at the photo for what must have been five minutes, the way Richie was looking at him, the fact Bill had taken this photo without Stan even realising, the memories that flooded back to him of kicking his legs off the side of the cliff, staring at the water below, which had snowballed into Stan and Richie kicking each other’s feet until someone called Uncle and had to jump into the water as a loser’s bet. Remembering how Richie had sat him on a rock afterwards and put on a nasally new-yorker accent and towelled Stan’s hair dry, asking him things like ‘So, Linda, how are the kids? Oi vey, I bet they’re so big now!’ and ‘Ugh! Men, honestly, I don’t even know why we girls bother, y’know? Just a trim today or are ya looking to go big! Give that hubby somethin’ to purr at later’.

Staring at Richie staring at him. The way their hands are so close together, with Bill’s grainy film it looks as though their pinky fingers are interlocked. Stan stares at that detail for a moment, and imagines it again. He imagines being there, shoulders warm from the sun, with steady beads of water dripping from his hair down to his neck and Richie beside him, kicking his legs and doing some gag he thinks is funny - it probably isn’t - but Stan laughs anyway, because Richie makes it work. He imagines that there hands are entwined, fingers folding together with practiced ease like they had been earlier that same day. He imagines moving closer, until their arms press together, closer until their legs are squashed into each other, closer until their mouths are only a hair apart -

“Did you fucking fall in? I swear, if I spent all evening helping you study fucking thermodynamics only for you to fall into the shitter I am going to be pissed-”

The door slammed open before Richie could even finish, almost smashing his face as it went if he had not jumped out of the way. The two stared at each other for a moment.

Stan’s mind was racing, his chest was caving in on itself whilst simultaneously swelling and swallowing him whole. He needed to be with Richie, he needed to be close to him and he felt as though if he didn’t kiss him right now he would drown in himself. They make out, they make out a
lot. So, that’s what he’ll do. He’ll make out with Richie. It makes his blood rush south a little, it makes him full of jitters and nerves. It’s not what he wants, it’s not what he needs - but it’s all he knows.

So he grabs the sides of Richie’s face and pulls their faces together, stopping just short of kissing him and just stares at him for a second, his freckles, his shocked expression, his cracked lips, the scar on his upper lip and the small pimple on his forehead. It was Richie. It was his best friend. Stan felt a chorus of words rise up in his gut but he swallowed them in Richie’s mouth and Richie ate it up without question.

It turned hot and heavy quick, with a newfound type of desperation pawing at Stan’s gut as he let Richie’s tongue into his mouth and licked back, taking every inch of what Richie was giving him. His hands pawed into Richie’s curls, tugging at his scalp a little every time he hit a knot. He found himself not caring much when Richie let out a breathy groan into his mouth at it.

It only took a minute or two before Richie had began to fight back, pushing and pulling at Stan’s mouth with his tongue - pulling Stan’s bottom lip into his mouth and sucking on it, making Stan breathe out a little keening noise. Richie pinched his teeth down lightly then let Stan’s lip out of his mouth, licking at the swollen flesh a little before dipping his tongue back into Stan’s eager mouth.

Stan moved his hands from Richie’s hair to clutch at his shirt, scrabbling for balance as Richie bracketed Stan with his legs and all but pushed him against the very door that Stan had almost brained him on. Stan grunted as the doorknob jabbed uncomfortably into his back, but didn’t make an effort to move as he twisted his fists in Richie’s t-shirt and pulled him closer.

Their mouths moved against each other’s with a clumsy type of practice, lips stumbling against each other between stilted breaths. Richie’s hands moved from where he had pushed at Stan’s shoulders to cup his jaw, thumbs resting gently on his cheeks. Stan felt the movements of his lips stutter a little, huffing a breath against the ghost of Richie’s lips, who had pulled back ever so slightly.

Stan could feel something settle in his chest that weighed heavy and made his throat hurt. He knew he wanted more, not in the sense of he wanted Richie to kiss him harder or suck bruises into his skin or anything like that, he wanted something else. Stan yearned for something he hadn’t necessarily explored with Richie before, or with anyone for that matter. He yearned for a different type of closeness, a different type of intimacy. The pull at his gut was so violent he winced. Richie cocked his head a little at that.

“Are you alright?” Richie said, voice hot against Stan’s ear as he shifted his weight so their heads were resting against each other, golden curls and dark messy waves becoming one. His voice was
soft, Stan recognizes the words as Richie asking ‘is this okay?’.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Richie lifted Stan’s chin to look at him, moving from Stan’s shoulder, right hand still letting his thumb ghost over Stan’s cheek, “Hell yeah you are.”

Stan heard the clear tone of jest in Richie’s voice, his mouth twisted in a half-smirk, creeping up the left side of his face as it usually does. Richie was constructed rather lopsidedly by God, and yet Stan couldn’t help but follow that lopsided smile. Richie could walk him around the world with it and Stan wouldn’t even notice.

Stan made a grunting noise in response, telling Richie he didn’t think his joke was funny. Richie, of course, understood this - they could have unspoken arguments with their eyes, tell stories through glances and gestures - reading each other’s grunts was as second-nature as reading the morning paper - or in Richie’s case - the morning cartoons.

“You are. Not to make this gay or anything, but you’re beautiful. If all of us losers went to a beauty contest, none of us would even be allowed to enter the building in comparison to you,” Richie moved his hand that was thumbing his cheek to twist a finger around a wayward curl, “these make you look like a cherub -”

Stan screwed up his face, “A fat baby with wings?”

“Don’t .-” Richie tugged lightly on the curl around his finger, “interrupt me when I’m waxing prose on your beauty. God, it’s like you don’t even want our marriage to work out.”

“We have to think of the kids, Rich.”

Richie huffed out a laugh, dropping his hand and pressing his head into Stan’s curls, giving the side of his head just above his temple an affectionate kiss, “Stan the man gets off on a good one.”

Stan unfurls his hands from Richie’s shirt, dropping them, this seemed to catch Richie’s attention, as he grabbed Stan’s hand before it even had the chance to move from between them, he seemed to fault at this - not really thinking the action through.
Stan hoped Richie didn’t hear the hitch in his breath. God, he was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. It was Richie for God’s sake. They’ve literally had sex and yet, Stan could feel his nerves prickling at their current situation, swollen lips still wet with each other’s spit, standing in the darkness of Richie’s upstairs landing, the only light coming from behind the crack of the bathroom door. Stan’s back resting against the wood of the door, with Richie’s hand encasing his own, pushed flush between them - sort of hovering. Stan could feel the mintiness of his mouth grow dry as the reality of their positions sang through his head. He was wearing Richie’s pyjamas, he brushed his teeth with a toothbrush which sits proudly in the coca-cola cup on the sink beside Richie’s with a photo of the two staring at him through the mirror.

Stan couldn’t help it, really - he had tried to talk himself out of it - but it was as though he was being controlled by an overpowering force within himself as he carefully moved his hand, slowly slotting his fingers between Richie’s, almost afraid that Richie would feel his heart thumping through his palm for some reason. Stan stared dumbly at his hand, not quite believing he did that under his own accord.

Richie didn’t seem to find this as dumbfounding as Stan did, simply threading his other arm around Stan’s shoulders and pulling him closer into a one-armed hug. Mumbling something lowly into his hair, a habit he’s seemingly picked up. Stan would be content with standing here - with Richie very softly swaying them side-to-side (God, even his balance is lopsided), wearing Richie’s pyjamas and Richie in his briefs and shitty t-shirt. Stan couldn’t think of ever doing anything else that could ever possibly make him feel as content as this again in his life.

Which made it pain him when Richie stopped swaying and pulled away, lowering Stan’s hand. Stan thought for a moment Richie was going to let their hands fall apart because Stan wouldn’t be able to admit to himself that he liked the feeling of holding hands with Richie enough to chase it but Richie simply adjusted his hold, holding Stan’s hand down where their hands are meant to fall. He was tapping a soft beat into the back of Stan’s hand, fidgeting his fingers with Stan’s.

Stan could choke on how thick the air felt, something big, something beautiful and something terrifying was braiding the two together, and Stan could pretend it was his overactive imagination, or chalk it down to lack of sleep - but the ache in his chest was too much to ignore. It settled deep, like the air itself was become denser and denser, pushing Stan’s ribs together and pushing his stomach up into his lungs and into his chest. Richie’s lips were the cure, he was sure of it.

“Richie…” Stan’s voice was soft and sticky, not realising he needed to clear his throat. Richie pulled his attention from their entwined hands back to Stan - Richie looked like he couldn’t quite care less about what Stan was going to say, face placid and cheeks warm. So Stan didn’t waste his breath, that idiot probably wouldn’t listen anyway. Instead, he let the hand that wasn’t serving as Richie’s tiny drumkit trace the side of Richie’s face. A whoosh of breath left him when he did. He could feel the warmth radiating from Richie’s cheeks, like there was a soft embering fire inside his
skin, it felt so familiar to Stan - feeling the same heat radiating under the covers when they shared a bed, legs knocking against each other, arms ending up curled over someone, someone drooling on someone’s shoulder. Definitely not Stan, Stan doesn’t drool in his sleep. He moved his hands from Richie’s face into his coarse hair, knots pulling at Stan’s fingers, pulling him deeper and deeper until he found himself pressing his lips onto his best friend’s. An act of boldness that if it were not for the costume of night, he would never have entertained - not like this.

He felt Richie still, he could feel the gears in his best friend’s head stutter harshly to a stop, before slowly but surely coming back to life with a slow thrum of … apprehension? Fear? Cautiousness? Stan didn’t quite have any words for the way Richie softly squeezed his hand and pressed back softly. Their mouths moved over each other with the same languid afterthought as life, as life full of peace with no rush, the life of a schoolchild on a July evening, the life of the moon rising up and down from the sky with the currents of the sea waving for it, the life of every single thing Stan could imagine with leisure.

It was a tenderness that Stan had not experienced with Richie before. He could feel his gut pulling for more, yearning for more of whatever this was. So Stan slowly deepened the kiss, parting his lips more and more, pulling Richie’s head closer to his own - feeling Richie allow him to maneuver him made Stan’s gut clench.

In the shroud of darkness that is the landing of the second floor of the Tozier household, Stan and Richie deepened their tender kisses, Stan’s tongue darting to lick at Richie’s lip every now and again, working to fully exploring Richie’s mouth after a few long-stretched minutes. It wasn’t long before they were back to where they had been shortly after Stan barged through the bathroom door - hungry for each other and pressing as close to the other as possible. It wasn’t long before Richie pulled himself off Stan - looking as though it was the most painful decision he had made in his life.

“Do you want to go to bed? Or do you want us to fuck in the hallway?” Richie’s voice was strained, throat ripped from sharply inhaling and panting the cold air. Stan’s face reddened at the thought of Richie getting on his knees in the hallway, even though there was nobody home it still felt like there was some sort of risk about it and it made Stan’s mind turn into mush for a moment and Richie, ever observant, picked up on this right away, “Holy shit! You do! You’re a dog, Stanley.”

“Shut up,” Stan thumped Richie in the shin with his foot, “Let’s go.”

Richie didn’t need to be told twice, pulling Stan with the hand that was still wrapped in Stan’s. Stan just managed to shut the door with a backwards kick when Richie pulled him onto the bed, the two of them bouncing a little with the movement.

The heavy pressure on Stan’s chest didn’t lift. He still found himself needing something, when he
breathed out a ‘I need more’ into Richie’s mouth, he felt his skin blaze as Richie mouthed along his neck, kissing hard, punctuating kisses up it, stopping just short of his ear, tracing his neck and licking over his Adam’s apple.

Stan whimpered into the pink air and grappled at Richie, tugging at his shirt to get Richie to take it off. He wanted to see him, he thinks, it made his chest hurt a little less when Richie pulled off his neck, sitting up on his knees to pull the shirt over his head. Richie pinched his own nipple and let out a long, dramatic moan of ‘oh fuck, Stanley!!’, a cheshire cat grin creeping on his face when Stan let out a sigh of frustration and kicked him.

“Can you take this seriously?” Stan said, pulling his own shirt off because despite Richie being, well, Richie, Stan still wanted to feel his hot skin leech into his chest - maybe that’s the issue. It’s all very Richie when Richie laughs in response, holding the area just on the side of Stan’s ribs, eyes catching the waistband of Stan’s brief as his pyjama pants had fell down his hips in the commotion. Richie all but threw his glasses in the direction of his nightstand, and both the boys ignored the clattering sound they made as they bounced off it and onto the floor as Richie surged forwards and attacked Stan’s mouth with a bruising force, the sudden change in demeanor had Stan reeling for a moment, but only a moment. Stan wanted to feel Richie - all of him. He grappled at Richie’s shoulders - which were broadening more and more every day. He filtered his hands over his jaw, shivering when Richie pulled back from Stan’s mouth enough to take his thumb into his mouth for a bit. The soft wetness of Richie’s tongue tracing the pad of his thumb made it hard to believe the knuckle of his thumb was resting against his lips, which were so dry and cracked that they would later crack and bleed a little when Richie takes Stan’s cock into his mouth.

Stan felt Richie smirk around his thumb as Stan let out a soft groan in response to Richie giving it a teasingly fleeting bit of suction. Richie pulled off and put his attention back to Stan’s mouth, working his lips open with his tongue and gently sucking on his bottom lip every now and again. Stan ran his hand down from Richie’s jaw and over the flat expanse of his chest, finding himself being pulled to go lower, and just as his fingers met the elastic of Richie’s boxer briefs, just when his mind started reeling - Richie bit down on Stan’s lip and he was done for.

He pressed down on the hard shaft in Richie’s boxers - it was so warm - he traced his hands over it, from the very tip - which Stan swore he could feel a little bit of moisture when he ghosted over it - down to the bottom of his shaft. Stan felt his mind go dumb, his entire focus on the feeling of Richie’s cock throbbing as he gave it an experimental squeeze. Shivers ran up the back of his spine as Richie dug his fingers into his shoulders as he explored over Richie’s cock.

Stan couldn’t think of anything else - his entire focus was purely on the weighted feeling of Richie in the palm of his hand, how he pulled low rumbling noises from Richie as he rubbed his thumb around the head. The ache in his chest didn’t go away, he still felt a dull ache, only it grew heavier with every hot kiss, with every squeeze of Richie’s cock.
It grew heavier, so Stan pushed harder. He wanted to rip his chest cavity open and pull the lead out with his bare hands - but trying to filter it through his mouth into the skin of Richie’s neck seemed like the next best thing. He tried his best to mimic what Richie had done for him, but it didn’t feel right, laying hot open-mouthed kisses on Richie’s neck, his gut still burned so he did what he felt he should, he sucked hard on the space to the left of Richie’s Adam’s apple, Richie’s sharp gasp of ‘holy fuck’ only caused him to pepper the area in tiny bites, he bit hard in warning when Richie almost tore his hair out with how hard he was steeling himself on Stan.

Stan’s throat tightened at the black-purple bruise that stood out like a glaring neon light on Richie’s pale skin.

He did that.

A part of him was embedded in Richie for upwards of a week, that everyone could see. Almost as if Richie was walking around with Stan’s name bruised into his skin. Stan groaned at that, bucking up involuntarily to meet Richie’s hips.

It didn’t take long for Richie to fall to his knees for Stan after that, tossing a condom at him as his fingers fell behind himself, Stan stopped himself short of asking to watch, barely swallowing the words in his mouth as he felt his guts twist and turn at the thought.

“More, Rich.” Stan had breathed into the air beside Richie’s mouth as they ground against each other, chests flush and sweat just starting to prick at Stan’s upper lip.

“Richie… please,” Stan had groaned into Richie’s mouth as Richie twisted his hand just fucking right. Stan pulled at his own underwear as if it was burning his skin, “I need…”

“God, Richie - please, more - I need more.” Stan had gasped as Richie sucked his member into the back of his throat, letting out wet choking noises around it, not that that had stopped him bobbing like he was on his deathbed for it.

More, more, more.

That’s what Stan needed.

More.
It wasn’t enough as he pushed the wind out of Richie when he first pushed past the ring of muscle.

It wasn’t enough as Richie wrapped his legs around Stan’s back, pushing him flush into him when he wasn’t going fast enough for Richie’s liking. “What am I? A fucking girl? Are you making love to me? Just put your dick in me already, Stanley.”

It wasn’t enough when Richie cursed into his own hand as he covered his mouth, biting on the flesh of his palm as Stan fucked long and slow into him - pulling him thin.

It wasn’t enough when Stan had gripped onto Richie’s hips and fucked him as hard as Richie had been begging him for, making Richie grapple for purchase on the headboard to stop himself getting fucked up the bed. Richie was sucking him in harder and harder as Stan fucked into him faster and faster. The bedroom was filled with dirty groans and spluttered cursing every time Stan adjusted his movements a little, and loud, face-reddening slapping noises as they fed into each other.

The ache in Stan’s chest had only choked him more as he stared at his friend, whose eyes were tightly shut, eyebrows flickering between being relaxed with bliss and wrought with pleasure. Richie’s mouth was open, Richie wasn’t particularly loud in bed, which Stan had found odd - sure, he doesn’t hold back on his stuttered gasps, or soft swears muttered into Stan’s shoulder, or heavy pants breathed into the thick air - but in terms of moaning? Not so much. Currently, Richie was muttering garbled variants of Stan’s name - which Stan had to admit - was really really fucking hot. He could listen to that all day, Richie fucked out on his cock to the point where the only thing his short-circuiting brain could form was a barely coherent string of his name.

Richie dragged his nails down Stan’s back as he got close, jerking himself off with an almost violent grip. Stan slowed down his thrusts, settling on hard and deep rather than shallow and fast, and Richie groaned in response, his thighs twitching violently. Stan ran his hands up and down the inside of Riche’s thighs. It wasn’t long before Richie came - a long, broken choked-out cry of ‘Stan!’ had almost made Stan freeze.

Richie came with a cry of his name on his lips. Richie cried for him. No one else had this. No one else had this with Richie. Stan wanted no one else to have what he and Richie have. This is theirs.

The ache didn’t leave his chest as he buried his head into Richie’s neck and cried out as he came with a warbled, wet sound.
He stilled inside Richie for a moment, not wanting to pull away. So he didn’t. He stayed in this bubble, where only he and Richie can go until Richie patted Stan’s curls and shifted himself a little under him, “Don’t fall asleep on me - or in me either. I shit out of there you know?”

And there it goes. “Gross.” Stan said, pulling out of Richie slowly, resting his hands on Richie’s knees as he did so. He tied off the condom and threw it in the wastebasket - scrunching his nose up as he did it.

“You’re grossed out by your own cum? Really?”

“It’s gross.”

“Well excuse me, but how do you think I felt having to scoop your baby juice out of my shithole last time?”

Stan didn’t reply, refusing to give Richie anything to feed off as he picked his underwear where it had been folded and softly dropped off the side of the bed. He shuffled them on, wishing he had kept some of his underwear at Richie’s, for times like these when he finds himself putting on his underwear while he was still sheening with sweat. He was too tired to have a shower - it was late and his eyes were heavy, the orgasm had rippled half of his consciousness out of him. And yet, the heavy pull of his chest hadn’t moved. It hung within him like a wet blanket, drowning out everything else. Except Richie’s stupid fucking voice.

“Well, Mistah Stanley - that sure was a wild night, darlin’. I bet you don’t even ride ya horses tha’ fast! Gawd - you sure did knock tha’ wind right outta me! I hate to be a bother, but would ya be so kind as tah wipe ma spunk off ma stomach? I woudln’t wanna… stain mah bedsheets, i wouldn’t be able to do anything but think about how ya buckled me like a cheap salloon whore. If ya’d be so kind, Mistah.” Richie pushed Stan lightly with his foot, urging him to get something to clean him up.

Stan didn’t have the energy to feed back into Richie’s bit again today, so he just muttered out an ‘Okay’ and lifted himself off the bed, feeling twenty pounds heavier than when he had got on it, feeling weighed down. Weighed down by need. He needed more. He needed so much more and he didn’t even know what that meant. All he knew was that it hurt. It pulled at his ribs and twisted his guts like they were balloons being twisted into all sorts of shapes at the carnival for gaggles of children to marvel at. Stan had never felt as out of touch with himself, as lost. He needed control. He needed to be in charge of himself and of his environment.

He walked into the blindingly bright bathroom - they hadn’t turned the light off - it was a shock to his eyes from the soft pink glow of Richie’s bedroom. Which is why it took him several blinks before he could see his reflection in the mirror. He blinked a couple more times when he realised
there were tears in his eyes. Red, big fat tears had welled up behind his eyes. His skin damp with sweat, looking more sticky and gross than the post-orgasm glow that Richie seemed to talk about, red welts from Richie’s nails bore in his shoulders, and trembling hands. Trembling hands. He palmed his eyes with his hands.

It wasn’t enough. He needed more.

He wanted to rip his entire torso out and feed it to a pack of wild dogs. He wanted to tear out his ribs and grind them to dust, to pull his stomach out and use it as a baseball, sending it hurtling in the best damn home run that Derry had ever seen, to take his heart and trample it under his foot. Trample it and stomp on it and pummel it until it’s just lumps and clumps of clotted blood in the fucking dirt.

He wanted more. Good God, he wanted Richie in ways he was unable to understand yet.

The look on his face; pale, uncertain and oh so very scared reminded him vaguely of a face Eddie had made earlier.

He washed the red from his eyes and tried to wash the ice in his blood down the drain and dutifully brought Richie back a pack of wet wipes. Turning the bathroom light off as he went, not before brushing his teeth again, and went back to his best friend.

They went to sleep quickly - Richie had already been half asleep when Stan returned, in the exact position he had been left in. They both got under the covers, Stan slipping back into his pyjamas, Richie just in a pair of clean boxers - which is what he usually wore, anyway.

Stan had tried to keep his distance from Richie, teetering himself on the edge of the bed. Richie was having none of it, as he all but yanked Stan towards him, curling an arm around his waist, tugging him into the burning nuclear reactor of his body. As much as Stan’s mind was racing, it didn’t keep him up much longer, his eyes and body heavy with fatigue and distress. He barely caught a soft press of something against the back of his neck, followed by a quiet whisper against it. He thinks his ears picked up his name at the tail end of it. He didn’t think anything after that, as he began to fall into a deep and undisturbed rest.

About twenty seconds before Stan fell unconscious, he felt wet drip down his face as he entwined his fingers with the hand that was resting against his stomach, a soft grunt left Richie at that, who gave a small squeeze and gently knocked his head against Stan’s as he began snoring.
In that brief moment, with Richie’s pink lava lamp setting a soft glow about the room, tucked up in a warm bed with Richie - entwined together without discomfort or unease, Richie snoring softly behind him, his own eyes falling shut for the last time this evening, that the ache in his chest had lifted, if only for a bit.

Chapter End Notes

please leave kudos and comments if you enjoyed! i love u all so so much.
richie and stan argue about ABBA

Chapter Summary

Richie just let Stan listen to ABBA what are you, a fuckin’ cop?

Chapter Notes

sorry for the wait! I have a big Stozier project going on for the IT Fairytale Project, so sadly Fries has been put a little on the back burner - but keep your eyes peeled for that :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stan woke up several minutes before the beeping of the alarm on his watch was due to wake him up for work. His eyes were a little heavy and his head was a little foggy from the late night. Stan’s body clock was almost more reliable than his watch - he woke up more days than not at five-thirty. Some days he would turn over and curl himself back into his blankets for another hour and a half, some days - if he was feeling particularly well-rested, he would get up and enjoy the peace of the cold mornings. This morning, to his fatigued annoyance, he wasn’t gifted the option to fall back into slumber. The sky was still heavy with black and frost licked up the window of Richie's bedroom, oozing heavy bristling Winter air into the room. Stan hadn’t woken up to the cold biting at his skin, though. No…he woke up the way he always found himself waking up with Richie, tangled in a whirlwind of arms and legs and feeling almost teasingly warm. Like a big middle finger to Winter as he lay as warm and as pleasantly as he would in the warmth of a mid-Spring day. Richie’s body encased his own in a warm embrace. Teasingly so because Stan would have to peel himself away from Richie with more reluctance than he would ever dare to admit.

He clicked off his alarm before it had the chance to ring out, letting Richie sleep and not be disturbed by the shrill beeping. He needed to get up and get ready, if he were to get up now he would have time to grab breakfast before he left Richie's house. Richie probably had little that would suit Stan's taste but he surely had bread and butter for Stan to have a slice of toast. Stan found himself getting cranky when he was hungry - which Mike is usually all too willing to point out as he sets a plate of scrambled egg in front of him more shifts than not.

Stan was lying on his back, with Richie wrapping up around him like a koala, breathing heavily with the tail end of quiet snores in his shoulder. Stan couldn't help but find himself staring at Richie. His face painted pink from the lava lamp beside him, Stan found himself flushed with a sense of peace at Richie's face, lax and vulnerable under the guise of sleep. His stomach fluttered and that awful heart-clenching feeling washed over him again and it only squeezed tighter when he began to untwine himself from Richie, trying to slip his shoulder out from under Richie's head without jostling him. It only somewhat worked. Richie let out a low grunting sound, thick and
sticky with sleep and nestled himself further into Stan. Stan stilled for a moment, feeling a sudden wave of an emotion he had come to know all too well, but refused to put a name to wash over him before he slipped away with less thought for Richie's comfort this time.

He wordlessly changed into his folded pair of work pants and a plain grey t-shirt from his backpack - refusing to spare a glance to Richie in fear of feeling those wonderful wretched emotions that hurt equally as much as they didn't.

He turned to leave Richie's room, hand ghosting the door handle, wishing desperately that he could just stay for a while longer. Behind the closed door of Richie's bedroom, there were no barriers. No hiding. Stan didn't have to worry about anyone seeing them or risk himself becoming the gossip of Derry. A part of him ached for more. A giant swelling feeling of his gut wanted more than frantic heavy kissing and orgasms behind closed doors and under heavy silence. A part of him wanted more… but somehow less. Small kisses and fleeting touches outside of the suffocating veil of secrecy.

Stan felt like his gut was turning over itself and about to eject out from his throat.

He lowered his hand off the doorknob and turned back to Richie. His steps were heavy with grief. Richie was lying on his stomach, his cheek pressed into the pillow and facing Stan, mouth slightly open. Drooling, no surprise there.

Stan moved around to Richie's side of the bed and switched off the lava lamp, sending the room into darkness if not for the faint orange glow from the streetlamps outside. Richie’s face twitched in irritation, a strand of hair had fallen onto his face and was tickling his nose, he kept scrunching and twitching his nose like a rabbit.

Cute.

Stan reached over and brushed the strand behind his ear. He paused there for a bit, his hand laced in Richie’s hair and half cradling his face. Richie looked so peaceful when he slept, like there was a certain type of weight lifted off of him when he was unconscious - him being quiet for once was just an added bonus. Stan felt smile fluttering up from his stomach and onto his face, a soft smile that only Richie can seem to put on his face and only in times like this. When it was just the two of them, no need to act differently for anyone else, with Stan not having to worry about his friends questioning his sexuality or the heavy eyes of Bill and Eddie, laced with judgment and curiosity. Eddie and Bill knew Stan better than the others did - with the exception of Richie, of course - Stan was sure they’d be so quick to pick up on any change of dynamic between him and Richie and it rattles his nerves.
Stan lifted his hand off of Richie and fixed the blanket a little so Richie’s shoulder blades were no longer being exposed to the cold air from his open window. His stupid open window. Stan’s face was beginning to blister with cold, so he picked up his shoes from the end of Richie’s bed and left the bedroom. The click of the bedroom door behind him hurt him a little more than he felt comfortable with.

Stan padded down the stairs in his bleach-white socks with his shoes in one hand, and his backpack in the other. The rest of the house was a little warmer than Richie’s room - but that wasn’t really saying much, since it was still an unheated house with seemingly thin windows in the dead of winter. His arms were prickling with goosebumps and he had to force his jaw to be still to make his teeth not clatter together. He tried his best to open the kitchen door quietly, grimacing when it let out a splitting creak into the silent air. He flicked the light on and winced at the sudden brightness.

The part of Stan that was raised by his parents to be polite and mannerly was crying out at him for being rude and helping himself to food from someone else’s kitchen without permission - it was by all means, incredibly disrespectful and rude to sift through someone else’s cupboards as he was. The other part of him - the part of himself that he considers to be a lot more true to his character - said to him that he was equally as welcome in Richie’s home as he was in his own. Although it has to be said, his own kitchen is stocked a lot better. Most of the cupboards were more or less empty with the exception of sauces and condiments - (if they’re open they’re meant to go in the refrigerator, not back in the cupboard, Richie) - and some cans of vegetables, soup, and some tinned peaches. No bread in sight. Stan closed the cupboards and settled on getting himself a glass of water instead, he would just have Mike make him some eggs when he comes in.

Stan wonders for a brief moment what Richie eats - since his cupboards are fairly anaemic. Probably take-out, he reckons. He always helps himself to food at the Diner, too. Big greasy burgers and helpings of fries whenever he takes notions to do so. Stan never said anything about Richie eating more than his allocated one meal per shift on break, and he didn’t have any plans to. The wise words of Richie echoed in his head - I’m a growing boy, Stanley!

Sure enough, Richie followed the trend of appearing whenever being spoken about, or in this case, thought about, and opened the kitchen door with a lot less softness than Stan had. It had made Stan jump a little, not expecting Richie to wake up after him - nevermind follow him downstairs. Stan felt the water in his stomach turn heavy when he watched a bleary-eyed and sluggish Richie close the door behind him. His hair was nothing short of a bird’s nest - sticking up in hundreds of different directions, Stan reckons Richie couldn’t have styled it like that if he tried. He was rubbing one of his eyes with one hand and scratching his stomach with the other. Stan had to force himself not to stare at the sliver of stomach that was exposed as Richie scratched his belly like a middle-aged divorcee from a 60’s film.

Richie trotted towards the refrigerator, not paying Stan any mind as he opened it and began rustling about the contents inside of it, pulling out a bottle of milk and moving towards the counter, where Stan was standing. It wasn’t until Richie was about three foot from Stan did he notice Stan was there at all, jumping near out of his skin and letting out a warbled noise of surprise.
“Stanley, holy fuck - what the hell are you doing standing there like a fucking ghost. I near fucking shit myself - my ass isn’t quite back to business yet so I’m gonna tell you this and tell you no more - but it was a close fuckin’ call.”

Stan’s short and quiet laughter at Richie jumping out of his skin was short-lived and he slapped Richie’s arm, “That’s disgusting.” Richie rubbed his arm where Stan had slapped him and groaned, more out of tiredness than pain, “You can’t fault me for scaring you when you came down without your glasses, you can only see what - three feet in front of you?”

Richie ripped the foil off of the bottle of milk and took a swig. Stan wondered how people could drink straight milk - it always seemed gross to him. “Yeah, I can’t see shit.” He smacked his lips and wiped the milk moustache off of his upper lip, “I thought this was OJ when I took it out,” he gestured it to Stan to wordlessly ask if he wanted some and Stan shook his head, “Why are you down here, anyway? What time is it?”

Stan checked his watch, “Five-thirty, I have about fifteen minutes before I have to go, I was going to get some toast…” Stan felt unease ripple at his stomach, “If that’s alright, that is…”

“If you can find anything to eat fuckin’ help yourself, not like this is the Hilton.”

“What do you normally have?”

“Pancakes off of Bill’s griddle, usually,” Stan didn’t respond and Richie continued, “And burgers and shakes, and usually I stop by either that Chinese place down Main Street or the pizza place on the corner for dinner.”

“How are you not obese?”

“High metabolism, baby. It all burns off when I jerk it three times a day.”

Stan pinched the bridge of his nose, it was way too early for this. He looked up from his internal debate of whether or not it was morally acceptable to glue someone’s mouth shut when something landed on the counter he was leaning on with a light but distinct noise. It was a granola bar, packaged in a green paper - Stan had seen them in the corner store a couple of times, if he recalls correctly. He stared at it dumbly for a second and looked up to Richie, who was looking at him expectantly. (Although Stan doubts that Richie could even pinpoint where Stan’s eyes were on his face, probably only seeing blobs of colour).
“It’s for eating… you know… put it in your mouth and chew.”

“I know what it is, jackass. Why are you giving it to me?”

“Because you’re hungry? It’s probably the closest thing I have to oatmeal here, and I know that’s what you usually have for breakfast, Grandpa - so just chew it and be grateful for the room service.”

Stan pressed his fingers lightly over the packaging, smoothing it out, “It hardly counts as room service, does it?”

“The kitchen is a room, yes? Therefore,” Richie clapped him heavily on the back, “room service, my dear,” Richie didn’t move his hand off of Stan’s back. Instead Stan felt Richie’s thumb rubbing softly at it. Stan couldn’t deal with the bubbling in his stomach this early, his face was glowing and he knew it - he was just glad that Richie had forgone his glasses. “I’m gonna go up and get my smokes, don’t run off on me now. Although, if all goes well maybe something of yours could be running off of me later,” and with a hearty slap to his back, Richie left the kitchen and barrelled up the stairs. Stan heard a string of curse words shortly following a loud thump - obviously Richie forgoing the glasses may have been in Stan’s best interest, but not in his own.

Stan had the granola bar finished by the time Richie had come back downstairs and into the kitchen, this time with his glasses sitting (more lopsided than usual) on his face and a jacket in his hands, said jacket was thrown at him not seconds later and Stan had almost not caught it, “Reflexes of an angel my ass, no wonder you were kicked off the baseball team,” Richie said, pulling the cigarette from behind his ear into his mouth.

“I wasn’t kicked off, I quit so I could focus on my studies,” Stan said, following Richie with his eyes as he stalked over beside him, clicking the gas of the stove on and pressing the ignition. The loud tacky noises of it trying to spark the gas made Stan wince, “Why are you giving me a jacket?”

“To model it down the catwalk, what do you think?” The spark caught the gas and Richie sucked his cigarette on it, lighting it before turning it off. Stan had found himself getting used to the smell of cigarette smoke the more he spent time with Richie, which he wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. It made him feel kinda good, so he supposes it’s good enough.

“I’m not wearing your jacket, Richie - you’ll need it, it’s freezing,” Stan tried to push it back to Richie but Richie put his foot down.

“Just put the fuckin’ coat on you’re looking as peaky as Eddie does when I wipe my snot on my
sleeve,” Stan stared at the jacket in horror, “Not that sleeve. My work sleeves.”

“You wear t-shirts. They don’t have sleeves.”

“My arm.”

“I hate you,” Stan said, slipping the jacket on, to end the conversation more than anything else. It was warm and Stan could feel the goosebumps falling back into his skin. It didn’t smell much like smoke… no… it smelt like jasmine and fresh linen. It was freshly washed, probably taken straight out of the closet. Stan zipped it up and put his hands into the pockets, trying the smother the cold out of his fingers.

“No you don’t,” Richie sing-songed, a grin spreading across his face.

Stan bit back a response that had almost made its way past his lips. He wasn’t sure what the response was going to be, but he knew well enough that it wasn’t anything either of them were expecting or necessarily ready to hear, he didn’t languish on it any longer, “Are you going to be on time today?”

“Probably not, I mean - do you really expect me to work after last night?! My legs fell out from under me when I was going up the stairs, Stanley,” Richie said, rubbing his ass cheek through his boxers for effect. Stan felt guilt rise up into his throat at that.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” His voice was small, a little afraid. They don’t normally talk about it, “You could have said, I would have been more gentle.”

Richie blinked at him, before letting out a hollering hoot of a laugh and wrapping an arm around Stan’s neck pulling him flush to his side, “Well isn’t that just darling - who woulda thought Stan the Animal had a soft side? A good Jewish boy in the streets, ass ravager in the sheets, huh Stanley?” He poked Stan’s cheek and pushed their cheeks together when Stan tried to wiggle away, “You know I love it when you take me on a one way trip to pound-town on the six-inch express… oh boy, believe me, last night? I’ll be playing that over and over again in my head and making multitudes of deposits into the spank bank with that one.”

Stan’s face all but exploded with red, he could feel the heat creeping onto his ears and down his neck, he let out an anguished groan and kicked Richie in the shin, telling him to shut up, “If you’re gonna be like that, I don’t want you to come in at all.”
“I’ll be in, boss - don’t you worry your pretty little curls about it,” Richie pulled at one of Stan’s curls then let him out of his grasp. They proceeded to chat shit for a while, Richie sitting up on the counter in his boxers and t-shirt, kicking Stan with his bare feet every so often. Richie offered to make Stan a coffee, Stan accepted - somehow Richie Tozier managed to even make shitty two-dollar instant coffee taste good - and Stan doesn’t even like coffee - it usually tastes like ass, so he says. Richie asked if Stan wanted to taste his ass. It was then, thankfully, time for Stan head off to work and he left Richie with that image dancing in his head.

“Don’t miss me too much,” Richie had said. Stan would, a little. He could feel the warm, happy feeling that bleached his chest slowly falling through his socks with every step towards the front door, then when he felt the heavy brass under his hand and twisted it open, it was gone. As if it had never been there at all, leaving just a shadow of guilt and … something. Need? Want? It was just as scary as it had felt to him last night, if not even scarier because he was here, on Richie’s front doorstep, wearing Richie’s navy-blue jacket with Richie waving him away in his underwear-slash-pajamas like a dutiful housewife.

Stan wanted to kiss him.

The thought made him feel sick with himself. There were no excuses now, no heavy breathing to mask it, no way for Stan to bury it under sex or shadow it with excuses of hormones and lust and erections. He just wanted nothing more, at five-forty-five on a dark and dewy Sunday morning than to give his best friend a kiss goodbye.

“Have I got something on my face?” Richie asked, wiping at his mouth.

“No.” Stan swallowed thickly. He knew he should look away. Look away and get his bike and cycle to work with a wave and a ‘see you later’ as he had done before. He knew he should do it, keep things normal. Stop making things weird. But he couldn’t. Well, if he had tried, he probably could… but the burning in his gut and the soft Winter breeze had pushed him forward, pushed him into Richie’s space before he even had time to consider that those other options had even existed in the first place.

Richie looked somewhere between a deer caught in the headlights and a kid who just got told Christmas was coming early, “Can’t get enough of me, huh?”

Stan didn’t even acknowledge Richie had spoken. He didn’t want to. He just grabbed the loose part of Richie’s shirt down by his hip and tugged lightly. Richie met him halfway. Their lips pressed together softly. With no whimpers, no breathy moans, no biting… none of that at all. No underlying excuses and nothing to mask it with.
No pretending, Stan’s mind provided.

It was soft, quick and chaste. Like Stan’s first kiss in third grade with Lucy Braxton. Innocent and simple. This wasn’t simple, though. This wasn’t simple at all - simple didn’t have Stan’s heart hammering in his chest or his stomach doing all types of somersaults inside of itself. Simple didn’t have the almost audible shifting of… this. Of something. Stan had known it himself when he pulled apart from Richie after the longest kiss of his life (it had been three seconds) and he looked at his friend. A face that was so open, so open with expression that it made Stan want to cry, want to heave and sob with a mix of all the heavy achy feelings as well as the fluttering and smiley ones.

Stan felt it when Richie squeezed his hand with an ‘I’ll see you later, Romeo’. Stan felt it when he got on his bike and cycled away - for the first time - like he wasn’t running away from something.

Stan felt that big, beautiful and scary thing shift from his imagination and from achy feelings of pain into something else. Into his skin. Into his bones. Into himself. It wasn’t just a part of him anymore, he could feel that much. It became him, it engulfed him. With a chaste goodbye kiss it had swallowed him from his chest outwards and he could feel it with Richie, too… maybe. It was something else. Something that they had never discussed… it was equally scary as it was euphoric.

Stan was consumed by it.

The start of Stan’s shift had gone as normal - they had a fairly decent sized rush of truckers come by as a pit stop on their way to some big truck show up in Bangor. They had managed it alright, with Beverly on coffees, Ben on the till and Stan on waiting, they had breezed through it like a well-oiled machine. They would have breezed through it a little better if Richie had shown up on time, but they hadn’t expected anything less from the biggest slacker in the workforce.

Stan was clearing up the small mountains of plates and mugs and all sorts that had piled up on the tables, balancing huge piles of stacked plates with ease out through the kitchen and over to Eddie, who had a sink full of soapy water and his scrubber at the ready. Normally, Eddie would have made a quip about bringing all the dishes out to him at once instead of taking them out as they come, complaining about the sudden mountain of shoulder-aching work. Not today though. Today he just grabbed a handful of plates off of the stack that Stan had set beside him and dropped them into the sink, scrubbing bacon grease off of them under a stream of hot water.
Something in Stan’s gut had told him to stop for a moment. So he did. He’s been doing an awful lot of thinking with his gut lately, it seems. Eddie looked … ill. Not the type of ill where he complains loudly to anyone within earshot and lists all the medication he’s been put on for influenza… not even sporting the Rudolph-red nose he usually wears when he’s ill from blowing at his nose. No… Eddie appeared subdued. Pale. Eyes distant and unfocused and quiet. Eddie Kaspbrak is a lot of things - quiet is most certainly not one of them.

Stan cleared his throat a little, which didn’t even get so much as a blink from Eddie. So he tried again, a little louder. Still nothing. Stan, who was now actively growing a little concerned at Eddie’s sudden bout of … whatever this was, gave Eddie’s shoulder a tentative squeeze, which had got his attention.

“Are you okay, Eddie? You’re looking a little anaemic today,” Stan said, trying to keep his tone light.

“No - yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it, I just uh - I just didn’t sleep much last night,”

“It’s the full moon, I bet,” Beverly interjected, dropping a stack of coffee mugs into the sink, causing an awful racket, “My Mom always said that a full moon messes with your sleep cycle. Ben had an awful nights sleep last night, too,” she suddenly got a little flustered, “So he said. He told me so this morning.”

Eddie just nodded and went back to the dishes, although he shot Stan a somewhat unreadable look that made Stan feel a little uncomfortable, like he was examining him for something. Stan could have got on his knees and prayed his thanks to the Lord when the familiar crunch of tires over loose gravel caught his ears - giving him an excuse to escape Eddie’s stare and sort through the delivery.

He took off his apron and hung it neatly on the hooks by the staff door, replacing the space where his - no, Richie’s - jacket had been hanging. He slipped the jacket on and zipped it up, bracing himself for the smack of cold air. He smelt the faintest bit of cigarette smoke on it, from when Richie had been having his morning smoke beside him. It definitely didn’t smell good, but it smelled somewhat like Richie, which meant it didn’t really smell all that bad either.

He went out and exchanged pleasantries with the driver for a moment, signing off on the delivery with a pen that was inconsistent and quite frankly, overall unpleasant to write with. He told the delivery man as much and he just snuffed a laugh and took the clipboard off of Stan and hopped back into the truck and drove away. Leaving Stan not only with a dozen boxes to pack away but also with a shitty, dried-out blue pen.
He tucked the pen behind his ear - the only place where it wouldn’t have a possibility of busting and staining his clothes - and began hauling the boxes from the loading bay to the door. They were heavy enough, filled with coffee beans and syrups and cocoa powder and all sorts. It was then, as Stan was hoisting a box of caramel and vanilla syrups up from the ground, did he hear an all-too-familiar voice cutting through the air.

“Atta boy, Stan! Lift with your legs, stick that ass out and squeeze! Get those glutes a-movin’!” Richie free-wheeled past him, jumping off of his still-moving bike and letting it crash into a heap on the side of the building.

“I’m surprised that bike hasn’t fallen apart yet,” Stan said, barely missing a beat in his stride, he let out a puff as he stacked the box on top of the others by the door, “You’re earlier than usual.”

Richie made a masquerade of his hands and bowed himself on top of the box that Stan had just set down, digging a loose cigarette out of his back pocket but instead of lighting it, hegestured with it, “What can I say, I am a man of many talents and virtues - gracing you with my presence earlier than I am obliged to is just one of my more charitable ones,” He said this, looking somewhat smug and with a smile pulling at his cheeks.

“You’re still an hour-” He pulled up his sleeve and checked his watch, “and forty minutes late. You’re still very much not on time. It’s important to me that you know that,” Stan said, kicking the bottom of Richie’s converse with his own shoe. Richie kicked back and finally lit his cigarette.

Richie eventually gets up off the box and helps Stan drag the boxes to the door, together they unpack them and put everything away - even if Richie did near give Stan blood pressure issues doing so - ‘Richie, please - and I am begging here - stop trying to balance glass bottles of syrup on your finger’

‘This ain’t the first nor the last time I’ll have you beggin’ over jus’ my pinky finger, Stanley!’

Naturally, almost like clockwork, it hadn’t been long before Stan and Richie were standing in the middle of the Diner, beside the jukebox, in the midst of a heated argument. Richie and Stan had an awful habit of having spats in work, arguing and moaning and complaining at each other like it was part of their job description. It was all light-hearted though, rarely out of anything other than jest. Although sometimes they got so heated and loud that Mike would put a hand on both of their shoulders and tell them, with a voice contrastingly sweet as honey, to ‘shut the hell up’.

This time, they were arguing about which song to play from the jukebox. Which, when Ben and Beverly - who were both sitting by the counter, flicking through one of Beverly’s fashion magazines - realized what the subject of discourse was about, caused them to suck their teeth and slink as far away from the conversation as they could. Richie was very headstrong about his music,
he bought all the Rolling Stone magazines when they came out, he went to the record store almost
religiously every other weekend and sifted through the new Rock n’ Roll records. Stan was well…
headstrong in general, confident and set in his ways for the most part.

Especially when it came to ABBA.

“Stanley, if I have to listen to Mamma Mia one more fucking time I swear I am going to throw
myself into the deep-fat fryers head-first,” Richie said, swatting Stan’s hand away of the button he
was about to press on the dated, yet miraculously still working, old machine.

“If you hate ABBA so much then why were you singing Dancing Queen under your breath earlier?”
Richie gasped, “Yeah, I heard you - don’t think you’re so slick, Tozier,” Stan said, pointing the
hand that Richie had swatted away accusingly, jabbing his chest as he rounded his sentence.

“Maybe I wanted to dance, to jive-” Richie jabbed Stan in the chest with his pointer finger, “
Maybe I even wanted to have the time of my life. That may be the case - but that does not
undermine my point.”

“It kinda does, Richie,” Beverly said from across the room, she received a middle finger for her
efforts.

“I’m begging you, Stanley. Between you with Abba, Eddie with Cher and Ben and whatever
shitty bleached blond boyband he plays nowadays,” ‘Hey!’ “- you’re killing me here!” Richie
braided his fingers together to beg, “Please, anything - The Smiths … Mötley Crüe … INXS…
XTC... I’ll even take Blondie for fuck’s sake,”

“I’m sick of The Smiths,” Stan said moving to try the button again, Richie clasped his hand tight in
his own before he even got close,

“How can you be sick of The Smiths? You like The Smiths!”

“Because that’s all you played last night, Richie. I’ve got his stupid nasally singing voice stuck in
my head.”

Ben piped up, “Have we got any-”
“No!” Stan and Richie said in unison, breaking their eye contact to glower at Ben, who just sighed and went back to looking at a spread of chiffon skirts with Beverly. He didn’t seem all too sure what exactly he was looking at, but listened intently to Beverly all the same.

“Right…” Stan breathed, “What about Big Star?”

Richie hummed in thought, “Which album?”

Stan looked at him like he was stupid, “As if either of us like any album of theirs except for Number One Record.”

Richie jabbed the button before Stan had the chance to and scowled at him, “Speak for yourself, Urine. Radio City is still a wicked album.”

“Oh yeah? Is that why it’s caked in dust at the bottom of your record pile?” The two turned in tandem as the music started to play through the battered speakers, walking towards the kitchen, Richie had his hands shoved into the pocket of his apron.

“Hey! I bought a Carpenters album for you, don’t start getting bitchy with me,” Richie said. He was right, he had in fact bought a Carpenters album a couple of weeks back to keep in his record pile for Stan to play when he comes over. Stan’s parents, as much as they loved their jazz music from the sixties, liked little else and didn’t much like Stanley playing his own music.

“Yeah, sure - you bought it, I’ll give you that but you’re yet to actually let me listen to it,” Stan said, pushing through the doors into the kitchen, missing Beverly and Ben rolling their eyes at the two.

Stan grabbed a rogue drying cloth from a counter and began folding it as Richie followed up behind him, twisting around him like some sort of boogeyman, “It’s the thought that counts, no?”

“You’re right: no,” Richie kept moving obnoxiously behind Stan, so Stan did what any other mature teenage boy would do, and whipped him with the drying cloth. Richie swore on impact, although Stan doubted it really hurt, considering Richie was wearing a heavy-looking pair of jeans. At least the dumbass started dressing somewhat for the weather.

Stan didn’t get much chance to mull it over because Richie had been all too quick to rip a spatula
from Bill’s hand and began thwacking Stan in the arms with it, “Ow! Richie - stop! That hurts!” Stan was smiling all the while whipping Richie in retaliation. The two whipped and slapped at each other for a bit before Beverly’s head popped through the doors, with a serious face that soon turned to one of bitten back laughter when she watched Richie smack his own glasses off his face with the spatula.

“Sorry to… interrupt - but the coffee machine is doing a weird thing again, Richie would you have a look at it?” She said, her facial muscles twitching in the effort not to laugh.

Richie picked his glasses up off the floor and adjusted them on his face, Stan reached over and adjusted them properly afterwards, “The noisy weird thing or the smokey weird thing?”

Beverly turned her head back out to Ben and shouted the question back, there was a moment while she waited on the answer before she popped her head back in, “Uh… the coffee-juice-is-squirting-everywhere weird thing.”

Richie looked more excited than anything else, “Oooh, a squirty weird thing? That’s a new one. This place is falling apart and I get the luxury of watching it happen, front row tickets,” Richie said, giddy. He patted Stan’s chest and called moments-truce and held his spatula out in front of him like a sword, marching out to Beverly. Beverly and Stan shared a look and shook their heads, both with undisputed smiles on their lips.

Stan left Richie at that, it would do him good to have something to focus on for a bit, it calms his brain down from going into overdrive the best of times. Stan walked around for a while, he cut a few strawberries for Bill and cleared up around Bill for a bit. He was so messy but Stan never found it in his heart to feel overly frustrated about it. Bill never did it intentionally… whatever Bill touches just tends to… explode into a warzone. It was one of his less endearing qualities but endearing nonetheless. Bill thanked him and took one of the strawberries off of his chopping board and popped it into his mouth. It took a second before he started cringing, “Too cuh-cold… my tuh-tuh-teeth hurt now.” Stan told him to grow better teeth. Bill told him to grow better manners. Mike told them both to grow up. They all had a bit of a laugh at that.

Stan continued skirting around the kitchen, organizing towels, throwing out old order tickets, brushing up a bit. He was about to walk over to the shelf where the folders are kept to look through some paperwork when Eddie cut into his vision, standing in front of him.

He looked equally as pale and unsettled as before, if not even more so, he looked moments away from spewing his guts out on the tiled floor. His brunette mop was limp on his head, his face was a sickly pale greyish colour, and he seemed to curl in on himself, like he was trying to curl into a ball and pop out of existence. He was shaking like a leaf underneath his heavy clothes, he had taken his apron off and was stood there in his knitted jumper and waterproof bottoms and his galoshes. Stan
doesn’t think he’s seen Eddie look this poorly in his life. Even when Eddie had fallen over a branch in track and broke his arm, Stan had waited outside the Gymnasium with him for his Mother to take him to the ER and even then, with tears welling in his eyes and pained whimpers leaving his mouth, he was talking furiously about whatever they were discussing, eyes bright behind the tears and his face thriving with emotions. Even when Eddie was holed up with the flu - which was not very often, mind. He hasn’t missed a vaccine since the day he was born - he still found the energy to complain and moan with a face taut with expression and liveliness.

This Eddie looked like he was a brief gust of wind away from crumpling to the floor.

“Can we talk?” Eddie looked around quickly, making sure no one else was around, “In private?”

Stan is a little taken aback, it’s so rare that any of them have any reason to hide anything from each other - usually what you told one person, you were happy enough to tell everyone. Even if Mike, Ben, and Beverly had been relatively new additions to their close-knit circle, they had each become equally as important and as loved as the original group who had known each other since they were less than four foot tall. Apprehension bubbled in Stan’s stomach and he nodded, following behind Eddie who walked him out the kitchen, through the hall, and into their tiny staff-room. Staff-closet more like.

Eddie had his hand firm on the table. Stan guessed it was to stop himself from keeling over. Eddie gnawed at his lip and tapped his foot, his eyes skirting around the room to look at anything besides Stan. Eddie didn’t like to be rushed so Stan waited. He waited patiently while Eddie opened his mouth, only to shut it as the words died out on his tongue over and over again, seemingly growing more and more agitated at the fact. It happened one final time before Eddie let out a frustrated groan and pulled at his hair.

“I don’t know why this is so fucking hard. There’s no reason for it to be this hard, it’s you - Stan. It’s you of all people there’s no reason for me to be tripping over myself about it. Hell, you probably already know - fuck,” He settled himself against the wall, looking equally defeated as he did relieved, “...everyone probably knows. I bet everyone knows and have just been waiting for me to catch up.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” Stan said, confused and wracking his brain to find clues on what Eddie could be referencing but he came up empty.

“I’m… I-” He stalled and started that sentence a couple of times before deflating like a balloon, “I shouldn’t have said shit. Forget it. It doesn’t matter… this was fucking stupid.”

“No no no -” Stan blocked Eddie from leaving, pushing him back a little into the room, “It’s bothering you, right? Is that why you have been acting so strange today?”
Eddie nodded.

“Then tell me, Eddie. If you don’t want to tell anyone else, that’s fine - but tell me what’s going on with you…” He considered Eddie’s fearful face and his shaky hands, “and whatever it is… you know I’m not going to judge you, right? I don’t know what it is or even what it could be but if it’s causing you this much distress then it’s clear that you need to get it off your chest,” Eddie looked at Stan for the first time since they walked in, his big brown eyes were pulled back with uncertainty, “Please, Eddie.”

“I’m fucking scared,” Eddie said. His voice was heartbreakingly genuine.

“Even more reason to say it.”

Eddie blinked at that, mulling it over in his head. He steeled himself and squinted his eyes shut as if saying it without being able to see Stan would make it any easier. Eddie looked like a frightened rabbit, but Stan would never dare say that in fear of Eddie thumping him.

“I’m gay,” Eddie said. It punched out of his mouth and the words grew heavy in the air, Eddie was quick to chase after it, “I think… I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.”

The silence was palpable. A heavy, pregnant pause. Stan swallowed - the words took him aback for some reason. He kind of knew, somewhere inside him, since he wasn’t shocked or even surprised. They all knew each other so well that this was one of the things that everyone had just… picked up, silently and in their own time. It didn’t matter, in fact, Stan had never really thought about it. Eddie was gay. Eddie didn’t like girls. It seems strange and somewhat foreign to make that distinction. Eddie was Eddie. That felt a lot better. That didn’t feel like he was stripping Eddie apart and examining specific parts of him to associate him with, so hearing Eddie to it with himself had him reeling a little.

The pause was growing uncomfortable so Stan forced himself out of his thoughts, “That’s fine, Eddie. None of us would ever judge you for it - you can be yourself around us, you know that, right?”

Eddie swallowed heavily, he still looked nervous and a little on edge but the change in him was palpable. He looked less sickly, less like a ghost and more alive, blushed with colour and he had unfurled from himself a little, “I… Thanks, Stanley. I know it’s stupid. I know no one will hate me for it, I just … I kinda hated myself for it for a while. I tried to ignore it and make it go away. I
even stole some of Richie’s playboy magazines he keeps in his locker to try and …” He looked anywhere apart from Stan, “Well - I couldn’t. I tried for ages and I couldn’t do it. I hated it… I thought I was broken but I figured that if I talked about it, I would feel a little better. I just wanted some guidance… not that I’m trying to unload all of this on you,” Eddie flapped his hand a little, before letting out a hefty sigh and running his hand through his hair, “I just thought… you’d be the best person for it.”

Stan’s stomach dropped at Eddie’s confessions - how could they have not noticed how much Eddie was struggling? If Stan had noticed that Eddie had been in such a terrible mindset with himself maybe he could have talked to him like this earlier, helped show him how completely okay it is to be himself. Sure - it probably wouldn’t be in his best interest to paint it across Derry unless he wants to find himself a victim of a hate crime but … none of those assholes matter. All that matters is that Eddie’s friends - no - his family - accept him wholly and truly as he is. Unconditionally.

Stan’s chest fluttered at that. It was true. Everyone would support Eddie so quickly. If Stan was gay they would support him, too. The thought made Stan feel a little sickly himself.

“I’m sorry you’ve been feeling like that for so long. We’ll always support you, Eddie… whenever you’re ready to tell the rest of the Losers - if you even want to, that is - we’ll do everything we can to support you. For now, though, what can I do to help? I’m sorry, I’m not really sure …,” Stan said softly, folding his arms, “Is there any particular reason you didn’t go to Richie, not that I have any issues with you talking to me but Richie would be able to help you better since he’s...uh-”

“Queer?” Eddie filled in, the word falling so insidiously easily from his mouth. He had heard it being shouted at him all of his life, it followed him like a shadow. The word made Stan’s nails made crescents in his arms where they were crossed when Eddie used it.

“-into boys too,” Stan finished, ignoring Eddie’s choice of word. Eddie let out a puff of air and relaxed a little, shoulders finally falling free of tension and the last paces of anxiety melting away from his features.

“Richie would be so…” He made a flippant gesture with his hand, “about it. He doesn’t care that people know… I’m not like that. I can’t be as flamboyant about it. That’s why I came to you, Stan. You get it… I don’t want people to know and I don’t want people to speculate about it much either;” He sucked his teeth and a wash of tired irritation flashed across his face for a moment, “even though people do that already.”

“I get that… but he would still be able to give you fairly valuable advice that I couldn’t.”

“Like what?”
Stan shrugged, “How he came to terms with it… how to deal with the internal struggle… things like that.”

Eddie stilled for a moment, eyes squinted in confusion, “Can’t you?”

“I mean… I can *try*… but I won’t be speaking from experience so it would all be theoretical advice without any actual practice,” Stan replied, looking back at Eddie with equal confusion. Eddie stared at him for a handful of heavy moments, gears turning behind his skull, before his eyebrows shot up only to shoot back down into a furrow.

“Wait… so you’re not…” Eddie looked at Stan, waiting for him to fill in the gap, although Stan just stared back with face blank of any semblance of understanding, “…gay?”

Stan all but jolted. He let out a few choked words before he gained control back of his mouth, “No!”

Eddie seemed to be equally as shocked as Stan, taking a great big breath through his nose and his eyes darted from Stan, to the door, to Stan, to his galoshes, to Stan’s mouth, to the door, back to Stan’s mouth, “Uh… Oh. I- uh- God, sorry. I just thought... nevermind. Sorry, we can just forget this entire thing happened. God… here I go, putting my galoshes in my mouth, huh.”

Eddie moved to walk past Stan but Stan grappled onto his forearm, “What do you mean? Why did you think that?” Stan’s stomach was bubbling unpleasantly and he could feel his underarms prickling with sweat and by God… could he feel the redness flushing across his face. Eddie looked like he was caught in a bear trap.

“I’m sorry… I was clearly mistaken. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Eddie.” Stan said firmly.

“I just… I thought you and Richie were -” Eddie’s sentence stopped short when he saw the look that washed over Stan’s face, from a fiery inquisition to a hollow type of fear. Fear for what? People thinking he was gay? His friends catching onto him and Richie’s antics? For being face-to-face to the crushing realization that maybe Eddie’s coming out had hit a little close to home and he tried, as he has been doing, to brush it under the carpet to deal with later… and the vicious cutting bite of time telling him that maybe… later is *now*. “Nevermind. It was dumb I don’t know-”
“H-how could you think that?” Good job, stuttering Stan, that sure does sound like a response from a man one-hundred-percent stable and cemented in his sexuality.

“I dunno… I must have heard it from someone and taken it out of context or dreamt it or something…” Eddie kept looking between Stan and the door, wanting nothing more than to leave.

“A dream.” Stan flatlined, Eddie nodded, gnawing at his lip. “Ok. Well… we’re not,” He said, taking a loaded breath, “Dating, that is.” Stan dropped his hand and let Eddie move to the door, walking out from Stan’s field of vision to the door behind him.

“Sorry again, I didn’t mean to offend you,” Stan heard the click of the latch of the door opening as Eddie pushed the handle down.

“You didn’t offend me… it’s just not like that.” Stan said, not sure if he was talking to Eddie or just saying the words into the stale air of the universe. It’s not like that. It’s… not like anything. ‘Ha! Stan the man gets off on a good one!’ Stan shakes Richie’s voice from his head. The creaking of the door had paused and Eddie’s voice danced into the room, quieter and softer than Stan had ever really heard it before - like he was talking to a caged animal, scared that it would either lash out and bite his arm clean off or cower in the corner and piss itself.

“What is it like then?”

Stan swallowed. The air seemed to grow even more stale and heavier with each breath he took. Which it had been quite a few by the time his answer was forced out of his mouth, “We’re friends, Eddie.” The words felt like cement on his tongue. Words heavy with lies - because that really was what they were - lies. There’s no other reason why saying it had made his stomach hollow and warbled with guilt.

*Friends.*

The word made Stan feel ill. A beautiful word, that truly seems to be a definition of what makes the world go round. A word so full of wonderful memories and seems to overlap so heavily with the most important things in Stan’s life now felt like a twisted and cruel type of mockery and he could tell by Eddie’s voice that Eddie knew somewhat he was lying, too.

“Well, Stan,” He said, “I’m gonna go.” The creaking of the door punctuated his sentence. Stan didn’t reply and not a moment later he heard the creaking of the door again as it fell shut. Stan took
a moment to himself, feeling a sudden rush of hurt pierce through him with the click of the door as it fell shut behind Eddie. There was little Stan could do, really. He found truth in Eddie’s words… pushing a part of himself down and ignoring it. He found truths in things he had tried to blind himself to and it scared him. It God-honest scared him. What scared him the most, what made his shoulders tremble and what made him itch absent-mindedly at the skin of his hand until it was red raw and shiny with the undermost layers of skin was that he found a type of comfort in them, too. A sense of right-ness in them. With a steeled breath and brief moment to blink the redness out of his eyes, Stan left the storeroom and got back to work.

Stan managed, somehow, to put the conversation with Eddie in the back of his mind, for the most part. He focused on working. Cleaning tables and helping Beverly polish the cutlery and if Beverly had been polishing the same spoon for ten minutes, he didn’t mention it. He usually re-polished after Beverly anyway and a part of him thinks that she knows that too. Ben had been not two minutes out of the door, setting off on his bike to get Beverly’s embroidery project for her, which she said she had left on the coffee table in the family room of Ben’s home, which Richie, who was sitting on the stool across the counter from Stan, drinking a vanilla milkshake - was all too quick to jump on.

“Say, how come your project is at Ben’s, Miss Marsh? Seems awfully suspicious if you ask me - ain’t that right, Stanley?” Richie asked, leering at Beverly with a thick smile on his face, like a cat playing with a mouse.

“Because Ben offered to help me with it, unlike the rest of you Ben is actually a good friend who helps his friends under times of great stress,” She quipped back without missing a beat. Almost. Stan noticed her hands shot still for a brief moment but he didn’t mention it.

“Stress, huh? What kinda stress, Bev?” He winked obscenely and leaned over the counter to Bev, leaving his raised ass to be directly in line with Stan’s vision, and when Richie spared Stan a glance and let out a silent laugh and raised his ass a little higher, Stan knew he was doing it on purpose. “Say… is Ginger shackin’ with Haystack, is he helping with your homework?” Richie took another quick glance and met Stan’s eyes, “Cause we all know what ‘he’s helping me study ’ means,” Richie pitched his voice up in a crude attempt at mimicking Beverly’s voice.

“That one needs more practice,” Stan said, pulling his attention from Richie’s ass to the knife he had been polishing.

“Was that meant to be me? I’m offended… genuinely offended. Is that how you think I sound?” Beverly said, laughter pulling at her words making them light and airy.

“Hey! Stop trying to change the conversation, girlie,” Richie took the butterknife from Stan’s
hands and pointed it at Beverly, ignoring Stan’s indigent yell, “A’ll get tha info outta ya if I gotta carve it out!” He glanced at Stan and Stan sighed, knowing what Richie wanted.

“That one was better,” Stan said, trying not to react to the way Richie glowed at the praise. “Still needs work, though.” Richie rolled his eyes.

“It sucked,” Eddie’s voice caught Stan’s attention but he didn’t turn around to face him, instead he took the knife off of Richie and polished where Richie’s fingerprints had been. Eddie walked behind Stan and laid out another light assortment of cutlery where Stan had lined up the ones he was due to clean. Richie immediately fluttered over and began doting at Eddie, causing Eddie to slap his hands away and tell him to fuck off. Richie made a big dramatic frown and started arranging the cutlery that Eddie had brought out into the way Stan likes it. Forks, then dessert forks, then butterknives, then spoons, then teaspoons. Stan finished polishing the butterknife and set it to his right, between himself and Beverly and when he moved to pick up another, his hand brushed against Richie’s.

He momentarily lost movement in his arm. Hold his hand. Hold his hand. Hold his hand.

Stan didn’t hold his hand, but he did take the knife that Richie was putting down in front of him out of his hands, letting their fingers touch a little longer than was maybe necessary. He mumbled a quiet ‘thanks’ for Richie. Beverly quickly shifted the mood for Stan, though - unaware what amounts of turmoil her sentence would give him.

“As if you’re one to talk, Richie. Don’t think we haven’t noticed that big ol’ bruise on your neck,” She said, laughing. Stan didn’t it find all that funny.

“I walked into a door, Beverly, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Richie said, instinctively ghosting his fingers over the sprawling black bruise to the side of his Adam’s apple. It’s a wonder that Richie’s neck didn’t spontaneously burst aflame with the heated look Stan was giving it. The cloth wrinkled in his hand. He had put that there. It made his gut alight with arousal when he thought back to the previous night as it did douse him in icy fear. They’re getting caught out. He heard Eddie mutter something beside him, but he didn’t quite hear what it was.

“Alright! I’ll come clean,” Richie said, Stan’s head shot up and his eyes went wide, “You wanna know who it is? Who’s been roughin’ me up? Who bought a ticket on the Ten-Inch-Tozier train?” Stan tried to meet Richie’s eyes to signal for him to shut up. Shut up Richie, please - don’t say dick, but Richie seemed to refuse to look anywhere near Stan’s direction, and with a great dramatic fanning motion he spoke, “The person who owns my heart? Why, it can only be Mrs. Kaspbrak… God - even thinking about it is getting my engines revving if you’re picking up what I’m putting down, Eds,” He finished off his sentence with a wink and pulled himself even more over the counter to pinch at Eddie’s cheeks, “Don’t look so upset, babe - we can act out a sexy little Step-
Eddie grimaced and slapped Richie’s hands away from his face with a string of very choice words. He pulled back and said something about getting back to the dishes - they were a lot less dirty than the conversations happening out here. Before he left he gave Richie a pointed look - no, not Richie. Richie’s neck. He then caught Stan staring at him and didn’t break the stare, boring holes into Stan. He knew all too well, Stan thought, feeling ice ripple over his chest and heat blaze up his cheeks. Eddie, however, did nothing past that and went back out into the kitchen without a word.

He pulled himself back into the conversation when he heard Richie laugh at something Beverly said, he’d much rather pay attention to that, he decides. Richie offers him a suck of his milkshake, ‘I got vanilla because I know you’re a freak of nature and also an old man who not only eats oatmeal for breakfast but whose favourite flavour of milkshake is vanilla’. Stan finishes it off and Richie actually helps him polish the cutlery and pokes fun at Beverly for not being able to polish to Stanley’s standards like him. Beverly stopped pretending to be working and flipped through one of her magazines instead, a pen behind her ear as she made notes and circled some fashion-things. Beverly pulls the book open and asks their opinions on things and both boys were as useless as each other, which Beverly was all too eager to point out. Richie threw her the finger on the same beat as Stan told her she was fired.

Richie seemed to make a point of looking up a lot whenever Stan was around. ‘Hey, does that lightbulb look dim to you - but don’t look at it I can describe it.’, ‘Look how high I can lift my head, Stan - ain’t that just neat?’, ‘Hey do you want to see my impression of Eddie talking to Big Bill?’. Stan had thumped him for that before Eddie even got the chance - not in defense of Eddie but because every time Richie did so, Stan’s body went flush when he saw the mark. It was a part of Richie, a piece of their strange relationship that Stan had sucked into his skin that Richie wore with pride. A little piece of their connection for the world to see. Part secret and part open. It made Stan equally as happy as it did sad.

It made Stan’s heart leap whenever Richie would pull his hands into his own to try and persuade him into a dance from beside the jukebox, it made him scoff fondly when Richie even put on ABBA and held out a hand for Stan to square-dance with him to Does Your Mother Know . It made Stan’s gut ache when he looked around at Ben and Beverly, who were crowded into a booth with reels of thread and magazine cut-outs spilling out from the seats and the table and he pulled himself out from Richie's grasp.

Stan’s body glowed warm from his hand inwards when he would put a hand on the small of Richie’s back to let him know that he was walking behind him with a hot coffee for some high-strung Mother of three very loud children. Even the briefest brush of contact had Stan feeling like he had been searching for it, like he had been spending his entire day only to be close to Richie. Perhaps he had been. Which only made him feel all the more disappointed when one of the demon-children let out a loud bellow and the moment was over and he brushed past Richie.
Stan’s entire fucking being fluttered to life when Richie had leaned over him when he was hunched over, filling in some paperwork and encased his hand with his own, taking control of the pen Stan was trying to write with - Richie’s other arm pressing hanging limply over Stan’s shoulder. Richie’s cheek was pressed flush with Stan - Stan could feel the brush of Richie’s eyelashes every time he blinked. It was all fun and games as Richie took control of Stan’s hand, mimicking his signature with as much control and finesse as he could muster (not much), until Richie decided to take some creative liberties and draw a crude mimic of a penis beside it. Stan tried to wrestle Richie off of him and it ended with both of them falling into giggles after Stan had swore at him and elbowed him in the gut, which caused Richie to headbutt Stan in the back of the skull with a heavy thunk. ‘I’m not even surprised that sounded fucking hollow’ Eddie had said, and if Eddie and Bill shared a look about it all, Stan ignored it - or tried to, at least. The sick-feeling made it hard.

Stan was barely out the door to go home when Richie had pulled him by the hood of his hoodie, “You suit wearing my clothes but they’d look better on my bedroom floor.”

“No they wouldn’t - don’t even joke about that,” Stan said, pulling Richie’s hand off of his hood.

“Oh yes, sorry I forgot I was talking to the man that folds his underwear mid-sex,” Richie said, poking Stan in the bicep, “It’ll look better neatly folded on the chair, is that better?”

“Oh Richie, take me now.” Stan deadpanned. Richie laughed. There was a comfortable silence. Not that either boy noticed, too encased in each other.

“Say, school starts again tomorrow,” Richie said, not looking as desolate about it as Stan had expected.

“Sure does,” Stan said.

“That means exams start tomorrow,” Richie said, “What do you have?”

“Math and Bio - you have them too, Rich.”

Richie slapped a hand to his forehead, “Ah shit, I forgot about Bio.”

Stan let out a short laugh, “As if you’re going to get anything besides an A.”
Richie shouldered him, “So… I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, you see me every day at school, dumbass.”

Richie shouldered him harder and Stan stumbled a little and let out a soft ouch, “I’m trying to be fuckin’ romantic here and you’re just being straight up annoying, Stanley! What’s a guy to do for a little bitta respect for his efforts?”

“Romantic? What are y-” Stan’s sentence died on his mouth when Richie’s hands bracketed his face softly, cradling it more than anything. There it was again. The overwhelming feeling in Stan. No longer in him, but a part of him. All of him. Every part of his body being filled and also encased with it. Richie didn’t need to close the gap because Stan closed it for him. It was brief, it was chaste. It was semi-public. Stan’s stomach rattled a little at that - but it settled when Richie dropped his hands down his face, to his shoulders, to his forearms and lastly to his hands. Stan interlaced their fingers and pulled apart. He swayed their hands a little.

“Tit for tat,” Richie smiled. He was vibrating under Stan’s touch, he noticed when he reached up to fix Richie’s lopsided glasses as best he could.

“Tit for tat,” Stan agreed. Breaking apart from Richie and collecting his bicycle. The happy-sad feeling encased him and took over him. He rode down the streets towards his home - no, not really, home isn’t his house anymore somehow, it’s something else that Stan didn’t dare speak. He rode with a temporary lightness in his lungs. It was public, sort-of. Outside the bubble they had existed within, it was far outside that. It was scary… becoming very real very quickly. It excited him. It made his hands shake equally with excitement as with anxiety. It made his heart ache with the happy-sad mix of emotions of pining for it.

Stan may have been scared about the feelings that had swept him off his feet and rattled his knowledge of himself, but he found himself not minding all that much anymore. The thought of being attracted to a boy was scary, the thought of these wonderfully happy-sad emotions coursing through him for another boy. Bullies and hate crimes and the carvings on the kissing bridge; AIDS MONKEYS. KILL THE QUEERS. FAG HUNTING IS A SPORT. They filled all of him with fear, a rightful and genuine fear for his safety. The thought of it all was horrifying. Telling his friends. Telling his parents. It was a big spectacle that made Stan sorrowfully uncomfortable. He should feel sick, sickly scared to his bones - but he wasn’t. For the simple fact that it wasn’t all for another boy. It was for Richie.

It was for Richie and somehow that made all the difference.
headcannon: bill has sensitive teeth and is a whiny bitch about it
It was now Tuesday and the kiss hadn’t left Stan’s mind. Two full days of seeing Richie in study hall or at lunch and his face would prickle pink and he would fight the urge to pull him off to the side and peck him on the mouth before running off to whatever exam hall he was due to go to. He would stare dumbly at Richie’s mouth sometimes… and Richie would do the same. They’d meet eyes and Richie’s eyes would widen at being caught out before he’d right himself and wink lewdly. When Stan would roll his eyes and focus his attention back to the group at the lunch table, he would catch Eddie and Bill’s eyes quickly darting elsewhere, as if they’d been staring.

It bothered him a little the way that Eddie’s eyes would trace over the fading bruise on Richie’s neck and fall to meet Stan’s gaze. A knowing look. But thankfully, a tight lip, and Eddie would just twist his eyebrows oddly and stab a fork into his pasta salad and turn back to whatever conversation was going on at the other end of the table. The thought is bleached from his mind when Richie would shift against him, purposely rubbing a bit too much into Stan and sending him little glances while he did it.

The kiss played on his mind over and over again. Stan lay in bed for sleep and tossed and turned and smiled into his pillow like a schoolgirl when he thought of it. He lived it again and again. The sharp air that cut his skin, the heavy feeling of Richie’s jacket, soft from years of use, the heat of Richie’s skin, the tender, pink-ish warmth of Richie’s lips. So soft, like melting into a bowl of pudding, like coming home, like going on an adventure, like packing up your bags and doing the scariest thing you ever did, and finding comfort in that.

Stan didn’t really feel necessarily at ease with the way his heart paused and thumped heavily in his chest sometimes when Richie brushed up beside him or put his hands on him. And he didn’t feel entirely comfortable with the overwhelmingly tranquil, somber feeling that laid in him when he paused to look at Richie telling a stupid joke, or showing Beverly one of his new voices, or doing much of anything at all, really.

The feeling was laden heavy in his gut right now, as he lifted his head from his study notes to watch Richie spin Georgie around in the little clearing he had made by the jukebox. Some chairs were stacked on top of each other and pushed out of the way so lift Georgie under the armpits and swing him so his legs were sailing through the air. Bill had protested when Richie punched in the buttons to play *Pour Some Sugar On Me*, but Richie just told him to stick his fat nose in his own business and pulled Georgie up to boogie. Bill turned to Mike, who was sitting at the counter rather than in a booth like Stan was, with Beverly and Ben in the booth behind him, and mumbled, “*How duh-does Georgie know the lyrics… he shouldn’t know the luh-luh-lyrics…*” To which Mike just laughed.
The Marsh had been too frozen for the group to trek down today, Ben had stepped over the fence that breaks the road and the woods and promptly slid onto his ass. The entire ground was like glass and with the journey down to their space being mostly downhill, they all decided to take their bikes up to the Diner where Bill was on shift and better yet, it gave them a warmer place to study and meant Bill wasn’t obscenely bored out of his mind.

Bill’s face brightened when Mike pushed the doors open and the rest of the losers filtered through, all of them bar Richie shivering from the icy Northern breeze that cut into their cheeks as they cycled down to the Diner. Georgie, who had been sitting at the counter looking bored, made a dash to Ben straight away to show him the cool new LEGO set he was building and they all gave him little high fives and pats on the head as he ran past, Ben tugged in tow over to what looked like some type of animal he was constructing.

Beverly and Ben were working together on one of Beverly’s projects and once again, yarn and thread spilled out from the booth and the table was covered in cuts of fabric and pins and three different types of scissors that Beverly insists are all different. Ben had gotten up at one point and moved to the counter where Bill was leaning over with a mug of hot chocolate in one hand and a copy of Antony and Cleopatra in the other. There was a pencil tucked behind his ear that every so often, he would grab and circle certain phrases or make annotations in the play. Stan could never understand how Bill could write essay after essay on that play, or any Shakespeare for that matter, Stan couldn’t even decipher what the characters were meant to be saying any time he peered over Bill’s shoulder for a glance at how English Literature is treating him. Ben seemed to ask Bill for something because Bill gave a soft smile and laid his book face down, keeping it open and moved out of Stan’s line of sight.

Bill didn’t seem all that stressed for his next exam, which was English Literature. He had no need to be, he would ace it like he always aced English. Mike seemed to be content in just flipping through Bill’s notes, not having any exams to study for with being homeschool - Stan doubted he could read Bill’s chicken scratch, though.

Stan glanced over to Eddie, who had insisted on sitting on his own at a table and Stan quickly realized why. Eddie had about three different textbooks open in front of him and no fewer than a dozen stray pages of messily scrawled notes. A couple of pages fluttered to the floor as he stuffed a pen into his mouth and leaned over to lift one of the textbooks and read between it and a page of his notes. It didn’t look good, whatever it was because Eddie slammed the textbook closed and thumped himself in the head with it.

Ah yes, the dynamic of their group study sessions. Nothing had changed. Especially not with Richie not even bringing anything to study, not like he needed to. Richie’s brain was like a sponge. He read something once - it was locked in. Stan envied him as he read over his flashcards for Physics again. He even mumbled one of Richie’s songs under his breath, one of the ones that Richie had made up when he was helping him study on Saturday evening. As much as it made him laugh at the time, it actually did help and it was almost excruciatingly catchy. Stan was paying a lot more attention to Richie doing obnoxious dance moves with Georgie than his work, though.
The song drew to a close and Richie made a masquerade of wiping non-existent sweat from his brow and holding his knees while Georgie laughed at the sight. “Wow, I can hardly keep up with you, you’re too good for me.”

“You’re out of breath!” Georgie laughed and rounded past one of the tables to tug on the back of Eddie’s shirt, “Look, Eddie… Richie is out of breath and I’m not!”

Eddie pulled away from his books and considered Georgie, tapping his pen against his textbook, “His lungs are rotting, that’s why. All them cigarettes,” Eddie raised his voice a little louder, “Isn’t that right, Richie?”

Stan caught a quick smirk and a glint in his eyes before Richie exploded into fits of heaving coughs. It sounded almost robotic with how forced it was, but Georgie looked horrified nonetheless and walked off to tell Billy all about Richie’s lungs falling out.

Stan paid no mind as he went back to studying, tuning everyone else out as he turned his focus back to the coloured cards in front of him. He read over the cards again and again before he suddenly realized he hadn’t been reading them at all, his eyes had been scanning while his brain was thinking about Richie putting on such a show to scare Georgie away from cigarettes - as terrible as his acting was.

He forced his brain to recalibrate again and again and again but every single time he found himself having drifted off without even knowing. In a bout of frustration he flicked his cards across the table with a sharp movement of the wrist and rubbed over his eyes with his hands. Stupid Richie, breaking his focus. Should’ve stayed at home and studied there without having Richie prancing around in front of him and becoming the only thing worth looking at. Maybe it’s because he just wished Richie would sit down (beside him, of course) or maybe it’s because Richie is currently talking animatedly to Bill with an arm tight around Mike’s neck, ushering Bill away for something or other. Bill handed Ben two cups - judging by the little string coming out over the lip of the cups, Ben got some of those fancy teas that Beverly had insisted they order in. Pink label… mixed berry, for Beverly, probably. Blue label… peppermint, for Ben. Stan listened as Ben fell out of eyesight and sat in the booth behind him.

“Here you go, Bev. I got your favourite,” Ben said.

“With two-” Beverly started, only to be cut off.
“With two sugars, yes.” Stan could hear the softness of their voices. As if a secret conversation. Perhaps it was, with the low tone and the gentle way the words were spoken. Stan felt as though he was almost intruding, thankfully he didn’t have long to lament about it because Richie plopped himself down in the seat opposite him with a pair of milkshakes in his hands.

“Stan The Man! Keep your energy up, you need to replenish your electrocarbs or whatever they’re called,” Richie said, sliding the milkshake over to him as though it was an offer he can’t refuse. It left condensation marks over his study cards. Stan gathered his cards and tapped them into place on his hand, drying the little marks of wet with his finger. Some of the ink smudged. He considered it for a moment and forgot about it as quick as he had noticed it, turning his attention to Richie.

“Electrocarbs?”

“Yeah, the shit athletes drink to stay jacked,” Richie said this and took a heavy slurp of his own milkshake, brow furrowing in effort when it seemed a little thicker than he expected.

“What, milkshakes?” Stan said humorously, Richie pulled a face at him around his straw and kicked him lightly in the shin. Richie let his foot stay there. Stan met Richie’s eyes and he got the sudden, violent urge to push his glasses into his hairline and kiss him over the table. His stomach fluttered and Stan quickly hid his red-faced smile by taking a drink of his milkshake. Vanilla - just as he liked it.

The air shifted somewhat. Stan could feel it. What was once a gathering among friends with Stan watching Richie from between flashcards and under the flickering fluorescent lights that made Richie’s skin look more washed out and pale than usual, now felt like something else. With Richie sitting opposite him, licking the cream off of the rim of the tall glass with his pointer finger as he curiously eyed over the notes Stan had spread over the table, reading it upside down (a strange ability Richie had been gifted with), Stan wondered if this was strange to the others. Were they acting out of sorts? It feels like their own separate special hang-out time existing within the bubble of the Loser’s Club study hall. Their own bubble - with no walls. No bedroom door and no duvet kisses. Was he being over speculative?

Before he could languish upon that thought any longer, a soft laugh broke his attention from behind him. It was Beverly. Laughing at a joke Ben had made while she pattered on to him about laces and ribbons and all sorts. A soft laugh, a personal laugh, a laugh not intended to draw attention.

Beverly and Ben were much the same, in their own little world - it’s not unusual or odd, it’s fine. It’s fine and perfectly normal. The thoughts soon sink from his head and he doesn’t think of them again as he brings his attention back to the boy in front of him, who seemed to look rather suddenly away from Stan when Stan’s gaze focused on him.
“What are you looking at?” Stan asked.

“Nothing,” Richie said.

“No - you were staring. Do I have something on my face?” Stan wiped around his mouth.

“Yeah, just uh - to the left… no, my left. Up a little -” After a couple more fumbled directions Richie said, “Here, I’ll get it,” and leaned over the table. Stan thinks he leaned over a little farther than was necessary. Richie’s face breached into Stan’s personal space and the urge to sneak a kiss was almost too strong to ignore. Almost. Stan reckons he should feel embarrassed with how often these thoughts overwhelmed his senses but it was so right that he couldn’t fault it much.

Richie’s fingertips brushed his cheek - his pinky finger stilled at the corner of his mouth and the thought alone had Stan’s face turning lax. Just as Stan took a breath in to say something, Richie slapped him. Stan sat in shock for a moment, the feeling barely registering.

“I think I got it,” Richie said.


Richie let Stan study in silence for a bit. Beverly and Ben’s quiet chatter was soft in his ear. He could hear Bill, Mike and Georgie chattering at the counter. He didn’t quite catch what it was about, he didn’t feel the need to listen in. Eddie was making tutts and huffs and little ‘what the fuck does that mean’ and ‘I can’t read my own fucking handwriting’ and ‘god fucking damn it - I’m screwed’ . Eddie didn’t do so well under pressure, despite having better-than-average grades. Stan couldn’t help feeling Richie watching him. His expression always quickly filtered to one of boredom or a funny face whenever Stan would look up from his notes - but he got a glimpse of something else once. Vulnerable and open and Stan couldn’t help but wonder if Richie was looking at him the way he found himself looking at Richie some times.

“Want some help?” Richie asked after a while. Shortly after he’d finished his own milkshake (and the rest of Stan’s - who had slid it over to Richie as soon as he heard the tell-tale sound of him sucking the last of his shake through the straw).

“I’m good,” Stan said, cracking his neck and moving his hair out of his eyes, “But thanks.”
Richie still for a moment, then yanked the cards out of Stan’s hands, “You’re good when I say you’re good-” and began rapid-fire asking Stan questions. He appeared to be reading the notes but he was asking questions that Stan knew he hadn’t written down. Richie still made a point of not lifting his eyes off of the cards.

Richie quizzed him for a good while, until Stan could answer questions before Richie even finished them. The night grew dark and the air grew cold and the group had collectively decided they had studied enough and one-by-one they packed up their books and filtered out of their booths and out of their chairs, cracking their backs and stretching their legs as they made way to the counter and sat in a row of equally uncomfortable stools and poked fun at Bill for having to mop behind the counter while they sat eating ice-cream. Georgie had dropped his and chocolate being the only flavour he liked, Richie had handed Georgie his cone and winked, “I’ll eat yours off the floor, don’t worry about it.” Eddie gagged around a spoonful of his raspberry ripple.

Richie slinked back to where he was before Georgie had dropped his ice-cream, at the end of the counter, leaning beside Stan with his elbow propped to face everyone. There was a handful of stools at the other side, beside Beverly but Richie just said he didn’t want to catch cooties and slapped Stan’s back as he leaned beside him, fairly close. Every time Richie would lean closer to talk to Eddie about the latest chapter of Wolverine, his chest would push against Stan’s shoulder. Stan didn’t necessarily mind - until Richie leaned further - Stan almost getting a nose full of bird nest as Richie’s hair tickled his face and Richie rested his hand on Stan’s thigh to balance himself. Stan slapped his hand away with a reddening face and grabbed another plastic spoon and stuck it in beside his own in his tub of vanilla.

The thought of speaking to Richie hadn’t even come into his head as Richie immediately began taking mouthfuls of Stan’s ice-cream. Stan kept scraping the sprinkles off of Richie’s spoonful with the back of his spoon. Richie starting trying to equally sabotage Stan’s spoonfuls. They did this while maintaining uninterrupted conversation with the rest of their friends and it wasn’t until Stan started giggling to himself after Richie managed to get a spoonful without Stan scraping the rainbow sprinkles off and brought it halfway to his mouth before saying, “Hey - it’s like gay ice-cream,” and ate it without saying anything further that they drew attention to themselves.

After a beat of silence Beverly said, “You two are strange,” and went back to eating her ice-cream. Half-strawberry and half-vanilla. Half-Ben’s and half-Beverly’s.

As the conversations grew more interesting - Georgie was talking animatedly about embarrassing things Bill had done while Bill was ganged up on seven-to-one - Richie leaned farther and farther into it and in likeness - into Stan. All but sitting on top of him, although Stan doubted he would even notice if he did. Laughter bubbled up at Bill’s quiet groan and they all talked on top of each other, but not obtrusively. Richie and Stan had naturally fell out of the conversation and into one of their own, something about the new Back to the Future movie that Richie wanted to see. Stan can’t say he cared much for the series - but he engaged Richie all the same.
Richie spoke with his eyes bright behind his glasses and the ghost of a smile on his face and Stan just sort of... watched. Watched how happy Richie was talking about some dumb movie and how invested he could become in things he truly cared about. And sure, Stan’s eyes sometimes lingered too long on his mouth - and sure, Richie’s eyes sometimes seemed to flick down to his, too. Richie knew Stan wanted to kiss him. Richie knew he wanted to be able to quiet him mid-rant with a pull of his dusty pink Hawaiian shirt and a press to the lips. Stan could see it in the way he looked at Stan’s mouth like he was reading him. Cover to cover.

Just like that, after a heavy look from Stan, Richie leaned over and whispered in his ear, “Hey... wanna come out for a smoke?” Stan turns to face him, noses barely an inch apart. He doesn’t move away as he speaks.

“How come you’re not asking Bev?”

Richie sucks on his teeth and glances over to Beverly, Stan didn’t follow his line of vision and watched patiently as Richie spoke, “I don’t wanna kiss Beverly. Girls have cooties.”

“You have cooties.”

“Nuh-uh”


“Well... tell me professor - what are the symptoms of cooties?”

“Bad breath,” Richie made a move to cover his mouth but aborted it last second, “inability to feel the cold-”

“It’s not cold,” Richie said in the same tone of voice he would have if Stan had said the sky was pink.

“It’s twenty-five degrees outside and you’re in shirt.”
“And a t-shirt!” Richie said nothing else, just squeezed Stan’s arm and pulled it a little. Stan briefly worried that someone would follow, but with the intensity of the debate between Eddie and Bill (Eddie was gesturing very angrily with his disposable spoon and Bill was standing there looking like a child who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar), Stan reckoned they probably wouldn’t even notice that they had gone. Richie seemed to sense Stan was thinking this and whispered as such into his ear. His breath tingled.

The cold air hit Stan suddenly, like walking into a brick wall. Richie didn’t fault as he walked out of view of the windows on the door - thankfully the blinds from the large interior windows were pulled down otherwise and unless you were pressed right up to the window and fingered open the slats of the blinds - you couldn’t see anything.

Stan folded his arms and warmed his hands in his armpits as he waited for Richie to light up a cigarette. Stan could see the outline of the pack through Richie’s jeans. Richie made no movement to dig it out and instead just stood with his back against the window.

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice,” Richie said without prompt. Stan looked at him in confusion.

“Notice what?”

“I put on a song by The Carpenters earlier,” Stan stared blankly, “After I finished teaching Georgie how to dance.”

“Is that what that was? Dancing?”

Richie let out a laugh and bumped his shoulder against Stan’s, “Stan The Man gets off on a good one!” Stan chased back into Richie when he moved away. Richie noticed this and despite Richie’s face softening, Stan chased it with an explanation.

“It’s cold.”

Richie relaxed against him, their sides pressed together. Their knuckles were touching and Stan knocked his against Richie’s gently, despite his previous excuse, “You don’t have to do that, you know,” Richie said, not looking at him - somewhere in the distance, “Make excuses.”

“Wh- I’m not making excuses,” Stan said, moving back into his own space. Richie followed him.
“You are. Bill all but sits in Mike’s lap and he doesn’t make excuses. Eddie drapes himself over Beverly like a housecat when she offers to comb through for lice for the third time that month. Hell - you and Eddie sit snuggled up on that loveseat at the Marsh. I don’t get why you feel the need to justify touching me when no one else feels the need to.”

Stan’s answer fell quickly from his mouth, “Because it’s different.”

Richie, who had been speaking casually with a languid air about him suddenly stopped dead. He seemed to take a moment to consider what Stan had just said and forced himself to appear casual, “It is?” Stan swallowed at that. Sure, it’s different. When Eddie’s squeezed against him on the loveseat in the Marsh he doesn’t want to kiss him. He doesn’t want to press himself flush against him, in fact, he doesn’t quite like being touched by anyone but Richie at the best of times. His heart doesn’t race when Bill presses a hand to his shoulder or when Mike beams a smile at him. None of the other losers consume him. Richie does. Richie consumes him and fills him up and it provides as much safety as it does risk.

Through a thick layer of honesty, Stan said, “It is,” and knocked his knuckles against Richie’s again, only to bring his hand around and thread his fingers with Richie’s.

“So you and Beverly aren’t bumping uglies then?”

“Definitely not. The only ugly I’m bumping is you.”

“Ouch. Can I beep-beep you or will that make the universe implode. Like a ‘don’t divide by zero’ situation?”

Stan wasn’t quite sure why he said what he said next. Maybe it was the cold biting his skin and turning his focus away from the potential fallout of the conversation. Maybe it was the warm, burning feeling encasing his hand. Maybe it was standing out in the cold and in the dark with Richie. Maybe it was a little bit of everything. “Can I kiss you?”

Richie looked at Stan now, pulling his eyes from the constellations he had been looking at, he looked at Stan as if he had put them there. As though Stan just reached up and moved the Stars into place to create Aries, or Oridon’s Belt. The look was answer enough and Stan, feeling everything that is so ardently Richie; his hair, the faint smell of cigarettes and the brash attempt at thwarting it with juicy fruit, the way Richie smiles and the way he takes up a space, moving and bouncing on his toes and never quite staying still, all of it consumed him. From the inside out. From the outside
in. From everywhere all at once.

Their lips connect and it takes Richie a moment to catch up. Their mouths move together slowly. They're not rushing for anything. Not chasing anything in particular. The feeling of being connected so intimately, outside work with exams looming over them and with the neon pink-ish purple-ish signs spreading colour along their cheeks, pink fading to purple where Stan traced Richie’s jaw with his hand, his pinky trailed down to where the hickey had once been - now faded back into oblivion.

Stan traced Richie’s lip with his tongue, and Richie willingly opened for him, letting Stan trace the caverns of his mouth. Gentle exploration. Stan felt Richie smile into his mouth and hands thread into his hair. Stan found himself smiling back and he left Richie’s mouth - unable to do much kissing with a grin on his face. Their foreheads bumped together and they stood there… not talking but not necessarily feeling the need to. It was comfortable. It was good. It was just as Stan wanted.

And then Eddie pushed the doors from the Diner open with enough force for them to swing back on their hinges and almost knock him straight back inside. If Stan and Richie hadn’t jumped a mile and fumbled apart from one another, they probably would have laughed.

“What the hell are you two fuck-nuts doing out here? It’s sub-zero,” Eddie said, looking at them strangely.

“I’m having a cigarette, Eds. Want one?” Richie said, barely missing a beat.

“Where is it?” Eddie crossed his arms, “The cigarette. You said you were smoking, so where is it?”

Stan and Richie shared an uncomfortable look, brains working overtime to try and scrape together even the weakest attempt at an excuse. Thankfully, Bill cut their thoughts short as he followed Eddie out of the Diner and squeezed his shoulder. Pretty hard by the look of it, “Hey guys cuh-cuh-come back in, there’s an announcement,” with that he pulled Eddie back in and Eddie kept eye contact with the two even as Bill dragged him back in through the doors.

When Stan and Richie followed the pair in, they were met with a chorus of excited chatter and everyone flocking Beverly and Ben like gulls to a child with fries. Pats on the back, hugs, even a kiss on the cheek or two. Stan and Richie stared at the strange happenings and met each other’s eyes with a shrug. They knew as well as each other did.
It took a minute before they both realized Beverly and Ben were holding hands and Ben’s face was redder than Stan thought was even possible, but he was glowing nonetheless.

“Congratulations, you two, I bet that you’re both really happy-” Stan started, only to be cut off by Richie.

“Holy shit! Benjamin - did you finally grow a pair?!” Richie laughed and walked to Ben and clapped his back heavily, “I’m proud of you, bud - soon enough you might even start getting pubes!”

Stan cringed and Ben puffed out a streamline of words, none of which seemed to really be words at all and Beverly swiped at Richie’s hand, “Beep-beep, Richie. Besides, I asked Ben.”

Richie whooped at that and gave Beverly a hard clap too, “Well ain’t this just sweet. Mister and Misses Marsh, tell us this, Bev - when are you gonna knock Ben up and have a cute little gingham?” Stan shoved Richie out of the way and congratulated them both, Beverly wrapped him in a tight hug and it took a second of recalibration, but Stan hugged her back. She smelled of drugstore perfume and Stan let it offend his senses as Beverly squeezed him tight, “Woah - hey, enough of that,” Richie said, separating them, “You can’t be making moves on my man anymore, Beverly. You’re tied down now, you skank - so hands off. No more of this hanky-panky nonsense, got it?” Richie waggled his finger and raised the inflection of his voice. Stan thinks it was meant to be a voice of some kind but it sounded more like Richie than anything else.

Stan elbowed him for it, “Don’t be a dick,” but Beverly just shook her head at him.

“It’s fine, I was pretty drunk. It was just a kiss, right, Stan?” Stan took a careful look at Ben, who seemed pretty unbothered about the situation, like it was information he already knew. Stan realised Beverly had told him, of course she had. Stan’s nerves deflated.

“Yeah, just a kiss,” It was strange at the time, uncomfortable, even - but now it was a little funny, looking back.

“A good one, though… right?” Beverly traced up Stan’s forearm flirtatiously.

“Uh -” Stan looked around for help, “I guess?” Beverly laughed and took her hand away, Richie was forcing himself to keep his mouth in a straight line, “Hey - stop laughing,” this made Beverly laugh more.
“Sorry, you just get so embarrassed, it’s endearing, really.” She said.

“Of course I get embarrassed…you kissed me,” Stan said, cheeks beginning to burn - especially when this grabbed the attention of everyone else.

“Wait - did I hear that right? Stan and Beverly made out?” Mike asked, looking as bewildered as Stan felt.

“It doesn’t count when you’re drunk…” Richie said, trailing off and staring at nothing in particular, like he was replaying something in his head. Stan remembers Richie’s cigarette breath on his tongue and Richie’s heat pooling in his lap and the taste of alcohol coating his mouth. His face grows redder and he looks at Richie and notices his cheeks are a little pink too.

“Counts when you’re sober, though.” Eddie spoke lowly. Low enough that only Stan seemed to hear him. Stan looks at him in confusion and Eddie just holds his stare for a moment, before shaking his head and muttering something under his breath. Eddie was acting weird. Eddie knew there was something going on between him and Richie, that much Stan knew, and although Stan feels as though he should be feeling anxious about judgement - he knows there is none. Eddie isn’t being judgemental - he’s being something else altogether.

“Enough about Stan The Man’s slutty, slutty activities - let’s bring the focus back to Mister and Misses - when the hell did you two dumbasses finally rub your brain cells together and opened your eyes to the thick ropes of sexual tension between you?” Richie asked, patting Stan’s shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. Stan grunted his disapproval at Richie’s choice of words but said nothing past that.

Beverly looked sheepish and tucked her hair behind her ear, “Well… I’ve always kind of known, I guess. It just felt right, with Ben. Safe,” Her arm made a little flexing motion as she squeezed Ben’s hand, “Like everything I did somehow was related to Ben… no matter what. We kind of did everything together. We’d study together, Ben will help me with all my textile projects and he’ll make me tea and split his ice-cream with me…” Beverly trailed off, love-sick. Ben looked like he was about to pass out, “It was inevitable, I think.”

Stan hardly felt Richie’s grip tightening on his shoulder, he was too focused on what Beverly had just said. What she had just implied. The thoughts swam through his head even as they gathered their things. Even as they waited for Bill to close the shutters down and lock the doors and even as they cycled down through Derry. Beverly and Ben - so obviously in love. So clearly meant for each other and even Beverly had said it was inevitable. Of course they were going to be together - it made sense. It was as obvious as the leaves on the trees and the wind blowing through his hair. Ben will help Beverly with her work. Ben will bring Beverly drinks when she’s working without needing to be asked. They split their desserts. They stay at each other’s houses and blush about it.
the next morning. They look at each other like there was no one else in the world that mattered. Now… doesn’t that just sound bone-achingly familiar?

Stan almost went over the handlebars of his bike when Beverly pressed a kiss to Ben’s mouth as they split into separate directions at the fork in the road. Eddie split off at the corner of Neibolt Street, then Bill at the turn of Witchim and then Mike waved his goodbye as he continued straight down the Main Street as Richie and Stan took a corner into the West. Sure - Stan could have took the turn at Bill’s and went on a short cut around the basketball courts, through the park and up past the old folk’s home. But he didn’t, he decided to take the long route and pedaled in parallel to Richie, who seemed deep in thought.

Richie’s glasses blasted orange under every streetlamp, Stan - who didn’t wear glasses - wondered if Richie could see out of them when that happens, or does he see flashes of orange over his eyes - a lot of unanswered and unasked questions.

“Do you think they’ve consummated their relationship yet?” Richie asked, maybe not as deep in thought as Stan had thought.

“Don’t be gross,” The last thing Stan wanted to think of was his friends having sex, especially not with the smell of Beverly’s perfume still stuck in his nose.

“All I’m saying is… do you think Ben has taken her to pound town or no?”

Stan cringed and almost cycled into a lampost, “I think he’d honestly pass out.”

“RIGHT?! Poor fella…” Richie trailed off, shaking his head, “Probably creamed himself when she kissed him.”

“That was a little strange,” Stan said, slowing down as they reached the corner of Stan’s street. Richie slowed to a stop too, resting his elbows on his handlebars.

“What do you mean?”

“Seeing them kiss, it was a little strange,” He admitted. Richie shrugged and scratched at his neck. The action made Stan all too aware of his neck. Unblemished and pale, “Your hickey is gone.”

Richie blinked and settled his glasses, “Yeah? They’re not permanent, Stanley.”
“Do you want to stay over?” The implications were there. Richie read them and nodded, face grafting into wickedness.

X

Stay over Richie did. Richie greeted Stan’s parents and accepted a mug of hot cocoa and drank it much too quick. Richie toed off his shoes and they were lopsided at Stan’s bedroom door. Richie opened Stan’s dresser and pulled out a faded Coca-Cola t-shirt that Stan hadn’t seen in months to change into, “I’m pretty sure this is Mike’s,” Richie said, slipping it on and testing the size of it.

“I think I borrowed it from Bill,” Stan said, shuffling a deck of cards on his bed where he was already changed into his pajamas - thick Winter socks and all. Richie snorted and pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

“Well I borrowed it from Mike, then swapped shirts with Bill in class one day…and now you have it,” Richie snorted at that, “And it’s back to me … two for Tozier.”

“You swapped shirts with Bill?”

“He spilt milk all over it and Eddie wouldn’t stop calling him milk-tits, remember?” Stan clapped a hand over his mouth. How could he have forgotten. Richie climbed into bed beside him, hiking the covers up and making Stan get under them too. Stan gathered up the cards and with disdain, cracked open his bedroom window. Richie likes the cold.

For hours the two sat there, underneath Stan’s bed covers with his little table lamp being the only thing to secure their field of vision. It was better that way, softer… more intimate. They played a couple rounds of cards until Stan started to get confused at all the rules so they resorted to playing Snap. Stan was the big winner and Richie flopped his head onto Stan’s shoulder and huffed when he won ten-four.

Cards soon moved to flicking through some old photo albums Stan had laying around his bedroom. Usually polaroids from Bill. Stan and Eddie sitting in front of the fire in the Marsh, Eddie’s head pulled back in a laugh and Stan with a soft smile and eyes caught mid-roll. Richie flipped the picture around to look at the date. June 1987. Richie flipped it back over and looked at it again, “I was laughing at something you said. You had pushed your glasses down to the tip of your nose and pretended to be Mister Keene. Something about Eddie’s dick-pills,” Stan said fondly. Richie’s face softened and he relaxed a little more into the headboard. They were sat side-to-side, shoulders overlapping and arms entangled. Even their legs were pressed flush together and Richie kept kicking at Stan’s feet because Stan would trace the bottom of Richie’s foot and Richie was
severely ticklish.

Richie put the photo back into the sleeve and turned the page. He pointed at another photo, “And this?” Stan leaned into Richie’s shoulder and got a closer look, although he didn’t lift his head when he was done. It was a picture of Eddie sweating and gasping into his aspirator, a heavy and violent look on his face directed to someone off-camera, with Bev patting him on the back and mouth open mid-shout.

“You convinced Eddie to take a drag of your cigarette. He almost choked. Beverly was so mad at you, do you remember?” Stan traced his finger over the date. January 1988. Another picture. Richie in a ‘ghost costume’ (a sheet with hole cut out for eyes) trying to scare Stan by jumping out from behind a wall. Bill got the shot at the right time, only Stan hadn’t been scared - he stared flatly at Richie quite unimpressed. October 1988. Another picture. An older picture. Stan pointing up at the tree line, face bright and a happy smile on his face with Richie staring open-mouthed at Stan with a deep-set brow. The lettering was faded and not in Bill’s handwriting - it was his Mother’s. March 1981 - Stanley and his friend Richard.

“That was so long ago,” Richie said, sounding a little dazed, “We were eight.”

Stan nodded, his head hitting the underside of Richie’s jaw a little, “I still remember that day,” Stan didn’t wait before continuing, “You came up to me at lunch that week and told me you were gonna take me to the park and that I was going to show you all of the birdies,” Stan almost laughed at the memory. A tiny Richie with mad hair and glasses that barely fit on his little nose marching over to him and giving him orders as Stan stared through a mouthful of jell-o.

“Kids were making fun of you about your stupid birds,” Richie said softly, sounding far away, “I didn’t think that was fair - so I decided to be your friend instead. Your Mom took us to the park to watch the birds.”

Stan pointed at the photo, “You didn’t do a very good job at bird-watching, Richard.”

Richie swallowed, “No, I guess I didn’t,” and quickly moved on to more photos. Birthdays and Halloweens and all sorts of photos taken by Bill with a date and sometimes messy messages or little pictures doodled onto the white space at the bottom. They spent more time trying to decipher Bill’s chicken scratch than actually looking at the pictures. They sorted through the pictures and Stan closed the lid of the box and slid it back under his bed. Richie was waiting for him with open arms and Stan barely argued before Richie pulled him into a horizontal hug with a kiss into his curls and a whisper there too. Stan, overcome with it all, pressed a small kiss to the only place he could reach - his neck.
“Hey… don’t do that unless you’re gonna do something about it,” Richie said. Stan huffed a smile into his neck and laid another kiss there - more open-mouthed and heavy. More intent. Richie leaned into it with a pleasant hum and Stan left kisses from his jaw down to his collarbone. He nipped at a fleshy part under his jaw and Richie sucked in a sharp breath, “Careful…” He said. Stan did it again and Richie flipped him onto his back and bracketed his head with his arms.

“Oops,” Stan watched as Richie slipped his glasses off and set them on the bedside table. Richie leaned down and kissed up Stan’s neck just as Stan had been doing to him. Stan wriggled under Richie and groaned, “Stop - you’re getting me all wet.”

“Your pussy all wet for me, babe?” Richie said, Stan let out a noise of disgust and slapped his shoulder, “You said it - not me,” Richie continued at Stan’s neck. Kissing and leaving soft bites - nowhere near hard enough to bruise and Stan whined from under him.

“Richie…”

Richie stopped and looked down, “What’s wrong? Have I done something? You wanna stop?”

Stan shook his head and decided that using his words was too much trouble, so he grabbed the front of Richie’s - or is it Mike’s - t-shirt and pulled him down, smashing their lips together. Richie barely had time to balance himself and quickly moved against Stan’s lips. They moved in tandem with each other. Perfectly balanced. Stan’s manicured movements and gentle, almost cautious tongue against Richie’s heavy-mouthed movements, happy and enthusiastic in Stan’s mouth.

Their kiss deepened until Richie was pawing at Stan’s pajama stop and Stan had his fingers entangled in Richie’s hair. It was brushed. Stan gasped when Richie bit his bottom lip and his hands jolted in Richie’s hair and got stuck on a knot Richie must have missed. Stan kept his hand at the knot and thread his other one down to tug at Richie’s top. Richie broke their kiss - with a breath of annoyance from Stan - and tugged it off. He used this opportunity to unbutton Stan’s shirt. Stan groaned as Richie sucked gently at his collarbone while his fingers worked through his buttons. He got to the final button and broke away from Stan’s neck - his eyes caught dead at Stan’s chest, flushed red and nipples hard and traced his hand down it, almost in a trance.

Stan whined out Richie’s name and shifted himself to try and take the shirt off while lying on his back. Richie pushed him back down flat to the bed with a firm hand on his breastbone, “No… leave it on,” He said, appreciating how fucked out it made Stan look. So much less put together. Stan canted his hips up and into Richie’s and both of them let out a quiet moan.

They quickly escalated, with Richie grinding down against Stan and snaking a hand into his pants, Stan breathing and panting and tugging at the knot in Richie’s hair and making choked off noise when Richie squeezes just right. Stan quickly cut him off by grabbing his wrist then, worried he was going to finish. A sudden urge overtook him, something he’s thought about a couple of times in the dark and under the sheets, whispered into his pillow and bit into the flesh of his hand. The time feels right. They’re not rushing, they’re not quite pretending, either. There’s no mention of
practice or of ‘just fooling around’ and Stan knows that that should scare him, but it doesn’t. It makes him feel safe. It makes him feel overwhelmed with feelings and emotions and the air has never felt so clean.

“I want to try something,” Stan says. Richie withdraws his hand and taps on the inside of Stan’s thigh, he rolls a ‘continue’ gesture with his other hand and Stan breaks eye contact to stare at the ceiling. There are a few heavy moments of silence while Richie waits patiently and while Stan forces the words out, “I want you to be on top.”

“Did I jerk your brains out? Have you forgotten how to talk?”

Stan sighed and steeled himself again, “I want you to be on top. I think. Maybe,” It wasn’t that he was unsure. He wasn’t unsure at all. He was more worried that Richie would be freaked out at the change. Richie’s hand tightened into Stan’s thigh so much it made him yelp and Richie was staring at him with a slack jaw - looking not unlike how he did after orgasm - like Stan had just rocked the brains right out of him.

“Oh - yeah. Yeah. Yeah we’re definitely doing that. Now?” Stan nodded, “Like… now-now?” Stan opened his mouth to speak, “If you’re pulling my leg I’m gonna unpair all your socks and leave you blue-balled, Stanley.”

“I’m not pulling your leg.”

Richie blew out a heavy breath of air and rubbed up Stan’s thigh, “Where the fuck did this come from - believe me I’m not complaining.”

Stan didn’t answer and Richie tweaked his nipple, “Ow! Fuck - Richie. I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“How long is a while?”

“A while.”

“Stanley,” Richie pressed.
“Okay!” Stan rubbed his face, suddenly quite embarrassed, “Remember when we planned Beverly’s party? I was trying to study and you only agreed to help me with it if I helped you?” Richie paused for a while in thought before nodding as recognition blew over his face, “Not long before then.” Stan didn’t particularly *want* to delve into his wet dream - that was dirty and private and Richie would never let him hear the end of it.

“So…” Richie considered him, “Before we started having sex?” Stan stilled cold. Ice cold. The fear was laden on his face and Richie spread his hands from his thigh to his chest, “Hey, that’s fine. That’s fine - you think that’s gonna weird me out?”

Stan shrugged.

“Because if we’re being honest…” Richie pulled himself down and kissed Stan, who kissed back desperately. Richie pulled away and bit at the lobe of Stan’s ear, “I’ve thought about fucking you too.” Stan let out a surprising moan and ground up into Richie - the electricity was pumping through his veins now and the air was clear again. Richie would take care of him.

“Lube?” Richie asked against Stan’s collarbone as he sucked a light bruise there.

“I have Vaseline - will that work?”

“I’ll make it work.”

After a couple bruises and a lot of heavy panting and muffled groans, Stan was naked. Bared to Richie. Richie was between his legs and pushing his legs open wider. Stan instinctively kept trying to close them to give himself some modesty and Richie was having none of it, “Why are you being shy? It’s only me,” And that was reason enough for Stan to let his legs go placid as Richie spread them and kissed the sharp of his hip bone, “So pretty,” He mumbled into him and Stan grew red.

“Will it hurt?” Stan asked as he watched Richie dip his fingers into the Vaseline that Stan had gotten from his medicine cabinet. Richie didn’t seem to get hurt. Richie seemed to enjoy it a lot, and then Stan remembers how his legs gave out only a couple of days prior going up the stairs, and how Richie could never really walk right afterward and it made his stomach bubble in nerves.

Richie caught his eyes and took his cheek in his hand, thumb stroking at him with movements so gentle Stan had to press into it to feel it much at all. Richie leaned over Stan, keeping his Vaseline-coated fingers away from the bed and resting them on his knee, and pressed a chaste kiss to the
corner of Stan’s mouth, “It’ll feel good, Stan. I’ll go slow, okay? And if you need me to stop just say so and I will - no questions asked, ok? You can beep-beep while I beep-beep you.”

“I’m going to beep-beep you right now,” Stan said, forcing his shoulders to relax. Richie gave his cheek a hearty pat and a small _atta boy_ and brought his focus back down south.

Much to Stan’s surprise, Richie took him into his mouth, tongue lapping hungrily around his member as Stan arched off the bed. Richie’s blowjobs were a gift. Richie bobbed up and down with suction so strong Stan was surprised he hadn’t gone cross-eyed. He went lower and lower and just when the head was breaching the tightness of Richie’s throat, a finger entered him. Stan instinctively tried to move away and ended up slamming himself to the hilt in Richie’s throat. Richie took it in stride and took the opportunity from Stan’s blissed-out face to push the finger in further.

It didn’t hurt. Stan was relieved to find out. It felt odd, a little uncomfortable and very intimate - but not painful. Not necessarily _good_ , either - but Richie just told him to be patient and lifted himself off of Stan’s cock and dragged his finger out slowly and pushed it back in. Stan winced at the feeling and his fingers dug into the sheets. Richie did it again, in and out. In and out. In and out. He was slow and gentle and Stan began to get used to the feeling. Richie’s long finger inside him may not have felt orgasmic, but knowing that a part of Richie was _inside_ him made him feel so dirty he had to close his eyes to swallow a moan.

Richie seemed to sense Stan’s growing comfort and he pushed in faster. This made Stan bite his lip at the feeling. Faster and faster until Stan could feel pleasure growing in his gut. _Now this feels good._ Stan whispered Richie’s name and Richie forced his eyes from where Stan’s hole was taking his finger and looked up - almost creaming himself at how Stan looked down at him. Chest flushed and face red and tacky with his mouth open in breathless gasps, “Please…”

“Please, what?” Richie wasn’t teasing him, he genuinely wanted Stan’s direction. He needed Stan to verbally tell him what he wanted.

“More, I can take more.”

Richie kissed the inside of Stan’s thigh and pulled his finger the entire way out, only to slowly push back in with another. Stan let out a low whine and arched his back at it. The stretch was tantalizing. Feeling Richie force his hole to accommodate him was so _hot_ he could hardly stand it. Richie, likewise, was transfixed on how Stan swallowed him. How tight he was around his fingers, “Stan… you’re taking me so good. You’re a natural, baby.”
Stan pressed down against Richie’s fingers at this, blowing out a violent hot breath at the feeling of the finger going deeper into him. Richie lazily fucked into him with two fingers, listening closely for any sounds of pain. There were none and when he started to scissor his fingers Stan had to bite down on his forearm to keep himself quiet. It wasn’t long before Stan was panting and asking for more. Richie obliged and another lubed finger slipped in and Stan was near winded. Stan panted and groaned and pulled himself so he was almost sitting up and pulled Richie in for a heated kiss. Richie groaned into it and fucked into Stan faster with his fingers.

Suddenly, Stan’s world exploded. His nerve endings lit up like fireworks and he blistered stars behind his eyes. He broke away from Richie with a choked gasp and his eyes rolled back into his head. Richie looked broken as he watched Stan descend into mumblings of “Harder. Do that again. I need that again. Oh my god. Fuck.” and best of all - Stan crying out broken whimpers of Richie’s name. Richie pushed Stan back down to the bed and focused on finding that spot again and Stan babbled like a baby when he did.

“Richie please, I need you. I need you now,” Stan panted, eyes hazed and unfocused as he canted his hips back onto Richie’s fingers. His brain was long past turned to mush and all he could think about was how good this feels.

“You’re gonna get me, Stanley. Be patient,” Richie said, slowly pulling his fingers out. Stan’s breath stuttered in his lungs as his hole desperately tried to clench around nothing. Stan’s legs fell open - spreading himself openly for Richie and feeling not even a little shameful at it. Why would he? It’s Richie. The only person he would even consider spreading himself out for. Stan pulled at his cock while Richie rolled on a condom and his head bumped against Stan’s hole.

“I’m ready, Rich,” Stan said, answering Richie’s question before he had even asked it. Before Richie pushed in - Stan grabbed the hand that was resting on his knee and brought it down to his stomach. Richie entwined their fingers and Stan squeezed it as Richie slowly pushed himself in.

Oh.

Oh.

This was a lot different than the fingers. This was a whole different kettle of fish. Stan felt like Richie was trying to ream him open and split him right in two. It got worse the more he pushed. Stan couldn’t speak if he tried, his mouth blew open in choked gasps. He squeezed Richie’s hand. Hard. And Richie stilled immediately.

“Are you alright?”
Stan shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to focus on anything else but the pain. It didn’t really work.

“Hey, hey, okay - I’m gonna pull out. It’s fine - just-” Stan cut him off with another shake of his head. He didn’t want to stop. He wanted this. Richie said it would feel good and he trusted him, “Stan… you’re crying,” Richie thumbed at the tracks that had fallen from his eyes. It hurt. It was such a big stretch that Stan felt like Richie was shoving his fucking arm inside him.

“Ten-Inch Tozier Train might hold more truth than I originally thought,” Stan grunted, coming to terms with the pain slowly, Richie laughed - more out of relief that Stan wasn’t actively dying under him.

“I apologize for the turbulence, you’ll get a refund for your ticket.”

“Trains don’t have turbulence, dumbass,” Stan played with Richie’s fingers before a horrible thought struck him that made him push Richie’s hand away from him, which got him an offended look from Richie, “Am I holding the hand that was in my ass?”

Richie laughed at that. And laughed. And laughed. Stan’s anger fizzled out on his tongue. Richie’s dick jumped every time he laughed. He could feel it throb inside him. Stan dug his hands into Richie’s biceps and kicked him with his foot, “Move.”

Richie stopped laughing, “Stan, are you-”

“Please,” And with that, Richie slowly pushed in. Inch by inch until Stan’s head was swimming and he felt so unapologetically full that he could barely breathe. He grappled for Richie’s hand again and squeezed it to ground himself. Richie looked like he was about to explode - sweat prickling his forehead and his eyes dark. Stan breathed through the feeling of being full for a few minutes before he began to make small, aborted movements with his hips and Richie let out a quiet moan.

“You’re made for this, seriously. You’re so tight I feel like you’re gonna pop my dick right off,” Richie sighed and gently moved his hips back and forward. Stan hummed at the feeling. Tiny movements, but movements all the same.

“I want you closer,” Stan said, “I wanna feel you better,” He grappled at Richie’s arms and dragged
him down until Richie was leaning over him, missionary style.

“Hey - I can almost see you from here,” Richie said, squinting his eyes. Stan smiled and wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

“Move, Rich,” And Richie did. He tested the water for a couple thrusts before pulling out until only the tip of his head was inside him then Richie slammed back in. Stan let out a garbled moan and fucked back on the movement, “Fuck - faster.”

“Kids these days have no manners,” Richie said, through his heavy breathing it came out a lot less cocky than he had intended, and fucked into Stan faster. It wasn’t as fast as Stan fucked Richie - not by a long shot. By all standards, it was an average speed - not really all that fast at all - but Stan writhed under him at it. Stan felt like he was going to get his brains fucked right out of him.

“Shut up, Rich- AH!” Stan cut himself off with a loud moan, Richie had hit it. The spot from before. Richie was fucking into it over and over and Stan scrambled at Richie’s back, “Oh yes, Richie - fuck. Yes, you’re so good, you’re so good to me,” Stan was almost in tears at the sensation coursing over his body.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah - you are. You’re so good to me. I want you, I need you, Richie,” Stan rambled, not thinking of his words - spewing out the first things that fell from his brain as his brain was clogged up with how fucking good Richie felt inside him, “I want all of you Richie.”

Richie groaned as Stan clenched around him, “You’ve got me, Stanley.”

“I need you - Richie, I’m close.”

Richie nodded his head frantically and fucked faster into him, snaking a hand around him to jerk Stan off. Stan’s tears fell from his eyes when Richie hit his prostate head on and squeezed around his cock, and the pleasure in him erupted. His orgasm ripped through him like a coil snapping back into place and he arched off of the bed and flush into Richie’s chest. Richie stroked him through his orgasm, whispering words of encouragement as he spent himself inside Stan with how tight Stan was clenching around him.

The air around them was thick and heavy with sex, Stan became aware. He was sticky and had
plastered his stomach in his own cum. Stan’s head was empty. He tried to fabricate some semblance of thought but found himself coming up empty. He did find the thought to kick Richie in the hip and tell him to get off of him. Richie groaned and held Stan’s hip still as he pulled out. Stan hissed as Richie slid out and the cold air hit him. Richie gave his ass a smack and pulled the condom off, tying it and putting it in Stan’s wastebasket, “You’re emptying that trashcan tomorrow,” Stan said, not even opening his eyes. Richie grunted in response and wiped the cum off of Stan with the tissues Stan kept on his desk.

Stan was beyond blissed out. He felt like he’d been hit by a semi-truck of tranquility. Richie barked out a laugh and Stan realised he had said that out loud, “Gee, thanks! I’ll be sure to put that review on the cover, babe,” Richie said.

“Shut up, I’m tired.”

“Did I fuck the electrocarbs right out of you?”

“Mhm,” Stan mumbled, sinking into the mattress. Richie threw a pair of boxer-briefs at him and told him to put them on. Stan didn’t. Richie grunted and fed Stan’s legs through them.

“You’re being a major pillow princess right now, you know that?”

“Just come to bed, Richie.” Stan mumbled and wormed himself under the blankets. He was borderline for passing out. Richie fed his way under the blankets beside Stan, and Stan heard the click of his bedside lamp turning off.

Stan fell collapsed into unconsciousness as Richie pressed a kiss to the side of his head, and Stan turned over, wrapped his arms around Richie, pressed a kiss into his shoulder and passed out, feeling more at ease with himself than he has in a long, long time. It felt right. It felt proper.

‘It was inevitable’ was the last thing he thought before he slipped away.

Chapter End Notes

enjoy it while it lasts, folks
Sorry this is such a short chapter - I couldn't make it much longer without losing the tone of it. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stan cursed Richie as he cycled down through Derry, his bike skidding as he shredded over black ice drowned in fresh puddles. His slicker wasn’t doing much to keep him dry and his face was dripping with the rain as it pelted into his face. Stanley had gotten home from school, ate his dinner and padded up to his room and changed into his pajamas to study for his big exam tomorrow. Of course, just Stan’s luck - Richie had distracted him that much in the Diner that he had left his textbooks and his notes on the booth table.

He did hold some thankfulness that the manager would treat his notes with care and shuffle them straight and gather it all up into the safety of the staff room, like he had to do with Eddie and his whirlwind of stray notes that ended up in odd places - once behind the coffee machine and twice in the fridge.

Stan cursed Richie even more when his bike throttled over a pothole and a heavy ache webbed through him from his backside. He’d been in pain all day, which Richie was equally apologetic about, buying him an extra jell-o at lunch as well as proud of, giving Stan a red-faced wink when Stan would sit down on the hard plastic bench and wince with a shuttered breath. Stan didn’t regret it, though. The pain had been worth it, not just for the pleasure - although Stan did grow red-faced when he circled around that thought for too long - but it had meant more. Stan wasn’t afraid of it any longer, no longer anguish for himself for being attracted to his best friend - a boy - no longer pushing the feelings away and burying them under excuse after excuse. It had been freeing, somewhat. Letting Richie explore his vulnerability and exposing himself bare, trusting Richie with something so delicate and so fragile. He trusted Richie with pretty much every part of him, something he had always done to some extent, really. Now it was amplified, more honest and transparent to both of them.

Stan reckons he could happily spend the remainder of his days with Richie. In fact, doing anything otherwise made his brain go blank in confusion. Imagining a day without Richie being somewhat a part of it was difficult to imagine, nevermind anything more. Richie had been a part of his life since he was little. A bundle of energy so bright and demanding of attention that Stan had no chance, not really. Childhood games and monopoly and Richie teaching Stan how to play chess had bubbled into adolescence, with broken voices and markings on doorframes and late nights spent watching horror films swelled, almost overwhelmingly into their teens. Almost adulthood, now. With jobs and driving lessons and important exams and all the anguish of hormone imbalances.

Overwhelmingly, Richie was always there - maybe soft at the start, a shadow, brief flurry of glasses or quick laughs before their attention is pulled elsewhere, but it grew and grew until before Stan had noticed it - Richie had become everything. Everything could be traced back to Richie,
every part of Stan was vibrating with it, with the intense sincerity of it.

Stan pulled into the back entrance of the Diner. The soft flow from the fluorescent lights through the windows reflected glitter against the puddles, only to slash into the air as Stan’s wheel cut through them. The glitter of the rain grew heavier, pounding tacky noises onto the plastic of Stan’s hood.

There was another bicycle lying haphazardly on the ground beside Silver. It was a little odd - Bill was the only one on shift tonight, sure, sometimes he would bring Georgie along but Georgie would cling to his back and stand on the spokes. This wasn’t a child’s bike, either - the same size as Silver if not with a ring of rust around the handlebars and the cushion of the seat bursting out of the split of the seam. Richie’s bike. Perhaps Richie was bored? Or maybe he wanted to study in a little more peace and quiet than they had gotten yesterday, even though Richie was the one causing the majority of the disruption.

Stan hadn’t seen much of Richie today, after Stan shook him awake in the morning and handed him some spare clothes and made him toast with a pint of orange juice, they branched off at the school gates and barely got time to eat lunch together before breaking apart once again to drag themselves to study hall. He felt out of sorts without him, like he had one foot in another dimension, toeing the line of his comfort in reality with Richie bracketing his placement.

Stan dismounted his bike and kicked the stand down and all but bolted to the door out of the rain. It smothered him like a wet blanket and when he opened the door and stepped inside, the cracking of the rain on the pavement was left outside and Stan could hear the squelching of his socks and the sound of the water dripping from the hems of his slicker onto the laminate. He disrobed the slicker and hung it up, not wanting to trek water into the Diner. His hair was stuck uncomfortably flat and he tried his best to shake some of the water from it but it didn’t help all that much.

There was a low rumbling sound coming from down the hall, Stan - who guessed it was coming relatively near the staff room, walked towards it. Some curiosity, he was curious and inquisitive by nature. It wasn’t until he was some five feet from the door did he begin to dissect the rumbles as Bill. His voice was low and soft, the way he speaks to Beverly when she’s upset, or the way he speaks to Georgie after their parents have a fight as he hands him a hot chocolate and a creme doughnut. He didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but as he went to take a step forward to knock on the door to alert him of his presence, he heard his name.

“No, Bill - he absolutely doesn’t want people to think he’s gay. Stan is the worst closet-case I’ve ever seen. I mean, I think. I don’t even think he’s gay, you know. I really don’t.” Stan froze solid, ice chips skittering over his spine. Richie was talking about him. Richie was talking about him to Bill.
“I muh-muh-mean, I wouldn’t have suh-sex with a guy two tuh-times - even if it wuh-was for practice. Not that it buh-being practice muh-makes much sense. Practice fuh-fuh-for what? I duh-don’t think the skills are transferable.”

“Three times.”

“Wuh-what? When?”

“Last night. God, it was amazing. It was different, Bill - don’t pull that face I’ll spare you the gory details - we were looking over old photo albums, all cuddled up together. It felt good, you know? Like it meant something.”

A beat of silence.

“You nuh-need to stop this, Rich. Suh-suh-someone’s gonna guh-get hurt.”

Richie huffed, “Yeah, so you keep telling me,” A sharp bark of laughter, “But the sex is so good, Bill! Can’t just get up and walk away from that now, can I?”

Stan’s chest closed up on itself. He could breathe fine. In and out. But his chest cavity caved in on itself like a building swallowing itself during detonation. He was suddenly exposed and vulnerable and it was terrible. He felt raw. His skin stripped from him, peeling back farther and farther with every word from Richie’s mouth, leaving him raw and open like a bleeding wound for the world to see without his consent. Crowds of people watching as his skin bleeds translucent plasma and his blood rushes to his face in shame. The shame of a fool, which is what he was. Stan Uris was a fool. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have let Richie dismantle his wall of safety and security brick by brick until he was fully exposed to the world, as poison sunk into his skin and down through his blood to settle in his stomach with a violent lurch.

It was all too much.

He had been playing Russian Roulette. Empty chamber after empty chamber but now his luck’s run out. Now he was staring down the barrel with the knowledge that he should have known better, not that it made it hurt any less when the chamber clicked.

The pain was palpable. Heavy stones in his stomach and sandpaper in his throat as he felt it
tightening. The pin-point when Stan’s entire being had been filled and consumed with Richie had turned to cement, ladening him heavy with grief. Grief? What is he grieving? Not Richie. No. Grieving himself, grieving for the loss of his personhood, the loss of something that had encapsulated him for so long and in such a poignant way.

The thought struck him, maybe losing Richie was the same as losing himself.

Stan hadn’t tuned into the rest of the conversation, and before he got a chance to understand what was happening - the door opened. Richie stepped through the threshold, head turned, still talking to Bill. He was wearing the baby blue t-shirt Stan had given him this morning. He was talking away, face lively and bubbling with stories. He quickly noticed Bill’s face blanche when Bill caught sight of Stan in the hall. Like he’d seen a ghost. Richie met Stan’s eyes and as if in slow motion, his face contorted to surprise, then horror, then his mouth began to open and close rapidly. Words. He was saying words. Stan wasn’t listening.

Stan grew more and more ill as he watched Richie’s face shift around his excuses - frantic backpedalling. And somehow, even worse - Bill with his arms by his side, a deer caught in the headlights. A shadow behind Richie - blackening what was once theirs. An echo that Stan had only just had the luxury to hear.

A sudden wave of embarrassment hit him. Bill had known - Bill knew everything. Stan had no way of knowing how much detail Richie went into about their time alone - and he didn’t want to. He had given up his vulnerability and laid himself out for Richie and Richie kept it, wrapped it up nice and neat, put it in his pocket and brought it for Show and Tell with Bill.

All the parts of this ugly-beautiful relationship that Stan had worried himself sick over, hated himself over, made himself feel disgusting over, had been passed from the secrets between the bedcovers right into the public domain - right into Bill’s ears. How had Bill seen him all these months? What types of thoughts went through Bill’s head when he saw Richie with bruises up his neck and a limp to his step or… at school, when Stan could hardly walk much at all. Had they laughed about it? Had Bill and Richie stalked up to Richie’s bedroom and lay on the sheets where Stan had fallen apart for his best friend and laughed and laughed?

Richie was walking towards him, as if to hold onto his arm - or maybe his hand. Stan couldn’t let that happen. His insides were crawling. Stan was sick inside. Sick for letting himself get to this point, sick for allowing another boy to find space in his heart and into choked moans into his bedsheets in the late hours of the night.

Stan shot back.

Richie looked hurt. Richie had the audacity to have his face twisted in such a shape of agony and
Stan was so *stupidly* consumed for Richie that he felt guilty. Stan tried to choke out words, a sentence, *anything* - but as soon as he put the effort in, he realised how tight his throat was and sure enough, he felt his eyes suddenly well with tears. His face grew hot, from a terrible mix of shame and embarrassment.

Richie moved forward to grab him once more, slowly - *painfully* this time, “Stan…”

Stan just shook his head, the tears fell then and slicked hot and angry down his face. He turned and he did all that he could bring himself to do, he left. He walked straight out into the rain, kicked the stand of his bike up and ran away.

Stanley Uris - running away. What else is new.

He ripped through puddles and tore down the orange-lit streets of Derry, burning orange on the cement, hot angry lava and Stan’s bicycle cut through it like a hot knife in cold butter. Orange and black across his face, ripping down past the streetlamps; strobes across his vision, warning flashes that he should have seen coming. Warnings of what happens to boys like him - they get hurt, over and over again. Just like the feminine, high-pitched boys in horror films, just like what happened to Adrian Mallon - there is no chance for a happy ending; he doesn’t deserve one.

He had been played. He had trusted Richie and Richie had tore the hope away from him. Maybe he could have had a happy ending - maybe it could have been him, but Richie had tossed that aside in favour of gossiping about all the disgusting and dirty things he convinced Stan to do with him.

Tears flooded his vision and the puddles of orange swelled to lakes and Stan was drowning in them, breaths choked and unstable and adrenaline pumping in his veins. More venom in his veins, more ache in his heart and more hurt than he had ever felt before.

He turned the corner where this time last night, Stan had invited Richie to stay over. Stan wished for the cement to melt into the Earth. Suddenly - he was cut off by someone skidding dramatically in front of him - almost sending the both of them flying into the pavement.

Stan skidded to a violent halt and Richie had to trip over his foot to stop himself keeling over. Richie’s face was red and prickled with damp, panting violently, so much so that he looked like he could really do with a shot of Eddie’s aspirator.

Stan tries to swerve around him but Richie, with a great deal of effort, blocks his path - lungs heaving.

“Let me leave,” Stan said, although it was difficult to understand with how choked it sounded.
Richie shook his head and continued to try and catch his breath for a moment, “I - please - Stan - fuck… give me a-a moment to catch my breath…”

Stan watched as Richie heaved gasped breaths, all but crumpled over his rusted handlebars. The streets stood still for them. In their own terrible, terrible little bubble.

“Leave me alone,” Stan said. He didn’t look at Richie. He watched as his knuckles grew white as he gripped the handlebars. The indentations of the rubber cut into his palm. He didn’t feel it. He didn’t feel the cold air on his skin or the rain pummeling his hair flat to his head. He could feel the cold wash of anger flush through him. The influenza-warmth of shame pulling at the fat of his cheeks.

Richie looked pained, his hair matted to his forehead like a drowned rat, thin t-shirt shivering into his rail of a body - all sharp elbows and long limbs. Richie, of course, was rarely cold - he was trembling more than shivering. Trembling in fear that the tight-knitted relationship they had would chasm into something beyond compare. His voice was soft, too fearful to produce must volume at all, “Stan-”

“No! Leave me alone! Let me go home - just get away from me and let me go home,” The tears in Stan’s eyes were growing fat and plump - heavy on the lip of his lower lid. Teetering on the edge, one small push from overflowing.

Richie let his bike fall to the ground and he took a step closer to Stan - who was too busy glaring at his knuckles to avoid having to look at Richie to notice. Richie grabbed onto the shivering, wet mess of his forearm and demanded his attention. Stan squeezed his eyes shut.

“I’m not going to let you go like this - I’ll follow you home and stand outside your goddamn bedroom window a la Say Anything if I have to. Please…” Richie dipped his head to try and reach Stan’s eyes - but they were still closed, “Please just listen to me… please just hear me out - one minute, Stan, can you give me one minute?”

Stan’s breathed shuddered as he tried to speak. Voice shaking and wet, “No, Richie. I can’t-” He opened his eyes. Richie was maybe only six inches from his face, eyes wet and face flush from both the exertion of catching up to Stan and the emotions running rampant underneath his skin, “I can’t even look at you.”

Richie swallowed hard and cracked a sad smile, “Well… close your eyes again then.”
This… this was all a joke to him, wasn’t it? Stan was sitting on his bike - swallowing tears which had just begun to drip out over the lip of his lower lid, streams and riptides of tears falling fast down his cheeks - and Richie was cracking jokes, a forced lopsided smile that normally would have enlightened a fire of some sort of adoration in his gut instead twisted it into something ugly; burning it with a type of broken and desperate anger. An anger which can only evolve from a terrible hurt, a terrible ache in his chest and stone in his gut.

“Is this funny to you?” Stan laughed, empty and cold, “This is all a big joke, isn’t it? Another trademark Trashmouth gag. Well ha-ha, Richie - I’m glad you and Bill got your chucks from it.”

Richie’s eyes blew wide, “Wh-no! Shit, no Stan I didn’t-”

“Shut up.” Richie’s mouth snapped shut. Stan never told him to shut up like that, in jest - sure, but with a cold voice, cutting into him like a sharpened knife - never. “Just stop, Richie. I get it, okay? I get it. Now just… please let me go home.”

Stan backed up his bike and moved to turn, Richie stared past him, somewhat unfocused, as though he wasn’t really there at all - his mind somewhere else. As soon as Stan began to press down on the pedal - he struggled to get a grip from the rain - Richie suddenly jumped back into reality and started to talk, started to plead - voice rising in volume.

“Please, Stan! Please - I’m begging, just let me explain - please don’t do this-” Stan cut him off, voice raising even higher, almost shouting - his level-headed temperament engulfed with anger, with shame, with a lot of feelings that Stan suddenly understood why there were so many songs about losing someone you cared about.

“NO-” A sob wrecked through him, only infuriating him further. He was crying, he was crying as though he was sad... but he wasn’t. Sad was a simple three-letter word that couldn’t nearly begin to unravel all the knots in his stomach. This was it, Stan knew it. This was every good thing that had consumed him and filled his life with meaning - over. All of the nice moments; studying together, Stan helping Richie bake a cake for his mother, looking through childhood photos together, watching Indiana Jones for the umpteenth time on Richie’s bed. All of the wonderfully terrifying feelings; his heart skipping a beat when Richie brushed his arm against his, the infection of Richie’s smile which was impossible not to mirror, the undying comfort and safety of Richie - a piece of himself living within him. It was all tied with a frayed rope to a block of stone and cast overside of a tugboat into the deepest part of the Atlantic Ocean, consumed by waves and sinking from the hazy blue of the surface until it hit the sand, void of light and out of reach.

It was all a big fucking joke at the end of the day, wasn’t it? Give uptight, high-strung Stanley a sexuality crisis - make him feel sick at the thought of himself, make him doubt every aspect of his life as he pulls Richie apart with sweaty bare chests and air filled with moans and heavy grunting.
Richie got his rocks off while Stan was pulling himself to pieces over it.

A venom in him, poison shot from his mouth, “I’m not listening to what you have to say - I don’t care. I don’t want to hear your voice again. You got what you fucking wanted, Richie. You got fucked and you got to boast all about it to our friends - about how you managed to fuck the virgin out of the good little Rabbi’s son. Well good job, you did it Richie - gold fucking star! You got what you wanted, you made a faggot out of me. You got front row tickets to Stanley Uris’ big gay crisis and got to fuck me while you watched. Well fucking done. I hope the pat on the back you’re giving yourself was worth it.”

Richie looked a little like Stan had killed him. And maybe he had, a little bit - but Stan couldn’t see that - his vision blurring as his anger and his hurt dripped from his eyes, steady and heavy.

His voice, previously warbled and raw; emotion scratching it and pulling it from his lungs then turned cold and distant. A shadow fell over Stan’s face as he resigned himself from Richie. Severing the tie with a pair of trembling scissors, already wet and coated with his own blood as he called himself a victor for winning this game of separation, “You’re disgusting, Richie. You’re absolutely vile. Now get out of my way, please.”

But Richie didn’t move. Richie stood there in the bucketing rain like a broken toy. Broken in all aspects of the word. Earth-shattering blows splintering him into pieces with every word from Stan’s mouth.

Stan cycled around him and the tears ran cold down his face as Stan left the best part of himself crumpled on the street corner.

Stan wondered, into his pillow, how things had gone so wrong so quickly.

Chapter End Notes

*sad fortnite dancing*
It had been three weeks since Stanley Uris and Richie Tozier spoke.

Three long, long weeks.

Stan couldn’t quite pin down how those three weeks passed. They whipped past him like a hurricane with the heavy rain still pelting on his face, a blink of an eye and the time had passed. Somehow, at the same time, the time passed achingly slowly. Almost stand-still. Every moment like an hour and every hour like its own day. The time spun fast around him while Stan; weighted by the stone in his gut, had stood achingly still - with all the time in the world to feel every single ounce of pain.

It is entirely possible that time was passing at a perfectly normal rate - Stan understands this. He understands that it’s far more likely that he has been far too stuck inside his head to make note of much of anything that goes on around him - time included.

Stan felt entirely disconnected from the world to an extent without Richie and as much as it pains him to say it; it didn’t come as much of a surprise. He tried to maintain the flush of anger, thinking that if he was angry at Richie it would make it easier - but it didn’t stick. After he had cycled home and cried into his pillow the anger had transformed and shifted back into what it really had been all along; hurt.

He would pick absent-mindedly at his lunch, not really listening much to the conversation at hand and nodding at the gaps he’d come to know well enough that he was meant to nod at. He would pick at his lunch only for the bell to ring and he would realise he didn’t actually eat more than maybe a spoonful or two.

He could feel the pitying looks. He hadn’t told any of them, of course - but his friends knew him well enough to know something had happened and Richie’s frequent disappearance didn’t go unnoticed either. They all had their own ways of dealing with this sudden and peculiar mood of his but Eddie’s had been the most unnerving. Eddie would simply stare at him until Stan met his eyes and he wouldn’t look away. A pointed look that Stan easily could have picked apart based on context. He made a decision not to.
Conversations with his friends felt forced now - tight-lipped. The elephant in the room proving too large to be able to comfortably navigate around. Strangely enough, they hadn’t necessarily asked him about his mood, his loss of appetite or the heavy dark circles under his eyes - he didn’t sleep much anymore, surviving on shitty coffee (which, notably tasted nothing like Richie’s) and power naps in the late evening, or about the awkward atmosphere surrounding both him and Richie. He would have expected Beverly’s comforting hand slip into his own with a tight squeeze, or Ben’s gentle distractions with new books with handwritten notes in the cover, or even Mike’s one-armed hugs and a plate of scrambled eggs. None of that happened. Instead, he received sad looks, mouths opening as if they were about to say something wildly important, only to close again. Perhaps they know, perhaps they didn’t. Stan couldn’t find it within himself to care.

He reached the assumption that they all knew. They’d all found out either through Richie or through Bill, pitying eyes for the new rainbow-coloured target on his back. Uncomfortable and sad glances between each other whenever Richie would give a little push to this heartbreaking game of push-and-tug.

Richie would sit down at the lunch table - beside Bill instead of Stan now - and slide his Jell-O across the table to Stan, Richie’s silent apology. Sometimes Stan ate it, sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes Richie gave him a smile, sometimes Richie did it looking like he was angry at himself for doing so. Somedays, Richie would walk into the lunchroom; take one look at Stan, and make a face like he pretended to forget something so he could make an excuse to turn around and leave.

Somedays, after a particularly long and sleepless night of Stan trying to desperately unravel the strings between him and Richie within his gut, Richie would take a pained look at Stan’s appearance, suddenly looking a lot more tired himself.

“Are you not sleeping? No offence but you look like shit,” Richie’s voice cracked and neither of them addressed how tight it sounded.

Stan didn’t reply and carried on with his work. He didn’t want to hurt Richie, or punish him per say - but Stan couldn’t trust his throat not to tighten up and choke out the words in what could only be an embarrassing spectacle.

Three minutes later there was a cup set in front of him and before Stan even had the chance to mumble out a weak thank you, Richie disappeared to the smoking area with a heavy swingback on the door.

The coffee didn’t make him any less tired, but it was Richie’s coffee so he drank it with heavy eyes.
A new routine in place - Richie arriving into work, on time now. Sometimes even early; what was once a blessing felt more like salt in the wounds to Stan. He would immediately annoy Eddie, wiping his dirty fingerprints over clean glasses or taking fistfuls of suds and trying to rub it in his hair, then he would make Stan a coffee. Just the way he liked it. Some days Richie said good morning, some days he looked like he couldn’t have said anything if he had tried. Some days Stan said thank you, some days he swallowed the coffee and it weighed down on him like cement.

Richie’s coffee was good… not as bitter as anyone else’s somehow. Stan wasn’t sure if the pain in his chest was worth the better taste.

This pain in his chest was constant. It never seemed to hurt any less. In fact, it seemed that the longer Stan grieved; the more it hurt. Because that’s what it was, wasn’t it? Grieving. Grieving losing his best friend - but it was more than that. Grieving losing Richie, which somehow has come to mean, in turn, losing himself too.

The pain grew heavier in the dark. In his ocean of a bed in a room with a closed window that seemed all too warm, yet under the covers, all too cold. He cried then, when the bed seemed too big for him and he ran his foot along the length of the bed and it never once made contact with someone else.

He hated how much he cried, he always did. His Father always had a habit of telling him in his youth that he was overly sensitive, that it would only lead him into trouble as he grew up. Stan would laugh sourly into his pillow at that, he sure was right, wasn’t he? A sensitive, somewhat feminine son who spends his nights crying into his pillow over another boy. This makes Stan hiccup. It wasn’t a boy, though. It was Richie - Richie who was as much as part of Stan as Stan was to himself; and it has all been ripped out of him, a messy and dreadful wound that is so deep within him it’s going to bear a scar until the day he rots into the Earth.

He didn’t sleep much, he didn’t let himself sleep. With sleep came visions of Richie’s face - sometimes Stan is yelling at Richie all over again and he replays Richie’s empty, broken look over and over again until it's burned deep within his retinas. Sometimes he’s having visions of Richie and Bill laughing about him, mocking him. Sometimes he has dreams of them having sex and those ones hurt particularly bad. They hurt him so deeply because he wants it. He wakes up with an erection and an insatiable need for Richie to find his way back between his legs. He masturbates over it, a blurry and nonsensical mix of memories and fantasy and he falls into a guilt-ridden and shameful type of crying when the orgasm washes over him.

So Stan forces himself to stay awake. He drinks shitty coffee before bed and purposefully leaves his bedroom light on so that even if he did fall asleep - the blinding yellow-ish light would sink into his eyelids and prevent him from entering that awful, terrible stage of deep sleep that plagues him.
This night, however, Stan hadn’t meant to fall asleep. He sat on his bed to reading a book Mike had let him borrow a couple weeks prior and in the slowly setting sun; slow enough that Stan hadn’t noticed it had grown dark, Stan ended up slipping into unconsciousness in his straight-cut jeans and his red shirt. Sundown burned into darkness on Stan’s sleeping form. The night passed on, unaware of the spinstress inside Stan’s head spinning him wonderful memories and beautiful what-ifs.

The dream itself was pleasant - the best dream Stan had ever had. A slideshow of memories; similar to the nostalgic act that he and Richie had partook in, sifting through old photographs, bringing memories almost forgotten back to the forefronts of their minds, their bellies bubbling with the feelings captured within the photographs. The dream was a mixture of these wonderful memories with notions that Stan could only allow himself to entertain in his sleep, never dare thinking of such ludacris ideas outside of the deepest parts of his mind. Holding hands down the Main Street of Derry, summer warm on their skins and Richie’s freckles darkening with it. People aren’t looking or staring - no one gives a shit about two boys holding hands here. They’re at the Marsh; surrounded by friends - crackling of the fire and the smell of woodsmoke in his hair. He would complain about the smell in his hair and his clothes, how it took so long to get out and Richie would make a dirty joke about showering back at his, Stan would roll his eyes (and notably not say no) and their friends wouldn’t cast so much as a blink when Richie presses a hard kiss into his cheek.

Stan woke up with the smell of firewood in his senses and a sense of feeling whole again, only for it to come crashing down when he blinked the sleep out of his eyes and recalled his predicament. He sat up against the headboard and it hit him then. Hard and fast. God, he missed him so much. He couldn’t have missed Richie anymore if he tried. A huge empty space wherever he goes - like missing a shadow. There was so much he was missing; Richie’s stupid jokes, sharing milkshakes, Richie distracting him constantly from work; the nights spent playing cards or watching movies on Richie’s bed; Richie making fun of Stan for eating his pizza with a knife and fork until Stan finally gave in and ate it like ‘a normal fucking person’. It was all so empty without Richie. Stan didn’t know when Richie became an integral part of his happiness and his personhood, but now that he’s gone Stan feels lost within himself.

The tears were coming again and as soon as Stan recognised the fact, a sob escaped from him without meaning, then the tears cascaded down his face in an unbroken stream. Stan bent forward and grappled onto his sheets and began to cry with the force of a person vomiting on all fours. He would claw and grasp at the bed for some semblance of support - but he would get none. The emptiness grew bigger and ate into him the more the flood came, it consumed him and choked him and he stuttered uneven breaths amidst his muffled sobs.

Things had gone so wrong. Things had gone so fucking wrong so quickly. Stan can’t tell if he’s more upset at himself for letting Richie build him up to this level of co-dependancy or at Richie; for fucking it all up in the first place. One thing he does know - is that he doesn’t hate Richie for it. Not even a little bit - if anything he needs Richie more than ever.
The next morning Stan showed up to work with messy hair and bleary red eyes. No one asked, no one did as much as acknowledge him with their sad smiles. Stan begins to hate it. He spends the morning rearranging the store cupboard thirteen times because it just isn’t right. His skin burns more than his eyes do for once and the horrible thoughts of the row of tinned peaches being off-centre, as nagging and biting as they were, a welcome change from the fragile thoughts of Richie Tozier.

Beverly walked in, taking Stan by surprise to grab something, she asked him how his day was going.

“You have a smudge of mascara on your cheek,” Stan said. The only thing he could say. A stark black against pale skin. He had to forcibly pull his eyes away. Beverly just gave him a smile and said her thanks and picked up a bottle of milk and left Stan alone again.

Stan spent a further fifteen minutes rearranging the milk bottles.

The itch was back. A foreboding type of nag at his brain that he has become uncomfortably familiar with as the months stretched out - only cropping up in moments of extreme stress and emotional turmoil. It was inconvenient. The last thing Stan needed today was for him to spend the majority of his morning inside the refrigerator with no jacket. His jacket stayed on the hook by the door where he had shrugged it off three weeks prior and Stan avoided it like the plague.

His skin was cold and he could feel the potential onset of a cold from the biting air but he took a step back and admired his handiwork. Every row perfect. Organised by colour, a perfect template from a catalogue. Stan convinces himself that the fruits of his labour was worth it and the itch stops for a moment; and then the pain starts.

A stinging, burning sensation from the back of his hand and when he looks he notices that he’s bleeding. The blood had smeared over the back of his hand like a Pollock piece and it was oozing like slime from the wound. It wasn’t until Stan used his other hand to wipe away the fat bead of blood to get a better look at the source of the bleeding did he notice the brown dried blood under his fingernail. Without anyone to stop him he was somewhat of a danger to himself, it seems.

Stan left the perfect refrigerator and steered towards Eddie, holding the bloodied hand close to his chest to lower the chances of him dripping all over the floor. Eddie was elbows-deep in a basin of soapy water, scrubbing hard enough at whatever it was he was cleaning that his entire body was shaking like some sort of angered chihuahua. He stilled as soon as Stan walked close enough into his peripheral vision.
He was pulling his elbow-length rubber gloves off of him before Stan even got the chance to open his mouth, “What the fuck did you do? Why are you bleeding?”

“I was scratching it - I didn’t notice.”

Eddie shook his head and ushered him over to the handwashing basin beside the door. A sink so small Stan could barely fit his hands under the tap. Eddie turned on the cold water and let Stan scrub the orange-ish stain of dried blood off of his hands. The water bled a sickly pink.

There was a comfortable silence as Eddie watched Stan’s hand-cleaning methods with a sharp eye. Between the fingers, up the thumb, back down, under the nails, over the back of the hand and up the wrist. Yes, Eddie - Stanley knows how to wash his hands.

The sound of the fans whirred in Stan’s ears and the clicking of one of the fans was piercing him like a cutlass - one of the bolts are loose and it makes this horrible sharp rattle every time the fan rotates. It doesn’t bother anyone else, it’s one of those repetitious sounds that you get used to after a couple of minutes. But not Stan. Stan hears that clicking long after he has clocked off and changed out of his work clothes.

Eddie’s eyes were careful over the wound and he tilted his head a little to see better. Stan took his hand from the sink and turned off the tap. Stan hadn’t even noticed the band-aid ready in Eddies hand, but Eddie took his hand into his own with a careful touch and looked at the angry pink flesh - shiny with the undermost layers of skin exposed. He shook his head and carefully pressed the band-aid onto Stan’s skin. Eddie’s touch was gentle without being patronizing.

Eddie has a lot of things sussed out. Eddie is prepared for everything - to the point of overkill, sometimes. Eddie is organised in the way that Stan isn’t. Eddie’s room was like a dumpster - a mess of clothes and papers and comic books - not quite as bad as Richie’s had been (the thought pains him) but Eddie was organised in his head. Eddie spoke his mind with brave confidence because he had no doubts about how he felt, his words honest and pure. So open to talking about things he hates or things he likes, and so quick to argue - even with Bowers, on occasion. Eddie is incredibly brave and sure of himself. Stan watches his friend as he smoothed the wrinkles over the band-aid, slowly and methodically.

“You know, don’t you?” Stan asked.

Eddie didn’t even so much as spare a glance at him, unsurprised by the question. Nonetheless, he
finished up Stan’s patch-work and gathered up the wrapper. It was only a moment or two before he responded but to Stan it felt a lot longer.

“All I know,” Eddie started, “Is that you and Richie are both acting like pussies and it’s pissing me off.”

Stan blinked, not expecting the bluntness.

“I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you two - and don’t get me wrong, it’s none of my fuckin’ business and I don’t want it to be any of my business because this conversation alone is making me want to be sick - but you went from being butt-buddies to walking around each other like you’ve both shit your pants. It’s annoying and it’s clearly doing neither of you any favours.”

Eddie’s tone was even, lacking the scathing tone that his words suggested, a small sign of sincerity that Stan finds a bit of comfort in.

Stan’s words were soft, spoken like they were made of glass, “I.. I don’t know what to do, Eddie.”

The familiar tightening of the throat closed off the end of his sentence and he winced at the sound of it - Eddie’s face softened and he sucked his lip in thought, choosing his words carefully.

“I think-”

A sudden slam of the door opening, bracketing off of the wall. A sharp and biting wind and a windswept-looking Richie, cheeks puffy and red from the cold.

The dream came rushing back to him like a freight train out of control, barreling towards him while he’s tied down on the tracks, too exhausted from struggling to even attempt to move out of the way. With the dream, came memories. Feelings, thoughts, tender fleeting touches and booze-flavoured kisses melting into chaste dewy morning goodbyes, laughing until their ribs pull stitches and Richie pulling every childish giggle out of him with a broad smile of his own. It struck him like the gentle kiss of a hammer to the jaw.

Stan couldn’t help it, he really couldn’t - a sob got caught in his throat and he made a choked sound to try and swallow it down. Eddie stepped a little closer to him and their shoulders were just about
touching and it was all too much.

He tasted salt in his mouth and Stan was quick to hide his face in his hands. The tears melted there, leaving his palms wet.

Richie took one look at Stan, who had dissolved into tears mere moments after they locked eyes and after his face twisted in pain until it resembled a withered fruit, he clenched his jaw to keep his own harrowed sounds in, and walked straight back out.

Richie didn’t come to work the next day.

It only got worse.

Another band-aid joined Stan’s hand. Then another. Then another and then Beverly forced him to wear a pair of Eddie’s obscenely yellow rubber gloves to stop him scratching into the skin of his hand.

‘I didn’t mean to’, he would always say to Eddie when he patched him up.

‘We know’, Eddie would always reply.

Everything was just *so much* all of the time. Bill’s uneven shoelaces, Mike’s muddy boots, Beverly’s necklace and how the clasp is never perfectly in the centre of the nape of her neck, Ben’s out-of-key singing; even that *one* strand of Eddie’s hair that always seems to stand upright where his hair parts. Everything was so loud. Every turn he took was an attack on his senses.

Stan, for the third time that shift, dropped a steaming mug of coffee straight onto the ground. He’d noticed a fork sitting in alongside the spoons and it stole his concentration for long enough that he caught his hip on the side of the counter and the coffee billowed out its steam when it rushed along the grooves of the aged linoleum. It was all Ben and Beverly could do to let Stan spend the better part of forty-five minutes making sure the floor looks *perfect* before he stops with a red face and an arm sore from scrubbing with the rough end of a sponge. Beverly had tried to steer him away the second time he had dropped it but he had to clean it - *he* had to do it because otherwise it would be done wrong and it *can’t* be done wrong because it just might kill him.
As soon as he so much as lifted his knees off of the ground with a final hearty sigh, Beverly had ever-so-gently lifted him up and shoved him out of the door.

“Go home, Stan. You’re not well, sweetheart.”

“I’m fine - I just need to-”

“You’re hurting yourself - look at the state of your hand.”

New little shreds in his fingers from broken porcelain and burns starting to blister along his fingertips. The argument died in his throat and Beverly stood by the door and watched him cycle off, like she was a doorman at a club and Stan was a little rat hooligan trying to sneak his way in to get his first drink of watered-down bud light.

He didn’t agree with Beverly. The argument didn’t die on his throat because he didn’t have one per say - no, it died in his throat because at a quick glance down - he noticed his band-aids were not parallel. One is at a slight angle - the one near the sharp bone of his wrist. A slight angle. Barely noticeable. Eddie had taken great care with his sharp eyebrows furrowed and his little tongue poking out between his lips to align the band-aids as parallel to each other as he could. It was such a small angle, barely there at all. Stan hit a pothole and almost goes over his handlebars.

The streetlight on the corner of Westbury and Ranfurly flickers. The alleyway behind Keene’s Pharmacy has 3 bricks which are brown-toned, when the rest of the bricks are red-toned. The tarmac outside The Ripsoms’ has two cracks on the left, but only one on the right. One of Stan’s socks falls down into his shoe. He chokes the brakes and fixes it otherwise his foot might fall off, or something along those lines.

Every crack in the pavement, every flickering neon light from the stores on Derry’s Main Street, every uneven lettering on mailboxes and every splintered white picket fence. It choked him. The cold air sliced through his lungs and let them leak like a punctured tire. When he turned the corner of his street - for a split second he saw Richie’s broken face, hair damp to his forehead and eyes even damper.

He didn’t - but it was a shock enough to sent Stan cycling directly into a streetlight. It flickered on impact.

Stan didn’t get up right away. His bike was lying haphazardly to his side. The wheel had caught the streetlight at such an angle that it jerked violently to the side and Stan, suddenly overbalanced, was sent to the ground with a hearty thump from his shoulder meeting the tarmac. Stan lay there
for a moment, broken and overwhelmed. This is how Richie must have felt, Stan guessed - he doubted he looked much different that how he had left Richie.

Stan smacked his hand into the pavement. Then again. And again. And again until his palms were grazed and red and pinned with little stones. Stan had no right to feel guilty about what happened. This isn’t his fault.

He forced himself onto his rear and picked the stones out of his hand. The band-aid was burning a hole in his skin so he tore it off. He tore them all off.

Hands scabbed and red and destroyed - Stan picked himself off of the ground and walked his bicycle the remaining three houses. He shut his eyes at his neighbor's bushes - clipped uneven.

Stan battled the stairs of his porch and sought the comforting organisation and clean-cut corners of his bedroom. He threw himself onto the floor of his bedroom and traced the sharp edges of his bed covers. You could bounce a quarter off of it.

Richie's twisted face. Richie's hurt etched into the wicked grooves between his brow and in the corner of his mouth. Face wet, top weighed down his skinny frame like a sack. And he just stood there. No response, no quick bit, no diversions - Richie had just stood there like a piece of roadkill while Stan drove away in an 18-wheeler.

Stan tried to will the images out of his mind but they were etched behind his retinas, a burning of agony through his mind. The anguish on Richie's face mirrored in his gut, the sheer power of it winding him.

The tight corners of his bed cut into his fingers. He dropped them to the carpet.

The emptiness and hollowness within him swelled until he was devoid of any feeling of himself at all. His feelings dripped out of himself into the floor around him the longer he was away from Richie. It was strange how the world could be buzzing so loudly around him when inside of him feels so grey and flat.

"You're disgusting."

Stan was disgusting. By all he had been taught from the Orthodox Jews his Father worked so
closely with, from the words thrown at them from the Bower's Gang. From all the stares and whispers and awful things people in school muttered under their breath as Richie walks through the halls.

The bleach white of his pristine runners burned his eyes like bleach.

"You're vile."

Stan was vile. Spitting venom at the only person who knew him better than he knew himself. In anger or no - the hurt heavy on Richie's face. The guilt bubbled violently in him and he felt so angry at himself for feeling guilty when he could hardly blame himself. Only he could - he could very easily blame himself for getting himself into this mess.

The walls closed in.

The flickering of the streetlight outside sent ugly flashes of orange onto his wallpaper.

Stan sucked in a sharp breath. There was so much he could say to Richie, if he had the chance. So many unspoken words and conversations unhad.

Before Stan could think much more of Richie, the orange light flickered angrily into his room once more and Stan got up and carefully pulled his smooth snow-white curtains closed. They burned his eyes more than the flickering streetlight did. When he pulled his hand away, a spot of red.

He looked down and noticed one of his newer scabs had opened and he was bleeding. The red on the curtain…

Stan tore his eyes away from it and onto something he knew was right before his chest started to squeeze more than it already did. His bookshelf, he thought. Yes, books aligned by colour, the way he liked it. The spines of his array of hardback novels and biographies and bird books stared back at him.

The way he liked it, right?
His chest squeezed tighter. He pulled himself towards the bookshelf with the pull of a lion pouncing his pray and tore through the books and rearranged them. It wasn’t right - not by colour… no… what should it be? He tried size. It didn’t work. He tried alphabetically. He felt sick. He tried the publishing date. He was getting light-headed. He tried by ISBN number. He dropped his copy of *Watership Down*.

Stan didn’t know what was more frightening - the fact that he couldn’t get his books right no matter how hard he tried - or the fact that every organisation had all been right. They had all been perfect. *Too perfect.* Right - but in the wrong way.

Frantically, his eyes searched around the room for something, *anything*.

Bleached runners burning his eyes. Tight sheets slitting his fingers open. Unmarked carpet swallowing him whole. Empty, perfect walls. Everything so obscenely in its place.

Stan couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

Raspy choked breaths.

A quiet emptiness, a perfect room. It was *perfect*. It was always fucking *perfect*. The sheer perfection of it all was making him itch all over like he’d dive-bombed into a bed of nettles. Glaring at him.

Overwhelmed and drastically short of breath - Stan considered wrinkling his bedsheets just to break the sheer fucking *cold* perfection of his bedroom that was slicing him open - but the thought of wrinkles only clenched at his gut harder and pulled a wrecked noise from his throat.

Shit.

Shit.

Stan pulled at the collar of his shirt and his fingers slipped over the button. And again. And again.

Finally it opened and Stan tried his very best to force his breathing to stabilize, but he wasn’t choking and gasping on air any less than he had been.
The walls grew closer and Stan let himself fall onto his knees as he heaved around the clenching of his throat.

This was new. This had *never* happened to him before. A panic attack in the chasm between the organization and alignment of everything being *right* and the brash, brave and disorder that he *hated*. Grappling onto a metronome swinging violently between the two. This was new and scary and he was all alone. He didn’t know what to do.

What do you do when everything that had been so poignantly *right* suddenly makes you want to scratch your skin to the bone but anything being so much as a *hair* out of place makes him want to tie his guts in a pretty little bow around a rock and throw himself into the Quarry?

Toe the line - Stan has to toe the line. Something not quite perfect, but not quite *not*.

Perfect.

Stan choked a sob.

Imperfect.

His skin was burning.

Perfect.

His chest was getting tighter.

Imperfect.

He can’t breathe.

Perfect.

He can’t breathe.
Imperfect.

Holy shit, he can’t breathe.

*Perfectly Imperfect.*

The thought struck him like a bus and with shaky legs and eyes bleeding heavily with tears and a head of cotton, Stan bolted into the streets of Derry and cycled towards the only possible thing that could ever balance it out. The chasm between the two poles. The only thing that could ever truly balance *him* out.

*Perfectly Imperfect.*

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be the final of the series :) im sad about it
Two years later and here we are. It's been an incredible journey and I'd like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read this monster of a fic. This is the last chapter of Fries that you will read and I hope you enjoy it. I hope you enjoyed the ride as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'm sad to see it finished, of course - this fic will always have a special place in my heart.

Thank you.

He didn’t knock. He didn’t even think to knock. He didn’t really think much of anything - in fact, Stan had cycled through Derry in his plaid pajamas with not even shoes on his feet in the pouring rain without even really registering that he had done it.

Stan only clicked into his surroundings when the front door slammed shut behind him on the backend of a heavy gust of wind.

Richie’s house?

Stan was at the foot of the stairs. A scrambling noise followed by a heavy thud and then Richie was standing at the top of the stairs, baseball bat raised in threat. His arms shook with effort.

How did Richie get there so fast? Stan only blinked and then he was suddenly there.

The baseball bat thumped to the floor and rolled down the stairs. It hit Stan’s ankle on the way down. It didn’t register.

“What happened?”

Stan doesn’t answer. Stan can’t answer. Tunnel vision on Richie. One step at a time, his chest heaving with a mix of exertion from the frantic pedalling and falling over the cusp of stability. The unsteady dripping from his hair and clothes onto the wood of the stairs. It chased him, followed him, blasted tiny little napalm holes in his ears and yet… they were at the back of his mind. The only thing on his mind is Richie - standing at the top of the stairs looking like he had seen a ghost.

Certainly Stan Uris, who had barely been able to so much as look Richie in the eye in almost a
month, dripping wet with red painful-looking eyes and breathing like a motor trying its best to turn over was the last fucking thing Richie had expected to see walking up his stairs at this time of night.

It was night?

It was night. The last time Stan had checked, it was afternoon - the hours blobbed heavily past him and congealed into a fat, blubbery mess at his feet. Stan stepped over it and continued his shakey journey up the stairs, his chest tight.

Black tunneled his vision, complete inability to take in any of his surrounds at all except the magnetism in his gut that had pulled him out of his home and into the rain-washed streets in the first place - his anguish with Richie and the current rocky state of their relationship wasn’t even accessible to Stan at this moment, blanketed by overwhelming panic and the inability to breathe, his instincts kicked in and Richie had become such a hearty foundation in his life that his instincts brought him here. Here, at the top of Richie’s stairs, a wet trail following him.

Standing barely three feet away from Richie, the last of Stan’s delicate resolve shattered and the force of it shocked through him like a landslide of gravel. Stan makes an aborted step towards Richie and crumples to the floor - Richie darted out and softened the blow by holding him by the elbows. Stan, on the floor and blubbering pathetically with his legs splayed out behind him and Richie, looking down at him bewildered and concerned, holding his upper body up by his arms.

Stan’s arms began to strain shake violently and Richie crouched himself down, squatting. He didn’t let go of Stan’s arm but he loosened his grip enough that Stan could move away if he wanted to.

When Richie spoke, he spoke casually, as though he was asking Stan about the weather, even if it cracked a little towards the end, “Hey… hey, Stan. Are you having one of your uh… things?” The tone wasn’t necessarily soft, not patronizing, so very much Richie that Stan couldn’t do anything but nod his head and squeeze his eyes shut as the very act of doing so made him impulsively need to move to expel some of this pent up energy, not that it would help. Stan helplessly began scratching at his skin, breaking open the scabs of the wounds on his hands and causing them to prickle with blood, Richie noticed almost immediately, “Hey - enough of that, c’mon man…”

Stan maintained his efforts and Richie, whose grasp on his elbows remained firm enough to thwart them, made an impulse decision to plop himself onto the floor from his squat position. The floorboards were cold and he was wearing nothing but a pair of briefs and a hoodie. As he sat, he lowered Stan’s upper body somewhat onto his lap, perpendicular to him.
“Hey, you’re fine, Stan - you’re good.”

Richie held onto his arms as the world spun around him. It didn’t settle. It was *meant* to settle - they were never this bad.

If anything, it was getting worse. The walls closing in and the coldness of the floorboards freezing ice into his soaking pajamas.

Richie could see the terror in Stan’s eyes - hazy and unfocused, “Do you want to lie down? We can go to my bedroom, it’s really tidy still - I keep it tidy for you,” Stan just continued to heave gasping and choked breathes in bursts of violent stutters, “I even arranged my comic books by issue number on my bookshelf.”

The fucking bookshelf.

The thought of his own bookshelf made him nauseous, but the thought of *Richie’s* bookshelf being in neat little rows, all organised the way Stan liked it downright made him want to roll over and puke. Everything so *tidy* for him. Richie made everything so beautifully neat for him - the way that usually made Stan feel comfortable and at ease now made his skin blister.

He struggled under Richie’s hold to itch the burning in his skin. Richie didn’t loosen his holding of Stan. He needed more - he needed less. He needed both more and less at the same time. Helpless, Stan wrenched his eyes open and for the first time in what felt like weeks, a moment - a brief moment - of clarity.

Richie’s glasses sitting wonkily on the bridge of his nose.

“Your-your…. Your glass-” Stan’s throat shot and crackled, “glass-glasses. Your glasses.”

Richie, whose eyes had widened to show Stan that he was listening, instantly released one of Stan’s arms and caught the underside of his glasses with his finger and flung them across the landing.

That’s not what Stan wanted. That’s not what he wanted at all.

“Better?”
Stan shook his head, face contorted in frustration.

“Tell me what to do, please. I’m not good at shit like this, you know this.”

If Stan was in any other type of predicament - he would have laughed, instead, his eyes darted somewhat frantically over Richie. Something, anything. Something in between. What is he looking for? He’s not sure - but in his gut, he knows that he will feel it when he sees it.

Richie blinks a strand of hair out of his eye. It doesn’t budge. Stan is sharply and suddenly transfixed. Richie let out a sharp blow of air at it and it flew back into the spot where it was meant to be. Stan maintained his laser-focus eyes on Richie’s hair.

It takes him a couple of tries but Stan eventually, after long drawn out moments of staring at the mess of black wiry hair, lifted his shaking hand - the one that Richie had let go of to play javelin with his glasses - until Richie carefully blocked his movement, eyes knowing and a little guilty. “I haven’t brushed it, Stan…”

That was all Stan needed.

With a hearty sob, he pushed Richie’s hand away and made contact with the mess of hair. It was a little dry and wiry under his touch, Richie didn’t use conditioner. It wraps around his fingers, wraps rings around his knuckles and buries his hand deep inside it. His fingers snag on a knot and it’s terrible. It’s knotted and awful. Stan pushes his other hand along with it. The knots pull at his finger and the coarse strands feel like chicken wire underneath the soft pads of his fingers.

Stan could cry at how terrible it is. How unorderly it is - and he could laugh, too. He could laugh at the violent tsunami of relief that begins to wash over him. Being with Richie Tozier meant not only becoming comfortable with the disorderly - it was becoming dependant on the disorderly.

Richie stared down at Stan with confusion - one of the defining reasonings behind his last breakdown was now suddenly fair game? Stan was diving into his head of hair like it was a bag of Halloween candy. Richie knew better than to say anything because whatever the fuck Stan was doing seemed to be working, his breathing had slowed down to somewhat normal pace and his eyes appeared more focused, less glossy.

Minutes of Stan’s breathing settling, becoming less like punches from his guts as the world buzzed
back into normality. No longer spinning around him like a hurricane of sounds and smells and sights and time, now he was lying still on the cold floorboards of Richie’s upstairs landing with his fingers threading delicately through Richie’s hair. Every so often he pulled on a knot and if it hurt, Richie didn’t show it.

The world stable, Richie’s dark eyes boring holes into his features but otherwise remaining silent.

Stan slowly lets one of his hands fall from Richie’s hair. He smoothes over a crease on his hoodie as he goes down. He should pull away, he thinks as his hands travel farther down Richie’s arm, he should pull away soon. Right now, maybe right now he should pull his hands aw-

Stan’s hand settles on top of Richie’s - Stan pretends the thought doesn’t make him feel as exhaustedly giddy as it does. His nails are jagged and rough where Richie had a habit of biting them and spitting the nail shavings onto the floor. Richie’s posture softened as Stan gently ran the pad of his thumb back and forth over a jagged hangnail.

Richie was the one to break the silence. Minutes of it, heavy and filled with equally heavy emotions and mountains of unspoken words, “Are you okay now?” A pause, “Has Stanley finally entered the building?”

Stan nodded, head still a little cottony. Richie said more words - but Stan didn’t really listen. He found himself staring at Richie, the emotions of affection and fondness rushed to the forefront of Stan’s mind.

Richie - who he had known for more of his life than he had not, who declared himself his friend because other kids were making fun of him, who invited himself birdwatching with him and sat quietly as he could, despite vibrating with untapped and unreleased energy beside him. Richie who sometimes made him mad, sometimes went too far with his jokes - who always wanted nothing more than to make him laugh. Late nights watching movies, laughing under the bedsheets at Richie’s voices and at Stan’s comebacks, Richie doing nothing short of driving Stan mad in work and picking fun at him when he’s stressed because it’s a distraction. Richie who whispered secrets into his hair as they fell asleep, who looks after him no matter what. Richie who would probably do anything on God’s green Earth to make Stan happy.

Stan very much understood. He would do the same.

Stan threaded his hand through Richie’s hair until his palm was flat on his crown. With a vulnerable level of tenderness, Stan pushed on Richie’s head, bringing him closer. Richie looked like he might cry, “Stan?” Stan didn’t reply. Stan stretched forward and as Richie stilled, Stan closed that cold gap.
Richie’s lips - dry and cracked, Stan’s lips - wet and salty. It was soft, chaste, like two Kindergarteners exchanging their first kiss underneath a pair of hawthorn trees. It was perfect. It was imperfect. It toed the line in the most terribly wonderfully way. Everything he ever wanted and somehow… without him realising, had become everything he had ever needed. Richie’s horrendous and glaring imperfections dulled the overwhelming disorder of the world around him, dulled Stan and honed him in like a beacon in the night. They shone to Stan like blistering lights that blurred everything else around him and Stan is a smoker addicted to nicotine.

Richie was the one to pull away.

“Stan?” He started, pushing Stan’s hand off his scalp, “You- we can’t. You’re not thinking straight… I just-” Richie rubbed the bridge of his nose, he looked older than his years for a moment, “I just can’t. Not when you’re like this. You’re soaking wet, I can’t believe you came out in your pajamas… C’mon - yeah, up you get, that’s it- don’t fall over the banister, c’mon. You can borrow some of my pajamas, have a shower, wash your hair, Mom might even have a blowdryer for you to use… we can put your hair in curlers and tuck you into bed with a nice steaming cup of hot cocoa and-”

“You’re rambling,” Stan’s legs were wobbling and the effort it took to stand up had left him feeling exhausted. He dragged his feet behind Richie as he followed him into the bedroom. Richie was right; as tidy as Stan had last seen it. Different bedsheets, though.

Richie paused for a moment, “Yeah - I guess I am. Motormouth, you know me,” Richie gave a forced laugh and pulled a pair of pajama bottoms and a top from his chest of drawers. He dropped them into Stan’s arms and missed them by about a foot and the clothes crumpled to the floor. “What happened?” Richie asked, looking bewildered and lost, blinking at the space between Stan and himself.

“You’re not wearing your glasses.”

Richie made a face, “Ah, yeah - that’s probably it. I’ll go get on my hands and knees and go all Velma from Scooby-Doo while you get changed.”

Richie left and Stan peeled off his soaked pajamas, they made heavy slopping noises when he put them in the laundry hamper, not quite sure where else to put them. The pajamas - pink floral bottoms (clearly Beverly’s) and an old track uniform t-shirt that Stan realised only then that he had not seen it in his drawers for a long time. If he looked hard enough, he’s sure that he would find enough of his clothes in Richie’s chest of drawers to give him outfits for a week.
When Richie came back into the bedroom with his glasses sitting slightly lopsided on his face, the settlement of their rocky relationship grew obvious, stagnant in the air. Stan sat awkwardly on the bed, hand smoothing out a particularly persistent group of wrinkles on his pants and Richie loitered at the doorway, hands shoved into the pockets of his hoodie. The silence was heavy and a little uncomfortable until Richie needed to fill it.

“So…” Richie said. The pause between this and the next sentence was a beat too long, “Breakdowns not as fun in the House of Uris? You gotta come here, right?”

Stan fumbled with the creases some more and he didn’t meet Richie’s eyes, staring off somewhere over his shoulder, “I can- I can leave.”

“No, I-”

“No, I shouldn’t have come. This was stupid, I shouldn’t have bothered you, I’m sorry,” Stan said, lifting himself off the bed only to get pushed back down.

“No no no no - please, stay? Ten minutes? Just ten minutes,” Richie said, he gave Stan’s shoulder an involuntary squeeze where he was holding it, “Please.”

Stan said nothing and nodded, the etchings of the broken face Stan had left Richie with seemed to flash in his memory and guilt crept into his throat. He couldn’t see that again - he had seen too many of Richie’s sour expressions.

Richie looked relieved but his hands still fidgeted in his hoodie pocket and he bounced a little on his toes. He was anxious. Richie thumbed at his glasses several times as he seemingly tried to start saying something over and over again. Words failed him, so as a reprise he picked a cigarette from the open-packet on his dresser and lit it with a rusted zippo. The effect was almost instant, with the first deep breath in - his bouncing stopped and Stan could practically see the frantic cogs in his head slow down to coherency.

Richie squeezed the bridge of his nose between his fingers and loosely bobbed the cigarette between his fingers, “Are you feeling better?”

The direct question made Stan squirm, he could feel Richie’s eyes on him and he couldn’t help but feel like he was doing something inherently wrong, “Yes, thanks. I shouldn’t have landed on your doorstep like that, sorry.”
“You didn’t land on my doorstep, you landed on my stairs - I thought I was gonna have to Home Alone your ass, thought you were a burglar,” Richie said, but he wasn’t finished, “You know - like who the fuck looks at my house with the ratty-ass garden and thinks ‘hey - that looks like a home with a secret stash of expensive gold jewellery we can pawn’? Seriously, you’d have to be pretty fuckin’ desperate. Hell, if I woke up to people rooting around my living room for money I’d fuckin’ join ‘em, you know what they say, if you can’t beat ‘em-”

“You’re rambling again,” Stan said. Richie was anxious, overthinking something, likely. Stan knew what it was and frankly, Richie skirting around the subject was only Stan feel more uneasy. “Stop beating around the bush, Richie. We both know what you want to talk about, you’re just drawing it out.”

Richie looked taken aback for a second, face almost comical before it sunk into seriousness - the range that Richie’s face can portray is always fascinating - he’s like a cartoon character. Richie moved from the dresser table towards the bed - but backtracked a little and closed the door. Another conversation behind closed doors. Richie sank into the bed beside Stan, elbows on his knees and head down in concentration, or nerves - one of the two. Stan brought his knees up to his chest.

“I’m sorry, like I’m really fucking sorry. Not like ‘oh Eddie I am so sorry I got dishwater in your shoes’ or ‘I’m sorry I stole your Zippo lighter again, Bev’. I’m really fucking sorry,” He took a long drag of the cigarette and looked at Stan through the corner of his eyes. Stan didn’t look away, “I really missed you.”

“You miss not having blue-balls, you mean,” Stan said. It sounded bitter enough from his throat and Richie looked affronted.

“Stan… do you really think that was all it was?” Stan shrugged, “No, look at me, do you think all I cared about was sex?”

Stan wanted to say yes. That it was all as simple and two-dimensional as that and although he may have believed that himself for a while, he couldn’t convince himself of it in his moment of stable-mindedness, “No, but what I overheard implies otherwise - if I didn’t know you so well I would probably think it.”

Richie pushed his glasses into his hair and rubbed at the indents on the bridge of his nose. If he keeps rubbing it he’ll get wrinkles. “God - I’m sorry you overheard that, it wasn’t what it sounded like. Oh God, I’m a cliche… I’m nothing but a shitty high-budget box office romance movie,” He laughed sourly.
“What did you tell him?”

“Uh, a lot of things,” Richie took a slow drag of the cigarette.

“I deserve to know,” Stan said, face flushing. He deserved to know how in-depth these smutty retellings of their relationship went. He deserved to know exactly what Bill knew about the most private aspect of his life - hopefully only Bill, “Who else did you tell?”

“Wh-no one! Don’t look at me like you don’t believe me, I swear. I’d never just… tell people shit like that, you know? I didn’t do it to gossip or to boast or whatever the hell is going through your mind - I had reasons,” Richie said. Stan believed him, unhappily. That only leaves Stan with the disturbing conclusion that he and Richie had been obvious enough that Eddie had been able to pick it up himself, surely then everyone else followed suit.

“You had reasons? Pray tell, Richie - what were these reasons that were so important that they warranted you telling Bill about something you knew all too damn well I wanted to keep between us?”

“God - I didn’t mean it like that, fuck-” Richie suddenly battered himself in the skull with his own fists, “I mean that there were underlying, pre-mediated clauses at hand-” Richie stilled and sucked hard on his cigarette, the ash fell onto his lap, “Wait - what? What does that mean? Ugh - I’m confusing myself.”

Stan’s jaw clicked as he clenched his jaw, “I should leave, clearly you’re not taking this seriously-”

“No! I am - I just, I’m really scared of fucking this up,” Richie’s voice softened and his eyes were unfocused on the carpet, “I know I’ve fucked this up already but I don’t want to lose you, as gay as that sounds. You’re my best friend - I’d sooner lose a fucking leg than you. A cane can’t replace Stanley Uris, you know?”

Stan did know.

“It was ours ,” Stan said, his throat catching.

“I know.”
“It was ours and you told Bill. You told Bill and it was special, Richie.”

“It was a secret,” Richie said, confirming Stan’s statement - but the words rang wrong in his ears.

“I don’t even care if it’s a secret, Richie. I don’t give a shit anymore. I just want it to be ours,” His eyes grew sore and red. He dropped his legs off the side of the bed, opening himself up a little more.

Richie gave him a twisted, confused look and bounced his head so his glasses fell back onto his face, “Okay - you’re not making sense.”

“I - I know.”

“Stan,” Richie said pointedly, stubbing out his cigarette. He took Stan’s hand in his own and Stan’s stomach exploded. He missed it - he missed it so much. “It’s me. Tell me, please. All cards on the table, señor.”

The floodgates opened and Stan didn’t want to move his hand away from Richie’s to wipe at them, “I know that it was just for practice - fool around with each other so that we don’t suck when we’re with our future partners - I know that was the agreement but somewhere along the line I started to hate it. The thought of you with someone else in that way just made me feel sick. It made me feel awful. Like there was nothing else that could happen to me that could make it feel ok,” Richie blinked at him, mouth open like a goldfish, Stan continued - the dam had broken.

“Not even just sex, either. I want to be with you all the time, Richie. All the time. I can’t even be in my own bedroom on my own anymore because it’s too perfect. It’s missing you, it’s missing your dumb knotted hair and your stale cigarette breath and your odd socks and your creased clothes. I never would have thought I would come to depend on you so badly but three measly weeks without speaking to you and I cycled through Derry in my pajamas in the middle of an attack because I’m that dependant on you. I need you that much,” The words grew tight in his throat and some of the words came out in choked stutters, “I think I truly need you, Richie. I can’t keep doing this - us not talking. It hurts so much. It hurts more than anything else I’ve ever felt.”

Richie swallowed hard, his eyes glued to where his and Stan’s hands met, “You didn’t want to see me,” his voice was carefully soft, not accusing in the slightest, “You said I was disgusting.”
Stan felt the salt run into his mouth. Stomach twisting in a pang of agonizing guilt, “I know. I’m… I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I was angry, I was hurt, Richie - I still am. I took my own feelings and used them as ammunition against you - it wasn’t fair. I’m sorry,” Stan dissolved into choked cries then, and he willed himself away from Richie’s hand to wipe at his face and press into the space at the side of his nose, near his tear ducts to try and stop the flow.

Richie scooted closer to Stan - their shoulders touching, “Now-now Mistah Stanley - ain’t no reason tah be cryin’, ‘nough of that - dry those tears, cowboy.”

Stan, despite himself, laughed through his sniffles, “Your voices are getting worse.”

Richie shouldered Stan, “No one else gives me honest feedback like you do.”

They sat like that for a moment, in the strange atmosphere, knowing that they were going to be somewhat okay, but still on unstable ground. Stan let the last of his tears fall and Richie offered him a tissue from his bedside table, “Should I ask why you keep tissues at hand?” Stan asked in the midst of blowing his nose.

“Well it sure ain’t for blowing my nose,” Richie said.

The awkward air slowly dissolved, traces of it remaining, sure - but Stan’s emotions were no longer running high, his head clear and the warmth of Richie pressing against his side made him feel somewhat safe. Richie was the one to break the silence, he considered lighting another cigarette but decided against it, “I deserved it. I was a complete asshole, I just…” Richie sighed heavily and fisted his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. Notably, he was still only in his tighty whities - that made Stan laugh to himself a little, “I needed to talk to someone about it - no, don’t interrupt me or I’m kicking you to the curb in those pink pajama bottoms. I needed to tell someone - years ago, and at the time the best person for that was Bill. I’ve always gone to him about it, and it became only natural to tell him about the developments… and I never stopped to think that I was oversharing - motormouth and all, you know me,” He laughed uncomfortably.

“Years ago? What are you talking about?”

Richie considered Stan for a moment and sucked his teeth, the words rolled around in his mouth for a while before he finally said them, “I’ve liked you for years, Stan.”

Stan cocked his head, “Liked? Well sure, Rich, I like you too-” Richie gave him a flat look and it
clicked rather unceremoniously, without fanfare, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Richie eyed up his cigarettes again.

“Since when?”

“Remember that photo of us at the park when we were kids?” Stan nodded and listened in, his stomach kicking up riptides inside of him. He tried to look relaxed, nonchalant but his actual expression was more similar to a lovesick puppy, it spurred Richie on, “Well… I didn’t know it at the time because I was basically just out of diapers but I remember I couldn’t stop staring at you. You were so excited about stupid fuckin’ birds and you knew so much - I sat and let you talk for hours but I didn’t listen to a single thing you said.”

Stan hid a smile behind his hand, “Nothing’s changed then.”

Richie snorted at the joke and looked at Stan affectionately anyway, “No - it really hasn’t,” Stan didn’t hide his small smile, “You’re still obsessed with dumb fuckin’ birds,” Stan slapped his arm.

Stan knew the silence was his to fill now and he knew what sort of confession he should be filling it with. It was scary, putting something like that out there unspoken to even himself, never leaving his lips. Richie sneezed and his glasses fell off of his face and he accidentally kicked them under the bed. Maybe saying it to Richie was easier than saying it to himself. Richie was halfway under the bed when Stan spoke, “It doesn’t seem right-” Richie thumped his head on the bed frame, “I want to tell you but… I can’t think of a word. I was never able to think of a word. You’re… Richie, that’s the best I can do.”

Richie pulled himself out from under the bed and rubbed his head - his glasses were in his hand and he was squinting up at Stan, “Y’know most people say that as an insult.”

Stan laughed at that, “Yeah, that’s part of it too.”

Richie brushed a bit of cigarette ash off of Stan’s knee - Stan hadn’t even noticed it was there. He kept his hand there and smoothed out a wrinkle, “Are we… good?”

“We’re always good, Richie.”
“Even when we’re...” an exaggerated wink, “naughty?”

“Shut up and give me a kiss, trashmouth,” Stan said, rolling his eyes as he did so. Richie was eager to please and quickly put both hands on Stan’s knees and sat up straight on his knees to meet Stan’s mouth.

Less chaste than before, the two moved against each other like two lost souls reuniting. It was fulfilling and poignant. Warm and comfortable and they both found themselves leaning in a little more, Stan carefully placing his hand on the nape of Richie’s neck and Richie’s hands moving up his thighs.

Richie’s tongue ghosted over Stan’s bottom lip and Stan eagerly let him in. Richie’s tongue traced along his own and flirted exceptionally well with it, Stan nipped at Richie’s bottom lip with Richie started teasing him by giving soft fleeting licks that would retreat back into his own mouth.

The kiss deepened with Stan pulling Richie closer, and Richie pushed himself off of the floor to stand up slowly, not once breaking their kiss. Richie’s hands moved from Stan’s thighs to bracket his face and Stan covered them with his own.

“You’re staying, right?” Richie asked when they broke apart. Stan answered by reaching up into Richie’s hair and pulling his glasses off his head, folding them and setting them on the bedside table. Richie’s eyes glinted mischievously and he took Stan’s mouth again, more enthusiastic, this time. Stan’s neck was strained from his position of looking upright at Richie but he couldn’t have stopped if he tried. The kiss grew more and more heated until Stan all but tugged Richie onto the bed beside him, sending them both flat on their backs, their teeth cracked together painfully and Richie groaned.

“Why you gots to be so roughs, sir?”

“You’re really going to do a voice now?”

Richie shrugged and rolled so he was resting his head on Stan’s chest, “You love my voices.”

Stan brushed a hair out of Richie’s eyes, “I don’t think I ever claimed that.”

“Don’t need to - I can see it.”
“Oh?”

“In your eyes,” Richie waggled his fingers in front of Stan’s face and stared at him with amusement.

“I’ll bite them off.”

“You’ll bite my fingers off? Seems a bit harsh.”

“The punishment fits the crime.”

“And are you the judge?”

“Judge, jury and executioner.”

“Well,” He trailed his fingers down his cheeks, “You’ve already sentenced me to death, so what’s one more?”

Stan brought him in for another kiss just to the side of the mouth, gentle and warm.

Richie got onto his knees and approached Stan from above, more mobility, although Stan certainly didn’t argue with Richie’s head blocking the ceiling light, framing the silhouette of his head. When Richie began kissing down the expanse of his neck, Stan bared it for him. He missed Richie. He missed him so much.

It wasn’t long before Stan had been shed of his borrowed clothes and lay with an erection straining against his boxer-briefs. Richie was kissing down the plane of his stomach, hands icy on his ribcage and mouth warm above his navel.

Richie had long pulled off his hoodie, folded and now sitting on top of his dresser. His freckled skin glowed with paleness under the light and he looked almost glowing. Like some sort of dream. He kissed the sharp of Stan’s hip bone and made a short yanking motion at Stan’s underwear,
asking him if it was ok.

Stan lifted his hips and let Richie pull them off. This was different. No fast hands or needy kisses, hasty handjobs and dominating hickies. This was languid in pace, gentle and… almost fun. They were chatting and laughing and Richie had accidentally punched himself in the nose when he took off his hoodie and it didn’t alter whatever mood this was.

“I always forget how weird your dick is,” Richie says, throwing Stan’s underwear in the general direction of the hamper. It missed. Stan stared at him flatly.

“Your mouth is about three inches from my dick and you’re calling it weird?”

“I mean - you’re missing the… uh… you know - privacy scarf.”

“The - the privacy scarf? The foreskin?” Stan sat up on his elbows. Richie hummed and wrapped a hand around his member and began to jerk him off loosely, Stan’s leg twitched.

“See? Look - there’s no movement here.”

“I - yeah, I guess. Is this really what you want to talk about right now?” Stan said, watching Richie jerk him off with a face of almost comical concentration.

“Sorry - I’ve just never thought about it in depth before,” He started moving his hand faster and squeezing tighter, Stan let himself fall back onto the mattress.

“Yeah.”

Richie licked a stripe up Stan’s cock lazily, enjoying watching the rise and fall of Stan’s chest and the way his thigh involuntarily flexed whenever he twisted his hand just like… that.

“Jesus, Richie.”

“Mmmmyes, my sweet?”
Stan shuddered a gasp when Richie prodded his head with his tongue - *just* enough teasing pressure to pull a reaction out of him, “You’re annoying.”

Richie took Stan’s head into his mouth and sucked, his cheeks hollowed out and he pulled off with a loud pop that made him snort, “Yeah, so you’ve said.” He takes Stan into his mouth a little more and bobs. His tongue circled Stan’s head hungrily and Stan’s chest huffed a staggered gasp. Richie was so *good* at giving head, he was so content in doing so - like he wanted nothing more than to sit and take Stan in his mouth all day. A complete selfless act of giving pleasure. Richie fistled the bottom of Stan’s member and pumped his hand in tandem with his bobbing.

“I’m more than alright, I just—” Stan moved out from under Richie. Richie said nothing and let him manoeuvre himself but his face wrapped in surprise when Stan slid off of the bed and knelt to the floor, “I want to try something,” His eyes zoned in on the wet spot on Richie’s briefs.

“...Praying?”

“I am *not* praying with my *dick* out, Richie.”

“Oh, why not?”

Stan rubbed his eyes and sighed, “Please…”

“What is it that you want to do?”

Stan locked eyes with Richie, “I want to give you a blowjob,” Richie’s dick visibly twitched in his briefs and his mouth fell open.

“Oh, thank you,” Richie said and he quickly scooped the waistband of his brief in his fingers and shot them off. They landed on the bedpost.
Stan tried to hold back a laugh, “Well, you’re very welcome, Richie.”

“Shut up,” Stan gave him a pointed look, “Or don’t… or do… do whatever you want, Stanley - you’re the man with a plan after all.”

Stan just shook his head and waved Richie over, Richie shuffled his ass along the bed until he was directly in front of Stan with his legs open. Although, Stan noticed; he was trying to shift his legs in such a way to keep his modesty. It baffled him, Richie had remarked at Stan for doing the same thing.

“Why are you closing your legs?”

Richie scrunched up his nose, “It’s embarrassing.”

“Richie,” Stan said with disbelief, “I’ve been inside you.”

“Yeah but now I’m worried you’re gonna make fun of my foreskin.”

“Richie, I’m not going to make fun of your foreskin,” Richie visibly relaxed and his thighs parted slightly, “Yet.”

“Stan!”

Stan just parted Richie’s legs, Richie let him and stayed propped up on his elbows, eyes squinted tight to try and bring Stan into focus. Stan braced himself on the fat (what little there was) of Richie’s thighs. He gave Richie’s member a few tight tugs and Richie blew out a heavy breath.

With bated breath, Stan lowered himself down until his breath was catching on the bead of pre-cum. Richie let out a low, rumbling noise and tugged his hand through his hair, “You’re gonna kill me, you know that right?”

Stan raised an eyebrow but said nothing, instead he directed the head of Richie’s leaking erection between his lips - not quite tasting it yet, but it breached his mouth an inch all the same. Richie let
out a low whine and Stan, after an agonising moment, flicked his tongue over the head. Richie shot his hand down to Stan’s head, “Stop.”

Stan pulled off, concerned, “Did I do something wrong? I’ve never done this before, Rich-”

“My glasses. Give me my glasses,” He made grabby motions at the bedside table, “If I can’t watch you doing this I’m going to tie my bedsheets into a rope and hang myself from the ceiling light.”

Stan got Richie’s glasses and slipped them onto his face carefully, “That’s a little morbid, don’t you think?”

“If I die, you’ll be happy at least - I sleep spread-eagle. This way there’ll be more bed for you,” Richie grinned.

Stan ripped Richie’s briefs from the bedpost, “Put these back on and leave.”

“Wh- this is my house!”

Stan replied by snapping the elastic and shooting the briefs at Richie’s face. Richie swiped them and threw them over his shoulder. He tried to look annoyed but dissolved into titters and thread his hand through Stan’s hair. His palm rested on his cheek and he gave Stan a soft, endearing look before punctuating it with a light slap, “Now, about that blowjob, Stannie?”

Stan swatted Richie’s hand away and shot him a look - but he complied, he wanted to do it after all. Feeling a little braver, he quickly took half of Richie into his mouth and Riche’s knee jerked violently in response, “Holy shit!”

Stan tasted Richie’s pre-come on his tongue. It was saltier than he had imagined (as much as it embarrassed him to admit, he had imagined it) and a little musty but not inherently gross or bad-tasting. It tasted, in hindsight, much like he’d expect any part of Richie to taste. The weight was… hotly heavy on his tongue. It felt inherently dirty to be sitting on his knees, hands on Richie’s thighs with his cock half-way in his mouth. That thought only encouraged him.

Stan swirled his tongue around the head, pulling back on his cock with his hand to pull back the foreskin to tongue dreadfully around it, running laps. Richie shifted and his chest was blowing with poorly concealed pants. Then, locking eyes with Richie while doing so, Stan chanced suction. His
cheeks bowed inwards and he maintained the movement of his tongue on Richie while he did it.

Richie let out a sound like a kicked dog, “Christ, Stan… you’re killing me.”

Stan jacked up the pace, bobbing his head a little faster - he couldn’t go particularly deep, being his first time and all but Stan reckons he wouldn’t mind Richie teaching him how to get it past his throat if he could. It felt amazing when Richie did it to him - so tight and so warm, he wanted to do the same for Richie. Not now, Stanley has an end game in mind.

Stan lifted himself off of Richie to gather some air - Richie looked like he could be doing with some as well. Stan jerked Richie with sharp movements that had Richie’s stomach muscles clenching, “Am I doing alright?” Stan asked he knew the answer by Richie’s blown-out pupils well enough.

“Can I marry your mouth?”

“I take that as a ‘yes’, then?”

“A resounding yes.”

Stan licked the underside of Richie’s cock, flexing his tongue and swirling it around the tip, tonguing at the slit. Richie looked like he was about to pass out. Stan took Richie back into his mouth and sucked hard, staring up at Richie while he did so - he flushed at how vulgar it must look, but Richie didn’t seem to mind one bit, until Richie groaned and asked Stan to stop, “I’m about to blow my load already. Your mouth is magic - turning me into a one-pump-chump.”

Stan gave one last teasing tug at Richie’s cock and pulled off, standing up. His knees cracked loudly when he stood up, the carpet may have been soft but his knees still had red marks from the pressure.

Richie patted his thighs, “Come on, sit.”

“I’m not a dog.”
“Aww come on, who’s a good boy, who’s a good boy? You are! Yes, you are!” Richie cooed, pulling at Stan’s cheek like a long-distance relative.

“Shut up, God. What’s gotten into you tonight, you’re being a freak,” Stan said, not unkindly.

Richie’s face shifted into something a lot more genuine, “I missed you, shitbird.”

Stan softened too. He missed Richie. He had missed him so much. Things were slotting back into place. Stan was finally home. Finally home and safe after a stormy month at sea, the threat of sinking and drowning and being lashed apart by the riptide looming over him.

Stan did what Richie asked, bracketing his hips with his knees and sat on his lap. Richie immediately wrapped an arm around him to steady him, the other drifting to Stan’s hand. Stan let Richie entwine their fingers together.

“I missed you too, Rich.”

Richie hummed and hugged Stan, resting his head on his chest, “Felt weird - not seeing you.”

Stan rubbed circles into Richie’s back, planting a soft kiss in his hair. His heart hammered inside of him. He was able to do that. He could kiss Richie, so he did. He lifted Richie’s chin with a gentle palm and pressed a soft kiss onto his chapped lips.

“Never again?” Stan said.

“Never again.”

Stan closed the gap again, heavier this time, tongues rolling together and mouths open and hot breaths panted into each other’s open mouths. In the midst of it, Richie dropped his hand from Stan’s back to cup at his ass - the suddenness of it made Stan jump - which just so happened to cause their erections to rub together.

“Holy shit - do that again,” Richie groaned. Stan did. He canted his hips forwards and ground down on Richie, relishing in the feeling of their hard-ons grinding together. Richie felt heavy against him, heavy and hot and Stan was overwhelmed with the need to have Richie take him again, splay him out on the bed and take him honestly and with none of their clouded reasons or
Stan dug his fingers into Richie’s shoulders as he rode his hips forward, long and slow and full of intent. Stan groaned and threw his head back, “Richie…”

“Yeah?”

“Please, I want it.”

Richie wrapped an arm around Stan’s waist and rolled him onto his back, loitering above him, the air puffed out of Stan when Richie manhandled him. Richie fell into place perfectly, hovering over him and tracing his fingers lightly over his ribcage, “You want it?”

Stan nodded, daring to grind up against Richie again, “I need it, I missed you.”

“I can do that,” Richie said. He lifted off of Stan to grab lube from the second drawer of his bedside locker, ‘Condom?’

Stan considered it without, briefly. The feeling of Richie fucking into him raw made him go hot all over, feeling the pulse of Richie inside his walls with no barrier, no boundaries between them. Feeling every drag of Richie’s length inside him, uninhibited. It drove swarms of tingles in his stomach but realistically, he knew better. They could always work up to it if need be, so he sighed a brief, “Yeah,” Then Richie was back between his legs, ushering him to shuffle up the bed so they were farther away from the edge.

“I don’t want to accidentally fuck you over the edge,” Richie said scooting himself between Stan’s legs, running gentle fingers up the inside of his thigh.

“You’re giving yourself a lot of credit.”

“You limped for two days.”

“Yeah, yeah I did.” Richie beamed at that, clearly very proud of himself.
After Richie opened the lube (handing it to Stan because it was too tight, then declaring, “Well I loosened it!” when Stan had successfully twisted the cap off) and warmed it up between his fingers, he circled a finger around Stan’s rim. Stan, who was staring straight up at the ceiling, curls well out of place, sucked in a sharp breath but Richie didn’t push in - just traced it.

“Richie… just put it in,” Stan groaned, not a particularly huge fan of Richie’s teasing.

“Now, babe. Don’t get greedy - I can’t just ‘put it in’ - I need to stretch you first,” Richie applied a little pressure and still didn’t fucking push it in, “Want to see you,” Richie said, manoeuvring himself so his face was hovering over Stan’s - sure, the angle made his wrist twist awkwardly, but it was worth it.

“Please, Richie,” Stan whined, not even finding it in himself to be embarrassed about the petulant act.

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Richie pushed the finger in slow, letting Stan feel every inch of it as it breached him and feel it he did.

Stan let out an airy breath, just a decibel away from a small moan. It ached deliciously, a gentle burn - the feeling of being stretched. Being stretched by Richie. That thought alone made his chest tighten a little more. Richie pressed his thumb into his perineum and shockwaves trembled under his skin.

“M-move it,” Stan bit out. Richie took his direction and slowly pulled his finger until only his fingertip was inside him, then slowly pushed it back in. Stan’s rim pulled at it as it went in and out, catching it and trying to keep it buried inside him. Stan’s eyebrows furrowed and he let out a keening sound as Richie slowly began to up the ante.

Richie pressed into him as deep as he could with this angle, twisting his finger and gently exploring inside of him, hoping to find Stan’s prostate, he couldn’t quite get deep enough at this angle but just when he was about to move back down between his legs to get a better angle, Stan had crashed their mouths together in a bruising kiss.

Well, he couldn’t move now, that would just be rude.

Stan kept a tight grip on Richie’s shoulders and began fucking back onto his finger through the kiss, the need swelling up in his chest. He fucked back desperately and Richie broke apart just so
he could watch Stan’s face pull apart into choked pleasure when he slowly pushed a second finger in.

Slowly, Stan opened up, loosening and relaxing under Richie’s stretching. Stan was shuddering out raspy breaths, wanton with need and pliant under Richie. Richie would take care of him. He trusted Richie. Richie sucked a bruise into his collarbone and punctuated it with a sharp bite - Stan let out a sharp cry and pulled Richie off of him by his hair, “That hurt!” Richie didn’t reply. His hand movements had stilled and his eyes were hazy, mouth drying up. Stan was about to ask if he was alright until he focused in behind the thick lenses and saw how blew out Richie’s eyes were, “You like getting your hair pulled?”

Richie just nodded dumbly and slowly began thrusting his fingers back into Stan, who keened at it and let go of Richie’s hair, before reconsidering and yanking him harshly towards his mouth. Open-mouthed and greedy.

“I wanna be inside you, God. You feel so tight around my fingers,” Richie scissored his fingers and the ring of muscle, although somewhat relaxed, still pushed back at the stretch.

“Do it, Richie. Come on…” Stan fucked back on his fingers and Richie swore he was dying. Stan, sweaty and dishevelled, so wanton with lust spread out on Richie’s fingers that he was canting his hips violently back and forth onto Richie. Richie stilled his fingers and let Stan fuck into himself. He was enamoured with Stan’s face, sheened with sweat and twisted in pleasure.

Richie leaned down and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth and put a hand on Stan’s hip to still him. He slowly pulled his fingers out of Stan and wiped his fingers on Stan’s calf.

“Did you just do what I think you did? That’s disgusting,” Stan said, not moving except for spreading his legs a little more for Richie, who was angrily trying to open the condom.

“Don’t say that ,” He whined, “My dick’s about to go in there,” Richie kept trying to tear at the foil of the wrapper only for his lubey fingers to keep slipping. Stan made an open-handed gimmie gesture and easily tore it open, “My white knight.”

The condom rolled on and Richie spread a little more lube onto his length. He teased the head of it against Stan’s rim, making Stan suck in a breath, “Just do it.”

Richie pushed in slowly, the pressure was immense and for a moment, Richie was ready to stop and prep Stan a little more when the head of his cock was pulled impossibly tight into Stan, his hole was hugging his cock so tight inside him Richie had to steel a breath, nearly in pain himself.
Stan, likewise, had bit down on his lip at the feeling, a mix of discomfort and the painful burn of the stretch, it didn't hurt per say as much as it stung, but it didn’t feel good either. Good things come to those who wait, of course, so Stan tried to breathe through it, long and deep, “Don’t move,” He said, clenching and unclenching his fists in the bedsheets.

“Hurt?” Richie asked, taking Stan’s erection in his hand and tugging at it slowly, enough to take the edge off, Stan let out a pleased gasp at that and nodded, agreeing, “You need to relax.”

“You try relaxing when you've got a giant dick in your ass,” Stan bit back, trying to will his muscles to loosen a little.

Richie grinned wide, “Giant?”

"Shut up," Stan said.

"No-no, you said my dick was giant. I most definitely won't shut up about that anytime soon."

"I hate you," Stan said affectionately, grabbing Richie's hand and holding it tight to his chest, tracing circles on the back of his hand, partly to distract himself and partly because he wanted to.

“Yeah, yeah. I hate you too,” Richie made a hand-talking gesture with his free hand and made a face.

Stan wonders how he could like Richie being so annoying during sex so much. It was fun, it was silly, it was everything he needed.

“You can move,” Stan said, squeezing Richie’s hand as he said it, “Please move.”

Richie didn’t need to be told twice, holding one of Stan’s hips and slowly pushing in a little more, face burning in concentration to not just bruise his fingers into his hips and fuck into him wildly like his body was begging him to.

Stan gawped when Richie bottomed out, eyes rolling back into his head with the feeling of it, “Holy shit,” His voice was shaking. His legs were shaking. Richie was so full inside of him. So complete with Richie inside of him, the ache that had been an empty hole in his gut finally being
“God, you look so fucked out already - I haven’t even done anything,” Richie’s voice was a little strained with effort, trying not to move. He rubbed assuringly at Stan’s hips, watching as Stan’s eyes came back into view and his pupils were blown wide, eyes glassy.

“Don’t move yet, give me a minute,” Stan groaned, not even trying to adjust to the pain, trying to adjust to the overwhelming feeling of Richie. It was so much. Nearly too much.

Richie pushed Stan’s legs open a little farther, making room for him to reach over and press a burning kiss to the underside of his jaw, as still as Richie tried to keep his lower half, it jolted nonetheless and Stan let out a harsh yelp.

“What did I just say - don’t fucking move. ”

“I wanted to kiss you!”

“Well don’t!”

Richie pulled a puppy-dog-face in retaliation, “You don’t want me to kiss you?”

Stan responded by tugging a fistful of Richie’s hair. Hard. The action made Richie let out a loud, uninhibited moan and fuck harshly into Stan - who let out a hoarse cry, “God - Richie, do that again.”

“Do what?” Richie asked, blinking to try and bring himself back from reality.

“Move. Move, godammit.”

Richie fucked into Stan again and Stan felt stars explode behind his eyes, he canted back and Richie got the memo. Go. All guns a blazing, Richie held onto Stan’s waist and thrust deep inside him with a powerful thrust. The words were fucked right out of Stan’s head and all he could do was blabber helplessly as he met Richie’s thrusts half-way. He didn’t realise tears were rolling down his cheeks until he tasted the salt on his tongue. It felt so impossibly good. He cried for more,
begging Richie to go harder, go faster until Richie had lifted his legs over his shoulders, pressed forward, leaning over Stan with his arms bracketing his head and fucked into him so fast that Stan had to scramble at the bedsheets for purchase, near ripping them under his manicured nails, “I missed you, I missed you so much,” Stan cried between senseless warbling, grappling at Richie, now. At his chest, his arms, his shoulders - any part of him that he could get.

Richie was panting hot and heavy over him, face twisted in effort and staring down at him with an almost offensively soft gaze, a sharp juxtaposition to the violent thrusts he was wrecking Stan with, “You’re crying.”

“Missed you.”

Richie took Stan gently in his mouth, tracing his tongue carefully over his lips, giving the bottom of Stan’s lip a light tug as he parted enough to talk, “I missed you too,” Right as Richie said that - he shifted his weight and nailed Stan’s prostate. Stan let out a loud, anguished moan and quickly moved to jerk himself off - the pressure overwhelming, consuming him, he needed release more than he has ever needed it before in his life.

Richie considered Stan and moved to mouth down the expanse of his neck, fucking into him all the while doing so, “You close?” His breath sent skittering of ice chips down his back as it ghosted over his ear in a hot breathy pant.

Stan could only make a pained noise of pleasure and stroked himself faster, teetering dangerously on the edge. Richie could feel how close he was - he was tightening dangerously around his cock - to the point were Richie found it difficult to move. So Richie did the next best thing, he spat in his palm and slapped Stan’s hand away, taking over the job of sending Stan over the edge, “You can come, want you to come on my ‘giant’ cock.”

Fireworks exploded behind Stan’s eyes. The orgasm ripped through him so strong that his back arched off the bed as he spent himself onto his stomach and over Richie’s hand. It was loud - burning in his ears and behind his eyes as it overwhelmed him. Stan swears he goes blind for a second. Then he feels Richie’s pace increase violently. Stan only capable of making little ‘uh-uh-uh’ noises as he’s desperately fucked into through his orgasm as Richie chases an orgasm of his own around the tightening of Stan’s hole.

Richie came shortly after, releasing into the condom. They both sat still, breaths panting into the air and trying to get their heart rate to slow down before they suffer simultaneous cardiac arrest.

As Richie tries to wipe a layer of sweat from his upper lip, his glasses slide down the sweat of his nose directly onto Stan’s face. They make a plastic noise as they collide with his nose. Stan huffs
and swipes them onto the bed, “Way to ruin the moment.”

Richie gives a breathless laugh, “We were having a moment?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to move ever again.”

Richie slowly pulled out, Stan letting out a small hiss at the sting of it, “I don’t mind. I’ll feed you Chinese takeaway and you can lie here in your birthday suit forever and I can ravage you when I please.”

“I hope those two activities don’t overlap. Pass me a tissue, I don't want this to dry onto my skin.”

Richie passed him a tissue, “Nah, Chinese takeaway isn’t really sex-food, is it? I mean, noodles, sure. But like - egg fried rice? Not so much.”

Stan wiped at the come on his stomach until he felt pretty much clean and tossed it into the trash. It landed and he watched lazily as Richie tied off his condom and tried to toss it into the trash, too. It missed. Stan laughed and Richie gave him the finger and got off of the bed to put it in the trash, stretching his back like a cat as he did so.

Stan watched Richie as he took two pairs of underwear from his dresser only to set them nearly on his bed, “Are you not going to put them on?” Stan asked, eyes trained on Richie’s softening penis, “I don’t want to look at your dick any more than I already have tonight.”

Richie laughed and started looking around the other side of the bed for his glasses, “Well, Mister Stanley - I seem to recall someone literally gagging for it less than half an hour ago,” Stan lobbed a pillow at him, “Haha! Caught it, nice try, Babe Ruth. Besides, you want a shower, don’t you?”

Stan contemplated it, “I want Chinese food.”

Richie plopped down on the bed, “Really? It’s late.”

“Mhmm. Couldn’t eat dinner.”
Richie looked backwards at the clock on his bedside locker. “Okay - yeah. Chinese food sounds real fuckin’ good. I’ll offer you a proposition, Stanley,” Stan hummed in response, “We both have a quick shower, walk to the Chinese place and while I order the food, you go next door to Blockbuster and rent us some movies to watch?”

“We both know you’ll just get upset because you want to watch Indiana Jones.”

“Nope - this choice is all on you, Stan the Man.”

“Teen Wolf.”

“Not a chance in fucking hell.”

They showered. Richie first, then while Stan was in the shower he laid out some clothes for Stan to borrow. Plain pair of jeans and the hoodie Richie had been wearing. Stan understood why Richie had been wearing it - it was the comfiest thing he’d ever worn. It was like wearing a blanket.

They walked down the night streets with an orange glow. Streetlights spilling amber to the pavement and Richie’s burning cigarette slicing through the cold darkness. Their fingers brushed when they walked. Stan wanted to hold Richie’s hand - but it was too risky, there were still people driving past every now and again. Stan didn’t mind as much as he thought he would, knowing that he could just reach down and grab Richie’s hand if he so wanted was enough for him.

Richie got egg rolls and lo mein, Stan got orange chicken and rice. Stan tried to teach Richie how to use chopsticks but they both got frustrated and Stan all but kicked Richie out of the room to get forks. Stan rented one of the Back to the Future movies and Richie gave him a slobbery kiss on the cheek for it.

They pushed their empty cartons to the desk and lay up against each other to watch it. The night crept on and the movie came to a close and Richie was lying with his head on Stan’s shoulder, it made his glasses lift awkwardly on his face but he doesn’t mind. Eventually, both their eyes begin to droop, long past midnight and long past what either of them would normally stay awake.

They turn the TV off and just when Stan settles into the bed beside Richie, he taps him on the cheek which results in a gravelly sounding, “What?”
“Do you want me to open the window?”

Richie turned over to face him, but didn’t open his eyes, “If you want it open, go for it.”

“I never have the window open, I’m asking if you want me to open it for you.”

Richie blinked up at him, eyes squinted and heavy with sleep, “I thought you liked the window open?”

Stan stared at him, a little disbelievingly, “No? It’s always freezing. I wake up and I can’t feel my feet and my lips are near blue every time I stay over, I only tolerate it because I know you like it open.”

“...I don’t like the window open. I only-” Richie let out a soft chuckle into the pillow, “I only kept it open because I thought you liked it open.”

The two stared at each other, a little dumbfounded before breaking down into giggles, even Stan found himself near crying with it, all this time Stan had been freezing his ass off because he thought Richie liked the window open - Richie had been doing pretty much the same thing.

“We’re fucking dumb. I’ve been freezing my nutsack off for no fuckin’ reason,” Richie said, wiping his tired eyes from tears.

“Wouldn’t take much,” Stan said, resting his head on Richie’s shoulder - revelling in his warmth. Window open or not, it was still cold.

Richie laughed at that, short and warm and pressed a kiss into Stan’s damp curls and softly spoke something utterly ridiculous into it. The same thing he had always said. Time and time again which was, without any room for misinterpretation, “I love you.”

And well… that was it, wasn’t it? That was it all along: love.

Love isn’t a four-letter word with an exact definition - it can’t be. Love is a lot of things to Stan. Watching Richie’s shitty movies, slipping his glasses onto his face for him, holding his arm whenever he’s getting too agitated, making stupid jokes and laughing late into the night, Richie’s
odd socks, and his smattering of freckles which darken in the summer - it’s everything. Love is just a hold-it word for all of those feelings, the feelings of Stan being home as long as he’s with Richie; his entire being consumed by him in a way that is not at all overwhelming, just safe.

Two souls meeting and connecting in such a way beyond what any other two people could emulate. It isn’t a word at all; love is a person, love is a time and a place and an emotion and a full-body drug that Stan never wants to quit.

That was it.

That’s what it had been all along. Stan lets out a loud, relieving belly-laugh at himself. He was so blind. He was so blind, how could he have ever thought otherwise?

“Are you- are you seriously fucking laughing at that? You’re a real asshole, Stanley,” Richie grumbled and moved out of his hair, but notably not any further.

“No.. Rich, I’m laughing because,” another choked off giggle, like an excited child, almost giddy with glee, “I love you too.”

Richie paused, staring wide-eyed at him, almost suspended in disbelief, “I’ll lament my emotions about that later… but first and foremost why the fuck is that funny?”

“It is, just a little bit though, isn’t it?”

Richie mulled it over, “I suppose it is. Stanley Urine and Trashmouth Tozier, what a couple, huh?”

Just as Stan was about to fall asleep, nestled up on Richie’s shoulder, feeling more at peace with every aspect of himself than he had in a long time, with a beautiful word to put a name on all of the wonderful and terrible feelings that had encompassed every part of him for the past… long time, Richie spoke. Gravelly and mumbled as if he had barely lifted himself from the cusp of sleep.

“What is it, Rich?” Stan whispered, not quite catching what Richie had said.

“I said,” Stan could hear a sleepy smile in his voice, “Are you still ‘not gay’?”

“No.”
“No?”

“It’s only been you, only ever been you, Richie.”

“So you’re… Richie-sexual?” Richie traced his fingers up Stan’s ribs. Just because he could.

“Maybe. If I give you a kiss will you shut up and go to sleep?”

“There’s only one way to find ou-” Stan pressed his lips to Richie’s before Richie even finished his sentence and when he pulled off, he kissed smattering of freckles on Richie’s cheeks. Just because he could.

Chapter End Notes

I’d like to thank you for reading this far. All 115k words. Your time, your effort and your willingness to grit your teeth through the first few chapters when I was trying to find my footing means the world to me. It makes me so happy that such a large range of people have enjoyed something I created. I hope some of you stick around to see what else I have planned for future Stozier projects (Halloween night!).

I’d like to thank every single person who left kudos, subscribed and most of all; commented. Comments drive me so much, being able to see an icon and a username and a personality reaching out and telling me how much they enjoyed the fic truly is what makes authors want to write. Especially one commenter in particular, who, unknowingly at the time, stopped this fic getting abandoned.

Some of you may know that this fic was on a hiatus for a year (?) and I had all but given up on it, no longer happy with writing or myself, struggling a lot with my worth and value as a creator. So one day, I was clearing out some old works on Ao3, deleting some works from old fandoms I didn't want to be associated with, and I saw this fic and said to myself 'well, I'm not going to finish it, am I?’ and my finger was hovering over the Orphan button when I thought, just for shits and giggles, to read the comments.

And on every. single. chapter. Spicywolfsbane (or @slaveofimagination on tumblr), your comments were so in-depth, clearly written with thought and appreciation and honesty, you burned through a LOT of the chapters in one night, staying up until 5am to finish it - I sat at my computer and cried because I have read fics I adored so much that I gave up sleep for them, I remember that feeling - and to know I gave someone else that feeling overwhelmed me. Your dedicated comments are what made me continue this fic - and I can't thank you enough. I went back in heads-first, I loved writing, then I began reading again, which only served me to love writing even MORE. My passion relighted and hundreds of ideas are flying through my head now,
all thanks to your wonderful, wonderful comments. I can never thank you enough for what you've done.

So here, I say goodbye to Fries. We say goodbye to Fries together. This silly little fic has brought me so many tears of frustration and hours of joy. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for reading.

lots of love, Kellie [@georgiedenbrough on tumblr.]

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!