ITerations

by grayorca

Summary

AU. This is what happens when the wolf decides to try and play sheepdog.

_Tentative hiatus until further notice._

Notes

_One-Time Disclaimer:_ *IT* © Stephen King.

Inspired by the likes of _Commit To The Bit / Georgie and the Clown_ and _Turned Good / You Can Keep Her._

Why? Because, yes, there isn't enough of this AU in this fandom.

Also can be found on FF.Net, same username.

Ratings and genres vary with every chapter. Not to be released in chronological order. Enjoy!
Friendly Fire

Beverly Marsh didn't need cosmic-grade powers of perception to see the impatience was rising in Richie's mind, as unstoppable as a returning high tide. She noticed, but that only served to help her hands move faster. Stripping away the protective packaging and applying the perfunctory antibacterial ointment, in what-was-becoming-practiced ease, she wrapped the Band Aid sideways around her friend's hand.

*Three... two... one.*

The tide peaked.

"Ouch! Careful!"

The downside to working fast was, perhaps, she wasn't as gentle as she could have been.

Then again, Richie's fidgeting didn't help.

Unceremoniously, she dropped his hand. "One more of these, and I'm taking the scissors away from you."

Her comment was met with quiet snickering, as the other Losers overheard, but none of them hazarded a quip.

While the sound rubbed him the wrong way just a bit, Richie pretended to glower as if it were the greatest insult, cradling his left hand as if the minor gash across the palm - now safely bandaged - were a sprain. "Yes, Nurse Marsh."

"How many is that now, anyway?" Because he knew Richie could endure no more than sixty seconds of silence at a time, maximum, Stan was quick to offer a prompting question, for it was better for someone to answer it than hear Richie complain anew.

Frustration was already running high for him today.

Arts and crafts, on a sunny Saturday, at the quarry? It was literally fifty feet that way, at the forest's edge. The air temperature was somewhere just shy of roasting, even in the shade. Wasn't the thought of swimming more appealing?

It was summer for fuck's sake.

Fuming, Richie glanced up, past the rims of his glasses. Typical. Even as he spoke, Stan's attention never lifted from meticulously applying the latest strip of tape to his paper contraption.

Tozier leaned against the tree trunk behind him and slumped back down into a sitting position, retaking his spot among the circle the gathered Losers had formed. His pitiful attempt at a project was utterly ignored, so he watched the others work. Scattered in the patchy swath of grass between them lay a veritable shallow sea of empty tape rolls, crayons and colored pencils, and multi-colored scraps of construction paper.

A set of hardcover books, opened to various step-by-step folding diagrams, sat by Bill's and Ben's feet respectively. Beyond their circle, the group's bikes formed a protective barricade against the forest and any would-be ambushes an unexpected 'attacker' might attempt from that direction.
Up until that moment, though, the only one proving remotely dangerous to their afternoon activities was Richie.

At least in terms of killing the mood.

Considering this, Bill tried to make light of his answer, with a half-smile for good measure. A little ribbing wasn't uncalled for. "Six... I t-think?"

Beverly closed the plastic First Aid kit with a snap, buckling its latch in a motion that seemed somehow-dignified. Too dignified for her to offer any confirmation to Bill's estimate.

Eddie, sitting cross-legged across from Richie, harbored no such reservations. He brushed pine needles from his knee-high socks. "At least. The first was the best."

"Best?" Richie repeated. "Never would'a thought you'd be happy at the sight of me bleeding, Eds."

"Were you so upset that we weren't in for swimming today you just decided to end things with a slash on the wrist, play it off like an accident?"

Richie scoffed, holding out both hands for any interested party's scrutiny. The first nick wasn't quite a slash as Kaspbrak described, but it was an impressive line of red, bound with three pieces of suture tape.

As no one else bothered, Ben leaned over for a closer look at the mounting damage. "Your Mom's gonna have a canary when she sees that."

"Don't worry. I have a story in mind already - I lost a fight with a badger."

"There were five of 'em. I was fightin' them off," Kaspbrak intoned, with dramatic hand gestures to match.

"Really?" Mike paused mid-snip, trimming one side of the tailplane of his paper plane to a more aggressive angle. "You'd sooner admit you lost a fight with some wild animal than tell the truth of this?"

"He just doesn't wanna admit it's only safe to leave him with the kidDie scissors."

The solemn, yet wisecracking comment, so out-of-nowhere in its delivery, drew immediate laughter, noticeably louder than before. Cackling madly, Eddie fell sideways in the grass, overtaken by mirth. Ben chuckled behind one hand. Even Beverly cracked a smile.

Richie, nowhere near as amused, grabbed the nearest piece of ammo on hand, and fired at the offender.

"No one asked you, Stripes!"

Unfortunately, in his haste, he failed to aim the acorn.

And even more unfortunately for him, it somehow missed the bigger target and struck the smaller one seated at the clown's side.

Rather than build paper planes, Georgie Denbrough had opted instead to practice his nautical knots, courtesy of the Sea Scout manual Ben had found for him. Lacking any string, he was making do with the undone laces from one of Pennywise's outstretched boots.

Engrossed in his task, the little boy did not notice the sailing acorn until it nailed him in the temple
with a stinging smack.

"Ah-Ow!"

As quickly as it began, the laughter died off, as Georgie clutched his face and burst into fervent tears. Ben's mouth fell open in mute shock. Mike dropped his scissors, disbelieving outrage writ large on his face, mirroring Bill's. "Richie?!"

Then the uproar ensued.

In the millisecond it took for him to realize the damage he had done and register Georgie's cry, the once-livid instigator found himself tackled by a *virtual blur* of silver and red. Laid flat on his back, gloved hands pinning his shoulders down, the wind momentarily gone from his lungs, Richie gaped and blinked stupidly at the painted visage growling at him.

Pennywise's face was half-warped, jaw distended in a wide, beastly snarl, dripping fangs poised mere centimeters from the boy's nose.

Somewhere in the background, Richie heard the others rallying to his defense. Their panicked pleas mingled and ran together, leaving no room to guess who said what:

"Pen, no! It's okay!"

"No biting! No!"

Hasty footsteps scrambled their way, twigs snapping underfoot. In the span of a few tense seconds, five sets of hands tried to pry them apart.

"He wasn't aiming at Georgie!"

"Stop, wait!"

Gradually seeming to return to his senses, Pennywise stopped growling, teeth retracting. Very seldom did anything get between him and a target, and the novelty alone was enough to give him pause. One yellow eye, followed by the other, glanced sideways at the person that had boldly grabbed his left forearm.

Bill was frowning, eyes sparkling with anger, but he did not shy away from the monster's gaze. He leaned close and uttered only a single command: "Don't."

The eldritch creature stared down at him, mute, for the longest time, not unlike an unruly lion whose tamer had just cracked the whip. No doubt he was weighing his options: to listen to Bill, or to lash out at him instead. The latter was just as likely as the former.

With a sighing hiss, he finally drew back, letting the Losers drag Richie away to a safe distance. Then, throwing a worried look over his shoulder, he loped back across the clearing on all fours, bells ringing.

Richie's mouth worked twice before he found his voice again, meek and trembling, but there. He could feel his hands twitching uncontrollably, even as the shock melted away. "Yeah, that... that kinda happened."

Eddie and Stanley helped him to sit up. In just as short a second, Eddie's expression went from concerned to critical. Without a missing beat, he smacked Richie upside the back of the head.
"You idiot, he could've killed you just now."

"He didn't think," Stan defended. "Like so many other times I wish he had."

Which 'he' was being referred to was anyone's guess.

"How could I miss...?" Richie murmured, rubbing distractedly at his disheveled hair, still trying to focus. His fast-forwarding emotions had already gone from fearing for his life to being almost amazed. Amazed that he wasn't lying there, a freshly-slain cadaver. "It's like trying to miss a billboard with a shotgun."

Without warning his world exploded in pain again, glasses almost jolting off his face. "Ow!" He grabbed for the back of his skull, shoulders hunched with arms folded protectively over his head. "Eds, enough. I know, I screwed up. You don't gotta beat it into me."

"Just making sure," Eddie deadpanned.

In the awkward near-quiet that followed, Bill sat and waited, steady as a rock in a stream, elbows on his knees. His face was unchanged.

Slowly, Richie lowered his arms and straightened his glasses.

"Sorry, Bill."

Pennywise, meanwhile, was having his own difficulties.

"Bevs, please..."

"No. Stay back." Ten feet away, the redhead stood her ground, sheltering a still-sniffling Georgie behind her jeans. She sidestepped to keep herself between the two as Pennywise tried to weave around her, unsuccessfully. As he ducked in the opposite direction, she steered him aside, as one might an over-inquisitive dog. "No. Not until you say you're sorry."

"SoRry?" He sat back on his heels, face screwed up in abject confusion. "Why? Richie threw it!"

"Only 'cause you don't know when to keep quiet."

Eddie facepalmed. "You ever notice how the same can be said of you, Rich?"

Pennywise bristled again, yanking his arm away from Beverly. He stalked back across the clearing, low to the ground, like a cougar about to pounce again. The edges of his irises were still yellow. "So yOU hurt GeorgIe instEad?"

Stan took half a step back, reaching impulsively for the trunk of the nearest tree, as if meaning to hide behind it.

"Pen, it was an accident," Eddie repeated, trying in vain to highlight the most important fact about this fracas.

Richie threw up his hands, not letting the argument lie. "I wouldn't have come close if you two weren't joined at the goddamn hip everywhere you went. Which seems to be a lot more often than not lately. Anyone else notice that besides me?"

"StiLL, he DIdn’T deserve tHat."

"We already told you, it wasn't on purpose, Doughboy! What, only you are allowed an infinite
number of screw ups? I ran out of fingers and toes a long time ago keeping track."

"Shut up, Richie!" Eddie snapped before he could help himself.

Pennywise's eyes flared to a rarely-seen molten orange. "Why, yOu LiTTe-" 

"Stop that, both of you, right now!"

Bill's voice finally rose. He stood and marched past the clown, over to his brother's side, draping a protective arm around Georgie's shoulders. The younger Denbrough's arms immediately laced themselves around him. Shiny tear trails marred Georgie's cheeks, and staring up at Bill, his wide, soft eyes were threatening to spill over with more waterworks.

For once, Richie heeded a command to remain silent, and averted his gaze, visibly abashed. Still crouching, Pennywise went as still and mute as a statue, for reasons only his multifaceted conscience could fathom. The forest around seemed just as deathly quiet, as if dreading the next outburst. Seeing what their vicious bickering had resulted in effectively shushed the two of them.

Reticent in the face of such social turmoil, Ben wordlessly stepped up and offered a handkerchief to Georgie, who silently wiped at his still-running nose.

"There's more than enough blame to go around here," Mike concluded, hands on his hips.

Beverly paced, taking in the breadth of the scene before her. Her scowl remained the same, but she seconded Mike's words in a tone that was almost forgiving. "You should both apologize. You, for hurting him. And you, for scaring him."

As unsure looks turned his way, one after another, Bill was decided by a final watery frown from Georgie. He nodded, rendering the verdict. "It's only fair."

Pennywise and Richie exchanged a mutual look of miserable irony before hanging their heads simultaneously. "Sorry, Georgie."

To his credit, Georgie put on his bravest smile, as good as any proverbial olive branch. He wiped the last of his tears away, twisting the plaid cloth nervously in his hands.

"T-that's okay. C-can we fly the planes now?"

They did, but there was little cheer in the sendoff.

Later that night, Richie would muse to himself, drifting off to sleep, staring at his bandaged hands, that at least he had earned his injuries over some kind of fight, even if it wasn't with the animal he claimed it to be.

Around the same time, the creature, lingering unseen in the sewers outside the Denbrough home, considered what remainder of the year he had left, and pondered the newfound wisdom of him keeping some kind of safer distance from the Losers in the interim, indulging in only as much close company as he could trust himself with.

Running with scissors was dangerous, after all.
New Heights

Chapter Summary

Stupid dare is stupid, Eddie.

Chapter Notes

Based on something that happened to me at camp one summer.

Somewhere in the woods west of Derry, a certain germaphobic boy discovered something they had not known waking up that Tuesday morning.

Eddie Kaspbrak didn't know he was afraid of heights.

Until he looked down, and realized he was.

Vehemently.

Honestly, the climb up had been almost fun. It was surprisingly easy, even exhilarating. Eddie was certainly not cast from an athletic mold, but he was pleased at how fluidly it had gone. He was just small enough that weaving his way up through gaps between the various limbs, like some vertically-crawling snake, had made for an entertaining challenge.

The surrounding oak and pine trees were closer to the fifty-foot-tall mark than the monster he scaled. Looking out across the top of the forest, a vantage point he didn't think he would ever find himself in the position to see, that was something else.

Probably as close to flying as you could get while still technically grounded.

Then he made the mistake of stopping, seating himself to catch his breath, then looking down at how far he had gone.

Too far.

Way too far.

Then it ceased to be fun.

Truth.

Why? Why didn't I pick truth?

With fingertips dug in as far as they would go, legs positioned crookedly underneath him, Eddie just managed not to sob, momentarily overwhelmed. His eyes were clamped firmly shut. He took solace in the fact that his reluctant truth-or-dare opponent, Ben, was probably feeling no small measure of guilt at this outcome.
Daring someone to climb to the highest possible branch of the biggest nearby oak tree, to find a
green acorn? What had he been thinking? The new kid was probably beside himself with panic, but
at this height, Eddie had no way of knowing for sure.

Stan wouldn't climb to his rescue. If anything, Ben was keeping him from having an anxiety
breakdown. He was probably off on an unstoppable blather, something like "his Mom's gonna kill
us, our parents are gonna ground us, etc."

Richie, per usual, was not helping.

Even if he was picking his way up after their treenapped-cat of a boy.

"Don't wet your pants, Eds, I'm coming."

Arms around the trunk, hands threaded together, Eddie pressed his forehead to the bark, blinked
once, and squeezed his eyes shut. The view from above was terrifying enough, without the high-up
whistle of wind against his ears, ruffling his short brown hair. Despite these discomforts, the universe
demanded he answer Richie's quip nonetheless.

"Keep heckling me, Rich, and I can't make any promises."

His quivering response wavered into sing-songy territory as a merciless gust of wind rocked the oak
tree.

Through that, he sensed a stunned pause. His mind could practically see a wide-eyed Richie frozen
mid-climb. "You wouldn't."

"Less talking, more climbing, Tozier!" Hanging on for dear life, Eddie ignored the way his voice
wavered and piqued, feeling the tree sway noticeably. Its wide branches, flush with greenery, were
practically sails, made to catch the wind.

"Did you get it?"

"Get wh- fuck! Really?!" Gingerly, Eddie parted his watery eyes, glimpsing only a silverly blur,
clinging to the next reachable branch, directly above his own, before clamping them shut again.
"Fuck, man, doing that, the jumpscare thing, you're so not helping."

"And... Richie is?"

"Hey! I heard that, Stripes!"

Eddie swallowed, scarcely daring to breathe. With his misfiring nerves, he didn't trust himself to
make the right call. But he trusted neither Richie or Pennywise to make a helpful difference even
less.

"Forget the flippin' acorn, Ding-Dong. This is serious."

"It's okay. I'll grab one if you don't." Even if the creature was there only to serve as the
counterpoint to Eddie's fear, Pennywise sounded completely at ease, utterly untroubled by this
unforeseen development. Given his astral origins, that was not surprising. Why would someone from
outer space be afraid of heights?

Would the clown be so nonchalant if it were Georgie stuck here, eighty feet off the ground?

Eddie was almost offended. Almost.
But then, despite his tender age, Georgie knew a stupid dare when he saw one.

And Pennywise was here. Not catching flies like the rest of their captive audience, still on the ground.

"Argh. This is so messed up."

"It's not that bad, Eds."

"S-says the guy who crash-landed here eons ago," Eddie stuttered.

"I never crashed."

"No. You skidded to a stop on your face in a primordial swamp somewhere a few billion years ago. Same difference, dude."

"Heh. If it helps you to laugh at that, go ahead."

_Eddie coughed out a laugh. He dared to keep his running eyes open, long enough for the prevailing breeze to dry the wetness away. That done, he got a good look at his would-be climbing partner, brow furrowed. "Dolt. You don't see the danger I'm in?"

Pennywise tilted his head, that god-awful smile ever-plastered across his red lips. He lay draped upon the branch, one arm dangling freely, looking like an insane parody of a jungle cat. Or a trapeze artist. Or both.

Looking down at the stranded boy, he turned over on his back to stare at Eddie, upside-down, mockingly, as his own weight were somehow excluded from gravity's pull. Even the layered collar of his outfit lay flat, as if it were made of wax, able to hold its form no matter which way he was orientated.

"You won't fall, Eds. I won't let you."

"Sure... surrre, you won't," Eddie grumbled into his aching shoulder. He kept picturing his lanky, thin-boned frame, tumbling down the length of the tree, pinballing off branches all the way.

Bones snapping. Skin tearing. Organs imploding.

"I won't."

"Right, sure..." The reassurance might have been faked, or genuine. Eddie didn't exactly care. Talking was taking his mind off the initial stabbing terror, bit by bit. He swallowed again. "Any other... useful advice you can throw my way, oh floaty one?"

Hair swishing free in the breeze, Pennywise turned his neck, eying the boy up like some strange flying fox before deciding on the matter. "Hmm. Breathe easier. You'll need your strength for the climb back down."

_That... actually kinda makes sense. Which is weird, coming from you. You're the incarnation of not-making-sense._

In contrast, all he could find to say was, "Okay..."

"That," Then Eddie felt a tapping against the back of his hand, numb as it was. "And the blood is
just about drained out of your hands. You'll lose your grip if you don't let them relax."

"You all right, Eds?" Richie hollered up, still some twenty feet below. But getting closer.

"He's good!"

"I can answer for myself, Dingbat," Eddie sniped, cautiously flexing his stiffened fingers. Admittedly, he was feeling up to the task. "Richie?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me again why I came up here."

*Just so that I can know I'm not alone in the arena of Acting on Glaringly Stupid Decisions."

"Because you'd sooner do this than tell the truth about your sixth grade math teacher."

"I told you, that story's not fit for children's ears!"

"Not fit, just like your Mom!"

"Beep-beep, Richie," Pennywise barked, righting himself, at last showing something like anger for their ludicrous circumstances. "That's not helping."

The eyes rolled themselves. Willing himself to breathe deep, banking as much oxygen as his narrow chest could stow, Eddie unwound one arm from the trunk. He winced, working his fingers back to their normal dexterity. Impressions from the bark showed on the length of the skin on his arm, he had held on so tightly.

Just as cautiously, he unfolded the bent leg that he had sat upon for ten nail-biting minutes. There was a rush of warmth as blood returned to the limb, refilling pinched arteries, and the fuzziness of his sleeping foot gradually faded.

"Okay, okay... I think I'm good."

Chiming bells answered him.

"You made it up here. Of course you are."

"Don't throw caution to the wind just yet, man," Richie lectured. Panting, sweat visible on his brow, he reached up and pulled himself to the next available branch below Eddie. Somewhere along the way he managed to let stray leaves lodge themselves in his hair. A regular Tarzan-in-waiting. "You ready?"

Kaspbrak let his hand ghost over the closed zipper of his fanny pack, still riding at his hip, and thought twice. One pull on the inhaler would be more trouble than it was worth. He hadn't indulged in any on the way up, oddly enough.

Surely the climb *down* would be easier.

"Yeah, I... Pen?"

The entity righted himself in one smooth motion, crouching upon his branch as easily if it were a balance-beam in the high school gym.

"Hmm?"
"...Find me that stupid acorn, will you?"

The clown's smile turned to a toothy grin. He said nothing, but reached for the next branch overhead and ascended nimbly, all but disappearing into the top third of the oak's foliage.

"Dude's part rabid monkey, I swear," Richie intoned under his breath.

*Heh. Not such a bad thing in this case.* Eddie thought as they descended together, watching each other's backs as they went.
"Agh... This is *boring*, Stan-IEy..."

Stan kept the binoculars glued to his eyes, completely unmoved by his pupil's doubts. Give it time, give it time. That Pennywise had even bothered sticking around this long, rather than wink out of existence, as he was wont to do, said the cosmic entity didn't really find this activity as unexciting as watching proverbial paint dry.

After all, the clown had made a legitimate effort to behave. Whatever legitimate meant for him. Namely, he hadn't tried for one physics-defying prank or jumpscare.

Yet.

"Wow," Stan mumbled, affecting mock offense. His eyes continued to pan sideways, glued to the space where the treetops, overlooking the hiking trail, met the eggshell-blue sky. "We've hardly been here ten minutes."

There was a rustling in the grass, cloth swishing against the blades. Though his bent arms were starting to ache, Stan resisted the temptation to check on his companion. The boy could see it in his head easily enough: Pennywise, lounging on the ground, practically begging for mercy at Stan's feet.

Kinda nice to know that, at least once, he had managed to drive someone else to the point of crawling and bemoaning their unwanted tutelage.

"That's all? It feels more like hours."

"Sometimes, that's what it takes. Keep your voice down."

As though he somehow thought it didn't count as his voice, Pennywise gave another melodramatic sigh. Whatever number you could assign it, Stan hadn't bothered keeping count.

*Thump.*
Stanley silently forgave the bench for the minor lurch it gave at being kicked.

"Why did I agree to this?"

"Because Bev said you need the practice."

"At being bored?"

"No, dummy. Being a good friend, even when it means doing things you don't like." He lowered the binos, took one brief glance down at the silver-suited clown's sullen mien, then pressed them back to his eyes. "Don't look at me like that. Keep playing the sourpuss, and see if I invite you along next time."

"As if this sad excuse for a hobby can get any more- riveting."

Stan snorted what-began-life-as a stifled chuckle, despite logic telling him there was something to be offended at there.

Now you're starting to sound like Richie.

A late springtime breeze stirred the forest around them, blowing along the trail as if it were a veritable wind tunnel. Stan breathed in a dose of the fresh air, savoring it. Even weathering a cosmic being's juvenile misgivings couldn't take away from the effects of that peaceful aroma. Better this than the stuffiness of the high school or the oppressive fugue of the synagogue.

He took little notice of the gloved hand which inchwormed its way onto the bench beside him, and then, with a single darting movement, snatched the birdwatcher's guide away. Hopelessly distracted by the agitated flapping noises that followed, Stan frowned and lowered the binos to his lap.

Pennywise lay sprawled on his back in the grass behind the bench, ankles crossed, birdbook held by its spine above his face. Bells ringing, he made a show of pawing violently through the chapters, blurring his way from cover-to-cover, hardly pausing long enough to appreciate one page from the next.

"What are you even looking for?"

Is this really what Dad puts up with from me?

Banishing that comparison, Stan offered an honest answer:

"Page 329, the folded corner."

Pennywise raised a brow at the boy's tight-lipped command, but surprisingly, he skimmed to the aforementioned page, braced his fingers against the text, and gave it a moment's consideration.

"The gyr-falcon?"

Stan nodded. "Largest of the falcons, presents as a silver-white sometimes, rarely seen in the northeast. I thought you'd appreciate it."

If possible, Pennywise looked more critical. Appreciating anything in Stan's choice of target was clearly the furthest emotion from his quicksilver mind.

He blinked. "There's a picture of one on a cliff. We're nowhere near the mountains."

"There's an avian sanctuary south of town. They sometimes turn their raptors loose. The trained ones
always give the forest a visit before flying back home."

His understudy glanced at the book a final time, before closing it with a *slap*.

"You knoW this... hoW?"

Stan rolled his eyes. "It's an easy couple of names off my sightings bucket list, okay? We might get lucky."

*Lord knows I can't ever have an easy pass on anything. Even when I try to relax.*

Pennywise tilted his head, affecting a puzzled face very much like that of a bewildered Georgie Denbrough. "BuckeTs aren't liSts."

"That'll be your next phonics lesson."

"GoodY."

In an effort to deflect any more impending sarcasm, Stan decided to change tact. He patted the empty bench space beside him.

"Here, sit."

Confronted with the stern command, Pennywise obliged, expression downturned and as full of lines as a dejected bulldog's.

Stan traded his binoculars for the field guide. "Look."

With a look that was the definition of dubious, the clown pressed them to his eyes, oversized hands half-cupped around the lenses, lanyard strap dangling against his chest. He made a single halting and highly-experimental scan of the treeline.

Moments later, the binoculars were handed back.

"They'Re out of focUs."

"What? How?"

Puzzled, Stan lifted them back to his eyes, fingertips gently tweaking the dial between the scopes. He hadn't *seen* Pennywise readjust anything.

Nor did Stan see the furtive grin that practically drew itself across the clown's face.

"I'vE got a betTer idea."

Stan's breath hitched at the loud *pop* beside his ear. Clenching his jaw, counting to three, and then unclenching, he lowered the binoculars (for what turned out to be the final time) and frowned at the empty air his otherworldly company had once occupied.

It was a diversion. The lenses were no fuzzier or sharper than before.

*Figures. Wait until Bev hears you bailed out. Your eyes will stay out of alignment for a week.*

Lesson over, Stan crammed the binos and book back into his waiting knapsack. He started back up the path, inwardly cursing the world for making him walk uphill to the grove where he had stashed his bike.
Unexpectedly, another bursting-balloon pop sounded off. Right beside his head. Heart skipping, Stan covered his ears on impulse, practically jumping three feet backwards.

"What the fff-"

In his panic, he glanced up. His jaw dropped.

The sharp and unforgiving profile of a raptor stared down at him, wings half-flared, perched innocuously on a oak tree branch, some ten feet above the path. Sporting a light gray coat flecked with darker, silvery plumage, it was a gyrfalcon, *Falco rusticolus*, accurate in every way.

Except for the size.

Most falcons weren't the size of a greyhound.

And the colors weren't a hundred-percent accurate, either. Nowhere in their natural history had any specimen ever presented with vibrant orange primary or tail feathers. Or blue eyes.

Hands catching in shock on his backpack's straps, Stan's feet clunked to a stop. His mind stalled momentarily to match. He blinked. "Seriously?"

The gyrfalcon's head cocked to one side, yellow bill snapping twice, otherwise holding as still as a statue.

That was, until its taloned feet released from the branch, and it dropped like a rock, wings angled back in a textbook hunting dive.

Stupefied, Stan's mind dialed back up to full speed, as a terrified rabbit's might as it acknowledges danger hurtling its way. Spotty flashes of Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Disney's *The Jungle Book* vultures danced through his head before he thought to frantically backpedal. His heel caught a stray stick, causing him an impressive stumble, before staggering back to a safe distance.

"N-no, no, stay back!"

With wings flaring, the stooping raptor hit the ground with a soft thump before the boy. The impossibly-huge bird hopped toward him, standing as tall as Georgie, emitting a little keening cry.

*Birding doesn't work like this!*

Stan would have laughed at himself for the ridiculous timing of that thought, but his mouth said something entirely different. "You got the size wrong!" he blurted out.

The gyr jolted to a stop, rocking forward, then back, unstable on its proportionally-huge talons. If possible, its head tilted even further to the left. Its orange wings mantled, then dropped comically to the ground at its sides.

All were behaviors no normal falcon would ever engage in.

"Awk?"

Nor would a normal one respond so literally to such an out-of-left-field observation.

"The s-size. It's not realistic. Gyrs aren't the size of an eagle."

If it were possible with a raptor's fixed, unemotive stare, for a bird to look confused, then slowly turn smug, Stan would have thought he had gone momentarily bonkers. Particularly at the moment when
the falcon's beak split as if it had lips and grinned, the narrow space inside filled with intersecting fangs.

And when it spoke in a high, hissy tone.

"RealiSTic. WhEre's the fUn in thAt, Stan-Ley?"

Stan gulped. No, don't. Do not even think-

His feet betrayed him. One nervous half step back, and the falcon lunged.

"Agh!"

It was like being hit by a very fluffy sack of dirt. Somehow, the raptor had weight behind it. Propelling itself dead-center into the boy's torso, Stan cried out more from shock than fear, arms aflail. His backpack made an ominous crunch as it broke his fall.

Pain danced along his spine before nesting somewhere between his shoulder blades. When he regained his bearings, he realized he was still laid out on the hard-packed ground. The gyrfalcon was perched atop his chest, talons splayed upon his shirt, orange wings held wide.

It was still grinning.

And the thing thought it was charming to boop his beak against Stanley's nose. "Tag, you'Re it!"

Stan coughed, clutching the back of his throbbing head. It paled in comparison to his back. "Not funny, Pen!" he choked, eyes squinting.

"HeH. It's a liTle funny."

"Like getting-sandbagged funny?" Temper flaring, Stan aimed a punch. "How's this for amusing?"

Pennywise actually gave a startled squawk as he was thrown aside. The impact was so jarring, bits of silver down feathers peeled off his form to float upon the breeze.

Stan didn't look to see where the alien landed. He heard a branch snap, followed by rustling leaves. With a grunt he sat up, and twisted around to check his crushed pack, wincing as the movement pulled on his back.

To the side of the path, a man-shaped form pried itself out of the underbrush, cringing and holding its brow in one hand. "Ow... Stan-Ley..."

"No! Don't even start! Look what you've done." To his dismay, Stan found his precious binoculars were no longer intact. One of the lenses had been cracked. And that was all the trigger he needed to unleash a long-fester ing rant, one he had been harboring for the better part of winter and into springtime.

Pennywise gaped, eyes centered. Whether he was actually astonished at the damage he had done, or simply putting on another act, Stanley couldn't tell.

And he was really tired of not being able to tell the difference.

"StaRn, I'm soR - "

"Enough!"
Chucking the binos aside, the livid boy stood up, towering over the clown for once, who all but shrank back into hiding amid the bushes, staring up at him with wide blue eyes.

"I don't know why I thought this would be a good idea, not with you in mind, not at all. Why? Because you have all the impulse control of a two-year-old, a completely ass-backwards sense of humor, and no idea what it means to go too far. You think you can smooth it all over with niceties and balloons and a oh-but-I-don't-know-better, but no! It only excuses so much. At some point, you gotta admit the truth, that you're just not made that way. And no amount of pretending is ever gonna change that, you infuriating, fractal-minded freak."

His piece said, mentally feeling about twenty pounds lighter, Uris made to depart. Already he was considering what meager possessions he might hawk, what chores he might take on, to earn some cash to replace the binoculars. Worse, he was dreading the lecture his father would pull out about professing responsibility for one's belongings.

Spurred on by these maddening thoughts, Stan stomped his way up the trail.

That was, until a meek, halting voice called after him.

"But... I'm trying, aren't I?"

Stan flinched, feeling sharply-pointed claws settle on one shoulder, light as feathers. It took every ounce of his self control to not wrench away, or throw another punch. He stopped, noting with dismay how his bike sat not twenty feet away, resting safely on its kickstand.

Turning his back when he thought it was safe. That was his third biggest mistake today.

He took another breath, grit his teeth, and let it out slowly. Raging emotions aside, he tried in vain to think logically. Keeping up with Pennywise's mercurial shifts in mood took actual effort.

Eyes closed, he breathed in again. "Yes, you're trying, but what gets me is how you seem to try in all the wrong ways."

"How can I know what's wrong if no one shows me?"

"Because you just don't seem to understand, even when we try. Or what, we can't tell the difference - with our stupid, primitive, single-wavelength brains? To you, if it doesn't fall under 'food' or 'amusement', it doesn't appear to be worthy of learning. If you would only listen..."

Moments later, after another breeze kicked up around them, Pennywise went on where the unfinished thought had trailed off with one of his own.

"...Is this better?"

Stan blinked his eyes open and froze anew, muscles tense. In that minute fraction of time, the entity's voice had seemingly jumped places. A strange, soft clack sounded off beside his ear.

From above and behind him, to one shoulder. Steeling himself, Stan gingerly let his eyes slide sideways, to the right.

A... Pica pica?

The scientific name crossed his mind before Stan had fully realized what he was looking at. A species not at all native to North America.
"How did..."

In some ways, the next bird form was even less accurate than the gyr's had been. But it was considerably less intimidating, and (thankfully) correctly sized. Perched delicately upon Stanley's shoulder, head ducked almost shyly, was a Eurasian magpie. A common sight overseas, the striking black-and-white crow was notable for its intelligence, vocal imitation range, and gossamer feathers.

Stan thought it would be years before he'd lay eyes on one, let alone carry it around on his shoulder, like the pirate and his parrot.

But in this context, it was the parrot who had stolen something.

And again, except for the colors, the bird's feather pattern was right.

Minus the pliable 'lip edges' that no beak should ever sport.

...what's wrong... show me...

"They're... darker than that. And you need to lose the orange."

Before his eyes, the silvery-gray feathers darkened to a shiny black that rippled from green to blue in the light. Along the wings, the bright apricot-colored primaries grew lighter and lighter, finally attaining an off-white shade, complete with webbed edges.

The midnight blue eyes blinked once at him, white nictitating eyelids rolling back, beak parting in anticipation.

No teeth inside.

"That... is better." Then, almost as an afterthought, Stan muttered with a half smile: "Nicely done."

With a little excited flutter of its wings, the avian-lookalike actually cooed at him. Next thing he knew, it was hunkering down against the crook of his neck, leaning in to nuzzle with that long, sharp beak laid flat against his jaw.

Stan flinched again, but only at the tickly sensation he felt.

Inside and out.
Peacekeeper

Chapter Summary

Pen mends a rift between the Denbrough boys.
What kind of rift it is, ultimately doesn't matter.

Chapter Notes

One of my personal favorites.

It wasn't often that Bill and Georgie disagreed on anything.
Oh, but when they did, watch out, world.

While arguing at home was simply not an option (per Mom's decree) all bets were off when it came to neutral ground like the Barrens, or 29 Neibolt Street.

Leery of where to approach this potential blow-up from, the rest of the Losers were treading lightly. No one asked anything direct to either boy. Even Richie was showing a rare, almost-cautious side, as long as he was dropping jokes in their presence. Where once they were inseparable, the Denbrough brothers had barely looked one another in the eye all day.

Things came to a head around five o'clock that Thursday afternoon.

"Let's go, Georgie."

"You go, Billy. I'm staying."

"No, you're not. Dad said we both needed to be home by six."

"So, go. I'll catch up. When I'm ready."

Bill frowned, lingering in the open, second-floor doorway, backpack held on one shoulder.

Georgie stayed where he was, sitting sprawled among his markers, coloring books, and crossword puzzles. His gaze was angled down, as if there were no other direction to look. For all his sweetness and adoration, the elementary-grade schooler could be a natural stick-in-the-mud when he wanted to be.

Right from the start, Bill could tell he wasn't going to get anywhere. Begging was out the window, let alone reasoning. He would have dragged Georgie home by his ankle if that's what it took. But that would mean enduring a verbal lashing from one or both parents, how dare he be so rough with the precious baby.

For Bill, the verbal beatings were just as bad as the physical.
"BilLy?"

Suddenly, he smelled mints and popcorn, oppressively close. Despite the abrupt, impossible change in the air, Bill didn't so do much as blink. His frown only morphed into a scowl. No doubt the creature now looming over him had sensed the tension when the boys had arrived, two hours prior. Beyond that, he had probably been sensing it the last three days.

For that was a new record in how long Bill and Georgie had been feuding in silence.

"You talk to him."

The red bells on Pennywise's suit gave a short, almost-embarrassed twinkle as the high school freshman shouldered his way past him, headed for the stairs. Befuddled, the slack-faced demon craned his neck around almost one-hundred eighty degrees to watch - again, something no normal human could do (and survive).

Bill wasn't a bluffer. Did that mean he really intended to leave without Georgie?

Georgie continued to scribble aimlessly, not bothering in the slightest to keep the marker's tip inside the lines, even as Pennywise timidly stepped into the room, then crouched down beside him, balanced on pompommed toes, hands threaded together.

"Georgie?"

"Hi, Penny."

The clown blinked, tilting his head. It wasn't often someone else beat him to the punch with a greeting. Not so sharply.

Not to mention, for being two of the best friends either had ever had, that was the first time they had laid eyes on each other yet that day.

"Hi..." Unsure, Pennywise took a rare moment to study the boy. One eye tracked Georgie's coloring hand. The other kept itself fixed on his glowering expression. "Billy says it's time for you to leave."

"I don't care."

He prodded the boy's bicep with one finger. "You're gonna be late for supPer."

"'M not hungry."

A frilly arm shot out and pulled him close. Pressing an ear to the boy's head, his captor smirked, and listened. It was as though Georgie were a conduit through which he could hear an empty stomach grumbling noisily.

Perhaps all he needed was a hug?

"NoW, I can telL that's not true."

The smirk vanished as, rather than struggling, Georgie turned in the clown's grip and thrust a fist against his ruffled chest. "Go away, Penny."

Confused, Pennywise let his arm go slack, but Georgie didn't bother to crawl away, letting the limb stay draped across his shoulders like a shawl. The boy reached for the green marker he had dropped, and, still scowling, he grabbed his coloring book with the other, as though he intended to resume coloring, no matter what.
"What's wroNg?"

"Nothing."

"Don't liE to me, GeorgIe. This isN't like you."

"So?"

"So... can I heLp?"

"What do you care?" The boy sniffled, clearly fighting to keep his real emotions at bay. "You don't have a brother. You wouldn't understand."

Pennywise raised a brow. True, he didn't have an actual sibling to quarrel with, per se, but he had the next best thing in the Losers. He wasn't totally without experience as to what it was to fight with someone you loved.

Not... totally.

Gently, with a deftness that belied his size, he took Georgie by the chin, directing them to look at each other.

"Try mE."

It was starting to get dark.

Standing astride Silver's frame, Bill kept one hand on the handlebars. With the other, he held Georgie's bicycle upright. The kickstand had broken off some time ago. Together, they faced 29 Neibolt's front door like an incomplete set of lawn decorations.

Outside the fence, the remainder of the Losers waited on the Denbroughs.

Better to travel in a pack than separately.

Stan clutched the upturned collar of his jacket, nervous eyes taking in the cloudy skies above. "It supposed to rain today?"

"Later tonight, maybe," Mike shrugged. A damp breeze stirred their surroundings, seemingly for effect. Strong winds often surged ahead of an oncoming stormfront. "That's what the radio said."

"How much longer do you think Pipsqueak'll be?" Richie mimed checking his wrist, upon which there was no watch.

"Doesn't matter. We wait until he's ready," Beverly reaffirmed. While the others watched the house, she watched the neighborhood around them. If the past eight months had taught them anything, it was that danger could come from every direction, especially the ones you thought were safe.

Perhaps that was why she was the last to notice the gangly, silver figure who appeared in the yard, directly behind Bill.

Despite how used to his sudden out-of-thin-air appearances they were, Ben gave a start, as did the rest of the gang. "Pen?"

With ears sharp as razors, It heard that from fifty feet away. His head whipped around to stare at him, at them all, with lowered brows. He did not smile, but he wasn't frowning, either. His walled eyes
were still blue.

In many ways, it was the most intimidating look in the entity's arsenal.

Today, it carried an unmistakable *hold-your-horses* vibe.

Impulsively, the group took a collective step back.

Sans Beverly. She stood her ground.

From a distance, she couldn't hear what Bill was saying. But she saw his mouth moving, as though he were frantically trying to explain himself before the creature said anything. With his agitation, the stutter wasn't doing him any favors.

Movement from one of the upstairs windows caught her attention next. Squinting, she could just spy the set of eyes peering out from between a pair of boards.

*Georgie?*

Whatever argument he was relaying, Denbrough's words seemed to be falling on selectively-deaf ears.

Pennywise simply stared him down, unmoving, for nearly three minutes.

Apparently, Bill relented. Shoulders sagging, he swung his leg, over Silver's back fender, and deployed her kickstand. He leaned Georgie's bike against the old Schwinn before plodding back up the steps and into the house.

Job done, Pennywise folded his arms, and - rather than vanishing - he waited.

Gingerly, haltingly, like they were stepping onto an active minefield, the six remaining youths inched their way back into the yard. The breeze kicked up again, ruffling their hair, jackets, the legs of their pants. Slowly, they fanned out to encircle their mascot from both sides.

He kept staring upward, as still as a pond on a windless day. Not a lock or ruffle blown out of place.

Just as Beverly breathed in to speak-

One of the clown's gloves shot up, index finger raised in a *wait* gesture.

"GivE them a miNute."

Beverly blinked, mouth snapping shut. Before she could think of what to say, Richie took an experimental step onto the porch.

Striking like a viper, Pennywise snagged him by the back of the neck. "NopE, you stay."

"The heck, man?" Richie blurted out. He twisted back and forth, hands grasping blindly at the arm behind his head, fruitlessly trying to wrench free. "You gonna tell us what's going on or not?"

"I... don't think we need to know, Rich," Ben mused. Catching his eye, Mike nodded in mute agreement.

Stan and Eddie also exchanged a knowing look.

Five minutes later, without so much as a peep between them all, Georgie, followed closely by Bill,
emerged from the house. Passing through their phalanx of dumbstruck friends, they wordlessly grabbed their bikes, wheeled them out to the street, and took their seats.

As Beverly leaned to one side for a better look, she saw Georgie's foot lift to set down on the bike's pedal. In the same moment, Bill's hand came to land on his little brother's shoulder. There was a mutual pause as both looked at each other, communicating better in silence than they had with words that day.

Then Bill offered a smile and tugged the sliding backpack strap higher up onto Georgie's shoulder.

Georgie smiled back. And even in the low light, his eyes glistened.

Whatever troubles they had had earlier, they were clearly resolved now.

Beverly breathed out, chancing a look up at their now-grinning guardian.

He winked.

"MuCh better."

Beverly smiled back at him, freckled cheeks flushing just slightly.

"Hurry nOw. StoRm's comin'."

Raindrops began to patter on the house's roof as the group departed.

Until Richie was the last to leave.

"...Anyone gonna tell us what that was about?"

Lingering just a moment longer, Pennywise snorted and shook his head. Being faced with the Trashmouth and his nagging persistence was the perfect period to end today on.

Now all was right with the world.

_Pop._

Then Richie was alone in the yard, with only the sunflowers to question.

"Anyone...?"

The yellow flowers nodded in the rising winds, but at what, that was anyone's guess.
"Your socks don't match today."

Stan frowned, eyes glancing up from the table, while the rest of him remained unmoved. The pencil in his hand stayed pressed to the notebook. "And this is relevant, how?"

"What happened?" Richie smirked, seated upon the nearby kitchen counter (to his own peril; who knew how stable that half-rotten thing was?). His dangling heels bounced off the door in an almost-rhythm: one, then the other, and again. "Is this a new Stanley I'm seeing?"

"No more than I was yesterday, Rich. Don't you have an essay to start?"

"Already did it."

"Liar."

"Yeah, I am," Richie shrugged, leaning back against the window. He wasn't in the mood for denial, except when it came to procrastinating on one's history assignment. "Any other obvious statements you got for me?"

"Here's one - get to work. Or you can get someone else to do your proofreading."

"My, my, fiesty today, rowr," Tozier mimed curling cat claws with his fingers.

"Shut it."

"Never."

"Joy. I can just see what this kinda study session's gonna be like." Making no bones about his arrival at 29 Neibolt, Eddie was the last of the three to make the afterschool rendezvous. He pulled up a chair, dumping his backpack on the floor. "Hiya, Stan."

"Edward." Stan mimed scratching his paper, even if his mind was currently stalled on the next sentence describing the events of Waterloo. As long as neither of them looked too closely, Richie or Eddie wouldn't know the difference.

"Eds, you bring 'em?"
"Be sure to save some for the others this time."

With an overeager leap to rival their missing mascot's, Richie sprung off the counter, pouncing upon the discarded backpack. The zipper opened with a shrill squeal. "Awesome!"

Though his rational voice told him not to, Stan glanced up again at the crinkle of plastic unwrapping. He frowned. "Twinkies? That's your idea of a snack?"

"Hey, it isn't everyday I save up enough to get one for everybody." Arranging his books before him (albeit as slowly as humanly possible), Eddie took the jab in stride.

Richie grinned, the yellow, cream-filled sponge cake almost lifted to his mouth. "You're saying you don't want yours, Stan?"

The pencil was set down with a click. "Give it here."

Though his face fell, abruptly disappointed, Richie handed the still-wrapped treat over. Turning it over in his hands, Stan put together an inspired plan. "Finish your essay, and you can have it."

With the promise of a tangible reward, Richie took a chair. Stan set the pastry down in the center of their pile of books and papers, a prize waiting to be claimed.

Cramming the last of his ration into his mouth, Richie spoke through a mixture of crumbs and cream. "You sure it won't go missing between now and then?"

Eddie pulled a face, silently brushing the more-offending crumbs off his notebook.

"There will be three sets of eyes on it the whole time. Get to work."

Fifteen minutes later...

"Seriously, though, what's with the socks?"

"Richie."

"I have to know! It's driving me mad."

"Does that matter right now?" Eddie blurted out, already exasperated. He didn't need to be told the context of Richie's observation. He could already guess. As with all of them, it was complete nonsense.

And therefore worth arguing about.

"I'm pretty sure it's a sign of the Apocalypse."

Turned out, to Tozier, it did matter very much.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, you can fixate on anything. Last week it was the not-Jesus-face in the soot on the side of the house."

"I'm telling you, it was!"

"Our laundry room's not in the best shape right now," Stan interrupted, primly erasing a misspelled word from his paper. His eyes never wandered. "Dad's had a contractor in there, renovating, after a building inspector told us there were signs of early-stage wood mold. Mom has had to cart our dirty stuff back and forth from the Kleen-Kloze for a week. Things are starting to get mixed up, lost in
transit."

Richie's face lit up in devilish delight. "Oh, I bet that doesn't chap her ass."

"So, are you satisfied? It's not what you thought it was."

"Truth is always better anyway. To think, such a disgrace could be taking place under the roof of the Uris household."


"Why? It's not due until Friday."

"Did you forget already, no paper, no Twinkie?"

"I reconsidered. Not worth it." Richie sat back in his chair, hands folding behind his head. He propped a foot on the table's edge, utterly at ease. "Unless... Stan were to up the ante?"

"No," Stan's voice went even flatter (defying all the written laws of physics in doing so). "They're your grades. I could care less if you flunk. You're this close to being held back."

"I'll talk my way through it, Stanny. I always do."

Eddie shook his head. "And if your Dad throws his two cents in? Good luck graduating same year as the rest of us."

"And don't say I didn't ever try to help you," Stan accused, with a dramatic pencil-point to match.

"Hmph." For a fleeting moment, Richie's eyes angled down, appreciating what few sentences he had strung together regarding the Napoleonic Wars. In truth, it wasn't that he didn't grasp the subject. Just that, on a nice day like this, there were better things to be doing. It was only Monday, after all.

"Speaking of help, where's Ben?"

"He's got some overdue assignments to catch up on, turned out he needed more references from the library. He knows better than to bring them around a walking distraction like you, Rich."

"Walking distraction, like your sideshow attraction of a- "

"Shut it, Richie!" Eddie kicked at the other boy's exposed chairleg, ineffective as it was. "Just because you want to skate by with D's doesn't mean I want to."

"Doesn't mean you have to, either, Eds. It's okay to let the books mellow a little bit before hitting 'em."

"That... doesn't make any sense."

"You're welcome."

"I'm almost done here," Stan revealed. Hearing the slow, telltale squeeek of a chair rocking forward, he grabbed for an empty notebook page, pulling it atop his completed draft. "No, you can't copy it."

"Aw, Stanley..."

"Enough with your whining, man. If I didn't know better I'd say you were doing all this as practice
for your next out-whining contest with Pen."

"Well! It's not a skill you acquire overnight, good sir," Richie huffed on his knuckles, brushing them against his shirt. Already his voice was veering into pseudo-aristocratic territory.

"It's not something to really be known for bragging about, either."

"We all have our talents, Mister Uris. Yours is laser-focus in the face of adversity, no matter what your old man tells you."

Caught in the awkward space between feeling genuinely complimented and seriously doubtful, Stan looked at the untouched Twinkie. Then, after a beat of deliberation, he used the tip of his pencil to push it closer to Richie.


"You're still an idiot."

"Yeah, yeah, moving on..." Richie trailed off, unwrapping his prize.

"And you still can't copy my paper."

"Aw!"

-----

Observing everything from the next floor, unseen in the shadows of the house, the host of 29 Neibolt fought back (what had to be) the fiftieth snort that afternoon. For all the talk about humans changing throughout the periods of their life and growing more mature, Richie didn't appear to be standing a chance.

Upon the arrival of his first guest, an unseen-Pennywise speculated about the look on the boy's face when he sank through the ceiling and onto the table the Jewish boy had proclaimed his workspace, but once he saw Stan unzip the backpack and get engaged in obviously very serious work, he decided to hold back and watch. Pranks could always be made later. It wasn't like the boy had a better opportunity to work at home, the clown concluded with a single look at the mismatched socks.

Stanley was fond of peace and quiet. He deserved the rarity of it when the chance was given.

In the end, Pennywise's decision had proven more generous than he would have thought. Not twenty minutes in — Stan's History notebook was getting impressively filled (Pen pinned a mental note to ask him about what it was later) — a familiar babble from the doorway dispersed the comfortable silence like a gunshot would a flock of birds, making Stan, Richie's polar opposite, roll his eyes at the ceiling, asking all heavens what he had done wrong, to think calling this session together was a good idea. Pen sympathized with him.

Instead of assuming the position in a chair next to his friend, Richie predictably dropped the backpack in the middle of the kitchen, and proceeded to seat himself on one of the counters, his stinging commentary never ceasing its flow.

Stan's rescue was delayed in its arrival just for another moment, though, coming in the shape of little, spiky, sarcasm-armed Eddie. Another-else-armed, too. Pennywise couldn't suppress an almost proud smile at the way Stan used the confection to effectively muzzle the Trashmouth into doing as he was told. Whole fifteen minutes.
Lying down in a more comfortable position, like an idle jaguar, he warped outside the laws of physics. Without a part of him to be seen through a huge gaping hole (invisible to the boys), the clown discovered there was something enjoyable in simply standing by and watching the situation unfold as it normally would, without his presence.

He did frown a bit, however, at the comparison of his "whining" to Richie's.

He never whined... he just proved points.

Still, he mused, leaning his chin on folded hands as Stan gave up and shoved the candy at Richie, whose victorious face wouldn't last long, the banter was always funnier to watch rather than actually taking part in.
Now, Bill Denbrough sometimes imagined that if he had a dog, caring for it would be somewhat like his relationship with It. Or vice versa?

Would both a dog and a cosmic-clown-beast be equally prone to disappearing for days on end, only to come back home, hungry, foul-tempered, smelling of refuse, and in desperate need of a bath?

Probably not. If the dog had had a meter-long, wrought-iron fence post jammed through its skull, there would be no going home for him or her.

*Unless it were a zombie dog!*

*Shut up, Richie-voice.*

At that moment, Pennywise only *sounded* one-hundred percent the part of a wild canine, snapping and growling (as best he could) at anyone attempting to approach him.

They had just gotten their ‘campsite’ in the front room situated, seven sleeping bags laid out in a row. The eighth was being arranged.

Then, just like a monster out of a campfire story, Pennywise fell out of the shadows. Literally - fell. The floor gave a noticeable jump.

Dragging himself in through Neibolt's front door, back from whatever mysterious venture he had been on, he had only succeeded only in frightening them all half to death. Wheezing and grumbling incomprehensibly, the beast had sought peace in the nearest available corner in the foyer.

Thankfully, Georgie had been upstairs at the time. Thinking fast, Bill took one look at the situation and pointed to the ceiling. Stan all but flew up the stairs to intercept the curious six-year-old before he saw anything alarming.

Ben followed seconds later, headphones and Walkman in hand, then returned.

Then came the struggle of figuring out what to do.

Pennywise acted half-feral on a good day. Now he was being downright animalistic. How he had come to be in this injured state, none of the Losers knew. And it would be a while before they ever
found out, if at all. Instead, they focused on doing what little they could to pacify the pain-crazed entity.

From a safe distance.

So far Bill and Beverly were the only ones to risk creeping closer.

The sleeping bags had been shoved aside, into an unkempt pile on the opposite side of the room. The remaining four Losers stood at the ready, in the freshly-cleared space, spread out in a half circle behind their Alpha and Beta.

To do what - who knew? But it was better than being caught unawares.

"Careful, guys," Mike said, for what-had-to-be the twentieth time.

"What do you think they're doing, brainiac?" Eddie half-whispered, restlesslly shifting from foot to foot. Ben stood beside him, eyes shifting just as much. Outwardly, though, the bookworm seemed the most calm. He laid a comforting hand on Kaspbrak's shoulder, and Eddie's shaky breaths settled the slightest bit.

Richie had taken the "safest" vantage point to be found, adjacent to the old loveseat. There was an empty hiding space behind it just beckoning to be used. With one hand on the armrest he plucked at the fraying material, anxious and short of breath.

But he was not so completely without his druthers to resist cracking a joke.

"Jeez, g-guess that 'coon hunt could have ended better for ya, eh, Stripes?"

At that Pennywise gave a spluttery groan, the lower half of his face awash with drool and upward-flowing threads of blood. He lay half-curl in on himself, shaking, one hand splayed protectively over his punctured face. With his still-intact left eye - now a veritable swirl between blue and yellow - he just managed to pull off a glare.

"S-s-ShuT up, R-Richie."

Nearly down on his hands and knees, Bill swallowed. It felt like creeping up on a whipped tiger. He was completely without a plan of action. In the months they had come to know this thing, he was still, arguably, the most distant from understanding It. Having Georgie for a brother imbued him with no more special status in the clown's social rankings than the other Losers.

Even if he was their so-called 'leader'.

Beverly had more of a rapport with the creature than he did.

"D-don'T t-oucH me!"

Somewhat more.

Pennywise wasn't totally without sense. Briefly, he seemed to reanimate enough to struggle up to his hands and knees, then his feet, claws half-pulling him up the wall, keeping his distorted face out of Beverly's reach. The far end of the fence post scraped against the old wood, eliciting a tortured whimper from its victim.

Bill almost flinched in sympathy. Who knew what feeling actual pain meant for a cosmic entity?

Undaunted, Beverly followed his half-hearted escape attempt, reaching up to grab the edges of the
clown's shredded collar with both hands. "Pen, don't be stupid. We need to do something about that."

"N-no. I-I'll be f-f-fine."

"Dude, it ain't no splinter that's gonna work itself out if you leave it alone," Richie seconded. "Quit playing hard to get."

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't need the help," Ben pointed out.

Panting, despite his ruined features, Pennywise apparently thought his predicament over and let the logic seep in. He gradually let his claws unhook from the wall, and promptly sank back down on his knees again, leaning against Beverly like a crutch.

Carefully, the others moved in.

"It hur-rts, Bevs."

"I know." She stroked the undamaged side of his wet jaw, never minding the hideous, film-like substance her hand passed through. If she was struggling with bearing her friend's weight, she gave no indication. "Hang tough. Bill has a plan."

No, I don't!

Denbrough swallowed a second time, harder than before, and blinked. It wasn't like Beverly to put him on the spot in such a way, and he wasn't sure to be affronted or inspired. But her reassurance seemed to be keeping Pennywise grounded. If it helped the entity from backsliding further out of his assumed-human element, Bill supposed he could improvise in the time he was bought.

Or he thought so for all of two seconds, until Pennywise took one pointed look at him and squashed that optimism like a bug.

"N-no, he d-d-doesn't."

Eddie facepalmed. "Man, now's not the time to doubt the guy about to perform surgery on you."

"Without anesthesia," Richie chimed in, to the ever-annoyed looks of Mike and Ben.

Taking their votes of confidence to heart, Bill exhaled deeply, a cleansing breath, steeling himself. He stepped closer. "I don't care how m-m-much it stings. Just promise me, whatever we do, you won't hurt anybody."

Pennywise's eye darted nervously across each of their waiting faces. The color of the iris continued to pinwheel uncontrollably. "I caN't p-promise tHat."

"You will," Bill repeated, firm.

If you're really our friend, you will.

The creature's once-harsh breathing slowed. He said nothing, but Beverly read his silence for reluctant acceptance. At her nod, they took action, and helped their patient away from the wall, toward the center of the room.

The four arranged themselves in a box around his kneeling form, two for each shoulder. Standing before the patient, Beverly kept her hands gentle, brushing away the crumbling flakes of imitation-skin from the impact point. The post had impaled him straight through his right eye socket, veering
off at enough of an angle that the far end protruded from behind his left ear.

Eddie's advice, to study the angle the post had entered from and deciding on the best tactic, would not go ignored. Bill circled the scene, hands flexing. His palms had already started to sweat.

"This is gonna suck, isn't it?" Richie got one last quip in before the end.

Mike patted Pennywise's back as the clown gave a nervous whimper. It wasn't worth the energy to glare at Richie. His own stomach already felt like it had turned outside in. "Just don't lose your grip."

Bill bit his cheeks. Weirdly enough, he was suddenly thinking of *Lonesome Dove*, and one of the more gruesome bits of that miniseries being the moment in which an arrow shaft had to be removed from Robert Duvall's leg.

So long as they were quick about it, the momentary increase in their friend's discomfort would be worth the reward.

Ben had seen the same special. Glancing sidelong at him, Hanscom nodded.

*Aye God, Woodrow. Let's get it done.*

"It's a pretty even shot, from each side," Bill concluded. "Any ideas there, Pen?"

It was as close to an up-front question as Denbrough had ever levelled at him. Heck, it was probably the first time he had actually called the eldritch mascot by his nickname. Normally, they had little to no reason to converse, except when it came to Georgie -

*Georgie. Dear God, Stan, keep the music playing.*

"W-whatever hurts less," Pennywise finally stammered. He might have tried to turn his head, before thinking twice.

"So, either way will do, right?" Bill smiled in spite of the grim response. "From behind, then. Don't bite Beverly."

The redhead smirked at him, either in actual irritation or in the sarcastic spirit of gee-thanks.

"Wait!" Inspired, Eddie dashed back to their cluster of backpacks. "That's what we're missing."

Beverly leaned aside as Kaspbrak returned, baseball glove in hand. "Bite down on this."

"W-why?"

"For the noise," Eddie explained. "You don't want to scare Georgie."

Realization dawning, Pennywise grabbed the mitt and let his teeth dig in.

"Ready?"

A grunt answered him. Without looking away, Beverly nodded a confirming affirmative. Standing behind the patient, Bill grasped the far end of the post, gently as he could manage. He wiped the sweat from his other hand on his shorts. "Ready, guys?"

Mike nodded, braced his feet.

"Three..."
Following the farmboy's example, Richie braced his forearm across the clown's upper back. Mike followed suit.

"Two..."

Eddie pushed on his assigned shoulder from the front. Keeping their patient from pitching forward or back was key. Ben did the same.

"One..."

Grabbing on, Bill closed his eyes, and threw his weight backwards.

"Pull!"

With a horrid, otherworldly shriek, the fencepost started its dreaded exit. Boxed in from all sides, It's form seized up like a vice clenching, a roar of new agony now reduced to a muffled yell, thanks to the leathery gag. Together, the Losers held firm. The iron jarred to a terrifying stop as the leading end caught on the way out, but a final tug helped it break free.

Bill stumbled, suddenly overcompensating, and landed squarely on his rump. The post clanged loudly against the dirty floor beside him.

Collectively, the others released their grip.

Spitting the ruined mitt out, Pennywise clutched his face with both hands, pitching forward at the waist. Beverly instantly knelt beside him, stroking his heaving back, murmuring words of encouragement.

"Fuck, man!" Richie cried, suddenly ecstatic. "You did it!"

Sitting up, Bill took a cursory look at the post and then tossed it aside. The accursed thing would find its way to the Derry landfill tomorrow.

*Give credit where credit is due.*

"We did it."

"You did the hard work," Ben clarified.

"Nice one," Mike nodded, wiping his hands on his shirt.

"Ha! I can't believe that went so well," Eddie admitted, sitting back on his heels. He was the picture of pleased.

Still on his knees, Pennywise kept his face hidden in his palms. Slowly, his rough breaths grew steadier. He was still shaking, bells tinkling as if they were attached to a running motor, but the worst had passed.

Bill took a knee beside Beverly.

"Pen, you okay?"

Pennywise's head twitched, turned to one side, and then up, at the sound of his operator's voice. Already, he was looking twenty percent healed. Where there once was a gaping hole, a blank white surface had spread to fill the new space, like a primed wall, ready for painting.
"Better already," Beverly smiled, after a preliminary check on both sides of their patient's skull.

Bill didn't turn to see. He was busy being caught in an impromptu staring contest.

"Hey, you in there? Say s-something."

Pennywise was blinking the strangest series of blinks Bill had ever seen: first with his left eye, then his newly-formed right, the left again, then both at the same time.

"Loading, please wait," Richie snickered, looking around the clown's shoulder.

Almost like a calibration check, Pennywise's eyes diverged, then centered. As if drawn by an invisible paintbrush, the missing red stripe extended upward from the corner of his newly-healed mouth, crossing his cheek, spearing its way through the middle of his eye.

Then a gloved finger was suddenly jabbed into Bill's face.

"NeVer again."

Caught off guard, Bill gave a laugh anyway.

With his lowered brows and wide blue eyes, Pennywise's mien was the strangest mixture of gratitude and fear ever.

"I won't p-plan on it if you don't."

Just in time, feet came running down from upstairs: one set, followed by a second.

The other Losers stepped back. As mercifully-oblivious as everyone hoped he would be, Georgie Denbrough bounded over and grabbed the still-kneeling clown in a hug, completely disregarding the soft meow of "ow" he gave, clutching at his temple.

"Penny!" the boy cried. "Where have you been?"

Bill chuckled again, face dropping into his palm.

Yep, kinda like having a dog that found its way home.

But at least they could skip the bath.
It was as picturesque a day as a Maine summertime fishing spot could get. The creek could be called serene, sliding quietly on by, its undisturbed surface as clear as a pane of freshly-waxed glass. High above, unfiltered sunlight beamed down, radiant as you like, illuminating the stony bed below the softly-flowing water with stunning clarity. Every fish that passed the would-be fishermen by could be accounted for: trout, crayfish, perch.

So far, none of them had bit. Even the mosquitoes flitting about at midday weren't taking their usual doses of blood.

Not even the two people currently struggling through the undergrowth toward the site were suffering from that many bug bites.

They made up for that shortage of discomfort by belittling one another en route.

"I did not!"
"Did too!"
"Did not!"
"Did too!"

"All right. Who did what?" Mike finally demanded, seconding the annoyed glower Ben was levelling at their two newly-arrived fishing 'buddies'. It was so jarring, the uncalled-for shattering of their peaceful scene was practically on par with murder. "And keep your voices down."

Neither boy moved from their spot on the weather-smoothed, sun-bleached log lying parallel with the creek's edge. Despite the calamity, their homemade fishing rods - baited with fresh earthworms only an hour out of the ground - could not afford to be abandoned.

A third fishlined stick stood, crammed deep into the mud beside the creek, utterly unattended.

To his credit, Eddie stepped out of the trees and put the budding argument on hold long enough to stop Richie from crashing into him. He had spotted what it was Mike was apparently so leery about
disturbing. Frowning, Eddie held a finger to his lips in warning, pointing with the other hand to a niche in the undergrowth, adjacent to the log.

Pennywise lay curled up on his side, arms arranged under his jaw, eyes closed. He looked hopelessly out of place against the backdrop of Mother Nature, even if he had mastered the act of appearing to truly be asleep. His deep, steady breathing was convincing enough on its own.

Nested in the crook made by his friend's pale form, Georgie Denbrough reclined against his midsection, legs stretched out before him. The boy's head was tilted sideways and back, supported by the pillow that was the clown's shoulder. His eyes flickered briefly under closed lids, but otherwise he didn't stir.

Somehow, neither of them had been roused awake by the fast-approaching bickering.

Perhaps, after a season's worth of exposure, they were simply desensitized to it, even in sleep.

"Awww..." Tozier mocked, softly as he knew how (which wasn't very). "Well, isn't that just preci-ouch, Eds!"

"Quiet!" Kaspbrak hissed. "Remember the last time you interrupted their nap?"

"Now, counselor, that was never prov- ow, ow, okay! Shit!" Richie fended off a second punch in the arm, still barely managing to keep his voice reduced to a borderline stage whisper. "Christ, had I known we were supposed to sneak our way up here, guerilla-style, I never would've bothered."
Nature Vs. Nurture

Chapter Summary

Half the club takes a little nature hike.

Chapter Notes

Drabble for drabble’s sake, this.

Grinning, Georgie swirled his hand in the creek.

"Aww... they're cute."

And therefore, it was worthwhile to try catching them in a whirlpool of your own making.

Crouched beside him on the bank, elbows on his knees, Pennywise made a sound that was best categorized as half-laugh, half-exasperation. His grin was small and wry to match.

"And very, veRy scared right noW."

"Really?" Astonished, Georgie snatched his hand back, watching as the clear water's rippling surface stilled. Below, a little school of quivering black specks milled about a shallow depression in the sand. "I scared them?"

"To tHem, yoU're the giaNt, GeorgIe. WhY wouldn't tHey be scareD?"

"Oh." Leaning down on his hands, the six-year-old put his face right up next to the underwater nest. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean it."

"Man. You got him talking to tadpoles now, Pen?" Mike asked, benignly as ever, arms loaded with kindling sticks - an eventual 'tribute' to their intended hosts. He stopped where the tall grass met the sandy bank, smirking crookedly. "Just when I thought you couldn't top sheep."

"But they're so cool." Georgie breathed out, still balancing on his hands, almost in awe. "Who knew frogs started out so... wiggly?"
The homeschooled boy shook his head. "For the most part, they stay that way, kid."

"And you can talk to them?"

Pennywise's blue eyes diverged, thinking of how to put his ability into terms Georgie could comprehend. "Not... exactly. But I can hear their panic." He affected a disgusted shiver, bells jingling. "It's awful. All high-pitched and tiny. You don't wish you could."

"Because that's all we need to be concerning ourselves with: horrified baby frogs," Richie grumped. Arms loaded down with the same material as Mike, he brushed by on his way to their destination without a backwards look.

Pennywise's grin took on an evil slant, eyes waspish. "Your fears kinda sound the same when I listen close enough, Richie!"

At this Mike and Georgie both cracked up. Mike even affected a passable falsetto Tozier impression. "No, please. I'm allergic to peanuts. Stay away!"

"Stuff it, clown. I'm not afraid of you."

Richie stopped preemptively, glower readied like a pistol, and aimed upward at the painted, smirking visage that suddenly materialized before him. Backlit against the afternoon sun, Pennywise's eyes shone brighter than the rest of his shaded face.

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure, doofus. Outta my way."

"Now, now, children, play nice," Beverly called, some fifteen feet off the path, deeper into the trees. "We haven't even gotten to the best part yet, and you're at it again."

"You mean Georgie hasn't gotten to the best part," Tozier replied, lingering to a near-stop to let Mike and young Denbrough catch up. "The rest of us know what a beaver dam looks like."

Together, the three of them pressed onward along the trail.

The clown didn't follow. He simply teleported around, the cheating bastard.

"Yeah, so stow the attitude. You don't need to go ruining things before we've even gotten there."
Hands on his backpack's straps, tasked with carrying the group's water and snacks, Georgie glanced around. Scattered here and there throughout the forest, the bare, pencil-shaped stump of a chewed-down tree jutted out, pale pulp visible against a backdrop of green and brown. Signs of activity that said a family of beavers had set up shop nearby.

This far into the brush, there would be no biking to the site. Georgie was mindful to watch his feet. A twisted ankle wasn't worth going to see a whopping heap of mud and sticks over, according to Richie.

"There it is," Mike pointed ahead, bushel of sticks held easily under one arm.

Georgie squinted, pushing branches aside. At one foot shorter than most of their party, he couldn't spot the dam so easily. "Where?"

"There. See where the creek forks?" Pressing closer, Georgie did. As Mike described, a smelly-looking, low-lying mound of damp earth had seemingly grown up midwater. "Looks like they took the starboard side."

"Wow."

"Wow," Richie repeated, fulfilling his role as afternoon buzzkiller-in-chief. He stood to the side of the trail to let Mike and Georgie pass. "All this way for a 'wow'."

"This lodge is relatively new," Beverly observed. She deposited her payload of sticks at the water's edge. Together, they stood about one-hundred feet upstream. "That's why it's so small. Or that's what Ben said."

Georgie stretched up on his toes. "Think we'll see one? A beaver?"

"Nah, beavers are nocturnal. But this late in the day, we may get lucky."

"To give blood via the Mosquito Collection Branch of the Red Cross." Dropping his sticks, Richie slapped at his neck. "Worst kind of luck ever."

"Or... if you get close enough, you can hear them snore."

"Really?"

"No, Georgie. I'm kidding."

The last to unload, Mike knelt and wiped his hands clean in the water. The air here was cool, but not
enough to chill wet skin. "Nice to get away from town for a bit, though, isn't it?"

"Sad. Homeschool, thanks to your Grandpops, you just think this is getting away. You don't know any better."

After washing her hands, Beverly motioned to Georgie, who obediently turned to let her unzip the backpack. From there, she passed out their water and assorted snacks.

A five-mile hike deserved at least a granola bar and some veggies.

Moments later, Pennywise sprang back onto the scene. He stood out as pale and contrasty against the woods as a beaver-afflicted stump. Like the obscene primate he looked like, he crept sideways around a bend in the creek, stopped short until Georgie waved him an all-clear, and then loped back over to the boy's side.

He stopped short, looking down in dismay at the dirtied palms of his gloves. His expression fizzled out like a lit firecracker dropped in a puddle. "Ugh. You dIdn't say it'D be this muDdy."

Leaning against a maple with water bottle in hand, Richie paused mid-swig, frowning. "Where did you think we were going, Dolly, Disneyland?"

"It'll wash off, Penny," Georgie assured his friend, companionable as ever, no matter what Tozier's misgivings were.

Glancing dubiously around at the dark soil the Losers had no qualms sitting in, the cosmic entity opted to stay standing.

Richie downed half his water before replacing the cap, then indulged in a lazy stretch. Not that, for him, there was any way to not make a stretch look lazy.

"So, what's next? You never said, Bev."

"No, I didn't," Beverly affirmed, cagey as you please.

"You gonna share now?"

"No. I'm just glad we... got away for a while."

Picking up on the stirrings of discontent, Pennywise sidestepped around to the girl's side, peering down at her curiously. If any of the Losers had a natural 'talent' for masking their repressed moods from him, she did. Somehow, it took him by surprise every time.
"EverythiNg okAy, Bevs?"

"If she says she's good, she's good, Stripes. We don't need your jacked-up translation."

Behind Marsh's head, Pennywise glared and stuck out his tongue in mute retaliation.

Sitting cross-legged, feigning obliviousness to the two's juvenile jabs, Beverly smirked, resting a cheek against her fist. She seemed at ease enough. With the other hand, she plucked a stick from the bank and began to trace aimless patterns in the mud.

Chewing up the last of his carrot sticks, Georgie glanced between them, apparently waiting for the stalled conversation to progress further. When it didn't, he paused to clean up the empty baggies.

Mike, wisely, came to the rescue with a change of topic.

"You guys all doing okay at school?"

"The usual. How's life on the farm?"

"Busy as ever. Today's the first one in a while that I've had more than a few hours of free time between runs."

"Yeah, you said as much on the phone," Richie recounted, scratching his ear as if in remembrance.

"When I could spare a moment to pick it up."

"Good timing on your part, then," Beverly smiled.

"Bowers or any of his guys played Chicken with you lately?"

Their eldritch mascot stood at the water's edge, arms drawn against his sides, unknowingly looking like the world's most absurd meerkat. His gaze panned around with the unfettered smoothness of a security camera.

Until the game's strange moniker caught his ear.

"ChicKen?"
"It's a game, Pen," Beverly interrupted, before Richie could fire sardonically back. While disappointed to see where their conversation was running, she elaborated, "Two people square off, to see who will blink first. The first to whinge out is the loser."

"Yeah, square off - between a few thousand pounds of metal versus Mike's rickety ride," Richie remarked, bitter. He had found himself on the the scary side of Belch's Trans Am a few too many times to think there was anything fair or amusing about the contest. And to him, anything inherently-unfunny was just not worth tolerating.

Meanwhile, Pennywise aimed his best question-mark face at Georgie.

The boy stared back at him, then simply shrugged.

"What does that have to do with farm animals?"

"It's named after the chicken's cowardly nature, I think," Beverly deduced. With the stick she had outlined the crude shape of said bird on the saturated bank. One poke, and there was the eye.

Mike's shoulders sagged. "And sickos like Bowers can't get enough of seeing the rest of us cluck in fright."

"Remind you of anyone, Spooky?" Richie asked, pointedly staring the clown down.

Stoic, Pennywise stared right back at him through the sides of his eyes. A flicker of yellow crossed his irises, or it might have been a trick of the sunlight.

Folding his arms around his knees, Georgie looked around the suddenly-tense group. "Henry hasn't hurt anybody lately, though. Right? At least... no one we know?"

Mike rubbed at the back of his neck, feeling more than a little awkward that their talk had gone so sideways. It wasn't what he intended. But then, the lonely farmboy didn't have the most-practiced social sense. "He's... I don't know how to explain it, Georgie, or if I should. I think it's something Bill ought to talk to you about. You ask the three of us, you'll get three different answers."

"Four." Scowling, Beverly held up four fingers for emphasis.

"...Four."

"The only good thing about Bowers is he's not determined enough to follow us all the way out to places like this," Richie waved at their surroundings, then folded his arms. "He sticks to the main drag. Where the easy pickings are aplenty."
"Easy pickings... He looks for people to hurt?" Dear Georgie Denbrough had yet to learn what it was that growing up rough meant you didn't always evolve into the nicest person out there.

"Guy's a predator in the making, if he's not already made," Richie harrumphed. He didn't bother to sugarcoat anything. Kid had to grow up someday. "Almost makes me wish trophy hunting extended to Man sometimes, almost. What was that story in Literature, *The Most Dangerous Game*? In Bowers' mind, it already has."

"You actually cited something from class?" Beverly sat back, eyes wide in mock-alarm. "Mike. Alert the media."

"Can you do something about him, Penny?" Georgie wondered aloud, craning his head to look at the silver-clad figure towering over him - upside-down against the treetops, as he was from that perspective. "Bowers. He seems dangerous."

Already on guard, Pennywise carefully let his expression slide back to a blank slate. The unsavory parallels between himself and Henry Bowers weren't going over his head. The older Losers knew of the entity's... carnivorous inclinations (is that what Ben called it?).

Georgie didn't. And Pennywise didn't intend to tell him anytime soon, even if the others didn't feel the same call for restraint.

Leave that ball in *their* park until his year was up. That was the plan.

"I caN do a lOt of thiNgs, but not thAt, GeorgIe." Gloved fingers flexed idly at his sides. "I can'T... make someonE disapPear."

*Not in the just-leave-me-alone sense you mean.*

"But you disappear all the time," Denbrough pointed out, head swiveling around to better look at him. "You'd always win at our games of hide-and-seek if I didn't make it a rule you can't break."

"And for all the rules the freak breaks on a daily basis, even in terms of existing, he only honors yours?" Richie muttered to himself. "What kinda fucked up nonsense is that?"

Pennywise folded his arms and glanced away from Georgie's probing gaze. This peaceful setting, it wasn't the place or the time to dig another fresh row with Tozier.

"Henry's a product of his environment," Mike broke in. "Everyone is. No one's born evil."
"It only excuses so much," Beverly objected, unknowingly echoing Stan on another nature excursion with their extraterrestrial mascot. "I don't have the best pedigree, but I chose to be decent nevertheless. Bowers chose otherwise."

"Do you think it was an easy choice for him?" Mike mused. "We all know between his Dad and him who's the alpha in that house."

"Alpha," Richie repeated, detestingly. "Couple'a omega bitches, more like."

Beverly shrugged, rolling the stick between her fingers, drawings forgotten. "Who knows? Maybe in his shoes, I would've become the same. Any of us could have. I'm just glad I'm that's not the hand I was dealt."

"Me, neither," Georgie chimed in.

"Or me," Richie admitted.

"Ditto," Mike nodded.

Pennywise simply kept quiet.

Anything he could have said would have been too open to scrutiny.

Just down the bank, ripples appeared in the water, perpendicular to the direction of the current.

Spotting them, the clown pointed. "Georgie, look."

Turning over on his knees, the boy did.

Then a small, brown figure emerged. Hobbling across the mud on four paws, it froze at the water's edge upon seeing the group, beady eyes wide.

Then, rather than duck back into the creek, it stood on its hind legs, paws poised, flat tail planked out behind it. Its whiskers worked in time with a trembling nose.

Georgie gasped. Talk of Bowers was instantly forgotten.

"Wow! A beaver kit."
The remainder of their time was spent watching as, against all nature's expectations, the six-year-old tried to befriend the baby beaver with a peace offering of mashed carrots.

Something good had come of Richie refusing to eat his wholesome snack.

Standing back, Pennywise didn't dismiss the talk so easily. He found a nearby elm to lounge against, folded arms propped up upon its lower branch, head resting atop them.

It meant he wouldn't have to look at his dirty gloves.

Dirtied with more than just dirt, that is.

He stayed back, for Georgie's sake, lest his aura frighten the critter away.

Now safely out of earshot, he sighed, feeling more than a little pensive. The alien sound crackled in his throat like a burning flame being snuffed out.

*Yes, Richie. If only we came all this way for a 'wow' and left it at that.*
Truce

Chapter Summary

Some drabble featuring Richie and Pen.

Because, in my mind, these two would get along like oil and water.

Chapter Notes

Continuation of “Friendly Fire”.

Knowing he was outmatched by at least two feet and a hundred pounds (and that, given his opponent, his odds could change for the even-worse at a moment's notice), a sensible person might have conceded defeat early on.

"I'm serious, Twitchy, give - them - back. Now."

Some days, Richie could be downright unreasonable.

He had cause. While the clown had behaved himself for a new record of five whole minutes, for no fathomable reason at all, Pennywise had spontaneously decided to mix things up, reaching over the boy's head to pluck the glasses right off his face.

Richie, nose buried in the refuge of a Thrasher skateboard magazine, spluttered in dismay as the world went fuzzy and depthless. He reached for the missing frames, processing a second of confusion before the telltale giggling told him exactly where his specs had gone.

"They better not be on your face."

The next five minutes had consisted of this futile struggle.

"Ohh, don't worry - they aRe."

Rendered as blind as a mole finding itself above ground, Richie could only imagine the horror his precious lenses were enduring. Wedged onto Pennywise's oversized face, the temples would be so bent out of shape. What if the nose pads were smudged with paint?
After another minute of uttering wordless noises of anger, the hapless boy gave up the wild, ineffectual batting and prying of his hands. One of the creature's silky palms was laid flat against his forehead, effectively holding him at arm's length and barring any retaliatory assault.

Visiting Neibolt alone had been a mistake.

Richie sagged. "I can't win with you, can I?"

"NopE!"

Pennywise had yet to grasp the intricacies of rhetorical questions, let alone the basic notion that they weren't supposed to be answered.

"Okay." Running through his limited options, Richie drew a tense breath. "Ohh... kay, truce. What do you want?"

"Nothing, nothing aT all," Pennywise chirped, in a lie that was about as transparent as Kenduskaeg mud.

"Bullshit. I just came here looking for a little peace and quiet."

"Heh hee. Now why do I find that higHly unlikely?"

"Of all the people to torment in Derry, you decide to stay here with me. Why?"

"You were the closEsT." Richie fumed the clown's juvenile reasoning, but his silence was inadvertently rewarded. His mind's eye could virtually see the bewilderment creeping across Pennywise's face. "PeAce and quliet. Don't you haVe that at home?"

*Not the kind I wanted.*

The boy folded his arms in a huff, thinking of all the chores he was ducking. Even if there weren't any of the usual tasks to complete, his mother would surely have thought some up for him - kicking back on the front porch sipping lemonade the whole time.

An insufferable, self-important queen overseeing her one perfectly-groomed subject.

Was avoiding that worth this hassle?

"You tell me," Richie grumbled at long last, addressing himself as much as his unwanted company.
While the creature that sometimes called itself Pennywise was the last being in the universe he would confide his personal problems to, young Tozier had sometimes - very seldomly - wondered how that scenario would go. And it would be one set in a world where sanity was part of Greek mythology.

Sensing the entity's waiting for an answer, staring down at him with even-bigger blue eyes than usual, he went on, begrudgingly, "I'm here, as opposed to there. Doesn't that answer things for you?"

"...Sort of."

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?"

"Wouldn't you rather be out with the others?" Pennywise asked, unmoved by Richie's incensed parroting. The complete smoothing-out of his strangely-enunciated words said his visitor was getting somewhere with their inane conversation, though.

"I called around, got a lousy hand of cards to pick from. Mike's got crop work to do. His grandpops'd just rope me into it. Eddie's got a summer cold - for real, for once. Bev's MIA. The list goes on."

"And... there were no other places you thought 'quiet' enough?"

Richie gestured offhandedly at their run-down surroundings. "I would'a called ahead."

_Not._

"Oh. That's okay. I wasn't busy anyway."

He could _hear_ that goofy, jagged smile.

"That's beside - " Richie closed his eyes and clenched his fists, forcing them to stay at his sides, willing himself to remain calm, calm, _calm._

How was it this _thing_ could get under his skin so easily?

Probably because, on more than one occasion, the opposite was quite true.

Was this how Stan sometimes felt? Or Mike? Or Ben? Asking legitimate questions of their otherwise-genuine friends, only to get irreverence and sarcasm back?

Mental note: try to do less of that, Trashmouth. Now you know what it's like.
"Liar. Buzz off. I'll make do without 'em."

And you, for that matter.

He trudged back across the foyer (as well as a half-blind person could, without tripping) to his abandoned pile of magazines. Reaching out, he felt for the rotting wall and turned as he sat down against it, folding his legs, weirdly grateful for the simple sensation of some solid wood behind his back. It grounded him in the absurdness of these circumstances, as everything else radiated utter strangeness.

The stack of magazines provided a welcome distraction. He grabbed the nearest issue, flipped to a random article, ignored the fact he had no snowball's chance of actually being able to read it, and pretended to look it over anyway.

Like so many times before, Pennywise seemed to grow impatient with the very thought of being brushed off. With a muted snap of air he merely reappeared to sit beside Richie, limbs splayed about like a shelved puppet's, and he prodded the dispirited boy's shoulder with one gloved finger.

Lips pursed, Richie opted for a sullen sideways glare in response.

"You're just making excuses."

He blinked, magazine dropping into his lap. Suddenly the clown was sounding (and looking) like the most lunatic couch therapist to ever grace the planet.

"The hell are you on about?"

"You didn't think the others would want to hear it. Again. You've all got problems, but you keep yours bottled up. They weren't that busy, you just thought they wouldn't want to listen to you... how do you say? Spill your guts."

Richie's face went red. His fingers clenched around the magazine's edges, though he had a sudden overwhelming urge to hit something.

And right there and then, Pennywise was making for a very convenient target.

Remembering his mistake with the acorn at the quarry, Tozier thought twice.

"Spill your guts" was a phrase that took on a whole new meaning when Pennywise was the one to voice it.
Lord knew Richie intended to do nothing of the kind.

Undaunted, feeling bold, the boy made a bludgeon out of his words. "The fuck do you know, Stripes? You never considered friendship was a concept that existed before you met us."

"I learned, didn't I?" Pennywise retorted, in what was the steadiest voice Richie had heard him use yet. "Georgie says it's oKay to talk, even when you think your friends don't waNt you to. People talk at each other all the time. That's how you know which ones are your friends - they'll heAr you out. Make fun of you, sure, maybe. But they'll liSten."

Richie stared, struck mute, the color slowly draining from his face, before arriving at one terrible conclusion. His brain had turned traitor, telling him those words actually made sense.

The creature was far more shrewd, and sensitive, than he pretended to be.

True to his own nature, Richie would sooner vaporize than admit it.

Diversion ever at the ready, he looked away and held out a hand, sighing theatrically.

"Whatever. Give 'em over."

To his astonishment, the halfhearted command was rewarded. He felt the narrow plastic frames drop into his waiting fingers. Stunned, Richie didn't think to place them on his face for a whole fifteen seconds.

Back in focus, along with the rest of the world, Pennywise beamed at him, then zeroed in on the forgotten magazine. No doubt the bright, abstract skateboard designs had caught the creature's eye.

"So! Which one do you like beSt?"

Richie stared, at once humbled and dumbfounded. He didn't even think to try and escape the frilly arm that snaked its way around his opposite shoulder.

He had thought this argument would have endured for another hour, at least. Instead he found himself answering a barrage of questions regarding skateboards, and listing in big, bold letters why getting Georgie one for his birthday was a very bad idea.

Perhaps there wasn't any harm in what was - for lack of a better description - cosmic being intervention.
Sometimes.
Chapter Summary

“Just to see if I can.”

That’s a good enough reason for most of us to try something new.

ITerations! Pennywise in a nutshell. Does he really need to be more complicated than that?

Chapter Notes

As yet, this is as close as I’ve gotten to explaining my AU motivations. Take it for what it is.

Most of the time, It found the Losers. Not the other way around. To an extent, he was never completely unaware of where they were. Therein lay the perks to being an entity of virtually limitless capabilities. And chief among them (second perhaps only to his shapeshifting) was the ability to teleport.

Yes, that was a fine perk indeed. Should your act fall flat on its face, you could simply hightail it out of there and try again later.

The problem was, that for every supposed perk, there was a drawback. Something to maintain balance, as that damn turtle would always ensure. And for It that meant making certain concessions.

Except when it came to the Losers. If he had done any redeemable thing in his neverending existence, or was going to, it would be seeing those eight children through the year humanity would later call 1989.

No one would remember, much less acknowledge him for it.

But it would be nice to see if he could break the mold. Just once.

Sadly, that didn't change the basic and unforgiving fact which defined his very nature: It needed to feed.

The various corpses floating in limbo in the air above the cistern, he would savor, dice, and save
those as long as it took. Nibble just enough to stave off the hunger pangs at their worst. Bite only to keep himself from salivating at every mere whiff of the motley gang who had come to virtually adopt his Neibolt abode as a second home.

Every few months, though, he would crave something more substantial. More satisfying.

More... afraid.

And then, his control was no more.

The first time he caved was - coincidentally - the same day Georgie Denbrough almost caught It in the act.

By day It meant night, actually.

No longer out of practice, successfully shaking off the muddled days it took to fully wake up, this venture hadn't fallen on its face, either.

It almost would have preferred that it had.

Then he could have simply retreated and tried another time.

Instead, reality reared her ugly head at the time he would have least expected.

Serrated mandibles, coated in blood, scissored nervously and the mincing mouthparts beneath stuttered in panic. A nervous rattle shuddered along his exoskeletal form, joints clenching in shock.

G-GeorGie?!

Pitching the fresh body down the well, wholly intending to shimmy down after it, It stopped short.

His diminuitive friend couldn't have intruded at a worse moment. But even if the creature ran now, it would mean explaining himself later.

Ears pricking up at the sound of sneakered feet, weight settling on the creaky stairs, It whirled around, ducking low on its many taloned paws, chittering. White, pupilless eyes the size of basketballs quirked backward.
Catching sight of the boy's shadowed frame, lingering at the top of the stairs, the alien form scuttled for what pathetic cover was to be had, long legs folding into the meager space behind the crumbling top of the well.

The only advantage he had was that night had fallen, ominous and black, and 29 Neibolt House had been without working electricity for decades.

All the better to hide his gruesome transformation. Gradually, the shape of a costumed human took the alien body's place.

His eyes changed last, shrinking, reforming to better fit his face, and adopting their preferred cerulean hue.

Outside, the night was just as dark a blue.

"Penny?" Georgie's thin voice echoed in the vast, rundown basement. His breath billowed into a noticeable cloud in the late autumn chill.

Whether his voice wavered out of confusion or concern, It could not sense. Not mid-morph.

"Pennywise, it's just me."

Moments later, It stumbled into view, finally back on two feet, and caught himself on the well's edge. A sliver of moonlight planed sideways through a broken basement window, tracing a jagged contour across his pale form.

If a ghost were given will to reassume its previously-held mortal body, they would probably feel something like It did post-transformation: off-kilter and clunky. He shook himself into the clown form as one might shrug deeper into a coat.

"Ohh, only you," he growled, eyes aflare, sounding and looking every bit as chastizing as he felt toward himself. He had let his guard down. No other human's scent would he be so dismissive of than Georgie Denbrough's.

Dismissiveness nearly had him found out.

He loped closer, brushing disheveled orange locks out of his eyes. "For goodness' sake, what are you doing here? Do you have any idea what time it... is?"

His reprimand forgotten before it had really begun, Pennywise abruptly forgot what he intended to
rant about, hands folding nervously before him. The look on the boy's face, one of abject worry, stalled him.

He almost stepped back. "Georgie...?"

"W-what's that on your mouth?" Georgie pointed at his tall friend with a mitten-clad hand, eyes wide. The other hand clutched the stairwell railing, so tightly it trembled. "Are you sick?"

Belatedly, blinking back to awareness, Pennywise ducked into the blind space beside the stairwell, realizing in hindsight how this form stood out like a cold candle, even in the darkness. Especially in the darkness.

"N-no, I juSt- " Unthinkingly, he wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, waxing on a bloody smear from wrist to inner elbow. He spit and grimaced, clotting bits of flesh still congealing between his teeth, crumbs of bone marrow lodged under his tongue. "It's just paiNt, Georgie."

Liar, liar, die in a fiRe.

"A-are you sure? Do you need a napkin?"

At this the creature couldn't help a disbelieving, bubbly laugh.

This kid was innocence personified.

He wiped at his saturated mouth again, head ducked low against his collarbone, back still facing the stairwell. "What are you doing heRe?" he repeated, stubborn in his need to know.

"I came to see you."

Pennywise bristled, ruffles flaring like the quills of an irritated porcupine, before he took a calming breath.

Kind, It. Remember to be kind.

"Is that so?" He risked a glance over his shoulder, eyes upturned, skeptical. "No. You can'T have come all this way, aloNe."

You couldn't have. How would the cosmos even allow that?

Forget the cosmos. What kind of braindead parent didn't keep the front door locked and the keys
hidden at night?

Kneeling for a closer look, Georgie stared at him from between the splintering banisters. His mittens rested on the railing, to either side of his forehead. "I did. All on my own."

Pennywise frowned. The boy was being uncharacteristically serious.

"Bill promise not to kill you?" he jested.

His visitor ducked his chin. "Bill... doesn't know I'm here."

Pennywise snorted, wiping at his face one last time. "Oh, well, we can't have that." The final vestiges of blood soaked into his form like soap drawn into a sponge. Confidence assumed, he made to turn and climb the stairs. "Come on, I'll see you home."

"Penny, I know."

He stopped short, half-stooped, hand outstretched, like a needle suddenly pulled from a spinning vinyl record.

"You... know what?"

Georgie sat on the stairs, hands resting easy at his sides. Only his face was truly tense.

"You're not really a clown."

... 

The creature let his hand drop to his side, swinging uselessly as if an invisible puppet string had been severed.

Dumbfounded didn't begin to say it.

No. He was a hermit who just so happened to practice a very peculiar lifestyle.

A hermit who was the very reason why so many missing children's corpses ended up in perpetual orbit surrounding a tower of knickknack-centric garbage in the deepest recesses of Derry's old sewer network.

*Of course I'm not!* It wanted to cry.
Instead, he let his expression wilt and bit his lower lip, hands wringing nervously once more.

"YesSs...? And?"

What else could he say to that?

*Please, don't run. Please, don't rUn.*

The hungry, arachnid-esqe aspect of him was still very much poised to strike. It would have liked nothing better than a side dish to go with its main course.

"You're not really... a *human*, either."

"Noo..."

"Billy says I shouldn't play with you anymore. That you're dangerous."

*He's not wrong.*

It just managed not to twitch. By what universe-defying backwards logic did he ever let a Turtle soundalike take up residence in his head?

Instead, Pennywise stared meekly up at the boy through the tops of his eyeballs, part beseeching, part accepting. This subject had to be broached between the Denbrough boys at some point. And eventually, between they and himself.

He simply had not seen it going like this, in any sense of the word.

Georgie licked his lips, bit the insides of his cheeks, finally showing some of the jittery nerves the clown-beast could spot a mile away. Through a blindfold. The boy tugged anxiously at the edge of his knit cap.

"I wanted to ask you, for myself. Are you? Dangerous, I mean."

He could have denied it. He could have cited every lie there ever was in the history of intelligent thought. It wouldn't have done him any favors.

What kind of friend could he really have been if the self he lied to create was the one befriended?
"...Yes. I aM."

Contrary to everything else his favorite assumed form aspired to, It's unveiling was anything but theatrical. If anything, he deadpanned the delivery. He glanced away, glaring at nothing visible to the naked human eye, and seethed through bared teeth.

He made no effort to disguise the jittering, alien growl eeking its way out of his throat, either.

Georgie blinked once, then twice, before he found his next set of words:

"What... what are you?"

"Does it maTter?" Pennywise asked, tone flat, feeling more and more like bluntness was the key to enduring this tailspin of a revelation. For better or worse, he had to put to words the secret fear he had been harboring since awakening in late September. "I'm whaTever you want to beliVe I am. To someone liKe your brother, that mEans to believe I'm a threat. Fine, leT him. I aM a threat."

He looked pleadingly back up at Georgie, aiming, this time, for the emotional kill. It was a look that said: But I... kind of hoped you'd think differenT. If you gave me a chanCe.

For the longest time, the boy said nothing. Time seemed to stand still around them, like the world was holding its breath. Even the background noise of the aging house above their heads seemed to creak to a halt.

"And... you've got something on your face, there."

Pennywise balked. The boy's nervousness had vanished, as quickly as light from a broken circuit.

"Georgie, doN't, I-I-"

Unflinching, Denbrough stood and held up both hands, as one might pacify a spooked, stamping horse. His expression suddenly broke and unveiled a shining grin. "Calm down, silly."

For once, the boy moved faster than he.

The mittens grabbed him by the striped cheeks.

Inwardly, Its' senses went haywire, screaming at him to strike. The close-up scent of food was overwhelming. Warring with them just as strongly was his voice of reason, and he tried his damnedest not to pull away.
Georgie's face fell, after a moment's pause, left thumb stroking the pale skin. "Oh, I guess that was just paint."

Almost as an afterthought, he looked up, directly into the petrified entity's blue eyes: impossibly-wide and dead-centered on him.

"I mean, would something 'dangerous' let me do this?"

Heat rose under the creature's gaze, involuntary, lightening his eyes. What a mess this was turning out to be. To be so close to easy prey, and Pennywise was suddenly reminded of his neglected kill, currently decomposing somewhere at the bottom of the well.

His voice went hoarse. "Well. Okay, fair's fair. But you need to get home now, Georgie." He couldn't dare try to wipe away the spit pooling in his mouth, beginning to drip from one corner as it was. "I can only imagine what Bill would do, waking up to find you gone."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to him." The mittens (mercifully) moved from his face to his shoulders. "Can't I stay? Please? Just for tonight?"

Pennywise blinked again, resolve hardening. "No. You walked this distance in the dark once already." He took the protesting boy gently by the arm, steering him back up the stairs, back to the ground floor. Once there, he stooped down to better stare the boy in the eye, drooling noticeably. "I'll go with you. I can't simply - "

"I brought my sleeping bag." Georgie pointed to a previously-unnoticed lump by the front door, a stuffed duffel. Like it held all he possibly needed to stay warm in this filth.

Claws hidden by gloves prodded him along. "No. It's too cold."

"Not even upstairs?"

The clown shook his head. "Not even there."

"What about you?" Georgie's head craned back, revealing his perplexed frown. "Don't you sleep somewhere?"

Pennywise swallowed an urge to sigh, wiping the drool from his chin. Again with asking the painfully pertinent questions. Glancing around, he spotted a timely alternative.

Even as urge after primal urge told him, begged him not to.
"It's a bad, bad, baaad idea."

"How about thiS?"

Fifteen minutes later, a makeshift shelter had been erected in the foyer. Overturned furniture created a passible framework for several old blankets to be draped across, keeping the worst of the chill out. Georgie's puffy sleeping bag had been unrolled, curled into a passable nest underneath the tent.

"It's like a fort!"

The lamest in the history of mankind.

Standing back, Pennywise pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting to detract too much from his guest's enthusiasm. "If you say So..." he grumbled, masking the hungry groans of his humanoid body with a growl.

_Moron._

His newfound conscience really needed to learn what it meant to pipe down.

_Well. At least this is one missing child who will end up home when all is said and done._

Georgie, in the meantime, crawled inside without hesitation, boots discarded along the way. Hat, coat, and mittens still on, he flopped over, haphazardly worked the zipper up to his shoulders, and effectively cocooned himself inside the polyester sleeve.

Job done, Pennywise rose from a crouch and made to leave.

"Don't go!"

The reluctant host half-turned back to him, affecting a tortured grimace. For more than one reason. "Georgie, pleaSe..."

Now it was young Denbrough's turn to play the begging card. He did so to great success, mittened hands balled up before his face, eyes soft and pleading. He needed not say a word.

Pennywise hesitated, the gravity of that gaze drawing him in again like a wayward meteor. His form was incrementally warmer than the midnight air. And even if he refused, he would spent the next six hours _worrying._
He didn't like worrying.

At least, if he stayed, he would worry *less*.

Mindful to not jostle anything, lest the 'fort' crash down on them both, he crawled in alongside the boy, curling up against his side, draping one long arm across his back.

Georgie snuggled closer instantly, worming his way in with a muffled giggle of triumph.

And Pennywise tried desperately not to think of the meal he was missing out on.

The meal that would be utterly stale and flavorless by the time he was free to reclaim it.

Instead, here he was, like a lion lying down to safeguard a lost lamb, of all things.

Why? Just to see if he *could*.

He chose to think about that instead.

Guarding the lamb. Not eating it.

Guard, don't eat.

Guard.

He drew a rattling breath, staring straight ahead. Willing his hand to stop shaking, he patted the side of Georgie's head, fingers gently working their way under the cap to knead his hair. "Now, *Sleep. We'll* talk to Bill tomorrow, togethEr."

"Promise?"

"...PromiSe."
Chapter Summary

Georgie. You gotta get up.
... *snerk*

Chapter Notes

Sounds like an episode of “NYPD Blue”, doesn’t it?
Crack/fluff interlude. Enjoy for what it is- not serious at all. XD

Richie smirked, a self-satisfied smirk of _it-was-only-a-matter-of-time._

"Why you lookin' so guilty there, Stripes?"

Hands wringing nervously, Pennywise's nearest eye glanced mutely over his shoulder by way of response. The other remained fixed on the prone form before him.

Peering around, Richie's formidable smirk fell into a frown. Against his better judgment, he grabbed the clown by the arm.

"Hey, is he still alive?"

"He's breaThing..." Pennywise squeaked, a miserable peep of a noise that did not sound natural, even for him. "I thinK?"

Alarmed, Richie elbowed the creature aside, took one look down, balked, and spun around.

"Back up! Bill! Back up is needed!" Like he was fleeing some inane, nonexistent shootout between gangbangers and law enforcement, Richie sprinted out of the room. His smoking shadow was all but left behind. "We need back up in here!"

Not that his former-well house hadn't ever been the scene of past wrongdoings, but now, Pennywise was beyond convinced he had made the biggest mistake of his entire existence, there and then. Leaving Georgie alone during naptime, when Bill had specifically asked him not to. He had only been gone for a moment, watching the car pulling a suspicious U-turn at the end of his street.
To come back to this...

A little whine of dismay escaped him, and he bit one of his knuckles. He was as good as hosed.

The slumbering boy looked peaceful enough. Avoiding the indignity that was a rat-chewed mattress, he reclined atop his polyester sleeping bag, his head resting on a pillow made of his own arms. He lay at an angle, back rising and falling with gentle, even breaths. Nothing was outwardly wrong with him.

Or inwardly.

Actually panicking, Pennywise dropped to all fours, then all the way down, flat against the floor, prodding first at Georgie's shoulder, then his nuzzling helplessly at his face. The seven-year-old's thought patterns had all but slipped under his guardian's proverbial radar. It was like pawing through a stack of copier papers, one sheet as blank as the next. No hints as to what was going on between synapses.

Outwardly, his face was just as unreadable.

Pounding feet rushed back up the stairs, echoing like gunshots through the empty hallway.

Richie's frantically explaining voice accompanied them. "...I was only gone for three minutes, max. Came back, and he hasn't-"

Bill, to the contrary, took one look at the scene and promptly burst out laughing.

"He's just napping, Richie."

"Napping the braindead sleep of those who can't even be brought back by love's first kiss." Before a bemused Pennywise could ask, Richie jabbed a finger between the clown's crossed eyes. "Don't try that."

Then he made the mistake of accepting the most impossible of challenges.

"I'll wake him up."

He started off gentle.

"Georgie! Nap time's over."
Nothing.

"Squirt, you hear me? This ain't funny."

Down on his knees, Richie grabbed young Denbrough by the shoulders.

"I know you can hear me."

"Billy, it isn't woRking."

"See? You've even got the Drama Diva convinced you're worse than ever."

"Georgle!"

Richie started shaking him.

**Insert zany dialogue montage here.**

*Ten minutes later...*

"WAKE UP! Live, LIVE again! I beseech you in the name of our Lord and our Savior! Rise!"

Tozier didn't know *what* he was saying anymore.

Somewhere along the way, Pennywise had slowly crawled backwards on his hands and knees, away from Georgie, out of the 'preacher's' field of view. There was something vaguely intimidating about the sight.

Arms dropping to his sides, Richie sat back on his knees, ankles numb. He felt something like the world's most ineffective exorcist. His insides felt like half-melted jelly, slowly leeching down into his limbs.

He was actually starting to sweat. Or were those tears of frustration leaking down his face?

Eyes still shut, Georgie finally put an end to the fracas.

He smiled.
And apparently that was his co-conspirator's cue.

Richie's heart stopped.

Vaguely, he heard ringing bells, quickly drawing close. Like a cat about to pounce.

"What's the *f*- urg!" Not caring who was in the way, he flailed and bucked uselessly as he was grabbed, pulled down, and promptly *trapped* in the arms of a walking, talking, laughing cosmic insanity. Just as well, they had worn him down before springing this surprise on him. "No! Quit it! Release me!"

Was this what Death's embrace was supposed to feel like?

Or Death's drooling, fifty-third great-great something-something-something cousin? Twice removed?

Pennywise was an idiot. Plain and simple. He somehow thought bearhugging his victims to death was a preferable alternative to being hypnotized, mauled, dismembered, disemboweled, or all of the above, at the same time.

He cackled the whole way through. Even more agitating, the entity was never short on breath to laugh with, either.

"You've seen your *faCe*. We had you *goIng* good!"

Somewhere in the background were the muddled voices of Bill and Georgie. Where those nimrods *congratulating* each other?

"Err, let go! I mean it, stop!"

Richie scowled, eyes squeezed shut. An oversized hand ruffled his already-disheveled hair. "Who's the guilty oNe *noW*?"

"You still are, you over*compensating*, dumba- ow! Stop! Too tight!" Tozier struggled for a solid five minutes. Or so it felt. It was like trying to break out of a duct-taped straightjacket sculpted from granite marble.

With a grunt, Richie finally managed to pry his face out from behind the clown's forearm. His glasses were askew, nosepads forced down on the bridge of his nose like a pinching clothespin.

Or was than another unseen poltergeist gnawing at his face?
"Errr... Not nice, Stripes. Not- urph - not nice. In any sense of the word!"

Caught up in their own round of hysterics, the hugging Denbrough boys collapsed on the overcrowded sleeping bag behind them.

With Richie still pinned against his chest, Pennywise fell over and kept on laughing.

"Evil. Evil plan. All of you."
Weight Of Living

Chapter Summary

Bill and Pen have a little chat.
Continuation of “Don’t Touch The Face”.

Chapter Notes

As inspired by Bastille’s songs of the same name.

Pennywise the Dancing Clown was a sadistic bastard.
No matter what he claimed (or didn’t claim) to the contrary.
Or perhaps, Bill Denbrough would later reason, it was just the jarring surprise he felt at the time making him think that way.

He wasn’t overexaggerating all that much, either. How many rainy afternoons did he get to himself, without anyone else home? Even if there weren’t any particularly interesting programs on TV, the peaceful lull of pattering raindrops falling outside more than made up for that.

Then... maestro, cue the attention-craving eldritch abomination.

Leaned back against the cushions, Bill remained seated on the couch, remote control raised, for all of ten tense seconds before he let his arm drop back to his side.

"What do you want?"

The rest of his visitor's face was lost in shadow. Only his unblinking blue eyes stared from over the very top of the television.

Or, it seemed like they were staring his way.

Pointed in two different directions, who could tell?

As thirty seconds of gravid silence answered him, Bill lifted the remote and pressed the power button. He had hit *mute* first.

The eyes disappeared as the appliance's screen flashed off. The spacious room's overall tint warmed from a muddled gray-blue, full of strong shadows, to a cozy, welcoming yellow, courtesy of the nearby lamps.

"NoThing. What are you uP to?"

Bill flinched, clenched his teeth, closed his eyes. He just managed not to curse.
"Jumpscare j-junkie..."

"WhaT?"

Then Denbrough dramatically clapped a hand over his eyes, head tilting back sharply against the cushy backrest.

Dummy. Did he say that out loud?

Might as well tell the truth of it.

"I-I was just thinking, how R-Richie was saying - "

"That I'm alwaYs startLing the socKs off you aLl, every chanCe I get?"

Bill glanced to his left.

Hands between his boots, knees (somehow) level with his shoulders, Pennywise perched on the couch's armrest. The creature's expression was flat. Fiery-maned head tilted to one side, he was looking up at the boy through the tops of his black-rimmed eyes. But what he claimed, he said it without spite, at least.

Hunched over, he looked a bit like a moody, contemplative spider might.

"I was theRe. I heArd."

You were outside with Georgie.

Recalling that day, Bill couldn't help a wry half smile. He had wondered at the creature's feelings on eavesdropping, if he ever succumbed to it.

Here it was. The Losers' very own cosmic embodiment of Big Brother.

Small wonder why Richie despised him so. The fact that It's favorite form just happened to be a clown was salt in a preexisting wound.

"So you did."

Pennywise frowned at that, dark blue eyes narrowing. They matched the sky outside perfectly. Acknowledging the entity's superior hearing didn't appear to endear Bill to him.

Was it supposed to have?

"Sorry. I know, I'm not b-b-being a very g-good host. But you gave me a s-startle."

A minute ago, I had no idea I'd be entertaining a guest.

"I won'T stay long," Pennywise remarked, unusually forward. He typically didn't keep to a timetable of any kind, much less share that information with anybody. Even as he said it, though, his attention strayed off somewhere to the freshman's left. His hands started to knead together.

"Is everything... okay?" Bill found himself asking out of habit, momentarily forgetting the sheer lunacy that was him, here, talking to an otherworldly creature that just so happened to teleport its way into his living room. "With you?"

Day by day, these situations were becoming less and less bizarre to behold.
Complacency. She had not abandoned them to unmerciful Reality yet.

"Yesss. I juSt..."

Bill waited. The clown's behavior had abruptly grown halting and awkward, just like the boy's own stutter. Whereas other people were prone to nonstop "uhhs" and "ums", protracting his syllables when he was thinking midsentence was another tell.

"I jusT meant to sssay... thankS?"

Bill smirked. Now there was something he hadn't counted on hearing.

But it answered the "what do you want" part of the equation nicely.

"You popped over to show off how well you're p-p-practicing manners now?"

"For the fence poSt," Pennywise went on like he hadn't heard. Or opted not to listen. "T... thanks for helping. You wweren't suRe at the time, but you helpEd anyway."

Bill nodded. He set the remote aside. He had already done the math. "You told G-Georgie, didn't you?"

His visitor's embarrassed, nearly-sheepish look said everything. His gloves kept fidgeting, fingers plucking at invisible frays in the seams.

"I thought you w-would. It's okay. There hadn't been a good time for me to t-tell him yet."

Slowly, the gloves stilled. "You'Re... welcome?"

"No, that's what I'm sup... never mind."

Sighing, Bill ran a hand over his face. He liked to think he was a tolerating kind of guy. This was how it had been when Georgie was practicing his etiquette. If he wasn't miffed enough to feel like a correction was necessary, Bill simply let it go.

"Are you feeling b-better, since then?"

Now there was a potentially-moot question. While Pennywise played a great deal at looking human, in actuality, he still needed to learn the steps to that dance, what it meant to act it. And with a only thought, the guy could fly apart, morph as easily as one breathed, and rematerialize into any form he wanted. On the spot.

That didn't mean he was immune to discomfort.

"By the time you all laid doWn to sleep, it wasn'T hurting anymore."

"Good."

Bill paused, frowning, and considered asking a risky question.

Then he did it anyway.

Sometimes, it was better not to overthink these things.

"How... can I ask, how did it happen?"
Billowy shoulders tensing up, Pennywise turned to stare directly at him.

His expression had flatlined. Not smiling, not frowning.

And by no means inviting.

"You can."

_Wow. Blunt._

Rain continued to hammer the house, as constant as a drumbeat, driving back the silence that ensued.

Until one of them offered a verbal beat to counterpoint it.

Which Bill eventually did.

"You're not g-gonna answer me, are you?"

The stare didn't waver.

"You wouldn't like my answer."

There it was, that niggling concern that tickled his nervous system in all the wrong ways. Bill shifted to sit up straighter, smoothed down a pant leg, curled his toes in his socks, trying to seem casual about dismissing it. Two could play the fidget game.

Yep, this was the same lion whom he had helped take a thorn out of its paw. 

Figuratively and literally.

But It was still a lion.

"Fair enough."

Pennywise never had shared much _about_ himself, save what he was impersonating. Georgie was either too willfully-trusting or too naïve to ask more. Or both. And the older Denbrough boy's doubts were founded largely on speculation and limited firsthand experience.

But the creature existed. He existed _on_ something. Everything did. The universe was just programmed that way. And no matter what the entity may have denied, something about Its makeup begetted that he stay in Derry for _some_ reason.

"I'm bothering you. I'll go now."

"No, wait."

Equally startled, they stared in newfound alarm at each other.

"I mean... it's raining. Georgie's at the dentist's. The others are just as cooped up as me, probably doing chores. I don't know if you had things to... do. But you can stay... if you want."

At first, Pennywise raised a brow. Weighing his options. Trying to fathom another excuse to depart. Assessing Bill's words for hidden meanings. Any of these things could have flitted through his skull in the next minute that passed.

Then he was staring at the silent television as if it were a museum display he had dismissed early in
the tour, only to rediscover it with a blossoming fascination.

"Whatt... were you watcHing?"

Bill smiled. What kind of good human education could the entity have hoped for if he didn't understand TV?

Feeling a touch playful, the boy tossed the remote across the couch.

"Turn it on and see."

Delicately, as if he were handling a sliver of glass, Pennywise picked the device up between two fingertips. He fumbled, grabbed it again, then onto held it with both hands. Then he brought it unnecessarily close to his face, studying the grid of rubber buttons with great intensity, looking something like Ben with his nose crammed deep into a book.

He froze.

Bill stifled an urge to laugh.

"It's the t-top button."

Yeah. The clown was sadistic all right.

Not only for being a welcome intrusion on a lonely afternoon.

But because after learning all he could about it, he hogged the remote.
Chapter Summary

Pen learns how to share.

Sorta.

Chapter Notes

Fluff and crack in equal measure. Still, I had fun with this one.

Because the bell gag at the end - how could I not?

Pennywise took one pensive glance down at the unruly mess of fur and, unexpectedly, he had only one thing to say.

"Why?"

"She's a stray, Pen."

If anything, the boy seemed encouraged by his giant friend's lackluster reaction, and Georgie kept brushing.

The tabby-coated cat, now sitting passively before him, revved up in her best fuzzy imitation of an outboard motor, her approving purrs reverberating throughout the spacious room. Several tufts of fur already littered the kitchen floor, as Georgie diligently worked his way through the tangled masses that had formed around caught pine needles and burrs.

Pennywise quashed a sudden urge to shiver, inner ears ringing like a set of tuning forks.

That purring thing was going to get annoying.

Fast.

He clenched his teeth, lacy arms scissoring together across his chest. The next question on his mind, he left unspoken, deciding instead to aim a prompting look at the next-most-guilty party in the kitchen.

Meaning...?

"What?" Bill stood nearby, with one plaid shoulder braced against the kitchen door, hands crammed into his jeans. His smile didn't radiate quite so blindingly as his brother's, but it was there nonetheless. "She kept d-dogging us all the way over here. Either she's a stray without anywhere to go, or a r-runaway with no collar. We c-couldn't just leave her."

"But, we can't take her home with us, so..." Georgie let the sentence hang unfinished, his hopeful
eyes peering up at 29 Neibolt's otherworldly landlord.

Given that expression, Pennywise couldn't bring himself to say "no". But that didn't mean he was Loser-bound to say "yes".

The next-best response was...

"For now... fiNe."

Georgie still had the brush in his grasp as he leapt over to trap the sulky-faced demon around the neck in a tight hug. "You're the best, Pen!"

Bill produced a handful of money from one of his pockets. "We're off to the p-pet shop for some basics. And to give Mrs. Lockleer her brush b-back. Keep an eye on her for us?"

Pennywise stared back at him - unmoving, unblinking.

It was a silently-murderous look that would send most children who saw it fleeing for the hills.

Clearing his throat, mildly unnerved, Bill stepped back, slowly pivoting in the general direction of the front door. "Okay, then..."

Georgie stooped long enough to bid goodbye to the feline, murmuring a wordless farewell into her whiskers, then scampered back across the room to retrieve his jacket.

Pennywise stopped him at the kitchen's threshold, one wide hand held up to bar his exit. "Georgie?"

The six-year-old bounced to a halt. "Yeah?"

The clown dared a glance at the cat, inanely seated as she was in the middle of the sunlight-flooded room. She was staring him down already. Like a bomb, who wasn't in any way intimidated by him, biding her time, waiting to go off.

Somehow, that was worse than the purring.

He was tempted to plead his way out of this. But his argument would be flat out silly - sillier. Neibolt wasn't an abode frequently visited by anyone except the Losers, and an ever-changing assortment of rodents. Not the most pristine place, no, but was cat hair really the one missing component? He could not claim he simply did not want a feline around because she was making a mess of the joint.

Still, if it keeps Georgie happy...

"Uhm... What am I supposed to caLl her?"

"Stripes!"

The house's front door had creaked shut again by the time Pennywise's waylaid brain caught up with registering reality.

He's kidding.

He had to be.

Stripes. That's Richie's name for me.
One of many, admittedly. Pennywise was a being fond of picking favorites, and that moniker still stood at the top of Tozier's never-ending list. Georgie knew of it, as did Bill. Did they assign it to this breathing furball as a term of endearment? Or just because it was an easy steal?

Pennywise scoffed and scratched at his hair, impossibly-perched atop an overturned chair, watching as the cat leapt about the foyer, her shadow cast along the far wall dancing in time with her movements. Her next order of business, after the preliminary grooming, seemed to be play. Discovering a floor full of dead, dried-up leaves to bat and chase around hopefully meant hours of entertainment would be ensured.

No, don't think like that. The Denbrough boys wouldn't be gone for hours. That was what the cosmic entity had to keep telling himself. And even if they were, any number of setbacks could befall them in that time, and turn their minds around. He hoped so. Anything to make them decide against or downright forget this arrangement. The odds were in the clown's favor.

*They are, they have to be.*

He was being ridiculous, yes, but that was what he *did* in this plane of existence, and he did it *well.*

New movement scuttled by under his nose and he looked down, frowning sharply. "Yesss? What do you want?"

The cat stood on her hind legs, front paws braced upon the chair's inverted back, puffy tailtip flicking to and fro. A tattered bit of brown tree leaf stuck out from between her lips. She made no sound, merely stared expectantly at her unwilling host.

Waiting for what, even he did not know.

"Shoo."

Nothing. She blinked in kind, a lazy, drawn-out motion that let the cosmic being note (most uninterestedly) that she sported one yellow eye and one blue eye.

Pennywise pursed his lips, the irony not lost on him. *That's where they got the idea.*

"Well, how's that for coincideNCe? Was that performance supposed to be your version of my dancIng, too?"

At that the tabby meowed a yowling affirmative.

He facepalmed, so hard he wasn't surprised at the vague pain of a new dent forming along his brow.

Somewhere in infinity, Maturin was laughing his leathery ass off.

Bound to these circumstances, his anti-entity sighed. The mark between his eyes filled out, back to its previous shape. "FiNe. You want a rEview? It needs work. Now, shOo."

He flitted his way to the second floor, prying a set of yellowed windowblinds open to look out on the street below. To his dismay, it was empty, not a Loser anywhere in sight.

Not even a convenient bystander he might steer not-Stripes toward.

Little cat feet followed him up the stairs.

He didn't sleep. Not in the conventional sense that humans and most other Earth species knew sleep
to be. But for every waking year, there always came a time or two to simply unplug and take in the scenery.

Derry was active today, an impossibly huge web of connections, hanging suspended between all of its living inhabitants. Every person stood out to It like a light on a traffic control switchboard. Putting his other endeavors on hold, he let his mind simply drift, floating about like a cork in the ocean, and he surveyed his options. Where would he find his next most likely meal?

Or he *would* be doing that, barring no distractions.

Something was scratching the outside of the cabinet door.

Persistently. With little fishhooks for claws.

Damn cat.

"Get!"

Striking the door from inside, it swung open with such violence it bounced off its neighbor to clap shut once more.

The cat, her reflexes *nearly* as sharp as her assailant's, deftly leapt out of the way.

Pennywise lingered long enough to glower menacingly for effect, fangs bared. "I mean iT." Twisted to fit in the tight space under the dilapidated counter (the only hiding spot that seemed feasible from which he could escape her company, without leaving the house), he pulled the door shut again.

The scratching resumed.

"No, for the fifteenth time, I don't have anything for you to eAt. Get."

The cat dove again, rubbing her face against his pompommed boot, then flopped over to sprawl on the dirty floor, meowing plaintively, paws in the air.

*Dramatic, ain't ya?*

Hunched over the table, Pennywise kept his eyes on his task, intent on finishing the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle Stan had placed in Neibolt's unofficial 'hobby room'. Fat chance. The feline was determined to make sure that he had no peace. Two hours after the Denbroughs had left, the meowing had started.

Three hours later, she was still sounding off. Like a police siren with no power switch.

What was this animal's *problem*? Did she not embrace her lot in life? It could be summed up in one sentence: she was destined to prance about, sleep eighteen hours a day, charm gullible humans with her fluffiness, and be the death of all stupid mice. She certainly had the assets for it.

If she really were a stray, she'd know what it was to feed herself.

Lost in pondering a solution, Pennywise belatedly heard the slight tearing sound, and then felt the minute pinch of small, barbed points latching onto his foot. He looked down.

She was gnawing on his bootlaces.

"Stop that!"
She deftly weaved aside of the swinging gray claws, and hissed in retort, seemingly unphased by the once-human-shaped hand's transformation.

Possessively folding his limbs under himself, scowling, he was very tempted to hiss back.

In fact, he was almost ready to do more than that. One quick chomp and this problem would be no more. He could always claim she ran away, out of the Denbroughs' lives as swiftly as she had entered them.

But what if his assumed insides didn't agree with raw cat, and brought the body back up, like an owl pellet from hell? There was a chance it could happen, at precisely the wrong time. How would he explain that one?

Okay, let's try something else...

The rat scurried for the door, limping. For the seventh time, Pennywise intervened. He plucked the rodent up by the scruff of its neck.

"Nooo. NO. You're supposed to kill it."

And to think, that he ever been accused of playing with his food. He knew when enough was enough. This took the proverbial cake in comparison.

The cat bounded over, meowing.

The rat squeaked, indignant, as it was twisted back and forth between two fingertips, appraised by the clown's scrutinizing yellow eyes. To be fair, the thing was bleeding, panting, and just about spent of energy. How it had just not given up and succumbed to shock was anyone's guess. A few more runs, and maybe not-Stripes would start to catch on.

Bizarrely, Pennywise was reminded of Georgie in this instance, and all the simple joys the boy had introduced the entity to in the past year. One common and very key point was the fact that in every way, Georgie had provided the example, and then let him try. That was how teaching worked.

Did cats operate that way?

"Do you... need me to show you?"

Not-Stripes blinked up at him, licking her lips in anticipation.

The ill-fated rat, hanging limp, gave another terrified round of squeaks, thrashing, sensing what was to come, teeth gnashing at nothing.

Pennywise felt something unpleasant rattle in his throat. It was his many hidden teeth, whirring to back into being like rows of rippling sawbands. Difference was, they were being called forth against their will, sliding and catching on each other like puzzle pieces hopelessly out of alignment. Later, he would describe it as a cold sweat that seemed to leak its way inside him instead of out, and try not to shudder in remembrance.

Yep. This was it, the lowest point of his year.

Best get it over with.

Eyes rolling back, he took one swift bite of the prey in his hand, and vanished.
The rendered rat carcass hung in midair for perhaps two seconds before gravity thought to reclaim it. A small cloud of dust puffed into the air as it hit the stone floor, a horrid, bloody pincushion formerly known as a Norway rat.

The cat set upon it like a starving refugee to a buffet.

Seconds later, her dismayed teacher's hitching voice drifted down from upstairs, and went utterly ignored.

"NeVer aGaIn!"

The street was still empty. And the sun was setting.

Seriously, where were they?!

Pennywise tried to fixate on his anger, a battle he was rapidly losing. Anything to keep the horrid memory of the crushed rat off his mind. Half a dozen morphs later, and the taste had been successfully washed from his mouth. Not so easily erased was the awful pop its stringy body had made, impaled at once by so many serrated edges.

As if that wasn't enough, not-Stripes was still - how did Bill say? - hopelessly dogging him. By sound, smell, or some other indescribable sense, she had found her babysitter sulking on Neibolt's highest floor, gazing listlessly out the 'decorative' picture window.

Apparently won over him by that pitiful sacrifice, she strode over to rub her face, neck, and spine against the back of his leg. The accursed purring had started up again, but didn't seem so bad now that the clown knew something worse - her yowling.

She was... persistent, he had to give her credit there.

*You and Bevs ought to get along famously.*

Instantly, his mood perked up. The lightbulb had gone off.

Not-Stripes gave a plaintive cry as her companion winked out of existence.

"I'm allergic."

Fragile hope evaporated for him like a raindrop in the desert. "No..."

"Sorry, buddy," Beverly patted his drooping shoulder. She kept her distance from the feline, poised as the cat was in the overgrown windowsill, napping off a full stomach. Lured over by the clown's promise of a surprise, and undoubtedly risking some future punishment for daring to sneak off after dinner, Beverly took the introduction to their newest club member well enough.

Taking not-Stripes home with her, that was a shot in the dark. "She's cute, though."

_Cute like a hair clog in a drain._

Pennywise pulled a face, fangs visible. As if things weren't bad enough, now he had the idea that Neibolt's growing cat hair collection would prohibit Beverly from visiting in the future. What had he done in a past existence to deserve this?

Beverly smirked at the gangly clown's lowbrow expression. "You don't think so?"
"Have you heard from Bill? Or Georgie?" Pennywise changed subjects, lest he drive himself up a wall. Literally. And opt to never come back down. Not even for a bribe of popcorn. "What could be taking them so long at a pet store?"

The redhead gave this a moment's thought. Then she ticked off possibilities on her fingers. "The salesperson could be a real chatterbox, plying Bill for every last cent? Maybe they found one of those care books and Georgie's insisting on reading it through first? Neither of them have owned a cat before."

They've stopped at the hamster. I like the hamster. At least he's in a cage.

Pennywise ground his mismatched teeth, eyes drifting askew. He could count as many alternative plans he harbored on one hand. Anywhere past the ring finger, and he knew there was no turning back. "Would the others adopt it?"

"Nah, I wouldn't bet on that. Eddie's probably in the same boat as me, and Rich's and Stan's parents seem pretty anti-animal. Not sure about Ben's step-family. Mike wouldn't have time to look after her."

"Fan-tastic..."

"Why are you in such a tizzy, anyway?" Beverly plucked at his collar, ever-disheveled as it was. The faint splotch of rat blood adorning the front, she hadn't questioned. "I would think you'd be happy to have some company when we're not around."

Tell her. Tell her what you had to do.

Nooo. You'll scare her away.

More likely she'll drop dead laughing.

Humans don't do that. They get better.

Not telling!

Fine, you'll disgust her away.

That's not a verb.

Shut up, Ben-voice!

"Pen?" Beverly tapped the clown's forehead as one might a malfunctioning television set. He was staring straight ahead at nothing, like the reception had gone out. "You in there?"

He flinched at her touch, flopping down to sit against the moldering wall, legs outstretched, arms folding. He stared in the general direction of the cat, but no better ideas for effectively ridding himself of her presented themselves.

"I'm out of ideas."

"What do you mean?" Beverly took a seat beside him, backpack squashed between her and the wall.

"How to get rid of this thing," Pennywise spoke through his teeth. Why not confess everything here and now? "Whatever I claimed, Georgie would always suspect me. And if he knew, he would never forgive me."
Beverly got that sly look she sometimes did when the context of the humans-take-for-granted-daily lesson dawned on her, blue eyes sliding away before refocusing on her inwardly-distraught friend.

"That's it... You need to learn how to share."

He blinked, stupefied. A car horn honked twice in the distance.

As if the world outside was declaring itself in agreement with Beverly.

"WhaT?" he squeaked in a helpless, tiny voice.

"You're afraid of what's going on, like you're being replaced. You're not. Nothing ever could, you dingbat. If you tried thinking different, it'd make things a lot easier than stomaching whatever anxiety you're currently putting up with."

"But I don't waNt to..."

Unsympathetic to his whining, Beverly grabbed his chin, forcing them to look at each other. Her voice took on a firmer tone to better match her icy expression, in contrast to his worried mien. "I don't want to go to school, but I also want to leave this town someday. And that's a lot easier with an education. You want Georgie to stay your friend, you'll make an allowance. As his friend, you'll be happy for him, understand?"

Each word was like a dart striking the board, racking up points. Points like stung like beestings. Pennywise cringed, trying to pull away, but Beverly held firm.

After a two minute staredown, he relented.

"...Aw. Do I have a choIce?"

The Denbrough boys returned the next day, overflowing with apologies. Bill totted over a backpack full of cat food cans, a set of brushes and scissors, and a book on cat ownership (as theorized). Georgie's shopping bag was full of balls of yarn and catnip-scented toys.

Over exaggerating, maybe. But no more than the story of the debacle that was yesterday afternoon did.

"I mean, t-talk about having to beg, borrow, and plead," Bill rambled, as they both worked on arranging their supplies upon Neibolt's kitchen table. "We had to do everything short of commit murder to scrape this much together."

"No stealing, though!" Georgie chimed in. "All bought and paid for."

Arranging the stacks of cans by flavor, it was another two minutes before Bill noticed the unusual condition of the table. Baffled, he rubbed his fingertips together, startled to find no fine layer of dust between them. "D-did you clean this?"

Crouching nearby, Pennywise thought of something smart to say, a la Richie Tozier, and then imagined the disapproving smack Beverly would deliver to his head if she were there. While the Denbroughs were busy unpacking, he had made short work of the dust. His evidence-covered gloves were tucked into hiding behind his elbows.

"MaYbe..."

Having the lesser load, Georgie had turned to greeting not-Stripes, obliging her with a boatload of
affection, strokes, and nuzzles.

Watching this ensued, Pennywise's mood deflated back to what it had been eighteen short hours ago, when not-Stripes first trotted into their lives. History was going to repeat itself today. The only thing worse than catsitting against your will had to be being utterly ignored in favor of her.

That was, until Georgie glanced up and spared a moment to embrace his forlorn-faced friend.

"We're sorry we didn't let you know," he mumbled, earnest as ever, despite this being the fifth apology in less than ten minutes. "But thanks for watching her."

And just to complete the moment, said feline bounded over to reinforce the message. She placed her front paws on the clown's bent knee, pupils wide in her dual-colored eyes.

Georgie looked between them, and given Pennywise's stunned silence, a plan formed in his head. He pried a silver-clad arm free, maneuvering it out to a horizontal pose in the air above the feline. "Wait, hold still."

Not-Stripes reacted instantly, pawing excitedly at the red bell, clawing at the braided cord it hung from.

Bill smirked. "That's explains why she likes you so much."

Georgie clapped him on the shoulder. "She's all yours, Penny! Keep that up and we'll get her dishes ready."

Thinking of how he could embellish, Pennywise yanked the bell away. Not-Stripes pounced after his hand, claws sunk deep into the encircling frill, hind paws kicking in the air. Moments later, still holding on, she was gently dragged across the floor, teeth sunk into the hem of his sleeve.

"Hah!" He grinned wickedly. "Two can play at this game."

That was the thing about cats. And cosmic spider-monsters-passing-themselves-off-as-clowns. They won't kill outright, because then they would have nothing to play with.

Food was all well and good, but it couldn't beat companionship.
Smokescreen

Chapter Summary

Bev's MIA.

Until she isn't.

Chapter Notes

My first foray into the AU, or "IT" in general.

Stylistically, it shows.

Empty? That can't be.

The uninvited visitor glanced around in confusion, taking another slow sweep of the dank, dimly-lit rooms. Stepping lightly, the floorboards hardly creaked under his ghostly steps. Doors swung compliantly on their hinges, prodded by gloved fingers.

The apartment was empty.

Contrary to everything the boys had said, everything they had warned him of, there was no sign of Alvin Marsh, let alone Beverly. The former, the uninvited guest had no use for, save a good, long-deserved mauling. In actuality it was all the better for the entity not to lay eyes on the janitor. It made it all the easier to keep his temporary promise to do no harm and not "engage the enemy unless absolutely necessary".

Stan was quick to stick a pin in the unmoving silence that followed the Trashmouth's otherwise-grandiose briefing speech. "Honestly, Richie, I think he'll do fine without the marching orders."

"Really?" Richie took an exaggerated double-take at the clown's deadpan expression. He even went so far as to grab their eldritch mascot by the chin. "Have you looked at this guy lately? I can't not make sure he isn't taking this all for a joke."

The latent memory almost made Pennywise roll his eyes. Almost, as eye rolling was a little too obvious a tell of discontent, especially among humans. Rather than stand there and watch things devolve further, the silver-clad creature had fled the scene in the millisecond it took for Richie to look away.

Wasn't it just like the Losers to play off their fretful anxiety by way of petty bickering?

He, the least-serious-looking member of the childrens' ragtag group, had simply offered to check up on Beverly, who was four days AWOL and counting. Who else was better suited to the task than the one who could go unseen and effectively alter the minds of any suspicious eyes that might turn toward the Marsh apartment in the process?
His second-best guess as to where Beverly could be found turned out to be the correct one. The apartment building, on closer inspection, was largely unoccupied. Most of the tenants were out to work, their children scattered among the street's various storefronts along the street below. So at the faint sound of shoes scuffling across the patchwork rooftop, the erstwhile visitor followed the central stairwell up instead of down, flitting from shadow to shadow, and stopped short the stairwell exit, peering around the open doorframe and into the drizzly, late-afternoon haze.

A week's worth of scattered thundershowers had left the air unseasonably cool, gutters awash with decaying leaf litter and mud, the roads dotted with their own motley collection of puddles (some big enough to almost warrant honorary monikers). What rays of sunlight found their way down through the partial cloud cover tended to offset that to a comfortable degree.

But today was tolerable at best, with precious little heat to offer relief from chilly shadows. The missing Loser wouldn't be out here on the roof for her health, as Eddie would say.

Or maybe she would. From what sounds the entity had discerned as emanating from the apartment's pipes, outside now was a more than preferable alternative to being trapped inside the past few nights.

Georgie had explained what being "grounded" meant, and Pennywise had tolerated listening to the explanation insofar as far as what it could mean for Beverly's situation. It was not an unknown concept to him, the practice of adults keeping their offspring holed up in the family domicile as a dual means of enacting punishment and teaching respect for one's elders.

Inwardly, though, the beast felt no shortage of uneasy tension at the thought, worry coiling itself into taut knots throughout his corporeal form.

Being grounded, for Beverly, meant more than the other Losers perhaps grasped at this point. He loathed to think what the last few days had entailed for their absent club member.

Arguably, he knew the most of the ugly truth that was Beverly's home life. Having an eye out and an ear to each pipe linked to every last home across Derry tended to mean virtually nothing went on without It knowing. What he knew of the Marsh household was more fact than the fiction pandered aimlessly about by their immediate neighbors.

In close company Beverly did not confide anything to confirm or deny the suspicions her friends likely harbored, and while the clown was prone to the occasional over-indulgent ramble, Pennywise did his best to not compromise her unspoken wish that he, or anyone, not blather on and on about dirty laundry better left unaired.

Even if his poor impulse control left much to be desired, he could practice at it for her sake, if nothing else.

All these thoughts went sideways from his sporadic attention span at the slight whiff of crackling, ashy smoke that assaulted his nose on reaching the rooftop. He paused at the open door, shrugged the unpleasant smell off, and glanced around, grinning as he spotted a familiar auburn-haired figure lounging nearby, not far from the roof's edge.

She was gazing off into the distance.

Without a second thought, he lunged in for the attack.

"Bevs!"

The bells gave him away.
"Pen!" Beverly scrambled to her feet and barely ducked the outstretched arms that reached to ensnare her. Whirling aside, she stepped out of reach, rounding on the lanky demon with a demand that was half-yell, half-hiss. "The hell did- what are you doing here?"

He almost shrank away, quailing under the girl's livid expression, but he felt more confusion and concern than fear in that moment. He stooped down to her eye level, leaning in for a closer look, eyes gleeful. "Visiting!"

Without a hint of bashfulness she lashed out to deal her newfound company a light smack across the face.

"Most people call ahead."

"Eep." The smack didn't hurt, per se, but it smarted enough to derail Pennywise's manic greeting just enough. He took an uncertain half-step back. "Okay, okay. I'm checking on you, that's all. The others were wondering where you were, they say you haven't called. I tried the pipes, but you didn't answer."

He tried to reach out again and she stepped back once more, out of the clown's immediate range, her outraged glare smoothing out into a guarded stare.

"I'm fine. Keep your voice down!"

He clapped a hand across his mouth before more fretful noises could find their way out (one smack was enough, thank you). The concern anyone would hear him was largely moot, insofar as it applied to a cosmic being, and Beverly knew that. But then again, she wasn't wrong for not wanting to draw attention from whomever may hear a very one-sided conversation taking place atop the building.

"That's better." Apparently pleased with his show of compliance, however dramatic, she seemed to relax. But as he waited and held that pose, clearly expecting more, it took her another minute to answer.

"I just needed... a break from things."

The acrid denial stunned him into momentary silence and motionlessness. The hand slid off his face like a raindrop.

Dare I ask... why? He hiked a brow, threading his fingers together before another spastic motion betrayed him, reassessing his approach. Exhibiting frantic concern wasn't doing him any favors, but in his elation to see her physically unharmed, he had forgotten. Turning that realization over in his head, he glanced around as if distracted, then back, eyes slightly askew.

"But... there are better places to take 'breaks' at than here, aren't there?"

She held his gaze, declining to respond in favor of putting the cigarette back to her lips. The glowing tip crackled ominously in the tense quiet that followed.

Faced with that wall, he sat back on his heels, content to engage in this momentary staring contest. He had had plenty of practice at them.

Beverly's attire didn't suggest anything outwardly amiss. An outfit comprised of a green, slightly-pilly sweater and threadbare jeans were well suited to the afternoon haze. A thin black headband held the scarlet bangs out of her blue eyes. Aimlessly, she balanced on one foot and leaned back, bracing the other sneaker back against the stairwell shed.
Her behavior - that was another story.

Two minutes later, still nothing.

That was until another unwelcome whiff of burning tobacco jarred Pennywise back to his senses.

Okay. Time for a change of subject.

"Blegh. I see you haven't run out of those."

Beverly's bright blue eyes dropped for just a moment before she half-turned away. "...And I don't suppose you brought any with you."

"Why should I? It's bad for you, Bevs," he stated simply, in a perfect parroting of Georgie's feelings on the same issue. He made an exaggerated waving gesture before his pale face, red nose wrinkling. "The smoke turns everything yellow. And I don't like the smell."

That made her turn back. Beverly scoffed in either abject disbelief or genuine amusement, fighting a half-smile at the absurd notion only to fail miserably. "You, hate the smell of cigarettes? This from a guy who hibernates where the sun never shines in Derry's fine sewer system, since before said system even existed."

"That's different." Pennywise bit back a growl of frustration. This wasn't supposed to be about him, but how else was he going to get her talking?

"Why? You gonna tell me you had no choice?" Beverly paused to flick ashes aside. "But then again, I guess real estate options for some... one like you would be pretty limited."

*They were.* The entity shook his head, repressing an urge to snarl for three different reasons and counting. This was getting off track. Let her have her joke, but his concern wasn't unwarranted. "I just mean, there are so many nice things about you, Bevs. And those aren't. Why even use them?"

Taking one last drag, she dropped the spent paper, snuffing it under her heel. "We all have our vices, Pen. Vices aren't, by definition, good for you. But for better or worse, they help us cope when life gets rough. Friends understand that."

Pennywise couldn't quite muster a convinced reply, settling instead for a noncommittal grumble and a petulant scowl. How just-like-her was it to work a lesson on the tenants of understanding humanity into a conversation with him?

Undaunted, Beverly's smile broadened, and she stepped closer. "I'll try to indulge in them less around you, okay?" She reached in to tuck a loose strand of hair behind his ear. Before he could pull away, unused to this fawning-over, she gripped his striped cheek firmly between her thumb and index finger, and grinned at the annoyed stare and gurgling growl it earned her. "I appreciate the concern, though, you goof. You're getting better at that."

"Hmph." While the touch and the smile it garnered was enjoyable, it didn't quite soothe his gloomy mood. The tension was still there, lurking behind her words, and he wouldn't be content until it had somehow been availed. "I guess you... don't want any company, then?"

The smile faltered. "I didn't say that."

With gentle deftness he pried the girl's fingers off him. "You don't have to." The clown glanced away and put on his best dejected face for greater effect, shoulders hunching forward. "If my being here somehow gets you into more trouble- "
"I'm not in any trouble, Pen. At least, for now." Realizing how hasty she must have sounded, she fidgeted nervously with the hem of her sleeve. Cottoning on to the owed explanation, she caved: "It's all over nothing, really. Dad just... likes to keep me close, make sure the chores are caught up on after he's done with work. These last few days haven't been any different. I only came up here for some air."

_There isn't air enough in the apartment, Bevs?_ Pennywise's gaze narrowed, dark eyes brightening ominously from navy blue to cobalt. He wondered what telltale evidence those green sleeves hid. _Repulsive, stale, and musty compared to this, but that's not what you came to the roof to get away from._

"You don't believe me, do you?" Beverly swallowed, reaching up to fidget with a strand of her own hair. "It's all right. I should be free to call Bill or somebody by Saturday. There just hasn't been... a good time."

"...OkaY."

More awkward silence ensued.

*What did Richie call it?*

"Bevs, what is eh-wall?"

"What?" She blinked, taken aback by the sharp change in topic, before pondering the alien's enunciation. "Eh-wo... Oh, it's an acronym. A-W-O-L. Stands for 'absent without leave'."

"L-Leave?"

"That's what off-duty military take when they aren't punching the clock. But only when it's permitted."

"Then... why would Richie use it talking about you?" Pennywise frowned, puzzle pieces clicking together. And he did not like the picture that was being revealed. "You don't need anyone's permission to go anywhere."

"Besides Dad's?" Beverly smiled tolerantly, if not a little sadly. "His idea of a joke, I'd guess. We all know they're never in short supply for Rich."

"Hrmph..." The clown ground his jaw in annoyance, sharpening teeth catching against one another. Next he saw the Trashmouth, they might reach an understanding as to what was so not funny about Beverly's social availability. "Joke, right."

He gave a startled flinch at the soft blow that knocked into his shoulder, glancing sidelong and up at the girl who was suddenly directly beside him. "Jeez, you're uptight today," she remarked. "So serious - for a change. I didn't think you had that in you."

"Me, neither," Pennywise admitted. "And I don't like how it feels, but someone had to do something."

She nodded. "I overheard Dad answering a few hung up calls the night before last. I guessed that was the others trying to reach me."

"Then why didn't you 'reach' back?"

"I already explained that." She gazed back at him, unflinching at the giant's accusatory tone. "Do
you think there was ever a good time for me to try?"

After a moment's thought, the creature heaved another weary sigh in lieu of a reply. He dropped from a crouch into a sitting position, long legs splayed out before him.

*Guess not.*

"I don't answer to pipes, either," Beverly went on. "You don't think my Dad would think that strange, me talking into the bathroom sink? He worries enough."

"You had all of us worried, Bevvie," Pennywise retorted, hissing the nickname through his teeth as if it were the most repugnant word imaginable. "How are we supposed to help you if you won't admit what's going on?"

"How does admitting it make things any better?" Beverly shot back, eyes brightening with anger. "To you, or Bill, or anyone else? Can't you all leave well enough alone?"

He tried not to bristle visibly at her words, but couldn't help giving another throaty growl. Suddenly he wanted nothing more than to slink back to the sewers and pretend the last ten minutes had never happened. It was the difficult moments like this that made him feel practicing compassion was more trouble than it was worth. The Losers all had their troubles, true, and some were problems for which there were no immediate solutions. The worst of which were the troubles they were so attuned and adapted to they did not see the necessity of shaking them.

They did not see how much better things could be.

But Beverly wasn't wrong. She never seemed to be. Say she did admit to the frank hideousness of her situation. What would that change? Her father's behavior? How the other kids at school saw her? And who was to say things would change for the better?

Though Pennywise said nothing, the ire slowly drained from Beverly's expression, looking at him. The inner turmoil playing out in his mind, if not his face, seemed to speak for itself.

She patted the back of his shoulder, a silent gesture of *It's-okay-don't-torture-yourself-on-my-account.*

"The guys miss me that much?"

He gave a one-armed shrug as the mood deflated further, playing the sudden-disinterest card. "Not really. They're bored, more than anything. Georgie, too. He was wondering when you might give him another lesson on your keyboard."

It hurt to see the girl's face light up at the fond memory, scarcely a week old, but it was more painful to see her pretend to brush it off. Her absence could hardly be dismissed as inconsequential or harmless. What in this realm of existence suggested she simply "be okay" with that?

"Maybe this weekend, we'll work something out. Tell him that for me, will you?"

"...Sure."

"I mean it. I'll be there."

"Pinky swear?"

She gave another disbelieving laugh, even as he raised a hand, little finger extended in offer. "What
are you, five?" At his waiting, unmoving stare she forced a long-suffering sigh and smiled again. Reaching over his shoulder, she hooked their fingers together with a tug of finality. "Okay, okay. I swear."

Before he thought to let go, the girl's opposite arm found its way over the clown's opposite shoulder, drawing tight against the ruffles of his collar. He froze in uncertainty, caught in the unexpected grip of a one-armed hug, her chin pressing against his brow. "Missed you, too, you well-meaning dolt."

He could muster no greater response than a single croaking laugh. The admonishment was deserved, but it was pacifying enough that she graced it with a smile as she said it, and he couldn't help grinning back.
Chapter Summary

More short-and-sweet fluff nonsense.

For these two? Always worth it.

Chapter Notes

Easter egg title is an Easter egg.

Pennywise frowned.

He was pretty sure it wasn't the sun in his eyes, making this sight seem stranger than it really was.

Seated in the grass, Georgie Denbrough's back was to him. The boy was holding something skinny in his hand like one would a French fry.

"Georgie, what are you doing?"

The boy turned. Crouching down, the tall clown looked closer, slowly eased closer on all fours, then balked, jerking backwards on his heels.

New question!

"What? Why are you eating a flower?"

Georgie smiled. Unbothered, he kept chewing away, a bit of green leaf just disappearing into his mouth. He held another up for appraisal. "It's not a flower, Pen. It's a dandelion."

Gingerly, Pennywise took the plant between two fingers, delicate as silk, held it close to his face for a moment. His frown stretched even further.

"It looks like a flower."

"But it's not." Georgie held up yet another specimen, a nastier-looking individual, with far more jagged little leaves. "It's a weed."

"Even worse," the clown deadpanned, arcing a brow. Experimentally, he rolled the stem back and forth between two fingertips, watching the yellow petals twirl. "You aren't supposed to eat them."

"Ben says you can."

"BeN?" Pennywise scoffed before he could stop himself. Only good thing about this unwanted revelation was that (for once) it wasn't Richie's doing.

"Yeah, he read it in a book."
Snorting, he dropped the spare dandelion back into Georgie's upturned hand. "And you beLieve everything he sayS?"

"Not everything. Just this. It's like having a salt-and-vinegar chip, after a few tries. They aren't bad, long as you can find one without the bugs."

And just to prove his point, the boy took a hearty, fearless bite out of the second.

Pennywise flinched, gloved hands pressing to his face in dismay.

The horror. The horror that was the truth.

Well, this is what happened when you hung around too long, asking too much.

"GeorgIe..."

"What?" Denbrough's hopeful expression wilted. "I thought you'd want to try one, too."
Taste Test

Chapter Summary

Ben gets caught in the crossfire.

Chapter Notes

Action writing isn’t my forte. But this didn’t turn out half bad.

It was late in the day. But not so late the shadows could hide all of the horror of what was happening in front of him. Practically on top of him.

Ben Hanscom was convinced. Completely and utterly. This was as close as he would ever come in his life to feeling what it was like to commit murder.

Ignoring the pain in his arms and gut, he struggled to his feet.

He had to put a stop to it.

"Wait, no!"

It almost went unheard. Otherworldly shrieking rent the air.

One half of an unfolding duet, with the screams of its prey.

"No, no, please! I'm sorry, don't- ow-haow! Ow! Let me go! Please, stop! No more!"

"Drop him!"

Stumbling forward, fighting for footing on the slippery, rocky shore of the stream, Ben grabbed blindly for a handhold. This close to the water, there was nothing else to keep yourself upright with. Alien flesh tensed under his hands, vibrating as its owner's chest resonated with a growl of warning and alarm.

The new kid almost fainted at the sound. So bass, it rattled his brain like he was standing on an active subway platform. His vision swam, focus dialing in and out, but somehow, instinctively, his hands kept on grasping.

It was a last resort. This manic, this bloodthirsty, touch was the only way left to get through to It.

"Pennywise, don't!"

Finally, Ben got a grip.

The snarling stopped.

"He's had enough."
Clothes torn, Victor Criss kept sobbing, too hysterical to do anything else. He was pinned on his back, like a fly on a dissecting board. Only a couple minutes must have passed since he was set upon, but he was already a wretched bloody, muddy mess. His torso and arms virtually shone with red. Shiny trails of lifeblood had leaked across the rocks he lay upon, spreading into a horrible, streaked canvas.

His face was streaked with grime, eyes pinched, but still - miraculously - looking up. Pathetically. Pleadingly.

This is what happened when you tried to branch out, to after hapless prey without the team of lowlifes you typically ran with. A scrappy little omega-of-a-bully with no hope of moving 'up' would undoubtedly be inexperienced with hunting alone. Just because you thought the new kid might have some pocket change to pilfer.

Not knowing just what backup your 'prey' was never without.

Not counting on the ambush about to be sprung from under the water.

Not having a chance of escaping once the spindly nightmare had you in Its grip.

Ben winced. Yes, for him, the tumble down the hill had hurt. His shirt stuck uncomfortably to him, glued to his skin by half-dried blood. Cleaning himself up later that night would sting like hell.

But if he had let things go too far, the would-be memory of what could have happened that evening, that would be the real pain to cope with.

"He hurR-rt youu, BeN."

Slowly, with his insectoid-looking jaws bloodied, lined with more teeth than there were stars in the sky, the creature's awful, pale eyes quirked around, zeroing in on the boy who held his foreleg in both hands. There was very little about this tall, gangly eight-legged thing that resembled the silver-suited being who had, contrary to even his own nature, adopted the Losers, when no one else in Derry would.

In the low light, Ben couldn't discern much besides the long limbs, arranged around him like obscene tent poles, and a segmented body, the width and length of a school bus. At the same time, he was terrified. Terrified of looking too close.

The voice alone scarcely resembled Pennywise's, so laden with a peculiar chirrups and hisses as it was.

But he was talking. Talking instead of impaling Criss through the chest with one set of monstrous talons.

He was thinking. Enough to want to make the other boy suffer before dispatching him.

He wasn't that far gone into his fury.

Or so Ben thought.

Without so much as a twitch of notice, the creature struck again, fangs closing upon Criss' already-ruined right shoulder, sinking deep. Rather than rip and tear, It simply held on, keeping the crushing pressure up.

The bully screamed anew, the sound echoing across the forest.
Ben wanted so badly to cover his ears.

Beside him, a three-toed paw reared up, with its wicked claws as long as pickaxes flashing in the sun.

Poised to thrust downward.

To kill.

"No!"

Releasing his hold on the leg, Ben grabbed for the paw's 'wrist'.

By some inexplicable luck, he moved fast enough to grasp the roughly-armored joint in both hands.

Stopping the headman's ax before it could fall.

It froze. The chirring went silent.

"BeN...?"

Mumbling, it sounded like a groan of surprise. Speaking with its mouth full, the apparently-puzzled creature scarcely dared to move. Breath hissed in and out through its narrow snout.

"He's had enough."

"Please, please, n-no more," Criss whimpered, somehow holding on to a sliver of lucid consciousness, adrift in a miasma of pain and shock. His free hand batted feebly at the jaws holding him. "I-I'm sorry... I'm s-so sorry..."

"Don't do this," Ben went on, shaking like a leaf. Through the numbness beginning to grip his mind, he felt sorrow also welling up, behind everything else, about to flush out the rest of his jangled emotions. His eyes stung worse than his damaged skin.

*Not in front of me, please.*

*Not in front of any of us, ever.*

*You said you're our friend.*

*A friend wouldn't make anyone see this.*

Like so many other times in the last six months, It seemed to stop and think, to consider a Loser's words, no matter what their circumstances. It was usually a charming sight, to watch the being with a clown's face react so earnestly to praise being handed his way, or to reaching an understanding, to promises being made. It was like watching someone younger than yourself learn and appreciate a new lesson they hadn't before.

This insectoid thing in its place seemed to be doing the same.

In the most horrible light Ben had yet seen It in.

There was nothing charming about sheer reality.

Hitchingly, like It was suddenly having trouble operating its own muscles, the jaws flexed. They hesitated to release, then parted.
Criss fell back against the rocks with a soft cry, a shredded hand reaching up to clutch his eyes. As if covering them would blot out his near-death experience.

Ben breathed out explosively, half in a sob. Far from being relieved, he felt like such as much of unkempt mess inside as Criss did outside. He was still clutching at the alien limb, as afraid to let go as he had been to intervene.

Like letting go would undo it all.

Slowly, with a great crackling sound, the armored head craned around and down on its neck, armor plates rasping against one another. Looking back under its own body, upside-down, the creature gazed at the boy sheltered in its shadow with a stoic, almost-palpable sadness.

The eyes slowly turned a milky blue.

"He hurT you. What- w-what elSe was I supPosed to do?"
Chapter Summary

*dun dun… dun dun...*

Chapter Notes

Recommended Background Movie: JAWS

Because it is a jumpscare classic.

"Slow ahead. I can go slow ahead. Come on down and chum some'a this shit."

The words had scarcely left Chief Brody's lips before the shark lunged up from the bloodied waters. What began as uneasy laughter suddenly devolved into a discordant chorus of frightened shouts and yelps. The overburdened couch gave a noticable lurch as no less than three of its occupants jumped to their feet and fled.

Or attempted their best impression of it.

Lounging beneath the audience's feet, almost unforgotten, Pennywise belatedly remembered to get out of the way. His reminder came in the form of a sneaker landing squarely on the back of one gloved hand, even as another foot brushed sideways, threatening to clock into the side of his skull. With a cry that was half-pain, half-irritation the cosmic beast shrunk back into the narrow space beneath the couch, so quick the dust skirt gave a dramatic swish not unlike a disrupted tent curtain.

"...You're gonna need a bigger boat."

Scrambling forward, braving the daunting space between the couch and the television set (for one would think it was dubbed no man's land), Richie jabbed at the VCR's stop button. The swelling movie soundtrack cut out abruptly, screen blanking out as the three-man crew of the Orca scrambled to action. "Time out!"

Eddie, daring a peek over the armrest, switched gears from startled to livid. "Richie, it was just getting good!"

"I know that, but you guys are flat-out ruining it now," Tozier declared, whirling back around, glasses glinting in what late evening light illuminated the living room, via frosty February windows.
"Who says you gotta wig-out like little girls at a basic jumpscare like that? Did you see the opening scene?"

Frowning, Bill took half a second to process the outrageousness of the question before dropping back onto his seat cushion. He had jumped to his feet in reflex more than rational thought, but stood his ground even as the others sought to hide. Now that he knew it was all for naught, as the movie ground to a halt more unexpected than any shark attack, indignation set in.

"T-thanks for interrupting the flow, jackass. If we thought w-we'd be being judged on our reactions not being the right ones-"

"You never would've agreed to this?" Richie finished. "Well, excuse me, when I heard you had spilled the beans to Georgie that we were watching JAWS this weekend, censorship would seem to have to go hand-in-hand-"

"Where is Georgie?" Stanley interrupted, voice equal parts meek and concerned, still crouched where he had lept, behind the opposite armrest. He chanced a look around the corner, wide eyes finding only an empty carpet, save for a pair of vacant popcorn bowls.

The four exchanged a moment of stunned, comedic realization before high-pitched giggles began to stutter out from underneath the couch.

Bill's legs snapped up, feet lifting off the floor, as he pivoted sideways and leaned down to grab for the skirt. "G-Georgie?"

"You boys all right in there?" Mrs. Tozier's mildly-concerned voice sounded off two rooms over.

Hanging upside down, hair dangling freely, Bill heard the others fall in around him as he gazed down into the impossible gap that had opened in the floor. The space was the equivalent of a shallow den.

Huddled within was the missing Denbrough boy, shaking with mirth. More intimidating was the great, white, man-shaped backdrop, arms curled protectively around his small friend. Georgie, face buried in the clown's collar, looked up to flash a giddy smile at his brother before clapping a hand over his mouth, stifling his giggles, while doing nothing to hide the laughter in his eyes.

Conversely, Pennywise stared back at Bill with eyes lit by every emotion except amusement.

"We're good, Ma, thanks!" Richie called back, after a moment's delay.

Eddie and Stan timidly resumed their seats to either side of Bill.
Teetering between realities, Richie thought to stand up at the same moment a black, rectangular piece of plastic tumbled out from under the couch. It landed unceremoniously between his hands.

Georgie scrambled out after it, grinning. "Penny found the remote, Richie!"

Pennywise half-crawled out at this cue, emerging as far as his ruffled shoulders, lying down to rest his chin on folded arms. His red lips were still turned down in a scowl, sharp teeth bared ever so slightly.

At what, Richie wouldn't risk a guess there and then, much less a quip.

That hazardous yellow glare promised harm enough to anyone who dared interrupt the film again.

"Turn the movie back on." The creature sharply craned his head around to an impossible, neck-breaking angle, to glare at the spectators arranged above him. Bill - the closest target - flinched despite himself, but kept his eyes steady. "And Bill?"

"Y-yeah?"

He jumped again as an accusing hand jabbed dramatically into his face. Or it would be considered dramatic, if there weren't for the impossible fact the hand was as formless and jagged as a wad of crumpled notebook paper. His shoe had 'flattened' the entity's hand, like Judge Doom after an unfortunate meeting with a steamroller.

"Don't step on my hand again."

"S-sorry."

"He didn't mean it, Penny," Georgie assured, patting the clown's lacey elbow as one might stroke an agitated dog. "It was just an accident."

"I don't like interruptions," Pennywise huffed, eyes flushing from murky yellow back to a hazy blue-green, not unlike the waters off Martha's Vineyard. One eye followed Richie's fingers as they nervously worked the remote. The other eye zeroed in on the TV screen as it flickered back to life.

Regarding his 'damaged' hand, he mimed snapping the wafer-thin fingers.

With a subtle pop, they sprang back to normal human form.

"Next time we go to Ben's. He has a bigger couch."
House Arrest

Chapter Summary

Georgie's grounded.
Sorta.

Chapter Notes

Fluff, plain and simple.
...What? I can't get enough.

Georgie Denbrough had been convicted without a fair trial.

That was the real crime here.

Pennywise had a half mind to file a motion.

...If he knew what a 'motion' was supposed to do. Or if there was a court to file it with. Or how to file anything. That would help.

Reading over Ben's shoulder at the library wasn't always as fulfilling and useful as the entity hoped for.

Instead, he resolved to visit Georgie.

Distantly, he had heard the argument emanating from the Denbrough household, discordant echoes reverberating into the cistern. One high-pitched voice was being yelled down by two older-sounding voices. One female, one male. Unanimous, for once, together, they said this "was the only way he'll learn" and promptly slammed the door.

Waiting until their footsteps departed, Pennywise peeked out from under the bed.

Bare feet walked by. Dust bunnies under the bedskirt danced, then flew away as the feet approached.

Then Georgie was down on his hands and knees, smiling radiantly at his expected visitor.
"Hi, Penny."

"Hiya," Pennywise grinned back. He tilted his head, eyes bright and inquisitive. And off-centered as always. "Is everything okay? It sounded like you were in trouble."

"I am, still. Mom says I gotta stay in here for a while."

Creeping forward to just shy of the bed's edge, the creature glanced around as if it were the first time he had seen Denbrough's bedroom. No, it was visit number four-hundred twenty or so.

"Here, for how long?"

Georgie turned and sat down roughly, arms folding. When he failed to offer more, Pennywise half-crawled out from under the bed beside him, leaning on his elbows. "What happened?"

"Nothing. It's stupid. I forgot to take my laundry out of the dryer."

Pennywise pulled a face, upper lip curling. "That is stupid."

"I didn't mean to." Georgie shrugged helplessly, palms upturned. "I just forgot, that's all. I tried to tell her, but she and Dad say this'll help me remember next time."

"I don't see how," the clown groused. Already evil thoughts of revenge were dancing a jig in his head. Pour rubbing alcohol over Mom's piano keys. Tear the power cable out of Dad's sanding machine.

As if sensing the plots being hatched on his behalf, Georgie smiled and reached over, indulging his friend with a scratch above the ear. "It's okay, Penny. I won't be in here forever."

"Long enough." Whereas any other time he would welcome a scratch, Pennywise twitched and leaned away from the boy's hand, frowning. "What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

'Twas a crime to let a sunny day like this go to waste.

Now, a more selfish boy may have turned the question around. "You? What about me?" But Georgie Denbrough was not that kind of kid. He bit his lip, tapped his own nose in serious thought. His friend had been nothing if not loyal in the short time they had known each other. Loyalty deserved a reward, didn't it?

"Oh! How about this?"
"This, this is a bad idea, Georgie." Pennywise glanced down, thinking all-too-suddenly of Eddie Kaspbrak, stranded eighty feet in the air. The strong breeze ruffling his orange hair certainly reminded him of it. "Very, very bad."

Now the Denbrough home wasn't quite that tall. But opening a second-story window to scale its paneled side was intimidating enough.

The arms around his neck tightened, then Georgie's perky voice sounded off behind the clown's ear. He could virtually hear a smile bending the words.

"But I haven't left the house, have I?"

Freeclimbing out the bedroom window, intending to spend a memorable lunchtime on the roof. And that was after sending his eldritch Sherpa to the kitchen for a snack raid.

Who was this boy?

In a way, Pennywise supposed, this was his own fault. And not only for asking a fated question. Just because the cosmic entity could defy gravity, physics, and every other nameable force of nature to, say, crawl vertically up a wall? That he had felt the need to show that talent off at Neibolt one Friday afternoon?

Just because you could doesn't mean you should.

And even worse, Georgie had remembered.

Momentarily frozen, with gloved hands hooked over the roof's edge, Pennywise wished more than ever that he could facepalm in dismay. The boy clinging to his back, knees dug into his guardian's sides, did so without complaint. He was a lot stronger than his size suggested.

In fact, he was giggling.

"Shh! What if someone hears you?"

"You'll make them forget, silly."

"Oh... right."
Oh, Georgie.

What a story he would have for later.

With a final heave, Pennywise cleared the roof's edge.

*Bill's gonna kill me. Yes, he is.*
Catch And Release

Chapter Summary

Don't you recognize your own kind, Gretta?

Chapter Notes

*WALL*E reference, anyone?

It wasn't the first time Beverly Marsh had been forcibly removed from the public women's bathroom at the Derry High School. She didn't dignify the thought with keeping track of how many times it had happened. At the moment, she had other concerns.

Like cleaning the blood off her face.

Really, for a pack of cheerleaders, Gretta Keene and her crew acted with twice with the motley, careless abandon the football team ever did.

Ripped from her place before the sink ("Clean girls only, loser."), Beverly had managed to avert doing more damage to herself than they had planned on. Being tossed into the hallway, staggering, she just kept from falling headlong into the set of lockers that faced the door. A glancing blow had still left a scratch across her cheekbone and the bridge of her nose.

Her upper arms would be bruised tomorrow. Another lie to endure.

"Your newest boyfriend rough you up, Beaverly? Or do you just like it that way?"

Those thoughts were neatly put aside, as was the open backpack by her feet. With a compact makeup mirror balanced in her fingertips, Beverly used a meager piece of tissue to blot the blood away. It stung just a bit, but thankfully, she wouldn't need a Band Aid, or stitches. It wasn't deep enough.

Then the screaming started.

Adrenaline racing again, Beverly snatched up her bag and jigged out of the way as the door slammed open. Accompanied by the collective shriek they had suddenly harmonized to, Gretta led the pack back out of the bathroom. They pushed and shoved at one another in their desperation to flee. Their
eyes were beyond wild, hands brushing and pawing frantically over their arms, their legs, their backs.

Wait.

Beverly blinked. As did every other bystander who turned to regard the unfolding calamity, or jumped to get out of their way.

Pawing? At what?

There was nothing on them. Their uniforms had looked none the worse for wear.

Eventually, the screaming faded into the distance.

The hallway was empty.

Then, just when she thought the silence couldn't get any more awkward...

"That'S right. Run, you litTle panSies."

Beverly frowned.

The hissy, hitching voice. Mints and popcorn.

She should have guessed.

She glanced sidelong at the intruder-slash-welcome-sight.

With his gloved hand holding the door's edge, Pennywise smirked down at her, complicit in every sense of the word.

And not doing a thing to deny it.

"What did you do?"

He stifled a laugh, painfully unsuccessfully. It sounded like a trap snapping shut. "N-nothIng."

"Pen."
"You shouLd have seen their faces, Bevs." The devilish grin shone more than this eyes.

Then she saw it, movement. Down there.

A little brown something, crawling across the floor. It skittered out from under the door, running against the wall.

"Roaches?"

As if it had heard her, the suspect in question turned her way, then crawled up the wall beside her.

The roach flicked its wing covers twice. There was a tiny chir-chir to match.

Beverly could have sworn the thing was saluting her.
Chapter Summary

Part 2 of "Taste Test".

Poor everybody, that's all I can say.

Chapter Notes

Recommended OST: "Leave Out All The Rest" by Linkin Park. RIP Chester.

In hindsight, it seems like every tenth entry of this collection became a big drama point. *shrug* ...Happy accident?

"What else? How about, try not to rip the guy limb from freaking limb?"

Down on all fours, Pennywise shrank away from the Trashmouth's biting words, cringing visibly in the center of the room. All that was missing was an interrogator's spotlight. He hunkered down so low it was as if he were trying to fold his human form into the smallest possible shape. Like a once-beloved dog, now unfairly muzzled after making the mistake of showing its teeth at one of the family.

From his 'seat of honor' in the foyer of 29 Neibolt House, Ben Hanscom winced sympathetically, running a hand over his face. Being the only one to have seen their monster's misconduct firsthand, two days prior, the other Losers stood about the perimeter of the room, while he sat. As much as he had wanted not to intervene in such a fashion, what had happened at the creek had to be addressed.

The best way to do that was to hold a 'hearing'.

Like it or not, each of the Losers had to cast their vote. Their mascot's blunder couldn't just be ignored.

Richie Tozier, unsurprisingly, was leading the charge against the clown's version of events.

"Criss is still alive, Richie."

"According to who, this lying dipstick?" Tozier spat, rounding on the 'defendant'.

Pennywise winced again, face half-hidden behind his anxiously-wrangling hands. If the words weren't hurtful enough on their own, the acidic delivery had him, and therefore everyone, on edge.

Ben frowned. "No, me. I stayed until the ambulance showed up. There was a payphone about half-a-mile down the road. And Pen stood watch the whole time. Criss was passed out, but alive."

Nearby, Mike leaned against the wall beside Eddie, who sat stoic, head held in his hands. Glancing down, seeing Kaspbrak's unchanged expression of mute horror, Hanlon ventured forward to learn
more. He didn't want to believe this story was as awful as Pennywise had made it sound.

Through much rambling, involuntary chitters, and stuttering cries, the clown hadn't spared any details.

"Did you stick around long enough to see what happened after?"

Ben sat forward, elbows on his knees. He tried to breathe easy, to hold on to some semblance of control. He just wasn't accustomed being the focal point of everyone's attention, much less as a de facto character witness.

Meanwhile, his insides were doing cartwheels. He swallowed hard.

"I did, as long as I could afford to, out of sight. I heard the paramedics mentioning something about a bear attack."

"A bear," Richie repeated, arms scissoring dramatically with a huff. "Right. A bear that crawled straight outta a John Carpenter flick."

Stanley stood guard by the half-open front door. Guarding against what, only he seemed privy to. One of his hands gripped the opposite elbow awkwardly, as if he were trying to console himself in silence. Half in shadow, he looked appropriately torn.

As yet, Bill and Beverly hadn't had much to offer. They sported similar looks of guarded caution, eyes flicking around in turn as each of their friends voiced an opinion.

Bill stood to Ben's left, arms crossed loosely. He seemed passive enough, but the set of his jaw said everything about which way he was leaning on this 'hearing'.

Beverly stood to the right of the couch, hip resting against the armrest, hands at her sides. Though the clown had aimed several helpless glances her way, the redhead's mien gave nothing away.

"Criss was alive, last I knew," Ben reiterated. "He may not have a functioning right arm, but he'll live."

At that, Pennywise made a strangled sound, more fretful than the Losers had yet ever seen him. He tugged at his collar as if it were choking him. How he felt didn't need to be assessed, with an expression of I messed up writ large upon his face.

Both his off-angled eyes then turned back to Ben, more contrite and bluer than the sky ever knew how to be.

"I'm soRry, it won't haPpen next time."

"Next time?" Richie went off again, eyes blazing behind his glasses. In a bout of fearlessness, he lashed out, grabbing the clown by the cheek, completely livid. "Dude, next time, you won't fly off the handle, chew someone up one side and down the other, just because they tripped one of us up? Don't make us laugh."

"He was only trying to help, Richie," Eddie finally spoke up, unusually mellowly, too. He successfully drew every watching eye in the room his way in the process. Usually he armed himself with sarcasm in times of high stress.

But not today, seemingly.
"None of us could have known that... that was how he would," Mike seconded, as best he could put into words the revelation that their club mascot was indeed a vicious, shapeshifting demon.

For months, they had all suspected, on and off. The evidence had slowly piled up, here and there. Bits and pieces that, alone, meant nothing, meant far too much once brought together.

So much like the Losers themselves.

Now they knew for sure.

Their friend, whatever form he took, was a man-eater.

With a recently-developed appetite for affection.

Now mortified at the thought of losing his friends.

Losing the Losers.

Through his own carelessness.

Or was it overprotectiveness?

Mishaps were bound to occur.

Pennywise cringed, eyes darting nervously. "I s-said I was soRry."

Richie leaned in close, communicating enough with an angry stare: 'Sorry' doesn't put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

Still caught in the boy's grip, the creature shrank away as best he could, mustering no more than a whimper in retort.

The complete opposite of the snarling, arachnid-like menace Ben had watched erupt from the creek.

"Jeez. Give him some space, Richie, he already feels bad enough," Beverly spoke tiredly, as though her mind were sighing in time with her voice, finally having sorted through as much as it needed to hear.

Begrudgingly, Richie let go, stalking back to take position beside Eddie and Mike. Almost protectively, he stood with feet staggered, and one shoulder thrown out before the other. "Doesn't change the fact we have to do something about it."

"But, we can't do anything about it, no more than he can," Stan hazarded, fingers still kneading his arm. "Right?"

"My baseball bat says otherwise, Uris."

"Jesus, Rich, you're acting like we gotta lynch the guy," Eddie turned angry eyes up at his counterpart.

"You're saying we should just send 'im to bed with no supper, Eds?"

"He was only doing what he thought he could do. He's a predator, and sometimes, he can be a pretty stupid one at that. He didn't know any better."

Eyes averted, Pennywise stayed crouched where he was, safely far enough away from any one
Loser, long limbs folded and pulled into himself. He was starting to tremble like there was an earthquake underway that only he could feel. To his credit, he hadn't simply fled the inquisition when it had begun, despite being more than capable of instantaneous disappearance, and had stuck to his place of 'judgment' for over an hour.

Didn't that count for something?

"We've seen his overreactions before."

"Almost mauled to death for pushing someone down a hill is a bit more than 'overreaction', Stan."

And it wasn't the first time I've taken such a fall. Ben mused, frowning. I would've sooner handed over the money than weather this storm.

But, here they were.

"This is only the first time any of us has really been in the line of fire, though," Mike pointed out, to Ben's silent approval. "I mean, whatever Criss wanted, he made the mistake of picking on Ben when he was alone. Every other time, when we've been together, the bullies haven't tried anything. Why else would Pen have intervened, had Ben not been vulnerable?"

"Oh, yeah. The trick to that is, then, we stick together, every waking moment imaginable. Just how long are we supposed to keep that up?" Richie threw his hands out to the sides, exasperation clear. His simmering anger was gaining steam again. "A few months? Years, after we all graduate? The rest of our lives?"

Their defendant answered before anyone else could fathom their next thought.

"For a year."

Beverly, ever watchful, always listening, was the first to hear it. She stepped closer, hesitated, then moved in, crouching down beside him.

"What was that, Pen?"

"A year," Pennywise repeated, so softly Marsh had to lean in to hear him. He was half-staring at the floor, abruptly looking even less-than-chipper. "If that."

"What do you mean?" Ben squinted.

The creature's long face tilted up, just barely, his odd gaze weighted with too many emotions to name. "I only wake once every twenty-seven years. For a year." With his secret out, he sat back with a dull thump on the leaf-littered floor, arms wrapping around his knees, boots pointed toe-to-toe. "I'll sleep again, eventually."

"Not soon enough, if you ask me," Tozier grumbled, under his breath, but deeply enough to still be heard.

Eddie bristled. "No one did. Shut up, Richie."

"Sleep," Beverly echoed, eyes darting back and forth. "Like, hibernate?"

"That's the word for it, yes..."

"You... don't sleep, at all, before that time?" Stan braved to ask. He took an uncertain step closer.
"No."

When he failed to go on, Beverly dared to ask the inevitable:

"And... we'll see you again, right, in twenty-seven years'?

"You won't remember."

"...What?"

"You won't remember. Like the boy in the hospital, he won't remember. He'll just think it was a bear who attacked him."

"Oh, did you do a little editing to his memories while you were busy chewing him to a pulp, too?"

"Shut up, Richie."

"It was after, afterward."

Pennywise kept rambling, eyes down. Whether or not he was heard didn't seem to matter anymore. These words had been apparently been meaning to get out for a while.

Then he glanced up at Beverly, arguably the Loser he held closest to his proverbial heart, besides Georgie. His luminescent eyes gleamed, but who knew if cosmic entities could cry? Did he?

Had this one ever had cause?

"And you won't remember me, because you'll have grown. It doesn't matter if you leave Derry or not. People forget. They always have. They always will. That's what I do, have always done."

Glancing around at them all, he heaved a brittle-sounding sigh and finally stopped shaking.

"It's okay. You'll forget, too. And you'll be safe."

There was a pause.

Then Beverly's arms instantly snaked themselves around his drooping shoulders, surprising them all into new silence with the sudden gesture.

Pennywise's head jerked up, and he glanced sidelong and down at her with newfound apprehension and distress, eyes held even wider.

Ben blinked, mouth dropping open.

Now Beverly was the one shaking.

After the initial shock wore off, as if he were afraid of even touching her, Pennywise let a careful hand settle against the girl's shoulder blade. "Bevs..."

"You idiot," she mumbled into the folds of the silver suit. Her left hand closed against his chest, a fistful of collar ruffles grasped between white knuckles. "You idiot..."

She said little else. And, mercifully, no one encouraged her to offer more.

Until Richie opened his mouth again.

"Great. On top of everything else, you made the lady cry. Proud of yourself, Stripes?"
He never saw the punch coming.

"Ouch!"

Then he was down against the wall, holding his head in his hands.

His attacker stood over him, having moved with unexpected, lightning-like speed.

"For the last time, shut - *up* - Richie." Eddie seethed, shaking the lingering pain out of his hand. The surprise that he hadn't broken the supposedly-fragile bones wasn't even acknowledged. His voice all but shook with anger. "You insensitive *prick.*"

"Eds-"

"Don't 'Eds' me, man! As if things weren't *awful* enough..."

Trailing off, voice thickening as he went, Eddie's feet seemed to lead him of their own accord to the center of the foyer. He stumbled at the last step, kneeling beside Beverly, winding his thin arms alongside her own, over one of the clown's shoulders and under his massive arm.

Ben stood next. The motion pulled at the bandaged scrapes under his clothes, but all too suddenly, he didn't care if more spots of blood ruined another shirt. Caught up in the mutual misery of their situation, he crossed over and took Beverly's other side.

"I never did say thanks, by the way," he mentioned, with a sad smile.

"You doN't-" Looking back at him, Pennywise was cut off by an arm weaving gently around his neck. Ben's hug was given from behind, but the gesture said more about the boy's confidence than anything else would.

He had their mascot's back, in more than one sense of the word.

Mike and Stan, as yet so reserved with their words of support, joined in without question, snuggling in close on the clown's free side. Wordlessly, Pennywise draped a frilly arm across both their backs, too, gently pulling them in tighter.

There wasn't much in the way of outward sobbing. Little sniffles and gasps were muffled against the being's suit, but the desperate way the kids grasped at him and pressed close spoke volumes more.

Bill and Richie hung back, understandably, for their own reasons, disclosed and not.

With five sets of arms around him, Pennywise didn't have the willpower to whine about that. Or the courage.

Two hugs less than a complete set.

Three, actually, as Georgie had thankfully been spared from this raw, painful encounter. Being grounded had actually been a blessing to him, of all things.

That was fine. An incomplete set of compassionate compromisers was the least of what the entity deserved, making the mistake he had.

The mistake of wanting to feel more.
At seven-years-old, Georgie Denbrough was too young to have made enemies out of anyone. So, to make up for that absence of antagonism, he picked a time of day to dub his nemesis. Naptime.

"But I don't want to."

Both his parents and big brother Bill seemed to unanimously agree on the matter. That these midday sleeps were necessary for someone as young as he. What was he, four?

No, seven, and counting.

What was worse, they had somehow managed to corrupt his friend Pennywise into believing the same thing. The elder Denbroughs were absolved of that evil, with having the built-in excuse of simply being unable to comprehend the clown's existence. More than once Georgie had found himself in the yard with Dad, or out shopping with Mom, and would unexpectedly spot the eldritch creature lounging in a nearby tree, or waving cheerfully at him from below a shelf. After the first few encounters, he gave up trying to point the clown out to his parents.

No adults in Derry could see him, it seemed.

Bill.

Bill had to be the one to blame. He could see Pennywise as plain as day as his little brother. As soon as he got out of this predicament, Georgie would track him down and demand answers.

"Penny, I'm not even sleepy."

"No? ReaLly?" Pennywise smirked, as tolerant as ever, only to reach over and unceremoniously pull the pillow out from under the boy's head.

Georgie fell the short distance with an involuntary giggle, scooting back to sit against the headboard.

"You wiLL be," Pennywise declared, coming across as oddly serious - so incongruous with his painted features and frilly attire. He reached down to tweak Georgie's nose with one finger. "I've knowN you long enougH."
The boy sat up, determined not to appear tired.

Determined. For Georgie, it was akin to a chipmunk trying to look butch.

"Not today, though! We can still go to the park and be back before Bill finds out we were gone."

"Now, now, that could take hours." Leaning over, the clown ruffled the boy's mussed hair (tussling it even further), already having guessed his ulterior motive on the first try. He watched as the flush-faced Georgie defiantly crawled aside from the blanket that had been spread over him.

Even the tiniest bit ill going into August, as Georgie was running a slight fever today, and Bill's orders as to how to treat it had been clear.

*Don't let him go anywhere.*

"I'll look for your missing racecar, don't worry."

Georgie crossed his arms, lip jutting out in his best Pennywise-pout impression. "Fine. I won't sleep until you find it, then."

"Hmm," Pennywise feigned a moment of skepticism, fingers drumming on the pillow. "You may be awake for a long time."

"I won't! I promise. You'll come back and I'll be right here waiting."

At that Pennywise smiled, a look that was somehow both latently-patient and a bit sad. Smoothing out the wrinkles from the pillowcase, he set it at the foot of the bed. "Are you sure?"

"Uh huh!" Georgie's head bobbed earnestly. "I think it may be over by the merry-go-round."

"...Right. Okay. One condition, then - I catch you sleeping, no piggyback rides for a day. Deal?"

"Deal!" Forgoing the clown's proffered handshake, Georgie rolled onto his knees and embraced him around the middle instead.

Just as suddenly, the boy found himself hugging empty air. He nearly took a tumble off the bed, hands scrambling to find the edge of the mattress. Frowning, he glanced up at the delicate tinkle of bells.

Pennywise grinned back at him from his new vantage point, halfway out the door, apparently thinking of a gem of a last minute addition. "Ohh, and no leaving the bedroom."

"Penny!" Outraged, young Denbrough stumbled in his haste to climb off the bed, nearly stumbling on the hem of his pyjamas. The slight fever he was enduring did nothing to help his sudden annoyance. "No fair."

"Sleep tight!" With a little mocking wave, the clown pulled the door shut.

Georgie grabbed for the handle, slightly dizzy, his reaction times dulled just enough. He stumbled forward, reaching out ahead of himself, only to be disappointed at hearing the dreaded click of lock tumblers engaging.

"Penny, wait!"
Hack Job

Chapter Summary

Some semi-serious drabble featuring Bill, Beverly, and Pennywise.

Chapter Notes

Callbacks to “Nature Vs. Nurture”.

It started off as a joke.

But, as with so many other of the Losers' brilliant ideas, it went sideways fast.

Before recovering just in the nick of time.

Amazingly enough, Pennywise had been the inspiration, but not the actual perpetrator of said crime. Or, at least, not the only one. Per his usual invasive, teasing self, the clown had taken one look at Bill Denbrough, hunched over his pile of homework at Neibolt's kitchen table, pencil in hand, and thought to do what he did best.

Make a distraction of himself.

Moreso than he already was.

It didn't take much. Just hop on the table, wait, wait for it, then slowly, eeeever so slowly, lean closer and closer. Using just the tip of his index finger, he pushed one half of Denbrough's impressive bangs to one side, revealing the boy hidden underneath.

Bill didn't move for perhaps two minutes. His pencil continued to ply away.

Circle this. Fill in that blank.

Then, finally glancing up, noticing how his overgrown bangs had been parted like a curtain, he frowned.

He glanced up even further.

Head tilted to one side, Pennywise smirked at him, poised, one fingertip still holding the locks aside.

"PeEk-a-boo."

Then, in a textbook example of cosmic bad timing, Beverly Marsh walked in.

She didn't even pause to consider the odd sight. She just asked.

"What are you doing, Pen?"
"Being as sneaky as ever," Bill deadpanned, pencil still in hand.

Pennywise frowned and sat back on his haunches, frilly arms wrapping around his knees.

Pitiful. That had been as far from the overblown reaction he had hoped for as one could get.

So, plan B.

"He neEds a haircut, Bevs."

The pencil was set down with a snap.

"N-no, he does not."

Pennywise snorted with barely-repressed laughter.

There we go!

Looking between them, Beverly's mein gradually took on a smirk of its own. Her own auburn locks were several inches shorter than they had been a week ago. The warming weather had her claiming she had done so to keep cool.

And far be it from her to not do the same for a friend.

Seeing her very visable change in expression, Bill recoiled from the table. "No, don't e-e-e-ven consider it!"

"Quit b-b-b-being a baby, Billy," Pennywise mocked, for good measure. Still on the table, he crept closer, moving almost daintily on fingerprints and toes. "How can you sEe where you're going otherwiSe?"

Backpack taken off, Beverly was already searching for a weapon. Any self-respecting high school student kept a basic arts-and-crafts stash in one cargo pocket. Scissors were a must-have. Her fine-toothed comb was her backup instrument.

Bill tensed, half-reaching for the yawning doorway approximately ten feet to his right. His eyes darted very obviously in that direction. Logic told him he had no chance to escape.

But damn if he wasn't gonna try!

Then Beverly gave the command.

"Pen. Sic 'im."

NopE!

In a cosmic blink, the gangly clown had trapped his target from behind, a bearhug-in-reverse, with an arm wrapped soundly across his collarbone, grasping the boy's opposite shoulder. The other hand held Denbrough's elbow, forcing his arm behind his back at an incapacitating, borderline-ouch angle.

Bill gasped involuntarily, belatedly remembering to still his shuffling feet (barely having acted on the impulse he had felt to run). He felt suddenly like that stray sheep who had refused to be part of the herd, scruff-grabbed gently-but-firmly in their attending sheepdog's jaws.

Well, that was the shortest pursuit in known history.
Pennywise gloated anyway.

"Gotcha!"

Shaking her head, Beverly stepped closer.

"You made the mistake when you stopped to think, Bill."

He swallowed nervously, stilling in fear between the gloves that held him. It wasn't that he hated the actual act of having his locks removed. He was more mature than that.

But the thought of being cut against your will?

Where was the justice in that?

He could see where he was walking just fine, thank you. Sometimes it took a little flick of the neck to be sure. A second look if he really wasn't certain. But what about it? Everyone had their tics.

"Is he always this difficult?"

With gentle precision, Beverly began combing the bangs out. Resigned to his fate, Bill scowled and blinked violently as the fraying tips danced before his eyes.

"Not usually," she replied, seemingly content to carry on a conversation with their orderly-ahem, mascot, as if their unwilling client had suddenly gone deaf. "But God help you if you try to do anything he doesn't sign off on."

"It's for your own good, Billy."

"S-so is keeping your personal habits personal," Bill retorted at long last. "I d-d-don't try to t-tell you what shape to take when you're around, do I?"

He struggled, a pathetic ripple of constricted movement. The arms around him didn't budge.

"Nope. But if it was for my own good, wouldn't you?"

Despite having a lot to work with, Beverly had already finished brushing. She held the scissors ready, smiling. At either one or both of them, who could say?

Fists unclenching, Bill went almost-deathly still. As much as he so wanted to deny the question being turned around on him, whatever counter-argument he came up with was bound to fall flat. Damn logic for being so... logical.

"I think he's ready, Bevs."

At the last possible second, Bill's blue eyes rolled upward, fruitlessly trying to see the painted face above his head.

"Who knows what your own good quantifies?"

"Quantifies," Pennywise repeated, voicing the word like an affectionate scoff. "You wouldn't begin to understand."

With great care, Beverly started trimming.

Understand. Kinda like you and your morbid fascination with the same species you've spent so many
Bill let it happen, breathing more and more easy. The clown's arms held firm. The delicate snipping was intimidating to behold at first, to see pointed metal angled so aggressively toward his eyeballs.

But Beverly's hand remained steady. She did not rush, stopping frequently to check her progress as she worked from her client's left to right.

A few minutes elapsed. No blood was drawn. No eyes were poked out.

Despite himself, Bill looked up again, eyes sashaying back and forth to track the scissors. The half-inch just above his eyebrows, that seemed to be the goal line.

A trim. Not abhorrently short, but still his bangs would stay a decent length.

"Mom's g-g-gonna have a cow when she sees me."

A milisecond later, he wondered just what had possessed him to utter such a thing.

He meant for it to sound casual, but as was typical with Pennywise, anything that sounded too casual needed exposing. And fast.

"HoW do you know she'Ll even notice?"

"...Wishful thinking, I guess."

The contented smile faded a degree from Beverly's face. "She notices, Bill," she reassured him, after a beat of silence. "She doesn't always show it, but she notices."

Bill felt a minor flush of shame. Heaven knew Beverly's 'wishful thinking', with regard to her father, was an entirely different ballgame than his.

Then again, had the clown not brought it up...

"Y'know, Pennywise, you still n-need to learn a thing or two about tact."

"TaCt?"

Yes, you demonic parrot.

"What it is to not offend someone."

"He's only saying what you already know," Beverly jabbed, before her client could direct too much undue attention at the very-attention-addicted being towering over them.

The scissors kept going.

The flush went from shamed to annoyed. Bill's expression went flat to better disguise it. His fingers worked idly at his sides.

"And if you're offended by it, why even bring it up?"

Maybe because I have the faintest, flickering glimmer of hope that things in Derry, and my life in general, are not that bad.

"In the face of impossible odds, I try to be an optimist sometimes, Beverly."
Put that one on a motivational poster, Denbrough.

"Try another subject."

Some of the ever-present-levity went out of Pennywise's voice with those words, to Bill's silent approval. Recognizing he had crossed some unspoken line in the sand, he wisely changed gears.

Beverly apparently sensed it, too.

In many ways, her ears were just as sharp.

Had that always been so, or did hanging around It make things appear that way?

The guy was a very practiced and manipulative illusionist.

"Maybe we can sit Georgie down next?" Marsh offered, sounding truly nonchalant. "Then you can point and laugh from this side of the handles. Wield them yourself, even."

"Noo. Georgie wouldn't stand a chance."

Bill smirked despite finding nothing actually funny about the idea. But the way Pennywise said it, so falsely-dismissive...

"It can't be worse than the time you talked him into bringing that beaver home."

Beverly snatched the scissors away before the laughter overwhelmed her, free hand clapping over her mouth. Her bright eyes fell shut, shoulders quaking.

No, sir, you did not just go there!

Pennywise's objection was as undeniable as gray hair in one's old age.

"I did nothing of the kind."

"He said you did," Bill went on. Amazingly, the thought to break out of the gloves' hold didn't occur to him, even as he felt the fingers relax - just by a bare fraction.

"But I didn't."

"You calling Georgie a liar, clown?"

"In the excitement, you probably misheard him."

*Underhanded excuse is still an excuse.*

"You were there, Beverly," Bill turned back to his 'stylist'. "How 'bout it?"

That put her in an awkward spot. While the hike to the dam had been her perogative, how that day had ended could best be summed up as a group effort. In convincing Georgie to leave the baby beaver behind, and not lure the thing miles away from its natural habitat, back into town, straight to 29 Neibolt House.

Why the darn thing had followed him so far was lost on *everybody*. Including Pennywise, who had tried every last step of the way to intimidate the waddling thing into running back to the dam.

Why? Was it the reincarnation of some long-lost Denbrough relative? A sudden, once-in-a-millenium
case of puppy love? What else could explain it?

For all his accumulated evils, it had nothing that could compare to the sheer lunacy of that evening.

"To this day, I still don't know what that was about, Bill," Beverly finally concluded, with a weary smile to match. The memories were fond, if not beyond-bizarre. Richie mock-charging at the thing. Mike trying to poke it into retreat with a stick.

A most-unhelpful Georgie waving a carrot before its face.

"And neither does Pen. So, can we just call that round a truce?" She gestured toward the abandoned bangs, one sliver of locks still dangling longer than the rest. "I'm almost done."

Heaving an overdramatic sigh, Denbrough blew the stray hairs that had been shed off his face.

"Don't bring that up again."

Nothing was funnier than a cosmic being grappling with a mystery the cosmos would not let them just solve already.

Especially when you couldn't see his assumed-face.

"Why?" Bill grinned. "That's gonna haunt you until the end of time, isn't it?"

"And beyond, if I let it."

"Which you won't," Beverly intoned, as solemn as any priest. The scissors went back into action. "Right?"

Another scoff: "Right..."

Snip.

The last lock fluttered to the floor.

Pennywise let go.

Bill stepped away, ruffling his hair both for function and effect.

He could see better after all.

Seconds later, the remainder of the fashionably-late club arrived on the scene. They stopped at the kitchen door, peering over each other's shoulders with a strange mix of expressions.

Bewilderment. Shock. Awe.

And maybe... just a bit of trepidation.

Richie looked down. He took one prolonged look at the brown tufts scattered about the dirty floor and adjusted his glasses, as though he had seen something wholly wrong.

Bill and Beverly were already seated, just starting to pour over once-neglected homework. They were smiling like a couple of guilty graverobbers after a successful late-night raid.

And Pennywise, crouching on the table between them, chin resting on a gloved fist.

Why was he frowning like it was his lunch money that had been stolen?
Exchanging a glance with Richie, Eddie blinked and breathed a steadying breath. "Allll right, what did we miss?"
Chapter Summary

Like two peas in a pod?
Not.

Chapter Notes

Self-indulgent crack. Because I had to write something with Currywise in mind.
The vernacular isn’t 100% King, mind you. Artistic license.

"Spit that out, kid. You don’t know where it's been."

With his mouth full, Pennywise intended to do no such thing.
Least of all at his command.

The skinny human limb being furiously gnawed at was just about stripped of flesh and muscle, leaving only the bland, connecting bits of rubbery tendons between wrist and elbow to snap off. It was little more than a skeletal ruin, the blood-stained series of bones.

And at that moment, It was wholly intending to get every last stringy scrap of meat off it.
That was going well.

Until another white-gloved hand reached in and grabbed the morsel by the forearm, and tugged violently as if to reiterate the message.

"Drop it, I said."

Pennywise flinched, startled as the wrecked human hand was wrenched away. Then, just as quickly, it seemed to spring back to life, only to whip back to strike him across the nose. The pain sent his eyes rolling back into his half-morphed skull.

"Ouch!"

"Told ya. Thing's diseased, possessed even."

Growling, with a hand held to his now-aching face, Pennywise let his form settle and smooth out. Exoskeletal patterns danced across the surface of his painted skin, and then he glared daggers over his knuckles at his attacker's smug expression.

"You're disEased, old man."

The shorter Being smirked up at him, showing sharp pirahna teeth. "Now, now. That's not how ya
should speak to your elders."

"Elders. Pah. You say that like you're owed some measure of respect. I have no respect for copyCats."

His visitor wagged a criticising finger in retort. Not his own - the bones of the dismembered arm continued to rattle noisily against one another.

More impossible yet was how he was seemingly able to puppet the grisly thing with no visible strings.

"Ey, I'll have you know you've got no corner on that market, either, kid. You ever read the papers? ...No? Humans make more of a running joke out of these forms to cover up far more erroneous crimes they commit than you and I can ever hope to compete with."

"Oh, then, I'm totally deVastated," Pennywise sneered, gloved fingers gently kneading the bridge of his nose. With a soft click it reset.

*To think, I was a 'copycat' all along.*

*Insert cosmos' loudest-ever DUH! here.*

At last, the ravaged arm was thrown aside, disappearing into the underbrush like a discarded corn dog stick. "Yea, I can tell. You're just crushed."

The visitor flicked dismissively at the alter-being's puffy shoulder, as if he were brushing away time's dust. Unceremoniously, he poked at an arm, making a bell ring in kind. He shook his head, took an exaggerated stroll around the taller Being, looking him up and down.

The disappointment-slash-amusement was clear in his sky-blue eyes.

"Good grief. And you say *I'm* behind the times. What history book did this disguise fall out of?"

Pennywise bristled.

He was fond of this look.

"In this univerSe? Wouldn't yOu like to know?"

Already, It could tell this was a mistake, one he would probably spend of the rest of the year making up for, dimensional debacle notwithstanding. Beings of their stature were not meant to occupy the same universe for any length of time, much less the same planet. Things became too unstable. For eons he had gone without hearing a whisper of any other Being within lightyears of Earth.

Then, out of nowhere, *he* came calling, like a long-lost relative you hoped against hope had passed. For weeks he kept rasping and harping on his would-be host to be introduced to this "pack of runts" who had supposedly adopted his alter-self.

Or was it the other way around?

Just Its luck the encroaching entity was of an older, tougher-to-please make. There would be no refusing him either way.

Knowing there would be no peace for him if he didn't arrange *some* kind of encounter with *his* Losers, It obliged.
Begrudgingly.

Always begrudgingly.

What he didn't count on was the seemingly-random hunting opportunity that presented itself, mere moments after the Being showed up. Derry, Maine was a veritable smorgasbord. There were some days when the town's lower crust and the outcasts practically fell into the Kenduskaeg.

He made short work of the five-year-old, hobbled as they were by a broken ankle, dragging the headless body off into the privacy offered by the Barrens. Together, alien claws set to work, they had seperated and quarreled over the meager pieces.

Then, after reassuming their humanoid forms, the ribbing and sizing-up had begun.

"So! Tell me, what do ya get up to between feeds? I mean, now that you've officially demoted yourself from almighty cosmic abomination to kiddie club mascot, your schedule must be a lot more, I dunno, free."

"The opposite, actualLy." Pennywise squinted.

Too much, way too much yellow assaulted his eyes. The other Being's guise was almost painful to look at, like an intense, multicolored star: so many bright and gaudy colors that were supposed to resemble a cohesive outfit.

He had really gone all-out in, effectively, clowning himself up.

"Annd...? Don't keep me in suspense here, kid. You've already had more than your fair share of doing that."

"Sooo, I'm greedy with my mysterIes. Sue mE."

"Sue you? Oh! In the court of what, exactly? Conflicting Cosmic Contrivances, Room 107, last door on the right. Gimmie a break."

With surprising strength, the shorter Being reached up to seize his host by the chin, yanking them down to a matching eye level.

It snarled impulsively, clawing violently at the other's offending wrist, eyes half-rolling back.

What was it with this universe and its never-ending penchant for grabbing his corporeal form's face?

"That's right. Show us that growl, kiddy cat. I can already tell you might've been hangin' around 'em a bit too much. I had a sneak peek on the way in. That little four-eyed loudmouth in particular seems to be an amoeba after your own heart."

Frowning, Pennywise tried to pry the hand off his face, with both of his own, grumbling as it refused to budge.

Meanwhile, he really didn't like the look that was crawling over the painted visage opposite his.

"Ya've gone soft. Can't have that, can we? I think... I can help ya out."

The gloves stopped prying.

His mind also ground to a halting stop, pupils dialating in alarm.
"Y'know, strike that. I know I can."

"I don't neEd your heLp, old man. There's nothing to help. You can have your lOok as promised - a lOok, only - and then you disappеAr. I don't want to see so much as a wiSp of you left in this galaxy by day's end. Do you undeRstand?"

The fingers holding his chin morphed abruptly, dark gray claws taking the place of once-silky digits. The sharpened tips cut into his false-skin, drawing bits of white, flaky imitation-substance that floated away on the breeze.

The old lion with a mane of scarlet leaned even closer, eyes shifting from light blue to a turbid yellow-gold.

His grin spread, blood red and wide enough to rival his alter's in every way. And was full of just as many teeth to boot.

"Oh, yes, kid. As I hope you do, too."
"You're shitting me."

. . .

A picketed sign might as well have dropped out of the sky, arrowing perfectly down into the dirt, punctuating the silence that ensued. Complete with the message of "Cue the crickets."

"Ahem. Guys? You - are - shitting me."

Finding no willing listeners among his gang of struck-mute friends, Richie Tozier abruptly threw out his arms and bellowed at the sky in general. He had a better chance of finding a response there.

"You hear that, world?! Speak up! If this is your idea of a kick in the pants, it AIN'T funny!"

Bill could have sworn he heard the panicked flapping of birds taking flight in the distance.

"Shut up, Richie," Eddie wheezed out. It was his most pathetic S.U.R. yet, even with his inhaler already held preemptively ready before a gaping mouth.

Mike blinked, shook his head, blinked again. "There are TWO of them now?"

When the red-haired Being finally did emote, he smirked like a cat who had just cornered a mouse.

Scratch that, a whole set of them.

And when he finally did speak, it was in a voice as rough as sandpaper covered with bits of asphalt and tobacco tar.

He leaned down for a closer look, hands on his knees, grinning slyly. "Nice pals ya got, kid. Five seconds, and I'm already wondering which one to take home with me."

Lingering nearby, half-hidden in the dappled shade of a maple tree, Pennywise facepalmed and finally understood. Exasperation, that feeling and everything it stood for.

*This* was what it was Eddie felt every time Richie said something he inherently didn't mean that deserved a good headslap.

*That's so not funny.*

Maybe 29 Neibolt House would have been a better choice to serve as introductory grounds. But that also would have meant keeping a potentially-curious neighborhood at bay.

No. It was better they set this encounter in the woods outside town.

Already, he felt like this had been a mistake. There was no shortage of repressed anger radiating from the group of kids, spilling out like the broken seal on a nuclear reactor. Anger and uneasy fear at being duped into assembling for the (seeming) prank of being sandbagged by the discovery their eldritch mascot was not alone in the universe.

Or this dimension of a universe, that is.

Georgie often held the distinction of being the joyful-exception, no matter what everyone else's mood
was. And today was no different in that sense. He took to the news like a moth to a light.

Most of the Losers seemed to grow rooted to the spot they stood, huddled together. All that was missing were the practical tendrils of vegetation binding their sneakers to the forest floor.

Meanwhile, the seven-year-old was scampering about the clearing like an overexcited puppy.

And yapping just as much.

Probably why he didn't hear the other Being's declaration of desiring to pick one of them out for a cosmic doggie-bag.

After a few bumbling tries, Pennywise had already given up trying to answer the torrent of questions emanating from Georgie. Five minutes after laying eyes on the other Being, and they were still pouring out like a gushing faucet, unable to stemmed with its handle broken off.

But enough was enough. There were introductions to be made.

He caught the boy by the flapping hood of his jacket.

"Come heRe."

With a sound that was half-laugh, half-squeal, the younger Denbrough stumbled to a stop. Just as compliantly, he let himself be led over, giggling the whole way.

The visiting Being didn't have far too stoop over with him, at least.

"GeorgIe, meet Pennywise."

The smile fizzled. He could virtually hear the proverbial car brakes screeching as the boy's mind jolted to a halt.

Slowly, Georgie looked back, forth, and again between the two Beings-imitating-clowns, hopelessly trying to make sense of the bizarreness unfolding around him.

"But... you're Pennywise."

"So's hE."

"No, he's not. You are, Penny." Georgie grabbed for his tall friend's hip, insistent, as if touching him somehow made the words more true. "You're Pennywise."

Snorting with repressed laughter, their visitor shook his head, folding his stripe-patterned arms.

"Nope. That's gonna get too confusin' real fast, kid. Human brains, remember? Try another name."

"I'm open to sugGestions."

"It?"

"Nooo." He pulled a are-you-serious face. "That's even moRe confusing."

"Bob Gray?"

"Who?" Stan blurted out, covering his mouth just as quickly, as if surprised at his slip of control.

"ShuSh, Stanley." He leaned in, a protective hand set on Georgie's shoulder. "You don'T have
anything better than that?” he demanded in a stage whisper.

Unphased, the shorter Being leaned in just as close. "No more than you got, genius. Think of somethin'."

"I-I... I think we ought to just go?" Bill stuttered suddenly, as if remembering he had a voice to stutter with. "This is... more we-weird than we were counting on."

"Nyh uh!" Georgie spoke up, startling them all. He had seemingly overcome his initial shock in favor of learning more. The curiosity would not be contained. "I want to know who this is."

"Georgie..." Ben moaned, a despairing hand held to his round face. Even his analytical ways were failing him.

"Penny, who is he?" Georgie demanded, unexpectedly switching gears from meek to fierce, and his guardian almost considered stepping away, momentarily intimidated. The tirade of questions was gaining steam again. "Where did he come from? How long have you known him? What do-"

"Kiddo," the visitor interrupted, as gently as he could manage. He squatted down to the six-year-old's level, elbows on his knees, gloved hands folded before him. All too abruptly, he looked and sounded like the definition of patience. "Time out. Let's go the other way around. What's your name?"

"...Georgie."

"Given name George?" the older Being asked, hiking an eyebrow toward Bill. Clearly he had already pegged the two brothers as related without being told.

"T-that's right."

"But everyone calls you Georgie."

"Yeah?"

"And our friend here, I noticed you call him Penny, rather than Pennywise. Ever have a classmate who happened to have the same name as you, or a cousin?"

"We aren't family," Pennywise growled under his breath, impulsively tugging Georgie closer. The visitor smirked mutely at him, a smug look of easy-bucko-I-didn't-mean-it.

"So... that's why you're both Pennywise." Caught up in almost-solving the riddle, Georgie was mercifully oblivious to the coalescing tension. "Coincidence?"

"Let's just leave it at that, okay?" the visitor finished, smiling a most-disarming smile. "Call your friend by his nickname for now. I'm Pennywise."

"Okay!" Beaming, Georgie grabbed the shorter clown's offered handshake, with both hands. "I'm George Denbrough. Nice to meet you."

"So, now we know each other!"

"Jesus H, Shortstop, I swear, you'll be the death of us all someday, if you aren't already," Richie mumbled, running a hand over his face, eyes closed.

His exasperation, however profound, would pale in comparison to that of what their twitching,
silently-fuming mascot felt, like a static shock compared to the violently-sparking wrath of a Tesla coil. The gloved hand still resting on Georgie's shoulder, he pulled away, hiding it in the folds of his suit before it could morph into visible claws. It was another minute's pause before he mentally recomposed himself sufficiently enough to continue in a civilized manner.

Just like that.

Georgie had all but given his designation away to the other cosmic being in the span of three minutes. Sure, one could argue he only did so out of a case of excited-little-boy-itis setting in. Poking metaphorical holes in the visitor's naming argument, before the rest of the Losers club, would just look and sound like sour grapes at that point.

And he had no idea where to start jabbing, anyway.

He felt something like betrayal already.

The rest of the introductions had gone easy, if one could say dealing with two all-powerful cosmic beings caught in the grips of a budding rivalry would ever go easy.

Beverly Marsh stood as far at the back of the pack as she could manage, gauging each of her friend's reactions as the 'new' Pennywise made a point to address every last one of them. When her turn came, she played into the alien's act of graciousness, as if her status being the only girl of the group made her something like royalty.

He even made a show of kissing her knuckles.

Standing back, the silver-suited Being grew more and more sullen-faced, more reproachful-looking. Every so often Beverly thought she heard the agitated jingle of a bell. If he were a cat, his violently-flicking tail would be a dead giveaway as to all the latent aggression building up in him.

This was her Pen. He couldn't hide icicles in a blizzard.

Thankfully, the others seemed to cotton on to her feelings of intent, of wanting to confide. After about half an hour of 'pleasantries' Bill launched into a little question-and-answer with their new cosmic acquaintance. Mike and Stan stood to either side, offering their own input to keep the redhaired clown's attention. It was all the distraction she needed to sidle away.

While he had started close, hovering like a bumblebee to a flower, Pen now kept his distance. His lanky frame almost blended in with the skinny-trunked poplars and pale birches, an otherworldly sentinel watching from the edge of the clearing. He even tried to appear relaxed, the fingers of one hand scratching idly at the surface of the papery-white birch tree.

Or it had seemed idle, until she took a closer look at the tree, and saw the damage he was doing.

She started simple. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yep." His eyes, though still a dark blue, glowed most menacingly. His upturned, fiery orange mane seemed a shade brighter, too.

All the better to match his smoldering mood.

"I just... wanted to check on you."

"WhY?"
"Because..."

He scowled down at her, fangs showing. "Because, whAt?"

"Because... what did that poor tree ever do to you?"

Belatedly, Pen took notice of the furrows his mantling fingers- that is, claws had wrought upon the innocent, young birch. The wafer-thin bark was peeling at the edges like shredded paper. He snatched his hand away as if burned.

Arms folded, Beverly watched as cloth rematerialized to fit the three claws as they reshaped into human contours.

He didn't relent. He kept on frowning.

"So, you don't need to tell me. I can see for myself that you're not exactly charmed by our... guest."

Pouting, he glanced away. Intentionally mimicking her or not, he also folded his arms.

"If you like, I can help. I just... need more information. And I mean whatever you can tell me that doesn't fall into the usual realm of cosmic-understanding-is-beyond-your-grasp."

"Which isN't a lot, Bevs," he finished, his tone still half a growl.

When he refused to continue, that was when she began to actually feel annoyed, for the first time that afternoon. Her hands went to her back pockets, weight shifting to one leg. "Pen, you can at least try me. Something's clearly eating you."

"No, it iSn't."

"Is, too."

"Is not."

"Is, too."

"Is not."

"Is, too."

"Is not, inFinity. Hah!"

Holding her hands up in defeat, Beverly couldn't help another disbelieving chuckle. He was so easy to dupe, every time. But if he were somewhat cheered up, perhaps he would feel like sharing more.

The pleased-with-himself smile was just what she had hoped to lure out. "You big oaf," she chastised affectionately. Having earned her way back into his good graces, the redhead dove in for a one-armed hug, nuzzling close.

How did you ever get this far in existence?

Through lots of trial and error, she had to guess. That he would never own up to.

The entity offered up no answer, too busy holding her tight in a smothering hug as he was, striped cheek pressed to her head. It wasn't often that she was so outwardly adoring.
"Hey! Little love fest goin' on over there?"

The moment ruined, Pen's voice evolved from a growl to a half-snarl. Beverly almost stumbled as he pushed her away. "Mind your own business, old man!"

"What? I just assumed - "

"Keep your assumptions on a leash, preferably muzzled, if you don't mind."

Beverly frowned. Their visitor actually laughed at that, a sound as full of gravel as a dump truck pouring its load. "Okay, okay. Yeesh. Didn't mean to interrupt."

The other Losers looked on with mingled expressions of worry and unease. Even Georgie seemed to detect the underlining thunderstorm of tension brewing. Rolling to his feet, neglecting the half-eaten apple slices from his backpack, he made to cross the clearing and check on his friend.

"Penny, what's -"

"No, Georgie." He all but whirled aside, seeming refusing to entertain any form of the little boy's attention. "Go away."

Snap.

Beverly blinked, finding empty space where the gangly entity once stood. Exchanging a look with Georgie, she shrugged. I tried.

Just as quickly as the situation had escalated, it deflated, like a balloon filled too fast. As it burst, the tension left with it.

After a moment's silence, the other clown scoffed, shaking his head. To his credit, though, he stood up and backed off, hands up, wisely putting space between him and Bill.

"Hah. A natural drama magnet. Am I right? Don't fret, kiddos. I'll check up on him."

Pop.

Just as quickly, he was gone, too.

Richie facepalmed in the discontented quiet that followed. As if it weren't bad enough having one teleporting, shapeshifting entity around with a penchant for circus antics.

"Show of hands, guys: today has already been a whole new level of fucked up?"

Six raised hands answered him.

Had he heard Tozier, Pen would have added his vote to the proceedings.

In that moment, though, he wasn't listening to anything. He had only thought getting away from the Losers was the smartest thing he could do. They didn't need to bear witness to his psyche coming apart at the seems, only to help him stitch it back together.

He could do that himself.

Without his alter-self's help.
"Go away includes yoU, you know," he seethed. He was well past drooling, still frothing at the mouth. Safely back in the dark, dank quiet of the sewer cistern, he hardly batted an eyelash at the sound of footsteps where - for the longest time - his own had been the only ones to be heard.

"I know." Practically swaggering, Pennywise ascended the deployed ramp leading into to the caravan car. He leaned against the opened platform frame, one ruffled ankle crossed over the other. "There a problem?"

Eyes white, Pen sat on the floor of the car, arms wrapped around his bent knees. He was still shaking. Holding himself together, both literally and not, he took a rare minute to think before responding. "You had youR look. Satisfied?"

"Yeah, but I gotta admit, it's kinda piqued my interest." Pennywise glanced aside, craning his neck and taking a moment to appreciate the slowly-rotating collection floating above their heads. The freshest additions were not far off in age from the children they had just left behind. "You and them, friends? It's quite the... arrangement."

"Hmph."

"...That's all ya got to say?"

Our Pen finally spared his counterpart a sidelong glare, eyes currently set to a burning orange. "I don't need to explaIn myself to you, no moRe than you do to me."

"How'd you even get here? I mean, as far as pickin' 'em. How did you know they were worth sparing?"

"I didn't."

Pennywise nodded. At what, who knew. But after a moment's pause, he crouched down beside the other Being's huddled form.

"How long since you woke up?"

There it was again, that awfully-sweet tone he had used on Georgie.

He couldn't just not answer it.

"MonthS."

"Annd...?"

"August," Pen snapped, though the word felt almost numb to say. "I have until AuguSt."

_Four months away._

Pennywise nodded, stroking his chin in thought. "You keen on... relearnin' a few things between now and then?"

"From yoU? Ohh, no. I've learned about all I can handLe this year."

"And just how much have your buddies learned about you?"

_Only what they need to know._

He would sooner take a flying leap into Sol than admit it, though. Whatever he had told the Losers
would be forgotten, yes, if not in twenty-seven years time, it would be forgotten as they perished, as all mortals eventually did.

But it wouldn't take away the cosmic taboo he had committed in ever disclosing anything of the kind.

Instead, he tried to stand and stride away.

A blur of color crossed his intended exit path. With a suddenness that took him aback, he almost slipped off the ramp's edge.

Frowning, Pennywise used one clawed hand to knock the feet out from under his reluctant pupil, so smoothly it almost looked casual.

Caught off guard, the taller creature just managed not to topple facefirst off the ramp and into the trash. He did avoid crying out, save for a muffled umph.

Malnourishment made you a lot more delicate than you wanted to think you were.

Claws seized his jaw again, pressing tight against his vulnerable neck. But again, there they were with the face-grabbing.

Put under new pressure, his Deadlights pulsed involuntarily and his throat went dry, uncomfortable heat flushing under his skin.

"Don't pander to me on this, kid. I noticed, your pantry's lookin' a bit bare up there. You're borderline-starvin' yourself on their account."

Pen made a dismissive scoff that came out more choked-sounding than he liked. "So?"

The other's eyes gleamed gold. "So... you know what happens to our kind if you don't hibernate with enough food stored away."

"I know."

"Do they?"

"Know? No." As the other waited, apparently-unsatisfied with that, he elaborated reluctantly: "They know... about that. They don't know how crucial it is."

They can't.

"And again, you're doin' it all for them? Just because they showed you what softies they can be, even to a bloodthirsty demon? Never once considerin' what you'd do to them, in the wrong circumstances?" Pennywise scoffed, holding a hand to his brow, blue-diamonded eyes falling shut in mock-distress. "Wow. Humanity is just as fickle here as it is my neck of the woods." He looked almost pitying as he turned back to study the younger entity.

"And what's worse, you've let it get to you."

His own claws brought forth, Pen pried the rough talons off his neck in retaliation.

He bared his teeth, as many as he could, never minding how they distorted and protruded from the limited human mouth.

"Fine. Visiting time's over. You don't have to stick around and watch."
They stared at one another, not saying anything, for the longest time. Neither emoted, neither moved.

No hints whatsoever as to what each other's thoughts were.

"Watch this, kid."

*Pop.*

Pen blinked, teeth shrinking out of sight.

Strange.

He thought he would see *something.*

Something... for which humanity had no sufficient words to describe. A presence of pure, undiluted energy. Like a star impossibly-struck by lighting, an otherworldly hybrid of radiation and electricity. Zapping. Burning. Lashing out with careless abandon.

Consuming anything that drew too close.

Or was snared in its proverbial talons.

An epitome of everything he once thought he was supposed to be.

It could have decimated him, the tower, everything in Derry, a good chunk of this very planet if it wanted.

But just like that, he was alone in the cistern again.

Well, not completely alone.

*Hear that?*

*He* was still there. On the peripheral of his host entity's dimmed senses, lurking like a deepwater shark, cruising the muddy, lightless floors in the ocean.

Waiting for scraps from above to fall his way.

The felled entity lay there, cycling deep gulps of air, trying to cool his overheated form's insides, for an even longer time than he cared to acknowledge, before even remembering to stand up again. Eventually, his limbs stopped trembling.

Then, he started pacing. Restlessly. Fraught with anxiety.

"This"? What was "this"? What does that signify?

Late into the night, his mind kept on racing.

*What to do, what to do?*

Finally, he came up with a comparison.

That line from westerns that Mike and Ben had once acted out, how had it gone...

"This town ain't big enough for the two of us"?

Enough with the wishy-wasy "do I, do I not" attitude.
This was his universe.

Those were his Losers.

Time to lay down the law.

School ended in two weeks.

The graduating class' year were scheduled to end a week before. He assumed that more than a couple would-be seniors would go missing the interim. Adolescents on the cusp of adulthood were more satisfying to the palate. The trade-off was that, at such an age, their fears were harder to root out, to exploit, and therefore they were a challenge to prey upon.

Still, he had a lot of lost ground to make up for. Replenishing the cistern was all the card he needed to convince the other cosmic entity there was no vacuum he could soon inhabit opening up here.

Derry couldn't endure the pressures of two apex hunters could exact in the same realm. Not for long. Too many kids went missing, too quickly, the families would slowly catch on. People would uproot, move in as little as two days' time. The hunting ground here wouldn't replenish itself in another three decades.

Meanwhile, he had to - in effect - stand guard over the Losers. And endure their constant questioning, even when he tried to sway their attention for mutual benefit.

It was already worst with Georgie. The younger Denbrough kept asking where his pseudo-guardian's "friend" had gone since that awkward afternoon in the woods. Pen was willing to forgive the boy's careless mistake of trading their shared name around as if it were a rare baseball card. Clearly, he hadn't mistaken one Pennywise for the other in the long term.

That much, Pen was eternally grateful for.

The rest meant weathering a relentless storm of inquiries he otherwise would never have had to answer.

Still, he did his best.

"Will we see him again?"

Hauled out to sunbathe upon the quarry rocks like a harbor seal, Pen opened an eye at the muffled state of Georgie's voice. There was a beach towel over his head, which the in-practice swimmer worked with both hands, scrubbing furiously as he attempted to dry off. Shrugging off the flicker of annoyance the question brought out in him, the entity sat up, mutely reaching over to touch the boy's arm.

He stilled obediently, smiling even as the edge of the towel obscured his eyes. "Thanks."

"I don't know, Georgie."

A blessed five seconds of silence fell.

"But, you do know, usually," Georgie objected, holding still as his friend gently toweled his hair and bare back. "And, I thought you invited him here."

"He invited himself," Pen corrected, willing himself to stay calm. "There's a difference."
"Isn't he your friend?"

"We exist the same way. That doesn't make us friends. Are you friends with everyone in your same grade?"

"No..."

"Same kinda thing."

Dried for the bike ride home, Georgie shrugged his blue t-shirt back on. He paused for a moment, then his face popped up past the hem of the neck, like a turtle's head out of its shell. "Would you want to be friends?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

Each of the other Losers seemed to bring it up whenever he had occasion to visit them, too.

After the indecency of putting them through it, listening was the least he could do.

"Why not?"

The refrigerator door swung shut with a gentle click.

Fingers crawling over the edge, Pen stared down from the narrow space atop the appliance. "Why wouldn't you want to be friends with Henry BowErs?"

Eddie balked visibly. "Oh, l-lots of reasons."

"There you go."

"But... if I had no other choice... I'd find something to like."

"There's nothing redeemable about him?"

Though he stood upwind of her on the sidewalk, Pen still waved the scent of cigarette smoke away from his face. Of course she'd bring that up.

"There might be."

Beverly squinted at him in the reflection of the storefront window. "'Might be'?"

"I'm not going out of my way to find out."

"There was with you."

"Was what?"

Stan half-smiled, almost coy, looking up from where he was scattering breadcrumbs for a quartet of mourning doves in Bassey Park.
"You're a certifiable pain in the ass, Pen. But we've found a way to get along, haven't we?"

"What makes you think I want to?"

"Forget wanting to." Snapping the padlock closed and testing the chain it was looped through with a firm shake, Mike wiped sweat from his brow, resting the other hand on the closed butcher shop's back door. "It's gotta be easier than what you're putting up with."

"Everything we have in common, we disagree on."

"So do Eds and I," Richie equipped, the front wheel of his bike hitting the road with a metallic clack. "Doesn't mean we haven't had some fun times."

"He doesn't even know what it is to co-exist."

"You know that for sure?"

"No, but..."

Reaching the page he had been searching for, Ben turned the library book around, and then slid it across the table.

"Maybe this'll help?"

Pen squinted, using one finger to drag the book closer. The meaning of the circular, black-white symbol (with two dots, almost like eyes) was lost on him. But he knew just who to ask about it.

"What's that?"

"Yin and Yang."

The alien's pupils diverted instantly. He turned the crude sketch over in his hands. "Who and what?"

"It's Chinese," Bill explained, setting his pencil down on the desk. "It's supposed to represent the concept of duality: that one half can't exist without another."

"I'm not a half," Pen spluttered, indignantly. "I'm a whole."

"No one's saying you aren't."

Georgie sat on the edge of his brother's bed, feet dangling in the air. "But if you can't make someone leave you alone, isn't it better to learn how to get along?"

Next he saw his for-better-for-worse counterpart, Pen expected every reaction in the book.

Except the moment when the older entity snickered, grimaced, then laughed uproariously and clapped him on the arm (the next-best backslap-substitute-point to his shoulder).

"You priceless moron," Pennywise guffawed, sagging against the taller Being, practically slapping his knee. "As if I would want to take away your precious babies."

"What...?"
"I meant, watch what'll happen, kid. See what humanity can bring outta you when you let it. I never said anythin' about claiming or even eating your kids, did I?"

It blinked slowly, his expression and arms hanging slack, feeling for all the world like the biggest cosmic equivalent of the village idiot at what he had been.

"You said it yourself: you hate copycats. Doesn't mean I would seriously entertain the notion, not here, not at any time in this dimension's infinity would I. You got 'em all to yourself, you dope."

Duped.

Again.

By his own emotionally-clouded stupidity.

What a joke.

Moments later, their combined laughter echoed up the well, spiraling, entwined into one insane, otherworldly sound, and pealed out onto Neibolt Street.

So much for laying down the law.
Eddie Kaspbrak never wanted to be a doctor.

"Paging Doctor K!"

After knowing Richie Tozier for as long as he had, Eddie was fairly convinced he would never shake the honorary title. Kinda like Richie himself. It would follow Kaspbrak the rest of his years, regardless of the occupation he actually pursued. All he would be missing was a white coat, clipboard, the stethoscope over the neck, and a Ph. D.

"Doctor K! Stat!"

But that afternoon in May 1989, in 29 Neibolt House's backyard, just after lunchtime, Eddie supposed it was a very good thing he had some meager medical experience.

Maybe that's why he took one look at the sight before him and did not get queasy in the slightest.

"Oh, shit."

Still, not the most encouraging thing to hear your attending physician say upon spotting your leaking form.

That's a lot of blood.

At that moment, Georgie Denbrough didn't care. He was too busy coping with the hurt. Big, round tears had already sprung up from his hazel eyes, and were steadily dripping off his chin by the time Eddie kneeled down beside him.

The little boy was clutching his left knee with both hands. Red rivulets had already welled up from underneath and were spilling over his fingers.

Standing over the scene, growling softly, Pennywise had already caught his man.

And, at least this time, he wasn't out for Tozier's head on a platter.

"What the hell, Ruffles! Put me down!"

His dignity would do instead.

With one clawed hand, the clown had proceeded to grab the attacker by the back of his shirt, hoisting him a clean two feet off the ground. Richie could only kick and dangle like the ornament hanging on a rearview mirror, suspended by the tight cloth of his distressed clothing.

"Shit. Talk about overreacting. I called for help. I said I was sorry. Hey!"
Richie jigged and flailed anew as he was carried away from the scene.

"Take care of him, Eds?" Pennywise barely glanced down at their 'medic' in passing. He was too busy glaring daggers at Richie. Clearly, he intended to keep him at bay so the Trashmouth's frenetic interference wouldn't cause more undue panic.

"Y-you got it."

"P-Penny, wait," Georgie blabbered helplessly, reaching after his departing friend with one bloodied palm. "Stay, please."

They disappeared into the open back doorway.

Eddie braced himself as if expecting to hear a crash, potentially-heralding the arrival of a second patient. When none came, he breathed out and set a hand on Denbrough's shoulder.

"It's okay, Georgie. I'll take care of you. Calm down." He looked down. A faint coat of red stained Georgie's leg, a half-dried patch running from the knee, down his shin, just now reaching his sock. "Can I have a closer look?"

"I-it hurts, Eddie, bad." Despite this, Georgie shuffled sideways and tried to roll over, as if he meant to stand up. His eyes darted about like a frightened fawn's. "Just help me get home."

"No, Georgie. Sit. That's not a good idea. We need to get the bleeding to stop first."

Through much gentle handling, he guided the younger boy back to a sitting position. Then he turned to unzipping his fanny pack. There he found tissues, Band Aids, and a travel-size bottle of antiseptic. Perfect.

"Relax. It probably looks worse than it is."

"Still hurts," Georgie mumbled into his clenched fist. With the other hand, he held his calf muscle, keeping the leg steady as Eddie began to wipe away the blood.

The older boy smiled, feeling almost genial. "I bet it does, but you've got Doctor K now. You're a lot better off than you were a minute ago."

It had the desired effect. Bravely, Georgie gave a shaky laugh, wiping the wetness from his face with the back of his hand. "I guess."

Within seconds, the bleeding had been staunched.

A breeze stirred the long stalks of grass around them as Eddie found the wound itself. It was a sizable scrape, perhaps three inches long, cut crosswise along and beneath Georgie's knee. How it had happened, Kaspbrak didn't stop to consider. Maybe it was from a fall, the deadly end of a sharp stick rearing up out of the grass?

Later. His concern was patching it up.

To his surprise, Georgie broached the subject first.

"It was an accident, Eddie."

Distracted, Eddie filed through the different sized bandages like playing cards. Which one would work best?
"They usually are, kid."

"No, I mean, he didn't mean it."

Eddie's brow furrowed. Georgie was being awfully serious all of a sudden.

"Who... didn't mean it?"

Denbrough gripped Eddie's wrist with sticky, bloody fingers, eyes entreating the other boy's full attention.

"Penny."

Eddie almost drew back, almost yelled in shock. His fingers tightened on the Band Aids. His breath stalled in chest.

"The c-clown did this to you?"

That explained him leaving the scene so swiftly.

"It was an accident." Tears gathered at the corners of Georgie's eyes. His lower lip trembled. "Don't be mad. And don't tell Billy, please."

Which is more important?

Shaking his head, Eddie dismissed the sarcasm, returning focus to the injury. "We'll worry about that later, Georgie." Selecting an appropriate patch, he tore the packaging open.

The tears started sliding down Georgie's cheeks again. In sulky silence, he held his elbows while Eddie treated the gash, as gently as his shaking hands could manage.

Leaning close, Eddie held the patch up against the doctored cut, took one final check that it would cover everything, then gently smoothed it flat with his palm.

Sniffle.

God, what a baby.

Now that was unfair.

Eddie resisted the urge to smack his own skull. Pennywise was important to Georgie, almost as important as Bill. Obviously the kid would react poorly to any situation that cast his friend in a bad light.

"There, all better." With one last pat on the knee, Eddie sat back. "Now, you wanna tell me how it happened?"

"Eds, don't believe him!"

A familiar figure sprinted back across the yard toward them, shirt flapping in the wind.

Georgie's head snapped up. "Richie, no."

"It was me."

Eddie gaped, mind blown for the second time in less than five minutes. "The fff-frig you on about,
"The fff-muck up," Richie barely amended his own words in time, hands wringing. "Georgie getting hurt. It's my fault. I startled them."

Richie Tozier, confessing to a crime Georgie Denbrough had initially attributed to their otherworldly club mascot?

_The hell is going on here?_

Eddie shot to his feet. "What? That doesn't make any sense. How do you startle a six-foot-something clown with eyes in the back of his head?"

"Ever try? You'd be surprised how easy it is, Doctor K," Richie deadpanned. Then his eyes shifted to the right. "I mean, just _look_ at the guy. He gets as hopelessly distracted as we ever do."

Eddie looked.

Both boy and clown were caught up in their own budding argument.

"He _told_ you not to say anything," Pennywise was whispering, practically hissing. He crouched beside Denbrough, a gloved hand gripping the boy's shoulder.

Gently, but firmly.

"I _know_," Georgie whispered just as fiercely back. He jabbed an accusing finger into the tall being's collar. "But it's better if Eddie thought _you_ did it, isn't it? He's been fighting with Richie all _day_."

"They fight all the _time_, Georgie. How did you think that would help anything?"

And on and on they went.

Eddie gaped, mouth working uselessly. No sound seemed to want to come out.

Georgie Denbrough, telling a little white _lie_?

Forget a scrape on the knee.

_This_ was what needed fixing.

Fast.

Before Bill found out.
Springtime was the best time of year for birdwatching. So many different species returned to Maine from their wintering grounds. Their exhuberant behavior was a thrill to behold. Their plummage was at its most vibrant. Their calls and their songs were never more amazing. More often than not, as the weeks went by, you could watch mated pairs rear their first brood, then forage with three or four fledging chicks in tow.

But there were always casualties.

"Easy, little guy."

Bassey Park hosted several bird feeders and baths. Some, strung in the corners furthest away from the encroaching public, were ideal for getting up close to low-lying nests. There, getting sneak peeks at the eggs and young of various little songbirds that flitted amidst the bushes was reward enough. It was more than worth the scratches and risk of possible allergic reactions to delve in for a firsthand encounter.

Stanley Uris hadn't counted on finding one of the baby chickadees out of their nest.

"Shh, shh, it's okay."

Gently, with both hands cupped as if to lift water from a river, he scooped the baby bird up out of the dirt. Tiny, tiny clawed feet hooked into his skin. Cheeping incessantly, its wings batted ineffectively against the undersides of his fingers. It was so ticklish against his sensitive nerves, Stan had to stop, get a grip on his sudden case of the jitters, and readjust his footing before stepping backwards, out of the underbrush. He didn't dare drop the chick.

He (or she) had already endured a ten foot drop from their nest hole in the trunk of a nearby blue spruce. No need to give its left-behind siblings an encore show.

"Heh. For such a small tuft of feathers, you fell a long way, pretty fast," Stan remarked, gazing up into the branches.

The black-capped chickadee - *Poecile articapillus* - dared another chorus of high-pitched peeps, its tiny beaked face poking out between Stan's curled thumb and index finger. He could still feel the flicking of its wings and tail feathers, fanning and mantling restlessly against the skin of his hands. The claws gripped and scratched, but did no real damage.
"Well, I'm not gonna let you go until we figure out how to get you home," Stan mused aloud, squinting against the few rays of sunlight that managed to penetrate the branches above. "There's gotta be a way..."

"Stan-Ley..."

Stan jumped despite himself, dark eyes shuttering instantly. *Be nice, Uris. He's been better about that jumpscare thing lately. Somewhat better. Be nice.*

He somehow managed not to clench his hands in shock. No need to strangle the fallen nestling in his startlement.

"And I suppose you have a suggestion or two?" he finally uttered through clenched teeth.

"Suggestion?" Half in a stoop already, Pennywise leaned over the boy's shoulder, expression bewildered. "About what?"

"This?"

"Chee-chee-chee!"

The chickadee's black-masked face ducked back into hiding under Stanley's fingers.

"That?" Pennywise blinked, head tilting, apparently-oblivious to the alarm to which the chickadee regarded him with. "What are you doing with it?"

"I wasn't doing anything with it, until a minute ago. I found it under a bush over there."

"And you thought, picking it up...?"

With a gloved palm upturned in a *yes-please-continue* gesture, Pennywise let the thought hang.

"I don't know. I hadn't gotten that far," Stan admitted. He nodded toward the blue spruce. "I'm pretty sure that's the tree it came from. But where the nest hole is-"

"Oh! One second!"

All at once, the sudden presence towering behind his back vanished.

Then, with a rustle of flapping wing feathers brushing by his cheek, he was left behind.

Stan's shoulders sagged.

*Of course.*

The showoff.

Even as a bird, It managed to put on a performance.

Like before, the Eurasian magpie had no business being on this side of the Atlantic. But Stan supposed they were secluded enough back here. There would be no need for him to explain to any fellow birdwatchers what the black-and-white crow was doing, hopping determinedly about the pine branches.

Perching right-side up, sideways, against the trunk.
Chickadee baby still in hand, Stan watched.

Ascending higher and higher, Pennywise jabbed experimentally at several hollows in the bark, prying and gnawing with his beak. He scratched at several with taloned feet. One of the gaps had to be deep enough to contain a nest.

"Just caw twice when you find it, okay?"

Awk!

Or rather, that was what Uris would have expected to hear.

Instead, the magpie kept searching. Flapping. Tapping. Scratching with its feet.

Five minutes later...

*He's not having any luck, is he?*

*Is he really even trying? Or just messing around?*

"Chee-chee!"

The nestling thought that a good moment to pipe up again.

"Oh, you think he is?" Stan asked, despite the lunacy that was asking the question of any animal which was very much not a cosmic entity in disguise.

Carefully, he lifted his cupped hands back to eye level. The chickadee's beady eyes bore into his own, unblinking.

"Well, Peeps, you're alone in that arena for now. Unless he finds- "

"AWK!"

Stan jumped again, looking up.

He saw only shadows at first, flitting to and fro behind a foreground of intersecting leaves. Then white, black-webbed wings beat their way through the thin branches, flapping at an almost-frantic beat.

"Awk, awk!"

"Did you find it?" The moment it was out of his mouth, Stan took a half step back. "Wait."

Something wasn't right.

Two tan-and-gray specks flitted after the diving magpie. That is, they flitted rather quickly, bobbing and weaving through the branches with tight, controlled flaps of their stunted wings.

Crying shrilly.

"Dee-dee-deelee!"

And out for blood, it sounded like.

*Aw, great.*
Mama and Papa.

...Wait.

Why was It running from them?

He was It.

"DrOp it!"

Stan sucked in a breath, eyes wide. "Did you just-"

"DrOp the baBy!"

Now there was a bit of guidance Stanley never thought he would hear and be expected to follow.

Against all better over-analytical judgment, he complied.

And the moment he let go, the tuft of feathers bobbed away, carried by its own jerky wing motions.

Mama and Papa veered off to follow.

Within a second, all three were gone.

Pennywise, free of his outraged pursuers, made an awkward landing on Stan's shoulder, long skinny legs spread wide for balance, wings limp.

Caught off guard, the boy tried to duck aside as the glossy plumage tickled his neck, unsuccessfully, splutteringly.

"Pen, what are-"

"It's noT a nestling," the entity explained, beak clacking with each word, even as his usual tone scratched its way out of the mismatched avian body. With halted, jerking steps, he managed to turn around, claws snagging the polo's striped, salmon-colored fabric, tail feathers fanning out for stability. "It's a fledGling."

So he was paying attention when Stan had explained the difference on a previous outing.

Just learning to fly.

That also explained why the chick struggled so much against being held.

So... it wasn't as helpless as I thought?

"Why did you run from them?" Stan found himself asking instead, dumbfounded for a wholly different reason. He held out an arm in invitation. "You're over five times their size."

Pennywise huffed, a sharp sound when broadcast through an angled beak, and tossed his head, neck feathers puffing out, dismissive. Either he wasn't in the mood to answer, or too ashamed by his instinctually-driven retreat to admit it.

After a moment's pause, he hopped down to a more-comfortable perch on Stan's forearm. "TeL1 me you wouLdn't run if two somEthings that smaL1 and stupidly-brave tried to peck yOur eyes out."

Magpies were excellent imitators. But cohesive speech was pushing things a little too far.
Self-conscious, Stan raised a finger, about to remind his companion to shush, before Pennywise turned away and addressed the forest at large, cawing for all to hear:

"You're *welcome*!"

Then, under his breath:

"Ungrateful fluFf bits..."

Among the other things he inadvertently learned that day, Stan discovered what a truly-sulky crow would look like.

He scoffed and rolled his eyes at the sight, but offered the magpie an affectionate throat-scratch all the same. Mother Nature may not have had thanks to give, but he did.

Bad mood averted, Pennywise warbled and cooed, half-closed eyes lighting up with a blue hue.
Orange You Glad

Chapter Summary

Never tried it?

Then how do you know you won’t like it?

Chapter Notes

An homage prompt to *Pennywise and the Losers Club* at FF.Net.

Growling under his breath, Pennywise glanced over to his left, through the sides of his eyes.

That was all it took.

From there, the bumpy-skinned orange sphere was practically shoved into his face.

*Shoved.*

Didn't matter if they were polite about it.

"Please?"

He scowled. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if he wasn't crouched down at the time. But if he knew anything about what the little boy preferred when it came to their conversations-slash-debates, it was being at the same eye level.

At least then Georgie didn't have to shout like he was trying to reach someone atop a skyscraper.

But past that, that was when Pennywise felt the 'spirit of cooperation' fizzle out of him.

He looked away, arms folding.

"No, Georgie."

"Just a taste?"

Pennywise scowled, wiping drool from his chin, eyeline angled off into the distance, unwavering. It wasn't his close proximity to the child making him salivate (though that *might* have contributed a bit). Rather, it was fault of the memories were assaulting his consciousness. The very tingle of citrus held too near his nose made his lips curl involuntarily.

"No. You didn'T see what happeNed last time."

Georgie blinked, tilted his head, holding the baseball-sized fruit with both hands. If he couldn't get a reaction, could he at least get a story out of the bargain?
"Why? What was it last time?"

With his suit's bells tinging for emphasis, Pennywise shuddered at being forced to remember.

Still, he rattled off an answer.

"KiWiS. LeMons. CucumbErs. CeleRy. The liSt goes on."

*If the Losers aren't trying to forcefeed them to me, having them turn up where I least expect is just as 'good', apparently.*

"I didn't see any of those. How do I know you're not just making that up?"

It, the cosmic horror from outer space, master of manipulatory illusions, older than the universe itself, who preyed on the fears and flesh of (most of) the children of Derry, Maine every twenty-seven-years.

"You don'T."

Making things up.

Neeever.

And yet, that he hated fruits and vegetables with all the fiery passion of countless burning stars...

Now that took some anaylizing to understand.

Kinda like the attribution of male pronouns to a creature that, by definition, was asexual in every sense of the word.

Human brains. Something about assigning "he" or "she" to whatever was being referred to made it somehow easier for them to grasp, to understand.

But we're getting off track here.

Back to the orange.

Which Pennywise was still turning his nose up at.

Like a snooty cat who found their new brand of food "ohh, most unappetizing".

"Give iT to someoNe else, GeorgIe. You'd just be waSting it, giviNg it to me."

*Trying to give it to me. Points for trying.*

Nothing worked better on convincing Georgie Denbrough of something than accusing the boy of being potentially-wasteful. 'Twas a sin, wasn't it?

"You don't waNt to lose your boat. Bill's gonna kiLl you."

Georgie frowned, ever reconsidering.

"Well... I am a little hungry."

He rolled the fruit over in his hands, looking thoughtful.

"But there's nothing to cut it with here. Or wash it."
There probably was, in the house. But Pennywise wouldn't ask Georgie to take a chance on that. Any silverware left in 29 Neibolt was decades old, neglected, well beyond its intended lifetime of use.

He couldn't do anything about cleaning off the morsel.

But, what if...

"Hand it over."

Raising an inquisitive eyebrow, Georgie did.

With one hand, Pennywise held the orange close to his face, examining it with a critical eye. Yes, he could work with that.

The other hand, he morphed it into a crude imitation of a Swiss army knife. All sharp edges and scissoring joints. A regular Edward Scissorhands would-be homage come to life.

He cut horizontally, from both sides. With one clean snip of the knife-like digits, the orange was cleaved into two neat halves atop the clown's gloved palm.

Georgie still marveled at the feat like a novel magic trick (which wasn't far off from the truth).

"Wow!"

Snapping his bladed digits, It's hand returned to human shape. "There, enjoy."

He tried handing both portions over, but to his quiet dismay, the boy only snatched one away.

Then Georgie grabbed the sticky glove, folding Pennywise's long digits back over the remaining orange half, and pushed the dripping extremity back toward the clown.

"Half for you!"

His guardian pulled a face at that, a long, profound frown. The fruit's split molecules were already stinging his senses, they were so tart.

It's gonna be the lemon all over again.

"Georgie..."

His pleading tone didn't work.

"C'mon, Penny, it can't be that bad, right?"

And just to make an example of himself, Georgie raised his half in an impromptu toast, then bit deep.

"Mmm! See?"

Pennywise looked down at his waiting sample, going completely still. He ran his tongue across the back of his teeth, uneasy.

Well, there was no getting out of this now.

Sensing Georgie's disappointment had become something like enduring a battery acid burn to the cosmic being.
It would smart long after the initial pain dulled.

And...

He stared down at the sectioned half, felt the juice soaking into his glove. He could almost hear the other Losers, goading-slash-cheering him on.

"What the hey?" Ben would say.

"There are worse things," Stan would reason.

"You only live once," Richie would concur.

"You live every day, you only die once," Eddie would object.

"Better a man than a mouse," Bill would add.

"Is It a man or a mouse?" Mike would ask.

"Better It be a man than a mouse, anytime," Beverly would endorse.

Eyes falling shut, Pennywise lifted the orange to his mouth and bit.

. . .

Nothing.

No ballistic spazzing.

No jolts of unease.

No inherent, uncontrollable repulsion.

It was... surprisingly pleasant.

The pulpy texture, combined with the sharp-yet-sweet taste.

The leaking half of orange stayed clutched in the creature's jagged, oversized teeth. The tips had punctured the thick outer skin with ease.

Experimentally, he gave a little pull on it, tearing off some of the fruit's flesh. The stringy white fibers seperated easily between the pointed fangs. Then he chewed carefully, mouth shut.

He opened an eye, glancing over at his newly-designated 'snacktime partner'.

It was worth the reward.

With a smile to rival the brightness of Sol, Georgie beamed back at him, juice dribbling down his face.

"Told you."
Conspiracy Of One

Chapter Summary

Our secret admirer tries again.

Chapter Notes

This is probably as close as I'll ever get to writing romance.

Not my forte, that genre.

Someone tapped him on the top of the head.

"What'cha up to?"

As perhaps the most mellow individual of the Losers, Ben Hanscom wasn't easily startled. Not often, anyway. That didn't stop the likes of Richie, much less Pennywise, from messing with him on an almost-daily basis. The best prank targets were the ones you had no idea what their reactions would be.

"Nothing."

Yeah.

Like that was going to dismiss Pennywise.

In the milisecond it took for Ben to deny his intentions, the entity jumped space, from standing behind him, to lying flat on his stomach atop the long reading table directly before the boy. Legs bent, swinging idly behind him like some mildly-bored toddler's, his smiling face rested easily on folded arms.

"Doesn't look like nothing."

"It's nothing," Ben hissed under his breath, a rare show of annoyance, snatching the unfinished letter away. He glanced around the mostly-vacant library vestibule, with its doorway forever-adorned with its INSIDE-VOICES sign. This early in the day, the only other occupant was the attending library assistant, still seated at her corner desk. And her gaze remained pointed at the inventory lists Ben knew she had been surveying for the past hour.

Following Hanscom's line of sight, Pennywise looked back at him, finger raised to his red lips, the question posed unspoken by his askew eyes.

"Yes, I have to be quiet," Ben whispered, so faintly he had trouble hearing himself.

With ears like an owl, the creature could hear him plainly enough. He could even read minds when it was called for.
Which it was very much not right now.

In vain, Ben tried to refocus on the letter he was drafting.

All three sentences of it.

This was already going poorly. Now he really had no chance of finishing it.

Pennywise squinted at the backside of the paper, head tilting further to one side. His eyes narrowed. "Is that for Bev's?"

"What?" Startled, Ben turned the lined sheet back and forth in his hands. "How did-"

That was new. Who said It could read a paragraph backwards?

Offering an all-too-rare explanation for his actions, Pennywise smirked smugly, eyes bright in the toned-down glow of the library lamps. "I read it over your shoulder."

Oh.

By now, Richie or Eddie would be fuming and/or frothing with anger. The audacity, the nerve of this thing for daring to interrupt!

Ben, being the tolerant soul he was, found himself smiling at his own folly instead. Jumping to conclusions much, are we?

"It's nothing," he continued to repeat. "Anyway, I can't talk about it here."

He regretted his words the moment they were out.

Gauging by the way Pennywise's expression lit up in anticipation, the entity seemed to take that to mean Ben intended to talk to him about it later.

Which he most certainly did not.

What did the clown possibly know about being a secret admirer?

Key part being the 'secret' part.

"Go. If I talk too much, I can't stay. Library rules."

"Rules," Pennywise parroted, unmoved, and even more unimpressed. "So, work on it at home."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"Nooo, no, I don't."

"No games right now, Pen. Please." Again, even more in vain than before, Ben tried to refocus on the content of his meager letter. I'm distracted enough.

Easing off on the immaturity throttle for just a moment, Pennywise glanced over his billowy shoulder, back at their 'supervisor'. She was looking up now, past the spiky rims of her glasses.

While all she saw was an empty table at which one portly boy sat, the whispers into thin air were no
doubt drawing her attention.

The letter gave a quiet rustle as it was tapped at.

"Neibolt's freE."

Paper still in hand, Ben looked up. He, too, suddenly saw an empty table. But that didn't mean he was out of the woods. The air felt no different, save for that it was now adorned with the vaguest aroma of mingled popcorn and peppermints.

Its' presence was still there, like a Broadway actor lingering just offstage, ready to jump back into the spotlight at a moment's notice.

Ben pushed his chair back from the table.

Time to take the production elsewhere.

What was worse, to be found out by the potentially-overprotective "big brother" of your crush, or the "little brother" with no proverbial zipper for his mouth?

Ben was having a hard time deciding. But it was no more difficult than finishing his letter, either.

Pennywise could, objectively, be either scenario, contained in the same person. The best and worst of both worlds.

For now, though, he seemed to be behaving fairly civilized about the discovery. Perhaps he was picking up on the genteel vibes behind the idea. Ben was as far from an overdomineering young 'stud' or a leering old man as any male in Derry.

Then again, Pennywise was a safe exclusion from that demographic, despite the gender-identifying pronouns assigned to him. The thing didn't seem to outwardly care about aspects of romance or reproduction in the least. At least, insofar as it pertained to himself.

Beverly's honor was another matter entirely.

"So, it is for Bevs."

Head in his hands, Ben felt the vaguest since like he had teleported as well. He had left the library, only to take another seat at the table in 29 Neibolt House's kitchen.

"Yeah..."

Crouched on the opposite end of the table, Pennywise looked down.

The unfinished letter sat between them.

"Why not work on it at hOme?"

"My step-brothers," Ben explained. "I'd never hear the end of it if they saw me."

"So?" The creature tilted his head again. Then, with a half-second glance, he grabbed the discarded page. "Let them talk. You shouldn't let that stop you from doing somethIng nice for her." Gently, almost reverently, he lifted the letter up for inspection again. What it consisted of seemed less important to him than the very idea it was meant as a gift. "Bevs doesN't get enough nice things."
Isn't that the truth?

Still, Ben had to be tread carefully.

If he made the slightest whiff of trouble for Beverly, he was sure the clown would switch gears from insufferably-sweet-cupid-wannabe to cosmic-terror in a heartbeat.

It didn't have to be about courting, per se. It could just be something nice, from one friend to another.

And if she saw it as something more than that...

Ben sighed. He had seen Bill and Beverly on lunch at school the previous day. And as such, he hadn't missed noticing how close their hands had strayed to one another's at the table.

"Something more" was a long shot.

Therein lay the other problem. Say Ben finished the letter.

Signing it "secret admirer" was as good as saying "Bill Denbrough wrote this".

*Tap, tap.*

Ben didn't need to glance behind him to see who stood there.

The table was empty, with the incomplete letter sitting directly in front of him again.

"Finish it."

Frowning thoughtfully, Ben picked up his neglected pencil.

*Well... what else do you have to lose?*

By his certain, unclouded tone of voice, Pennywise apparently had part two of the plan already figured out.

It rained the next day.

Beverly Marsh shuttered her umbrella with a sigh, with a gentle shake to disperse the raindrops. Good to be home, as insofar as it meant getting out of the weather. School had been the usual gauntlet of dirty looks and sullied whispers to endure. And now there was a six-page literary assignment expected from her by Friday.

As was customary, she collected the mail from its box before Dad came home. It wasn't much, but the three envelopes there did more than enough damage on their own. Alvin's paycheck would contain just enough to satisfy the three bills, as it always was. What fresh groceries might be-

Wait.

What was that fourth one?

It wasn't even an envelope.

It was notebook paper, folded accordion style, tied elegantly with a piece of red ribbon.

Curious, she unfolded it. Bright blue eyes skimmed back and forth over the contents.
From a distance, hood drawn up against the rain, Ben Hanscom couldn't hope to read her expression. He stood across Main Street, hidden in the shadow cast by a nearby storefront.

Thankfully, he had another set of all-seeing eyes on his side.

After a moment's pause, Beverly vanished into the apartment building.

A moment later, Ben spotted something else, stark white against the gray road. There was an open drain for gutter runoff just outside the apartment building’s entrance.

A gloved hand, raised in a thumbs-up gesture.

A blink later, it, too, was gone.

Ben couldn't help a little satisfied chuckle as he departed the scene.

Better to have loved and lost, right?
"Heh. Look like someone you know?"

Arms held at his sides, Pennywise frowned, one blue eye glancing back over toward the hallway where Beverly waited.

Sort of.

The 'short' answer was, yes. He had been a part of Derry's framework since before there was ever a colonial settlement here. In some way, everything that happened in this town was partially and very, very indirectly his doing.

But the uncanny fact that a decorative former-bowling pin in the corner of the Marshs' cramped 'living room' just happened to be dolled up like a clown?

It was pure coincidence.

As was his sudden, very-fleeting interest in the thing.

What would Richie say to that?

"Hah hah, Bevs." He poked at it with two fingertips, as a cat might prod a mouse's corpse with their paw.

It wobbled dangerously, but did not fall.

The redhead shrugged. "Yeah, it's an ugly thing. Matches the rest of the apartment, doesn't it?"

Pennywise looked back in time to see her disappear around the corner. "Bevs..."

The pin forgotten, he straightened up and followed.

He hoped that comment wasn't meant to be as self-depreciating as he thought it sounded.

She took a seat at her keyboard. "It was nice of you to visit on a rainy day, Pen. But you don't have to stay if you don't want to. We both know how easily bored you get."
Then he was there, leaning in way too obnoxiously close, their faces inches apart, nosing at her like an overanxious pet who hadn't seen their owner for days.

"No, wE don't."

She grinned, pushed his smiling face away. "Okay, lknow, then."

In this instance, "rainy day" was a very literal description of the summertime weather outside, and not just Beverly's mood. Her window blinds were lowered and drawn, the lamps on at near-midday to compensate for a lack of sunlight. Shadows cast by thick rivulets of water rolled down the pane of glass, well fed as they were by the strength of the storm.

Glancing about, taking stock of his choices for potential mayhem, Pennywise found few viable possibilities. Instead, he primly spun around and sat down on the floor, elbows on his bent knees, with his back against the girl's bed.

Lousy weather. Small wonder why Beverly was feeling low.

She was stuck here.

"ShaMe you don’T have moRe room," he commented, trying to seem purely-offhanded about it. He glanced past her, at the keyboard, taking note of the white keys. "I'vE heard you prActicing. Not bAdly, either."

"You can't dance in here." Beverly was quick to recite the most-recently-instated rule number one, not falling for his butter-up act.

"Aww." Pennywise pressed his gloves to his ears, as if the memory were already paining him. He frowned, lip jutting out. "HonestLy? For the milliOnth time, I'm soRry about the plaTe."

"And I heard you the first nine-hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety nine times, thank you."

That had quickly become their most customary exchange, after the entity's first unexpected appearance at the apartment had ended in disaster. After so many offers to fix the damage he had done (only to have them rebuffed time and again), he had begrudgingly settled for offering repeated apologies.

As yet, she had declined to forgive him. And the keyboard had remained untouched ever since.

Who knew if that old Lenox plate had been worth anything, anyway?

Beverly turned sideways, away from her visitor, with her legs crossed, and let her arm hang over the back of the chair. She was smiling, but it was a tolerant smile. Not the genuinely-amused smile he had been aiming to bring out.

Curious.

Pennywise frowned, hands dropping into his lap. "Bevs, what is iT?"

She seemed tense. More than usual.

Glancing around, he took a quick sniff and already figured it out before she had inhaled to answer.

"You'Re out of cigareTtes?"
Beverly grimaced, plucking at the hem of her sleeve. It was the same tic as he had seen that day not long ago, on the rooftop. The slight flush in her round cheeks said her blood pressure was up. "For now. It's not the first time."

Pennywise raised a brow.

Beverly Marsh was a high school student with little to no income. From what he understood, she either stole or charmed her way into this habit that (by local legislation) she wasn't legally old enough to be partaking in.

But that was beside the point. Smokers weren't usually pleasant to be around when they were without their vice.

_Bevs, unpleasant? Nooo._

Perish the thought.

Throw it down the Neibolt well, then climb down and stomp it into dust.

Sure, sometimes she had cause to hit him. A slap if she was serious. But it was usually with reason. She always had the best perspective in mind, for everyone, if not herself. She listened when most wouldn't. She comforted others when they were hurting, himself included. She did nothing those awful rumors claimed she said she did.

He may not have always regarded her as a "favorite of his favorites", but as the saying went, he was wrapped around her finger, simply out of principle. Maybe out of no small measure of envy, too.

If he had a _tenth_ the composure she did...

All she would have to do was point to the nearest drugstore and say, "Fetch."

But then, there was _his_ line in the sand. And he was stubborn about enforcing it. Smoking wasn't good for her, body or mind. She could get into real trouble if anyone caught her being a thief, or partaking in the habit. What harm could befall her that the entity may not be able to pull enough strings to undo?

"Don't."

Like coming up for air after a deep dive, Pennywise blinked back to awareness.

Beverly was standing now, scowling down at him. She stood less than a meter away. Her index finger was aimed dead-center between his eyes.

Odd. Usually _he_ was the one invading his mortal friends' personal spaces.

"I know that look. Don't even think about it."

"About whAt?"

"The lecture. I can just see those rusty gears spooling up in your head."

_So you can. Aaand?_

The creature braced a gloved fist against his cheek and kept pondering - very, very obviously.

_What to do, what to do..._
He also knew Beverly lived under her father's thumb, in every way except the most literal. Whenever Alvin was around (which was, blessedly, not that often), she obeyed his every command.

"Don't, I said."

Did he not know? What would he have to say about this?

Could there be a way to -

"Pen. Stop it."

Then she took the musing clown by surprise. She had grabbed his face between her hands, palms flat against his temples.

Her clear blue eyes were sharp, fierce. She was also shaking.

He frowned. "Bevs, if you need them that bad-"

"I don't." She seethed through bared teeth, breathing tight. "What I need is for you to stop thinking about it, every time you look at me."

But I don't...

Wait.

Forget that half-hearted denial.

...Are you sure your perceptiveness hasn't rubbed off on them? On her, most of all?

Pennywise almost winced.

That was the other thing - Beverly Marsh was far more candid with him than any of the other Losers. Often, he did not understand why. Just because he was actively practicing restraint did not mean he was any better at it now than when they had met, ten months prior. More and more, she seemed to confide in him apart from the rest of the gang.

Was it her way of testing him? Helping him learn?

Or did his very presence just have that effect on her?

Gift her with a heightened ability to sense what most would overlook?

...Maybe it was both.

Bingo!

He knew just what to do.

By some kind of miracle, as he thought of it, he kept his face straight.

"Don't worry, Bevs. That's... not what I'm thinking about."

Slowly...

The shaking eased. Her eyes wavered just a bit, searching his expression for any signs of jesting or
insincerity.

"It's not?"

"No, not... entiRely."

That's it, lure her in...

"I know there's no talking yOu out of it." Considering her jeweled hands were still on his face, the clinking of her many bracelets just begging to be batted at, he held perfectly still. He wouldn't give into the foolish temptation.

Earnestness was an easy expression to mime, after enough practice.

And a mild influx of Deadlights as projected through hypnotic eyes couldn't hurt.

"But you should also kNow there's no taLking me into it."

Perfect.

There.

"Ever."

Their eyes stayed locked.

She didn't notice the index finger sloooowly reaching up to tap her freckled nose until it caught her unawares. Even as she flinched and looked down, the oversized clown made a sudden, swooping grab across her back with one arm. Ignoring her startled cry, he pulled the girl against him, encasing her in a tight hug.

"NoPe, no talking anyBody into anyThing! Not todAy!"

"Pen! Stop it! Right now! Let go, you stupid, overgrown- Pen, what if Dad- "

After about thirty blustery seconds of struggle, Beverly gave up on the insults. She twisted and struggled halfheartedly, slipping against the satin folds of his suit. Trying to pry his arms off, she fought to wrench free, to escape this newest prison she found herself confined to.

The best she had yet known, really.

Gigging madly, Pennywise simply held on.

He couldn't remember the last time he had heard her laugh so much.

Of her own accord.

Eventually, she relented.

Lying sideways across his lap, she grew still, laughs tapering off, finally off her ever-constant guard, for once. Pushing the collar away from her face, she stifled the last few chuckles and breathed deep, lounging in his arms like a cat. She pushed her mussed bangs out of her eyes, smiling an insecure, almost-giddy smile.

"God, enough. Okay. Then... like Ben would say... we're at an impasse."
"You don't need 'em, Bevs," her captor stated simply. Then, not so simply, he added: "No more than you think you need me to tell you."

*I worry. But I shouldn't.*

*You don't want anyone to worry because of you.*

*Doesn't mean I can't for you.*

"But, I thought you didn't like-"

He reached over, cupping her chin in his gloved palm before it could stammer any more.

With the other hand, he ruffled her short auburn hair into even more of a tangled mess.

An affectionately-induced mess.

"I don't." He grinned broadly. "Doesn't mean I don't like you any less."

*Do what you will.*

*No one can tell you what to do, not even me.*

He couldn't claim to have changed her mind on the matter right then and there.

But by the way Beverly suddenly smiled again, gripped his shoulder, sat up and nuzzled him, jarring and unpracticed though she was at it, Pennywise could tell he got *somewhere* with that performance.
Chapter Summary

Send it back, Mike.

Chapter Notes

Written at a friend’s request.

Anyone spot the “True Detective” Easter egg?

Mike Hanlon's bedroom was the envy of every other student at Derry High.

If only they knew.

If they had his workload, they would realize pretty fast there was nothing to envy.

He didn't have time to see much of it. His grandfather typically kept him so busy he often didn't have the strength to climb the stairs/ladder at the end of the day. Biking back and forth from town had made his legs strong. But that mattered very little when you could barely shuffle over to the couch in the middle of the rustic living room.

He was more familiar with that torn-up, cigarette-burned, coffee-stained couch than his own bed.

And while Mike was tough, his body was just as prone to unexpected illness as anyone else's. He made no bones about it the few times it had happened, not expecting anyone to fuss over him in the least. Right now, it was a fever sapping his energy, not the pumping of his heart and the extertions of his honed muscles.

A fever. That would take care of itself on its own, normally.

Eyes closed, reclining in bed, he tried to make the best out of his dire situation. The pillow was practically a cloud. He sighed and wiped his brow, appreciating the feeling of soft, clean sheets underneath him. A bedroom made out of a converted loft, the second story of the Hanlons' smaller, older barn. The livestock were kept in the larger, newer structure on the other side of the lot.

Best of all, his grandfather had taken one look at him that morning and - wordlessly - closed the door.

He knew things were going too well when Pennywise showed up.

"MikEy..."

The farmboy frowned, feeling something akin to a dog's wet nose prodding his outstretched left hand. Insistently.
"Hat's up, Pen?" he mumbled, still half asleep in a warm fog.

"You oKay? Bevs said you diDn't call."

The phone is all the way over there, man - down the ladder, across the driveway, in the house.

There was no way Mike could have made it without fainting.

Even if he had had a prior arrangement to meet the Losers at the arcade, somewhere he had practically-never been, to "pop his gaming cherry" as Richie put it.

God, Tozier was crass.

Mike cracked his eyes open and glanced over, with a feeble smile to match. "I'm good. I'm just a little under the weather."

He regretted using that metaphor the moment it was out of his mouth.

Peering just over the edge of the mattress like a overly-cautious gopher, suspiciously close to Mike's hand, Pennywise blinked, eyes diverging.

"But... aren't we all?"

The cosmic entity could be painfully literal in his attempts to understand creative expressions of that kind.

"I mean, I'm a bit sick, Pen. You can probably already tell. It's just a fever, with enough of a headache. I'll be fine tomorrow."

At that, he heard bells sound off. He let his eyes fall shut. He didn't need them to see how the gangly being stood up to his full height, no doubt looking the bedridden boy over for any other obvious flaws. To confirm those were gloved fingers brushing softly, concernedly over his sweating brow.

The mingled look of confusion and reluctant-acceptance curving those red stripes into a frown.

Mike could envision it all in his head just fine.

"Is there... anything I can do? Get you?"

Hanlon almost frowned. Then he thought twice. Pennywise could sense a dismissive, uncaring ploy as obviously as if it were a stab to the back.

How unfair of Mike. When the being was only trying to practice his compassion.

Instead, the farmboy sighed, trying to fathom a simple, easily-handled request.

If he didn't, the clown wouldn't budge. He wouldn't whisk away, back to the rest of the Losers.

He would stay there. Disappointed. Whining.

Interrupting his peace.

"Some tea would be nice."

Mike didn't feel a need to elaborate. Or a reason to be worried. His 'caretaker' was billions of years old. He had been a part of this universe since before humanity's inception.
Surely It knew what it was to heat up a cup of tea.

There wasn't so much as a whisp of air misplaced.

When Mike opened his eyes again, the clown was gone.

He reappeared five minutes later, according to the ticking clock on the bedside table.

Along with the most awful stench -

Mike struggled to sit up.

And not instinctively flee at the same time.

Now perched in a crouch on the righthand edge of the loft's bed, Pennywise primly held the dreaded BIG HUG MUG in both of his hands. Steam was still wafting up from inside it. Whatever scalding heat it was putting off, it didn't appear to bother him whatsoever.

Like his gloves were veritable oven mitts.

To be fair, he waited until after the mug had cooled down before handing it over.

He undoubtedly knew how Hanlon felt about fire. Or the mere reminder of it, with high temperatures.

Still, Mike stared down at the thick, murky substance in unmitigated horror.

He was sweating three times as much all of a sudden.

What did he do, sacrifice a sheep and boil its blood? With a sheared lock of wool for 'flavor'?

Probably.

Or he conjured it out of nothing known to man.

Pennywise, ever pretending-to-be-oblivious (there were no valid excuses for this), tilted his head to one side, completely innocent-faced.

"Was thaT the wRong kind?"

As if he suddenly couldn't sense Mike's raging dismay.

I don't know what kind it is, let alone if it's wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

All kinds of wrong.

Closing his eyes, Mike put the mug's edge to his mouth. Tipped it back.

Swallowed deep.

It took every bit of stringy scrap of strength and divine willpower he had ever possessed in his life to not hurl.

Vile. Vile stuff.
Indescribable.

"It-t's good." Several violent coughs later, Mike got ahold of himself. The bed shook with the force of the coughs. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Really, i-i-it is. Thanks, man."

Half of Pennywise's mouth quirked up in a wicked, little smile.

It was the same kind of not-smile Richie typically had after 'accidentally' riding his muddy bike through one of Georgie's sidewalk chalk drawings.

Like he had known just what he was doing all along...

"ThaT good?"

Okay, enough with the nice-guy act.

Scowling, Mike shoved the cream-colored mug under the clown's red nose.

"You try it. Or you can explain to Georgie why his xylophone needed up at 29 Neibolt Street, smashed to bits."
It was raining again.

How poetically ironic.

Sitting at his desk, Bill Denbrough stared at the window, watching drops strike the glass. His right arm hung over the back of the chair, his legs were crossed. He looked utterly relaxed.

It was just like they had travelled back in time.

October 1988.

There were two big differences between then and now.

There was a six-foot-something extraterrestrial in his bedroom.

And this was a springtime rain.

An unseasonally-early one. The snow had gone away fast this year. Warmer days were on the way. But it was still early April, too cold to enjoy a rain such as this, whereas in the summer, he and Georgie had ventured out many a time to play in the outdoor showers.

"Billy..."

The boy scoffed, glanced away.

Yeah, he was being petty about this.

But in light of all that had happened, 'petty' was the least offended he could be.

He barely batted an eye. There was motion somewhere to his right. Bill didn't look close enough to see what it was about.

It might have been a hand. A familiar, white gloved hand, trying to wave for his attention.

Before the motion was aborted, and it pulled away.
Bill frowned. He refused to look the creature in the eye.

At least, at first.

He wanted to hear what Pennywise had to say.

Then he would speak.

Just to be sure he heard everything correctly, Bill would not interrupt.

So he could render a fair verdict.

Most of the Losers may have forgiven their shapeshifting mascot. Each for their own unique reasons, that was more than apparent.

There had been two holdouts at that trial.

One being their stuttering leader.

The other was the Trashmouth.

Richie would come to grips with this in his own way. On that, Bill had no doubt.

Right now, settling accounts between himself and It was more important.

No. That was the wrong way to put it. Truth be told, there was no bad blood between him and the clown.

Drawing lines. Laying down ground rules.

That was more like it.

But first, he had to listen.

"BillLy, will yOu at leaSt look at me? PleasE?"

_No. Doesn't matter how well you use your manners now. Earn it. Earn my attention._

There was a rattling sigh, above and behind his head. A rustle of silky fabric, bells tinging, once, twice.

Then, with an unceremonious _thud_, Pennywise sat down on the floor next to the desk, hunched back pressed to the windowsill. With a sullen expression, he stared up at the freshman with cool-blue eyes, elbows on his knees.

"Is thiS better?"

_Looking up at me instead of down? It's a start._

Even if the difference was only in a few mere inches. It was a difference.

Bill shrugged. With his free hand, he rolled a Sharpie back and forth across the surface of the desk. Trying to seem idle.

He was tense.

So was Pennywise. That couldn't be helped. The thing, It, it reflected moods of the beings around it
like a mirror can reflect a person's image.

The clown's eyes narrowed, and his head canted to one side like a sharp-eared bird of prey's. "You doN't have anything to say?"

Not yet.

They stared at each other for a beat. Rain continued to patter against the window.

"Your mind's racIng. Even if yoU don't admit it, I can teLl... And I knoW you know that."

So?

"I also know you'Re still... unsure about me. About what haPpened at the well houSe."

And now you're here, to talk, man to... man.

Pennywise scoffed, held a glove to his ruffled chest. "ThiS would be a lot easiEr if I wasn't the one doing aLl the talking."

"You know that?" Bill finally muttered, eyes still locked. Blue against blue. "You think it'd be easier to face me, after you show up unannounced? When you know Georgie isn't here? You think whatever I have to say will somehow absolve you of everything you didn't tell us? What danger we've been in, the whole time we've known you?"

Then, in a rough imitation of so many other occasions he had seen the clown do the same to his friends, Bill leaned forward.

He grabbed the creature by the chin.

So tightly, flakes of white skin cracked under his fingertips and floated away like ash rising from a fire.

"You lied to us, Pennywise."

Cowering.

Denial.

Sorrow.

Heated anger.

Explosive rage.

More lies.

Having his hand bitten off.

Being obliterated on the spot.

Bill expected every reaction except the one he received.

... Nothing.
It drew an absolute blank.

In mind and in expression.

Bill was almost unnerved. Almost. He had been prepared to feel something resitant to touch. Under his fingers, he felt nothing but... cold, vacant *space*. As if his skin wasn't registering anything, save little else but the barest, shady feeling of flesh.

Like what touching a ghost might have been like.

Wisy flakes of white skin rose, jarred loose by the pressure of his tightly-gripping hand, and disappated, soundlessly.

The rain continued to drum on the windows. Almost like the world itself was trying to say, "Hey, remember us? Life? Reality? What's going on in there that's more important?"

At that moment... making sense of the ordeal before him.

Pennywise continued to stare straight ahead, stare through Denbrough, like the young man was suddenly not there.

Like the clown was no longer *there*.

Like he had virtually left his form behind.

Like... the light had gone out behind the creature's eyes.

The irises stayed blue, the pupils remaining the same size and shape.

Bill breathed out, slowly, cautiously.

Had he been that acrid, that biting with his words?

He had virtually stunned Pennywise into petrified silence.

Catatonic.

That was the word.

... Well, perhaps he hadn't meant to be that harsh. But harshness was the only way to get through to It sometimes. To convey how serious you were, how outraged.

How concerned.

Truthfully, Bill was concerned.

Concerned for Georgie. The Losers. For It.

But that, being oh so concerned, only solved so much. Just what was he supposed to do? He was their leader, for better or worse.

They had to reign in their mascot. He was the man for the job, right?

How?
How did he even start going about doing that?

He hadn't even been sure when to, if at all.

Pennywise would eventually fall asleep. In perhaps as little as four months' time.

Could they not simply keep their distance from him until then?

Ask Georgie, to keep his distance from the cosmic novelty, just forget the day in October when It had first endeared itself to him, by rescuing his paper boat?

No matter, ultimately.

It would sleep.

Georgie would forget.

They would all forget.

Or so Pennywise had claimed.

Was he even one-hundred percent certain?

Prior to this 'awakening', he hadn't even known himself capable of feeling things like loneliness, compassion, protectiveness.

All emotions the Losers had helped him hone, to cope with.

If he could learn these things, would it not somehow counteract the previously-assumed pattern?

He certainly wouldn't be going to sleep with a full... 'stomach'.

So, he had an unseen hand in everything that took place in Derry.

Would a lack of food weaken that hand's grip? Would the town mend itself? Would the people change, for the better, as It had?

In the end, would that have been enough?

Ever the die-hard optimist, Bill had to hold on to the faintest speck of hope that were somehow true.

For everything that happened, there was always an equal and opposite reaction, wasn't there?

Patterns could change. Evolve. Improve.

It didn't matter how old you were.

What did they say about "old dogs" and "new tricks"?

...Dog.

The debacle with the iron fence post.

Was that meant to be a hint of some kind?

A botched hunting attempt?
A snarling, dangerous, foaming-at-the-mouth hint?

"If you didn't get the hint, Denbrough, you're the dense one."

That's probably something like what Beverly would say.

Nah. Forget like.

It's exactly what she would say.

And she wouldn't leave it at that.

"Who cares how it happened? He sought us out for help. We helped. After you made him promise not to harm any of us."

Which It hadn't.

Eddie had, oddly enough, been the real voice of reason at the well house.

"He's a predator, and sometimes he can be a pretty stupid one at that."

But, a shy few weeks before Ben's attack, when Bill had pressed the entity on the matter, Pennywise hadn't been willing to own up to his mistake.

"You're not gonna answer me, are you?"

"You wouldn't like my answer."

Remember what we said about 'forget like'?

Now, this was a matter for knowing for one's own good, not of sweeping it under the carpet out of vanity or mere embarrassment.

You're a killer. Someone who takes pleasure in the act of snuffing the life out of others. A sadist, a high-and-mighty thug who takes the weak and the vulnerable. The original thug, if you will.

No, a carnivore. Just doing what you have to to survive, no spite, no malice. Nothing personal about it. No apologies, but no excuses, either.

...A bit of both?

How much of each do you embody, Pennywise?

Black and white. But clearly disproportionate halves. Thrown into a blender, set on HIGH.

Whereas before, they were equal. There was no mixing the two.

Why?

Why the change in attitude now?

Because of some happenstance run-in with a boy and his paper boat?

Was changing who you are suddenly that important, because you had never known anything different? Never considered it?

In the span of billions of years, not even once?
That's a long time to stick to your guns.

Only to set them aside for a grain-of-sand's-worth of time. Maybe less.

Was that all the Losers were to It? A passing fad? A cheap experiment?

Would he simply wake up again and pretend 1989 never happened? Disregard it as a fluke 'run'?

He said they would forget.

Would he?

How could he go on otherwise, without tormenting himself over it until time's end?

All because he wanted to see if he was capable of some 'greater meaning'?

Noble intentions, especially from a bloodthirsty, craven backbiter.

Or so Richie would probably have said.

Who knew what It thought from his side of the equation?

Most of that was above man's ability to rationalize.

Perhaps it was better left an unknown.

But that didn't address Bill's most immediate of concerns.

Time to end this trance.

Those eyes had to be getting dry by now.

"Pennywise."

Heedless of how blankly the red-and-white face seemed to stare off at nothing, Bill let go. As quietly as he knew how, he snapped his fingers beside the clown's ear, then the other, as if he were bringing a subject out of hypnotism session.

In many ways, he supposed that was exactly what he was doing.

Corny as it may have felt.

Were there any myths to compare the feat to, mortals beseeched by their supposed-gods?

Or was this another first for mankind?

"Come on, come back. I know what I want to say."

"YoU do?"

"I think so," Denbrough bit his lip, sat back in his chair. "I... g-gave it some thought. Looking at you, I... I don't know if I can ever fully understand. But I wanted just one thing to be clear, between us. If that were, I think it'd make all the difference."

"NaMe it," Pennywise gasped, almost earnestly. In a blink he leaned forward, crouching on his toes, the halfway point between sitting and literally pleading on his knees. His hands threaded together. "If there's anything I can do, anythiNg I can anSwer- "
"Don't get carried away," Bill cautioned, with a tired, somewhat-regrettable smile. "You may change your tune once you hear what it is."

"Ohh?" Looking just slightly crestfallen, Pennywise's eyes darted nervously. "What... what is it, then?"

"Georgie," Bill stated, simply. "Were you going to tell him?"

"Tell him...?"

"About you, your hibernation."

"..."

"You didn't just space out again, did you?"

"I... I . . ."

"Focus, Pennywise. Answer me: are you going to tell Georgie what you told us?"

"...Eventually."

"When?"

"I... hadn't decided."

"You'll tell him," Bill ordered, as firmly as he knew how to be. "Whatever happens between now and then, you will tell him at some point."

Pennywise cringed and leaned away like he had been scalded by acidic words all over again. "Bill, I- "

"He doesn't need to know what you are. What you do to... live. But he needs to know, as much as any of us, just how long you'll be around. It's only fair." Denbrough went for the kill: "And if you don't, I'll tell him myself. You wouldn't want him to think me a liar, right?"

"You wouldn't be lying, Bill. And Georgie would never expect that of you, anyway," Pennywise replied, voice steady, even as his expression stayed taut and distraught. Uneasily, he gnawed at one of his knuckles, fingers working restlessly. "But, if I tell him, where does that put me with you? You and the others won't... shy away?"

"As long as you mind yourself around us, and around Georgie, there'll be no problem."

"None?"

"You said we'll all forget you, no matter what," Bill reiterated, solemnly, though not without a muted note of sadness. "Instead, just don't leave us with anything to r-regret, okay?"

That much, we can all live with, can't we?

Us, until the ends of our own lives.

And yours, until... whatever the end means for you.

Not much.
But it's something.

Better than what we had before.

And that's what counts.
"Well. It's this just nice and... dare I say... COZY?!

Mother Nature was a blessedly-deaf bitch. The downpour absorbed the brunt of Richie Tozier's fury gracefully, a flash of lightning splitting the churning sky with impeccable timing.

Huddled into himself, Georgie Denbrough still flinched and covered his ears, whimpering at the clap of thunder that shook the world around them. It sounded even louder than it should ever rightfully be inside the sewer pipe.

Bill crouched beside him, a protective arm wound over his little brother's soaking shoulders. How they had come to be stuck in the open mouth of a runoff drain emptying into the Kenduskaeg Canal could be attributed to two things: poor planning and plain old bad luck.

Mapping the system for themselves, comparing it to what layouts Ben had gleaned from archives, what Bill had scarcely verified from Dad's office, picking out vital underground 'landmarks' to navigate by, it all had seemed prudent at the time.

Getting lost was just par for the course.

That it all coincided precisely as a midsummer storm broke open in the skies above Derry?

More of the same luck, only worse.

Richie slumped down beside the Denbrough boys, knees bent, his back pressed against the grimy wall.

"Should've never let you talk me into this."

"H-how long do you think it will last?" Georgie choked out, watching with round eyes the cold, surging water rushing by before them.

The rocky banks to either side of the drain were already swamped, impossible to reach without getting swept into the rising rapids (where you were as good as dead). The land there was just as bad, too steep and thickly overgrown to scale, even on a good day.
Branches as thick as baseball bats were already falling prey to the elements, drifting by from upriver, jarred loose to set sail in the violent current.

"Long enough, kid. The way the water's coming up, that fast - ow, okay, Bill, stop!"

Rather than offer the customary "shut up, Richie", Bill had reached over to yank the loose hood of Richie's green rainslicker down past his overmagnified eyes. All the better to interrupt that thought before it could complete its run.

The Trashmouth was still pawing the hood aside when they felt the telltale airborne prickle heralding the arrival of their erstwhile guardian on the scene. The air grew a touch hotter, drier, as if the excess moisture around them had been whisked away.

"Penny!" Georgie immediately dove for cover, threading himself under the clown's waiting arm, clutching at his silvery suit, face nuzzling into hiding under the ruffled collar.

Richie took in the sight with a humorless frown. "Stripes, what a surprise."

Patting Georgie's shivering back, Pennywise tolerated the older boy's lackluster greeting with a smirk. "Admiring the view, are we?"

"Oh, totally. Waterfront property, cheap rates, all the rat carcasses you can eat, swept right to your door. What's not to love?"

"W-we're lost," Bill admitted, holding up his folded, tattered excuse-of-a-map for emphasis.

"Heh." Sure not to waste a chance to invade each boy's personal space (the exception being, in Richie's case, simply appearing accomplished that), Pennywise ruffled Bill's dark hair with his free hand, not unaffectionately. His eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Figured that much out for myself, Billy boy."

"You know a way out, right, Penny?" Georgie emerged from hiding long enough to risk another timid look at the canal, as if he were hoping it had magically subsided, or was an illusion just banished. "You have to."

Richie wiped at his glasses with the back of his hand. Unwelcome as the entity's presence sometimes-slash-always was for him, at least it freed him from having to worry now.

"This is his turf, squirt. 'Course he does."

The flash of unease that crossed Pennywise's expression was as unexpected as it was fleeting. His eyes jigged left and right before refocusing, and he grinned awkwardly, scratching nervously at a tufted lock of hair.

"Uh, about that..."

"Dude, don't tell me we're stuck."

"Well, the thing is, that last junction with the collapsing mortar-"

"Stop." Holding up a hand, Richie pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're saying we gotta wait this out."

"Fraid so."

"Fff-frig-a-frack."
"WhaT?"

"Censorship, man. Gotta think of the kid."

"Beats having to d-dig or slog our way out, right?" Bill tried for optimism in the face of sheer disappointment. "It's okay. The water w-won't stay high for long."

"We won't be back in time for dinner, though," Georgie objected.

"Oh! I could try findiNg you something," Pennywise piped up.

A tint of green surfaced in Richie's cheeks. His imagination suddenly provided a very vivid mental picture of the finer pickings when it came to eating garbage. Despite his moniker as "the Trashmouth", he in no way aspired to bring a literal interpretation for it into reality.

No matter how hungry he was.

He couldn't tell if Bill was smiling in gratitude or horror.

"Thanks, but no, no, thanks very much, Dolly. I think we can go without the snacks."

"Hmph." With Georgie safely gathered into his arms, Pennywise settled down against the brick wall, booted feet braced against the opposite curve of the drain. He spared the swelling canal a smoldering glare. "Well, at least you'll be dRy here."

Exchanging a resigned look, Bill and Richie crawled over to sit against either side of the creature, wedging themselves in just close enough to enjoy what little warmth their combined bodies would produce.

Outside, the storm continued to bellow and vent her fury.

"Can't you try that radio of yours, Bill?" Richie blurted out, when the silence - punctuated only by Georgie's whimpers and random grumbles of distant thunder - proved unbearable. "Doesn't it have more than one channel?"

"It's a w-walkie, Richie, shortwave. In this weather, the signal wouldn't p-p-pick up anything on the other side of the canal."


"Oh, yeah." He smiled fondly after a moment's consideration. "That was a while ago."

"Only about a year, for your birthday," Georgie recalled, toying absentmindedly with Pennywise's wrist frill, gathering and then smoothing the silky fabric between his fingers. "Dad didn't think they'd work so long."

"Bought 'em used?" Richie asked, not exactly interested in the story, but talking about anything was preferable to uncomfortable quiet.

"CheapskAte," Pennywise mumbled, offhandedly, picking up on the repressed anger Bill felt well up within him in that moment.

"No, he wasn't," Georgie retorted. "They still work, don't they? What's wrong with getting used ones? We didn't know at the time."
"He thought that was better than nothing like it, probably," Richie leaned his head against his fist, elbow braced against a folded knee. "At least he sort of got you what you asked for."

"Your Dad doesn't?"

"Not if I don't beg, bleed, and sweat for it first," Tozier lamented. "By then I don't usually want it anymore."

"Like your skateboard?"

"Shh-ssha-ut-it!" Richie aborted mid-curse, knowing (and hating instantly that) there was nothing he could do or say to unmake Pennywise's statement.

Bill blinked, glanced at the clown, then blinked again. "Skateboard?"

"What skateboard?" Georgie rephrased, craning his neck to look at Richie.

"Yeah, right, what skateboard, Blabbermouth?" Found out, the spectacled boy mustered the sternist glare in his arsenal.

"The skateboard you pointed out in *Thrasher* the other day?"

"Don't know, don't care how you do," Richie muttered, continuing to stare a hole in the slimy bricks above his head. Whatever their predicament, wherever the conversation went, revisiting his part-confessional at 29 Neibolt House was not on today's agenda.

Thankfully, the clown-beast seemed to figure that out without further need for hint-dropping. Instead, his teeth gave a little *click* as Georgie (somehow) squirmed closer against his chest, wedging his hooded head under Pennywise's chin.

For a time, they stared out at the rising floodwaters in silence.

Again.

The thought crossed Bill's mind to double-back and see if Pennywise knew of a longer route to follow out. No one in Derry, much less the world, knew this system better.

Why wait it out any longer? Surely Mom and Dad, otherwise-indifferent as they often were to the brothers, would notice both of their boys were gone from the dinner table.

Until...

"Billy, I'm hungry."

"We're all hungry, kid," Richie sympathized - or his version of sympathizing, anyway. "But I don't care to sample rotting cheeseburger and fungus fries for my dinner."

"Richle!"

"No offense, Dingles, but that's the best we could hope to find down here. I know you'd give us your best, but the sewer's best is still Derry's worst when it comes to cuisine."

"Not that we won't appreciate the thought," Bill interjected.

"Fungus fries, heh heh hee," Georgie repeated, grinning. Maybe it was the potent cocktail of fear and fatigue getting to him, exacerbated by low blood sugar, but the little boy was suddenly giggling like
Richie had told the best punchline ever.

Tozier couldn't help a half-smile. "Yeah, gross. With rat blood for ketchup."

"Ewww!"

"With the best, rotten maple leaf salad you ever not want, with greasy, pinecone croutons. Mm! Delish."

Bill rubbed at his eyes, trying (and failing) to banish the mental images that were being conjured up. His empty stomach was seconds away from bringing up bile for no other reason than seemingly-being offended.

"Okay, you can stop there."

"And for dessert-"


"Aww."

Tozier relented, though he was secretly rejoicing to think he had somehow managed to make the sourfaced clown feel the slightest bit nauseous.

"Well, we gotta do something. Georgie's hunger isn't gonna make itself go away."

"Living with an empty stomach is preferable to a concussion, a serious possibility of drowning, and broken ankles, Rich."

Alas, the glow of good humor faded as quickly as it appeared.

Richie threw his hands up. "I've had it with sitting around, waiting. Stripes, I gotta be honest, you're a pretty lame Lassie stand-in."

"A wHat?"

"I'm saying, a border collie with a rolled-up script in its mouth would get us home faster than you have."

Pennywise exchanged a look with Georgie, one bald eyebrow slowly creeping higher than the other. Mutely, they seemed to agree, to not dare stepping outside the box.

"BilLy says you should wait, I tHink you should liSten."

"Then aren't I just the smartest guy alive for not giving a mere cent what you think?"

"Richie!"

Bracing both hands against the wall behind him, he lurched forward, onto his boots in one smooth motion. There was a flashlight in one of his slicker's pockets.

He had that, and a home to get back to.

Bill could stuff his amateur cartography.

"Forget this. I'm out!"
And like so many other of his failed endeavors, that was the beginning of the end for Richie Tozier. He kept walking long after their voices stopped echoing after him.

Faintly, it sounded like they tried to follow. At first. Pennywise may well have teleported his way in front of the boy to keep Tozier from separating himself from the group.

But there were the Denbrough boys to watch, too. He wouldn't leave them unattended.

Oddly enough, for being a supposedly-supreme cosmic being, even It couldn't be in two places at once.

Bill probably drew, and therefore stalled, the clown's attention with his borderline-bickering, stuttering argument, too. "L-Let him go. Maybe he'll get lucky."

Richie was nothing if not lucky.

Bad luck, good luck. Dumb luck. Worse luck. Didn't matter.

He was walking.

Walking where? Hoping to do what?

Who the fuck knew?

Richie didn't. Not that he'd say otherwise if someone pressed him on it. If he had, he would have started his way in that direction a long time ago.

But he was a man of action, not of words. If he went out, it wouldn't be sitting on his ass, waiting around for Fate to drop the hammer.

Flashlight in hand, he slogged onward.

Already, they had spent a few hours down here. He was sure of that much. Enough time for the storm to break, and wail on and on for an indeterminate length of time. Compared to the Denbrough boys, Richie's parental concerns were a mere shade. It wouldn't be the first time he had trundled back home long after dark set in on Derry.

No dinner. No dessert. No "Where on Earth were you, son?"

He wasn't missing out on much.

It had been that way since before junior high. Before intermediate school. Since he had been gifted his first bike at the age of five, practically.

So long as there was a town to see, things to do, Richie went where he wanted. Not where others told him to go.

Meeting Bill, then Eddie and Stan, had somewhat quashed the gallivanting habit. Richie seldom went anywhere without his three friends in tow, or vice versa. It went from being purely for the fun of one another's company to being a purely-defensive tactic. Sticking together meant you were less likely to get picked on (sometimes).

As they got older, the simple 'getting picked on' evolved into the more-complicated, almost-daily ambush beatings and humiliating public embarrassments that were better off forgotten. Occasionally, Richie found himself playing the lone wolf, and, unsurprisingly, it was much easier to outrun the
bullies when you didn't have to make sure your friends were keeping pace.

When they didn't slow you down.

Like now.

Richie stumbled, footing almost lost, catching himself on the wall. Panning the light around, he realized where he was.

It was the same three-point junction Pennywise had claimed was flooded. Wasn't it? With the missing mortar? There was that same wet rock Bill had placed in the gap where a long-missing brick had once been.

Tozier scoffed.

It had lied.

Again, unsurprising.

"And he'll probably keep you dolts waiting there until high noon tomorrow, he doesn't know what he's talking about," Richie mumbled, taking the right fork. "Clown's got a brain the size of a pea, no matter how big his head is."

Despite his ramblings, Tozier's mind didn't stray too far off navigation.

The water ran toward him from the right.

As they had descended, he remembered following the flow down.

Proceeding back uphill, the current was stronger than he recalled. Mindful of the splashing against his shins, how forceful it was, he took the climb slowly.

The next junction, that would be a left, instead of the right it originally was.

"Could be worse," he mused aloud, alone with nothing save the sewer walls. "Can you imagine if Bill had talked everyone into this?"

Then there really wouldn't have been any hope for him to escape.

They would have closed ranks, held him back.

Beverly would have seconded Bill and said little else.

Mike would have tried to keep Georgie calm, keep them all talking, civilized-like.

Ben wouldn't mind either way, a budding zen master he was.

Stan would be pulling his hair out, absolutely beside himself with panic.

Eddie would have to keep his inhaler crammed into his mouth like a diver's respirator.

Thankfully, that was not the case. The entirety of their club wasn't necessary for this venture.

Although, it would have made 'telephoning' one another via the pipes a lot more efficent.

And there would be more of them to watch out for one another if the group split in half.
Perks and drawbacks. As always.

Balance.

As if Fate were honing her sense of humor, with him as the guinea pig, Richie felt his toe catch some unseen obstacle under the water.

Almost causing him to lose his footing.

He slipped again. Stumbling sideways, his free hand splayed out, found a wall. He braced himself, just managing to not pitch facefirst into the gray water.

Impulsively, he checked the frames of his glasses. The temples, snug behind his ears, had wiggled a bit loose.

"Fuckin' sewers. No wonder the 'public' wants nothing to do with them, eh, Bill?"

A hiss answered him.

His flashlight found a rat, clinging atop an old glass beer bottle. A brief second of eyeshine was visible in the pitch blackness.

It scurried away.

For apparently, it did not answer to Bill.

"Wow. Tough crowd."

He kept going.

...Did Pennywise ever grow so bored he started talking to the rats?

Now there was an odd thought.

Odd, in that it seemed bizarrely natural. Like how someone might talk to their dog or cat.

The entity was trying to 'practice' his human mannerisms. Every opportunity he got, seemingly. Keeping pets. That seemed like a good lesson in and of itself.

Stan would concur.

Richie shook his head.

He didn't care, remember?

He shouldn't care.

He needed to think of something to talk about, anything to avail the monotone splashing of his boots, the lonely, echoey gasps of air.

He stumbled, took the left turn as planned.

Kept going.

...Echoey? Is that a word?
The sewers declined to answer.

So he provided his own.

"I'd ask you, Ben, if you were around. But nooo. You couldn't be bothered to go anywhere at all until your extra credit assignment was one-thousand-percent complete. If you want to shove half of it my way, that'd be nice. Already done and ready to turn in, preferably."

Wow, that was a pretty long-winded rant (kinda like his journey was panning out to be). Had it bothered him that much?

Then there was the inevitable.

When was the clown gonna show up?

He had to be fretting by now. Seeing it all in his mind's eye. Keeping track of Richie via some not-echolocation/infrared sense his oversized head seemed to house.

Twitching, practically spazzing, just itching to teleport.

Georgie was probably clinging to his ankle, preventing it.

God, that kid could be a pain sometimes.

When had it been decided that admitting him to the Losers was really needed?

Richie must have missed that club meeting. Or slept through it.

He had cause. Like Bill was never guilty of being unnecessarily verbose.

And not just because of the stutter.

Crash.

His blood went from already-cold to near-frozen.

Richie froze, knees locking up. The air around him grew equally still. He reached for the nearest wall, pointed the flashlight ahead of himself.

Nothing.

The pipe before him stretched off into darkness.

Just empty air.

He swore he could hear his own heartbeat, the sedate thump-thump, thump-thump bouncing off the walls.

Wait.

There, faintly...

Was that... rumbling?

Like an earthquake?

Impossible. Maine was nowhere near a fault line.
Lightning, maybe? That was the sound of it striking, as distorted through an opening somewhere in the line?

An open manhole chute? A maintenance ladder?

That still didn't explain the rumbling...

And how it was getting closer.

Louder.

Then, it was there.

Shaking the very walls.

Already overpowering his hearing, blotting out all else.

No.

No, no, no.

The clown was lying.

He had to have been.

That waterline, over there on the bricks, how damp it still was, this couldn't be the same tunnel that had flooded out.

Barring their escape.

It couldn't be.

Crasssh.

Dumbfounded, Richie took a step back.

Like something out of an Indiana Jones movie, it rolled toward him.

Only real.

Soil-yourself-terrifyingly real.

Spray flew from where the water hit the slimey bricks, bits of foam glowing like yellow confetti in the meager flashlight beam.

Then it roared his way.

A regular underground tsunami.

He dropped the flashlight.

Pennywise hadn't been lying.

He had been telling the truth.

The same kinda awful truth that was that wall of water, flooding the pipe, washing out the very air.
Crashing, *surging* toward the boy.

Staring, frozen in the crosshairs, Richie hardly thought to lift his arms, to shield himself.

There was nowhere to run.

*Well, fuc*-

It slammed into him with all the unrelenting momentum of a freight train.

Everything went black.

Moreso than it already was.
Sometime later (minutes, hours, who knew for sure?), the waterlogged body's still-functioning brain thought it would be a good idea to return to the land of the living.

Lungs, muscles, heart, break time's over. Get back to work!

First things first, the body had to get itself out of the puddle it was lying in.

Richie came to around the same time his arms moved, almost of their own accord, instinctively folding up at the elbows, pushing his hands flat against the ground. He coughed, trying to lift his face out of the water.

Pain, hot and jagged, lanced through him, from the bottom of his spine to the back of his skull. He winced, involuntarily folding at the waist, hands fisting, cringing under the agony. It felt like someone had shoved a blazing firepoker deep into his back.

And hadn't taken it out.

"FF-fuck, fuck, ow. Oww..."

Face pressed to the floor, he waited. He tried to breathe deep, to somehow ease it with every exhale. Even if the pain was unwelcome, it at least took the chill out of his thoroughly-drenched form.

Mercifully, the ache abated quickly. One bit of good news. Carefully, he lifted himself up on his elbows.

Richie breathed out, opened his eyes. Gingerly at first, then he blinked furiously, frowning, wiping at them with the back of his hand.

Hold the phone.

Why couldn't he see anything?

He was awake.

Why was it still dark?

His eyes were open. Achy, sensitive, but open.

Blind.

What was that?

What?

That, over there.

Footsteps.

Were they getting closer?

Wait, there was another sound.

In time with the shuffling footsteps.
Higher.

Tinnier.

Bells.

*God - damn - It.*

They drew to a stop.

Then the bells tinged again, presumably as the creature crouched down before him.

... "You should've listened to Billy."

Richie scoffed, half-retching at the aftertaste of sewage, in his *mouth*. He gaped, eyes going wide. How it flowed back *up* his throat, sickeningly.

He started gagging, coughing.

Vomiting.

And he couldn't stop.

Oh, great.

Everyone, gather around. Tozier's puking his guts out. Let the mocking commence.

Starting with that infernal clown. He would be first in line.

Eventually, the boy's overabused lungs and stomach emptied themselves completely.

Richie coughed one last time, clutched his head, squinting. He lurched aside, away from the putrid stench of his self-made mess. His arms shook.

Ow, that would smart tomorrow.

Time for a quip.

"S-send him over here, he can- *ugh, so gross - um, he can t-tell me himself.*"

The darkness cleared away. Just a bit.

Something off-white, a few feet away, gray against the blackness all around them.

And orange, a crest of orange flames atop its head.

Yep, that was Stripes.

Wait.

Was that... light, up above them?

No time to think about it.

The silvery blur sniffed, very loudly, leaned closer.
Something sweet and rotten wafted against Richie's face.
The smell was bad, but with it came a worse revelation.
Wait. His face.
His naked face.
Reeling back, Richie clutched at his cheekbones, his ears, disbelieving all over again. How had he not realized sooner? He blinked, hard, wiped at his eyes. Blinked again.
No good.
The world around him stayed just as muddled as ever.
"Wh-where are my glasses?"
"Gone."
At least Pennywise didn't mince words on that.
And the word bowled Tozier over like another Derry Public Works tsunami.
Mom was gonna hit the ceiling, punch a new hole through it, shaped just like herself. Just like in a Warner Bros. cartoon.
Impulsively, Richie reached ahead, sweeping his hands back and forth. His very fingertips reached desperately, ghosting hesitantly over sopping-wet concrete.
"T-that can't be."
"'Fraid it is, RichIe."
The hands stilled. Slowly, he glanced up, in the vague direction of the breathy voice.
He had never heard Pennywise speak so... seriously.
The clown was being unusually solemn. Grim, even.
Richie had once thought his sense of humor to be pretty twisted.
He stopped thinking that way about six months ago.
It's Twilight-Zone-warped idea of amusement put the Trashmouth's to shame.
And, most days, they hated each other's guts.
Physical and not.
 Didn't he find this perdicament of Tozier's the least bit... funny?
Cruelly funny?
Just a bit?
Richie was suddenly overcome with a powerful, illogical need to ask.
"Why aren't you-"

A wide hand closed on his shoulder, long fingers practically reaching all the way around. Firmly, unquestioningly.

"Stand up, Richie."

He had never heard It sound so commanding, either.

"Chill." He wiped at his face, wincing at discovering all the fresh scratches adorning it. No doubt he was covered in unspeakable, septic muck that had been glued there by his own dried blood. "It's a bit fast for me right now, man. Give me a minute."

The second hand found his other shoulder.

Together, they grabbed the boy under his arms and lifted.

"Hey, easy!"

He struggled, wriggling like a fish caught on a set of unforgiving hooks.

Protested for all he was worth.

"Hey! I said-"

Suddenly, he was airborne. His feet swung aimlessly. Somehow, his boots hadn't been swept off while underwater. The toes bounced off the concrete below him.

After a few seconds, they found purchase again.

He stumbled as the hands let him go.

"You've had plenty of minutes. You can't stay here."

Why the fuck not?

Anger snapped on. Fingers clawing, Richie lashed out at the air before him, feeling more than a bit stupid when his swinging hands failed to hit their target.

"What's your hurry, douchebag? Where are we?"

If only he could see.

"Somewhere you shouldn't be."

"Agghh!" Richie grasped at his ears in exasperation. "No shit, Sherlock. I wasn't meant to be here from the very beginning." He brushed at his sullied hair, the hood of his slicker long gone. What was this awful gunk on his head? "Fucking Stuttery-Ass Bill. And Pipsqueak. All this, over making some half-assed maps. When I see them again-"

A growl interrupted him.

And that wasn't hyperbole.

A low, undulating growl, forming the words:

"You won't see anyone again if you don't listen."
Richie's heart went still.
Just briefly.
Forget stern. Forget deadly-serious.
He had never heard Pennywise so angry, either.
Playfully annoyed, irritated, Tozier had already seen that many a time.
But that...
That was long-festering fury right there.
Centuries-long.
...Did he really get under the entity's false-skin that much? So easily?
He held up his hands, a momentary white flag.
"Okay, okay..."
That was met with a heavy sigh. It meant its wielder was pacified, hopefully. Richie felt loose hairs blow away from his face with the force of it.
God, what was that nasty smell?
"I'll help you. You can still get out."
Still?
Was something going to keep him there?
His blindness? His half-broken body?
Death itself?
Instead, he asked:
"How? How am I supposed to see where I'm going?"
"You'll have to trust me."
Richie facepalmed.
"Trust you? Trust you to play guide dog?"
His rescuer leaned in close.
"Do you have any better ideas?"
There was that sickly sweet smell again.
Right into his face.
Another odd thought popped outta the swirling carousel that was Richie's frenetic brain.
The smell. Was that... was that the clown's breath?

If he ever smelled like anything in the past, it was like popcorn. And mints. Sometimes both.

This, this was the pungnant odor of rotten something blowing Tozier's way.

A trick of the moist conditions? Maybe, because they were underground, something about the trapped, stale air just made it seem that way. Worse than it really was.

What was the use in wondering?

Mentioning something else that "smelled bad" in the sewers was tantamount to claiming "also, it's wet down here".

Kinda went without saying.

Irrelevant.

"...No."

Richie sighed in defeat, finally letting his shoulders droop. His arms hung limp at his sides.

Let's see where this gets me.

"...Just don't walk me into a wall, man. I've had a rough enough day."

Or was it night, by now?

A gloved hand found his shoulder again.

Gently, almost.

"Hrmph. Don'T worry."

Richie worried.

With the long, lacey arm serving as his de facto leash, Tozier let himself be led into the dark. Blurry shadows, ranging in every cool color from black to gray to blue, swam before him, mixing into a backdrop more abstract and impossible to discern abstract art.

He kept his eyes half shut. What meager information his soggy mind could handle processing, he would keep it to a minimum.

For now.

Not until they were back where he could see daylight.

Pennywise took short strides, half a step to every two of his reluctant ward's.

For Richie, he still had to walk twice his normal speed to keep up.

From that point on, they said little else. The clown occasionally stopped, made him turn left, turn right, avoid that hole, duck around that spigot.

Don't unexpectedly halt in the middle of the road with annoying questions.

"Where're Bill and Georgie?"
Ahead of him, he heard the boots shuffle to a stop. There was a soft growl, but Pennywise brought out another melodramatic sigh to cover it up.

Mostly.

"Topslde."

Richie wiped at his dirty face, almost frettingly. Awful, awful feeling. Once he found clean water, he resolved to jump in and scrub like his life depended on it.

In the meantime, he had to figure something out.

Before they found the Denbroughs again.

"How'd you find me?"

"I loOked."

"No, Dipstick. How?"

"With... my eYes?"

"Is that what you call them, or do you really not have a name for the sparkly-magic crap you use to get around down here?"

"WhY do you want to kNow now?"

"I just want to make sure you're not pulling some sick shit," Richie's voice went low, venomous, almost deadpan. Thoughts far darker than his own lack of eyesight had started to needle him. "Now's your chance."

How do I know you're not just gonna finish what the water started?

There was no thoughtful pause.

The glove latched onto his shoulder again, vicelike, pulling him along.

"KeEp up."

Richie stumbled, recovered, and did his best to oblige. He was practically trotting.

Eventually, the ground beneath their feet began to plane upward.

Slowly at first, then steeper and steeper.

Richie's feet slipped inside his flooded boots. He stumbled.

With his free hand, Pennywise kept the half-blind boy from careening headlong into a wall.

Far from being thankful, Richie bristled.

To be so pathetic, depending on someone else to see you out of the shitstorm you yourself had knowingly walked into...

No.

He had known going in. That there was a chance of a washout.
He just hadn't counted on it happening.

And still he went.

Almost died.

But whatever.

Apparently he couldn't be trusted with his own life.

So Fate saw fit to bring him back, with this thing to see him home.

That rubbed Richie the wrong way. All over.

"You must be loving this."

"NoPe." Pennywise's reaction was almost flippant, irritatingly base. "NopE, I don'T."

Confounding clown.

"Why not? Most days, you can't seem to get enough outta working me up. Now you've got me at your mercy and you're not gonna take advantage?"

"NopE."

"Not even a little?"

C'mon. You know you want to.

They started walking again.

"You said it aLready, RichIe. You've hAd a rough day. Why shOuld I bother mAking it worse?"

"Because it's what you get off on."

His guide stopped dead. Two bright yellow orbs turned around on him, flaring coldly.

Richie jabbed a defiant index finger in what-he-hoped was the creature's direction.

"No, don't start with that growling shit. You know what I mean. The jumpscares, the teasing, the undermining. It's constant. You're never satisfied. No one else in the club gets the same treatment I do, from you. Now I go off, get washing-machined through Derry's pus-laden undersides, and you're not gonna make the most of it? What are you playing at?"

Why not sort things out, here and now?

With no one else around.

No distractions, no easy-outs.

No one to put on a show for.

Let's hear it.

... "BeiNg human."
What?

Slowly, Richie glanced around, blinked violently against his blurred vision. He lowered his arm.

Wait, his vision... was it starting to sharpen up?

"...What?"

Suddenly, he couldn't think of anything else.

It couldn't be that simple.

Not for something known only as It.

Shoulders up, Pennywise was glaring down at him, eyes gradually fading from livid yellow back to cool blue.

There it was, that not-smile, not-frown thing the being sometimes did.

It usually indicated he meant what he said.

"It's not aLL about you, RichIe," he hissed. "I came to find you beCause Georgie and BiLLy expectEd me to. Why do I nEed any other reaSon?"

Because you're IT.

Richie wanted to say as much, but all that happened was a useless, voiceless wag of his chin.

Incredulity stole his words.

Watching it happen, Pennywise's red lips spread wide in a sharklike grin.

Minus the dozens of pointed teeth, thankfully. He looked sinister enough without them.

"You're fuNny when you'Re confused, too. Maybe thaT's why. LoudmouthS are always the beSt to tease."

Um... 'thanks for not going there'?

Richie felt his stomach drop, saying instead, "I really don't want to know what you mean by that, man."

That answer had been equal parts satisfying and intimidating.

And on they went.

Tozier no longer needed the hand on his shoulder. As long as he kept sight of those crisscrossed laces up the center of Pennywise's back, he knew he was going the right away.

Gradually, by degrees, Richie felt his tingling eyes drying, clearing up. Past experience told him he would still be uselessly impaired, no matter his improvements now. Without his glasses he was little better than Ray Charles at the piano.

And Ray Charles knew his stuff.

Richie didn't know jack about the sewers.
Except they stunk, and he didn't like them.

"How far down are we, Stripes?"

Enough of the tension.

Maybe a more benign subject was called for.

Something to take his mind off all the **diseases** he had potentially been exposed to...

"Far enough. The water took you away. That junction was going to cave any time." The gangly being stopped, tilting his head to listen, eyes upturned and askew. Listening for what, only he could say. And he wasn't too sharing on that front.

Richie wandered to a stop, looking up at him.

Without moving, the clown added. "You were lucky to wind up where you did."

*Yeah. That good, old Tozier luck.*

"Why didn't you follow me... before?"

Blue eyes glanced sideways at him.

"Georgie asked me to stay."

"...Just like that?"

"Just like that," Pennywise repeated. They strode forward, stopped at a T junction. After a brief consideration, he turned right. The climb remained pointed uphill. "Billy asked me to go after you."

"And, what? Your own conscience was the tiebreaker?"

"Is that what it's called? A conscience?"

"Of knowing right from wrong, yeah, I guess," Richie shrugged. Truthfully, he was a little bewildered, to be the one to show it the meaning of the word. "Georgie... he hadn't taught you that yet?"

"No. Not yet."

So it was only a matter of time.

Just like him and seeing the sun again.

"Did you... you didn't happen to see my glasses anywhere?"

"I looked, Richie. I didn't," Pennywise paused, glancing back long enough to appreciate how the boy's expression sank. "Sorry."

*Not your fault.*

Richie scratched at his caked-up hair, checking the impulsive response before it could be verbalized.

"You think you could, later, I mean?"

"They're probably broken, Richie. You wouldn't want them back."
Dismissive. So much for hoping we’d moved beyond the pettiness that is us.

Still, the creature had a valid point.

"We're almOst there."

"Almost where?"

Another hundred yards on...

..."HeRe."

They stepped into a room. Or the closest thing resembling one down here, with the corners swallowed up in unpenetrable shadow. It was a virtual underground intersection, four tunnel entrances laid out north-south-east-west. In the center, a metal ladder led up through the ceiling.

Richie squinted. "Where does it go?"

"Above ground. BilLy said it's where they would wAit."

That was the important information, right?

Forcing a chuckle, Richie gestured toward the ladder, bending at the waist in a half-bow.

"After you."

Pop.

The silver vanished.

Richie blinked.

"Cheating bastard." He reached out, felt for one of the rungs. It was cold and slippery to the touch. "I'm supposed to climb this thing, half blind?"

Beats staying where you are, Toze.

...

Well, I guess it can't be worse than getting ragdolled, and living through it.

Feeling for the ladder's sides, he lifted a foot. Gauging the space between the rungs, it seemed doable.

In a half-assed, take-a-chance way.

He made it about half the distance.

Then his hand slipped as he made to pull himself up again, exactly as he raised a boot.

Three points of contact, at all times. Wasn't that what Dad said once?

Seconds later, Richie was windmilling his arms, about to topple backwards through open space, onto unforgiving cement.
"F-fuck! Iknewit! Knewitwasabadidea!"

"GotcHa!"

Then, he stopped, midfall. He lay there, impossibly-tilted at forty-five degrees. His feet were still on the ladder.

There was a hand, splayed in the middle of his back.

Right between his shoulders.

Keeping him from falling.

Cracking his skull open. On top of everything else.

Richie blinked, stupidly, hardly daring to breathe, let alone move.

"Sss..."

He couldn't even choke out the name.

With a shove from behind, he reached out, trapping himself back against the metal, gripping the ladder in an awkward hug. He clamped his eyes shut, the better to keep them from stinging so fiercely.

Finally, the impulse to cry in frustration had caught up with him.

"This was a bad idea, Jingles. I can't see where I'm going."

But he had come this far...

"Hmm..."

*Pop.*

Silence.

Seconds passed.

Then, with a rusty, metallic shriek from above...

"Richie!"

Something went *slam.*

Then the hatch at the top of the ladder swung to one side, flooding the room with light.

The darkness recoiled as if it had been burned away.

Daytime? Had he been down here that long?

Tozier squinted against it. Distorted as his vision was, he would know those overgrown bangs anywhere.

"Bill?"

Outlined against the blue skies above, Denbrough reached in, clearly meaning to pull his lost friend
up.

"Keep going, you're almost there."

A second face joined him.

"C'mon, Richie!"

*Georgie.*

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

The voice of his 'guide dog' drifted up from somewhere underneath, spurring him on.

Leading from behind rather than in front.

Wasn't that just like It?

Richie didn't dare look down, see how high he really was off the floor.

But something in the back of his head said, this was it. If he climbed up, reunited with Bill and Georgie, Pennywise wouldn't be joining them.

At least... not right away.

He would keep to the dark, the place he knew more of.

Where he was comfortable, at home.

They had had their fill of nitpicking and ribbing today, hadn't they? And then some?

They could always... pick it up again later.

He supposed.

Richie chanced a look down.

With blue eyes, Pennywise's upturned face smirked at him.

Perhaps he had been thinking just the same thing.

"Mind your step, Trashmouth."

*Pop.*

Mites of dust swirled in the light where he once stood.

*Same goes for you, clown.*
Chapter Summary

It knows, except when he doesn’t.

Chapter Notes

Part 2 of “Snooze, You Lose”.

There were two choices for the “pick your ending” at FF.Net. Not many votes were cast, so I ended up combining them.

There were only so many places it could have gone.

The act of actually finding the little, blue sports car, that much the clown was not worried about.

He was more upset with notion of locking the bedroom door, albeit only a *tad*. Despite his flippant manner and intent to adhere to the terms of the bet, Pennywise frowned as he had turned the lock.

Then the frown spread further at him sensing a brief rush of muted disappointment radiate through the frame.

He stopped, laid a hand flat against the closed door.

*Sorry, Georgie.*

But it was the only way to ensure the boy wouldn't leave the house while his otherworldly caretaker was absent.

The kid had once thought it a good idea to chase a paper boat down a flooded street, after all. For *fun*. It didn't matter if the plan had been a joint effort between himself and his older brother. Left to his own devices while ill, who knew what trouble Georgie would find?

Plucking the other Losers out of their various troubles, playing the siphon for their bad moods, mending their hurts, that was exhausting stuff.

Pennywise supposed he was owed a simpler task - for a change.

For once in his dwindling yea-

No, don't think about that. Not now.

The racecar.

Where was it?

There was no need to look physically, per se. But eyes were easier to imitate than pulling from just
raw energies.

Bassey Park offered a wide range of settings and activities for a visitor to pick from. There was the sizable pavilion for hosting events, anything from birthday parties to Fourth of July cook-outs. There were open fields for throwing frisbees and flying kites. There was even a summertime concessions area, where no less than four lunchtruck vendors parked to serve their food and drinks to a needy public.

And then there was the playground, which its usual cast of attractions.

The slides.

The swings.

The towering jungle gym.

A quartet of see-saws.

The monster-truck tires half buried in sandy pits.

The merry-go-round.

That thing seemed... kinda dangerous.

Pennywise scoffed quietly, loitering in the shadows beneath said device. With gloved fingers he shifted through the sand, panning, brushing carefully, digging occasionally. Right now, the spinning metal contraption was idle. The nearest family of four were engaged with playing on the swings.

Sometimes it seemed to spin so fast the riders were in peril of being thrown off. It wasn't as if the thing had an emergency brake. And you could break an arm trying to reach out and snag a passing bar.

Ow.

Pennywise flinched, ducking an inch lower as the giant plate lurched on its pivot point. Someone had raced over and jumped aboard. The metallic reverb it gave off at the impact was not unlike a poor imitation of a gong.

Or so it felt like to his hyperaware ears.

Distractedly, the wincing entity rubbed at the new sore spot at the top of his head.

_Merry-go-round._

_Slinking around underneath it looking for a lost toy it isn't advisable, either._

The Eddie-voice sounded especially deadpan today.

Hunkering down even lower, he crept toward the disc's outer edge.

What would the racecar be doing this far back in the pit, anyway?

"Courtney, look at this!"
Pennywise froze mid-creep, eyes widening.

*Oh, no.*

A set of sneakers raced by, then stopped. Then the denim-clad legs turned to one side, feet repositioned themselves as the girl stooped down.

*Don't say they-*

Then a small hand reached down, digging determinedly into the sand, brushing away the grains to reveal a bit of glinting, blue metal.

"Someone lost their Hot Wheels."

"Oh, that's a cool one, too!"

Pennywise's red lips curled up in a mute snarl.

*Well. That's what you get for delaying needlessly, dummy.*

*Shut- no. Hrmph. I guess that's true.*

The snarl eased away, and It practiced a deserved eye roll.

Not even in his own head did he have the nerve to disobey a Beverly-voice.

The unseen creature swallowed the saliva already pooling in his mouth, crawled up to the carousel's shadowed edge, like a burrowing spider about to pounce from its lair, and thought fast.

No.

He couldn't just leap out in broad daylight. But what if-

*Aw, hell. Don't overthink it! Just go!*

If you say so, Richie-voice.

*Lose?*

"No, he didn't!"

It struck.

Forgoing a human hand, two slimy octopus-tentacle-like extensions lashed out, wrapping around the girl's ankle.

With a high scream to rival any black-and-white horror classic, both girls fled at Roadrunner-speed back across the sandpit.

The forgotten racecar hit the ground with a barely-audible *tink.*

Snickering wickedly, Pennywise crawled back into the shadows. Mission objective - complete. The little blue coupe fit neatly in the center of his palm. With a fingertip, he brushed the last few sand particles off its curvy hood.

*Too easy.*
Now, Stan-voice, why do you have to go spoiling It's victory?

Already, It could hear the frantic girls' hysteric voices, talking on top of one another, pleading with their bemused parents. Mingled with their elders' growing-ever-dismissive thoughts, already the situation was leaning in the creature's favor there.

No, there really was a monster under the merry-go-round.

Now, Shannon, you can't be serious.

We saw it, I'm telling you.

Courtney, we've had the monsters-don't-exist talk already.

Something touched my leg!

Pennywise scoffed to himself. *If only they knew.*

There was a time he would have done a lot worse.

Occasionally, he still did.

*No, there's nothing here. Go on about your day.*

A little nudge in the right direction. There's an ice cream cart over that way. Smooth this over with a sundae or three.


When normally...

No, *don't* go there. Nothing about this waking year had been normal.

Not even by Its standards.

And, once another sleep cycle had passed, he was sure he wouldn't change a thing.

Would be.

Would be sure.

Now, back to-

Wait.

Pennywise glanced down, luninescent eyes narrowing to slits. He froze, taking a second, longer look at the toy in his hand.

Something was different about it.

Different than before.

The racecar. With its metal body, plastic windshield...

Rubber wheels.

Prone to detaching.
Torpdeoed by inane circumstance or simple bad luck, the cosmic entity's good mood sank.

The wheels. One was missing. Front, driver's side.

*Georgie, you'd better have gotten some sleep. I don't care about the bet you had at this point. Pen kept you up for hours when you could have been resting. No, I am gonna have a talk with him about that.*

That kinda sounded like a Bill-voice's most likely tirade, anyway.

Hours.

It wouldn't take hours to find a missing wheel less than a centimeter wide.

But then... when had it come loose? Upon hitting the sand? When Georgie first set it atop the metal plate yesterday, pretended to run it along the rounded edge like an inverted race track? Could it have happened as it was thrown away by centrifugal force?

Or... even before that?

Pennywise snorted, shook his head, growing disgruntled all over again.

He had found the thing.

Did it really matter what shape it was in?

He could virtually conjure up a new one.

But that wouldn't feel... genuine.

It'd feel fake, phony.

When their friendship was anything but.

No, Georgie would notice. Ask what happened to it.

Stuck at home, nearly-sick. Tied to a stupid wager.

He had already endured enough disappointment for one day.

That mattered.

Especially now.

Mind made up, Pennywise stashed the car at the merry-go-round's rusty base. Then he took to sifting through the dark expanse of sand again, eyes sharp.

* Determination's one thing. Foolishness is another.*

While it sounded unconvinced, Ben-voice wouldn't say as much. But if the thought had its own face, that would be the look it wore.

Determindedly foolish.

That was about how well you could sum up, not only this excursion, but this new calling of Its' as a whole.
If sparing some eight kids from ever ending up on your proverbial-slash-literal dinner plate could ever be considered a calling.

But therein lay the benefit to being older than time. Who did you ever need to answer to?

Besides yourself.

With his new search turning up empty, It ventured out into the sun.

Shrunk down to a near-invisible size, no one would pay the silver speck a second look.

Biking to Bassey Park, Georgie had kept the racecar in his jacket pocket. Any jarring movement could have pried and loosened the wheel. Say it had fallen out of said pocket on the way. That was a lot of ground to cover between here and the Denbrough household.

He drifted to a stop at the sidewalk's edge, senses wide open. Sets of feet walked by, headed either direction. The cars on the road before him parroted the same movement, bearing their drivers on to any number of untold destinations.

*Georgie knows better than to ride on the shoulder, not without Bill or one of us there. Check the sidewalk, man.*

Last and never least, Mike-voice, ever, forever helpful.

He wasn't far off.

There, where the curb met the cracking street, wedged up against the remnants of a crabgrass cluster. Two blocks from the house, five from the park.

Really, the boy hadn't noticed by the time he reached the merry-go-round?

Well, if he had, Georgie was too good natured to care, to fuss. Three wheels were just as good for rolling across metal playground fixtures with.

His toy car had still been in his pocket.

That was the important part.

Still, Pennywise thought, back under the carousel, wedging the missing component back onto the naked axle, still worth it.

Once the clown told him what had ensued, Georgie would appreciate his guardian's going the extra mile.

He always did.

"C'mon, Shan, whatever it was, it's gotta be gone now."

Smile fading, Pennywise glanced through the sides of his eyes.

He recognized those sneakers, if not the set of sandals that strode next to them.

Walking back toward the merry-go-round.

*Noo... This again? I thought I sent you away for ice cream.*
Their voices approached just as quick.

"See? I'll take a look."

"No! What if it gets you, too?"

"Then how 'bout we both look? On three."

_How nice of them to give me a countdown._

Oh, well.

He could have one last bit of fun before departing.

"One... two... three!"

He crept forward, halting just shy of the shadow's edge.

Both dropped to their hands and knees. Nervous eyes peered under the carousel.

With his eyes gone white, Pennywise flashed them a razor-toothed smile and waved.

"Boo."

They squealed and scurried backwards so fast, one lost a sandal and didn't even look back to reclaim it. The other girl slipped on her undone shoelaces. All that was missing was a cartoonish dustcloud left in their wake.

Demonic laughter spurred them on, completely uncaring of who heard it.

Five minutes later, the still-shaking girls returned, with an exasperated Dad now in tow.

Together they looked.

Only to find there was nothing there.

________

_Ohh... what happened here?_

Glancing around the now-disheveled bedroom, Pennywise bit one of his knuckles.

But it was only to keep from bursting out in manic laughter.

Here, it wasn't called for.

Then, belatedly, the clown thought to step the rest of the way into the room and close the open door. No need for Bill to return home and see this inexplicable mess, not after having to suffer through another unwanted afterschool debate class.

What Georgie had gotten up to in the meantime, trying his darndest _not_ to go to sleep, the evidence littering the room could not even begin to be discerned. It was like a pint-sized tornado had blown through.

Books lay about the floor, splayed open upon their pages. Already gravity had started to bend their spines out of shape.

Along with those were just as many recognizable staples: the LEGOs, the Slinky, the xylophone. All
stood overseen by a multi-species herd of stuffed animals.

The closet looked like it had been detonated from within, as an avalanche brought down all the trees on a mountainside.

The drawers of his desk had been pulled out. Scribbled-on, half-crumpled papers had been strawn haphazardly about. Crayons and colored pencils lay unattended among them.

And of all the places to crash, Georgie - still in his PJs, despite all the once-folded clothing thrown about the room like some chimpanzee had raided his dresser - had fallen asleep at the foot of the bed, facing the bedroom window. Curled up on himself like a cat, he was basking in the afternoon sunshine.

Funny. One would think, feeling a touch feverish, that the boy would try to avoid getting warmer.

Still chuckling quietly, Pennywise glanced over at the vacant head of the bed. There, the pillow, sheets, and blanket had been shoved into a useless, rejected wad in the corner.

And, going by the clock in the kitchen, he had been gone all of an hour.

Unbelievable.

He moved closer, easily avoiding the mess with one exaggerated goose step, pausing only to set the recovered racecar back on the corner of the dresser. It stood out like a little blue jewel against all the clutter.

Then, soundlessly, he curled up behind and beside Georgie. There was just enough room to spare if the entity laid on his side.

"Not even sleepy."

You were, just not the way you thought.

Then you figured it out.

And turned into a right little terror about it.

For good measure, Pennywise reached over the boy's shoulder to deal him another affectionate nose-flick. The bells hanging off his forearm gave a soft ting with the sharp movement.

Resting deep, Georgie hardly stirred. His face wrinkled at being touched, or at the sound of the bell, and he mumbled something half-incoherent. His clenched hands, once held balled up before his face, tightened and relaxed.

His mind emitted nothing but the steady, gentle pulse that came with an untroubled sleep.

After venting all of its very-likely-repressed fury on the world around it.

Instead of on the people it knew.

Pennywise ignored the dark realizations lingering, unwelcome, at the back of his mind and smirked instead.

*Smart, Georgie. Very smart.*

Sunlight continued to stream through the glass, casting its pleasant heat over both of their bodies.
Content to wait, Pennywise folded one arm below his head to lean on.

The other arm he laid across Georgie's shoulder in a half-hug, gloved fingers nestling into the boy's hair.

Forget sleep.

Forget dark thoughts.

Basking sounded good right about now.
Chapter Summary

Mike gets his revenge.

And he doesn’t have to lift a finger.

Chapter Notes

Show of hands: who hates moths?

At midnight, there was silence.

Punctuated only by singing crickets and the never-ending drone of frogs.

Until...

"Errr... go aWay!"

Flashlight on, Mike looked up from the book propped against his knees, frowning.

He had moved a short distance from the Barrens campsite. He usually read to help himself go to sleep, but with the others already out, he had taken a seat at the clearing's edge. Reclining against a log, he kept the beam of light pointed down.

Amazingly enough, no light-craving bugs had pestered him in the past thirty minutes.

Then the tiny bells started jingling.

"Something wrong, Pen?"

Looking up, Mike realized how utterly pointless that question had been.

Pennywise had sidestepped away from the other Losers' sleeping bags. His scrunched-up expression was apparent even by starlight, let alone torchlight.

He was being dogged by no less than four luna moths.

Right up in his face.

Not counting all the little speck-like insects that were too numerous to mention.

Oh, wait. Too late.

Did we mention that?

Pennywise blinked hard and flinched backwards, as one brave soul tried to land on his nose. Its
green wings fluttered, a harried, excited movement. Weakly, as if he were actually apprehensive of killing the thing, he swept it aside and took another half step in near-retreat.

Only to be set upon by the next moth in line.

Whining, he batted as ineffectually at this one as the first.

"MikEy, maKe them stop!"

Hanlon almost put his book down. Almost clicked the flashlight off.

Then he remembered the escapade with the mug of not-tea.

And he smiled.

Knowing a six-foot-plus clown creature with luminescent eyes was good for something after all.
Draw

Chapter Summary

Win? Lose? Who cares? :')

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Snooze, You Lose / Racing Time”.

Recommended OST: “The Places Where You Are” by Johnny Black

An hour later, the sun-basking session ended.

Time to undo the damage.

Then Georgie paused mid-bedroom-clean-up, spying the blue prize sitting atop his dresser. Funny that it had been fifteen minutes before he had even bothered asking, what fate had befallen the precious bit of metal. Fever broken, his face lit up with instant excitement.

The group of stuffed animals, once in his arms, hit the floor as he moved to grab it, to make sure the car was real.

"You found it!"

Across the room, Pennywise paused, half-smirking as he recalled the events at the park, before sliding an open desk drawer shut.

"Did you thiNk I wouldn't?"

"No..."

But the way the boy's eyes slid away, like he were trying to sidle his way out of answering. 

Pennywise didn't believe an atom of it.

In an instant, he was crouched down beside the boy, affecting his best pretend-threatening hiss: "LiaR."

Georgie glanced sidelong at him, features taut as he struggled to keep a straight face. Then the clown leaned even closer to his ear, eyebrow raised. "HmMm?"

"I didn't." A moment later, he relented, spinning one of the racecar's wheels for emphasis. "Okay, but only for a second."

This earned him a gentle tug on the ear in reprimand. "Less. LesS than a second."

"What's less than a second, Penny?"
Pennywise frowned, tilted his head, pretending to consider the literacy of that. Timekeeping science was not his forte, wake-sleep cycles notwithstanding. "...Half? Then half of a half?"

"Ugh." Georgie affected a pained face, held his head in both hands. "No fractions, please. I hate doing those."

The glove let go of his earlobe.

_Flick._

"You diD ask."

Denbrough jumped, rubbing fitfully at his 'offended' nose as if it had been punched. "Well, next time, don't answer me."

"I can't not ansWer you, Georgie."

"Yes, you can."

A low, unconvinced _hrmph_ answered him.

"Not when you aSk like that."

Georgie turned around, looked up, and almost stepped back.

Pennywise stood there, half-crouched above him, one hand raised, as if he were about to swear some weird oath.

Wait.

Why was he smiling?

"Like what?"

"ThiS!"

There wasn't much in the way of free space left in the room (even if they had spent the last ten minutes policing up the sharper objects). Caught off guard by the gentle push, Georgie stumbled back and half-fell against the pile of clothing. Arguably, it was a soft landing. He slipped on a disheveled pile of shirts, attempting to get back up.

Then he was pinned. Gloved hands found his sides, tickling mercilessly.

And from there it was all downhill.

"Penny, no! Stop! I- ah-ha-ha! Please, no!"

Immediately, Georgie was reduced to a fit of helpless giggles, kicking and trying in vain to worm his way out of reach.

Oh, the number of times one of their 'disagreements' had ended in this fashion.

He had long ago lost count how many it had been.

They seemed to average one every three days.

Georgie hated fractions, but didn't mind averages.
"N-no- ah-ha-ha-hee! No fair! Ha, no, stop! I can't- Ha-hee-ha!"

Then one of the gloves found his face, holding it easily in the wide span between thumb and index finger, pinching his cheeks.

Not enough to hurt. No, never.

Through his watery, squinting eyes, the boy could just see Pennywise's expression, leering down at him, teeth bared in a playfully-mocking grin.

"Can't wHat, Georgie boy? What caN't you do?"

The other hand never stopped, creeping under the hem of his shirt, fingers fluttering against his ribs.

"I-I-I, e-hee-hee-hee! I-I c-can't, heh, a-a-ssk you anotherway! Ah, no! N-not there!"

This happened every time.

First the sides, then under the arms. Worse and worse.

No matter how he twisted and wriggled, Georgie could never seem to get free.

The one time he almost had, Pennywise had simply reached out with one long arm, grabbed him by the ankle, and dragged him back across the carpet.

Carefully. Always carefully.

Their tickle fights never actually got anybody hurt.

Bill had worried at first. He thought the creature would be too rough, not know his own strength. Or that Georgie was too fragile, too sensitive to withstand such prolonged 'torture' in the name of harmless fun.

As time went on, with every passing session, he grew less and less concerned.

No one ever complained. No one got an accidental kick in the face. No one suffered as much as a little rug burn.

Were he to come home to this sight, Bill would have simply taken one unbothered glance into the bedroom, and then kept on walking back to his own. Tickling. Nothing unusual about that sight.

Before racing back to do an open-mouthed double-take at the carnage Georgie had wrought upon his belongings.

Finally, the fluttering eased, and the pleasant tremors racing along teased nerves ceased.

Georgie held his sides protectively, almost hiccuping as he gasped for air. Trying to calm down, he slowly went from overblown laughter to muted snickering. He turned on his side, face burying into a once-folded sweater, glancing up with one eye.

He didn't have long to look up at, as Pennywise flopped down beside him, content to wedge his own face up in amidst the expansive pile of clothes. His glowing eyes, still a bright, effervescent blue, peered up from the gap between two shirts.

"You can aSk me anYthing, GeorgIe. You knoW that, yeS?"
"What took you so long, then?" Denbrough blurted out, but not unaffectionately. Already he had lost his grip on the racecar in question. They would find it again, sometime after resuming the bedroom cleanup.

But for now, he wanted a story-slash-explanation.

"So loNg?" Pennywise likely sensed this, and rose up on his elbows. He frowned and braced his knuckles against his striped cheek, forever-exaggerating his changes in expression, in keeping with his chosen guise. "You liTtle imp, I wasN't gone more tHan an hOur."

"Then why lock the door on me? I wouldn't've left!"

"Nooo?"

"No, silly." Georgie sat up on his hands, a bit defensive and not averse to tapping into the leftover outrage he had felt just before naptime ensued. "No, I wouldn't've. You know I wouldn't, and you locked it anyway."

Pennywise flinched at the accusatory finger that prodded his red nose, but otherwise, he was unmoved. "I'm soRry, GeorgIe. MayBe I shouldn't haVe. But if I diDn't, and Billy had come home-
"

"That was his idea?" Crestfallen, Georgie's face fell in kind. He went from incensed to disappointed in a heartbeat. To think, he wasn't well behaved enough already, that someone thought that was necessary, least of all Billy. "To lock me up?"

"No, GeorgIe. But he told mE you were to stay home, no maTter what. He was wOrried. If you got sickEr..."

Pennywise trailed off, looking more uncertain with every passing second. His eyes strayed apart, and he slowly eased down to rest his chin on his folded arms.

"If I got sicker, what?" Georgie felt suddenly, ridiculously compelled to ask. He crawled close. When the clown didn't so much as glance his way, he turned around and struggled to get even closer, just managing to thread his way through a gap underneath one massive arm. "What would've happened, Penny?"

After what-seemed-like-forever, Pennywise finally looked over at him.

The grin he sported now seemed almost... pained, almost forced.

But it was there.

The arm lying across Georgie's shoulders lifted momentarily. "It'S okAy. You diDn't, anD I found youR racecar anyway. WiN-win?"

Georgie blinked as his unkempt hair was ruffled, and he said nothing.

Suddenly, he knew. He knew without having to be told.

He just nuzzled in deep, into his favorite place in between Pennywise's chin and ruffled collar.

Wordlessly, the entity let him, arm wrapping back around and underneath the boy's chest.

Georgie kneaded a satin frill between his fingers, letting his moistening eyes drop shut.
Yeah, win-win.

Their wager.

No winner, no loser.

A draw.

That was fine.

Didn't matter if he had been locked up or not.

Neither of them wanted to admit what might have been missed.

It was "win" enough just to be back together again.
Chapter Summary

Things are starting to devolve.

Starting.

For all his metaphorical strides in the past year, learning as many new things as he had, there are some things about human beings It figured he would never understand.

Particularly the intricacies of what it meant for the male of the species to beat up on one another in an act that somehow signified affection.

Verbally, and often physically.

Richie and Eddie seemed to demonstrate it the most often. Occasionally, they would talk Mike into their roughhousing, but that was a rare occurrence. Simply because the homeschooled kid was used to farmwork did not mean he necessarily enjoyed living rough besides.

Besides, wasn't Eddie a bit fragile for that sort of thing? He bruised easily. Paper cuts for others meant stitches for him. Some days one could hardly glance at him without enduring some hysterical lecture about the importance of "knocking first!"

Then again, Pennywise had mistimed that one. Never again would he try to drop in on Eddie, or any of the the Losers, in the morning, particularly when they were in a delicate state of mid-dress.

Oops.

Hearing the story, Richie Tozier's reaction was on par with a grand mal seizure.

If epilepsy caused laughter.

Looking on, his expression bordering on murderous, Eddie had the self control to not wring his friend's neck. His hands stayed where they were, curled tightly around his bike's handlebars.

Handlebars not to be confused with a certain someone's neck, mind you.

Instead, he settled for a scathing remark: "You know, for hating clowns, you seem to get a lot of enjoyment out of having this guy around."

Without waiting for the guffawing to stop (Richie was practically hiccuping now), Kaspbrak rounded on his next target, who crouched between them, expression blank.

"And you, you didn't need to tell him."

"Ha- he- how could he not?" Richie choked out, before the cosmic entity could fathom an answer. "Ruffles, you just made my week."

Caught in limbo between feeling pride at having earned Tozier's hard-won approval (in the way he had least expected, no less) and enduring the wrath of Eddie's fierce temper, Pennywise could only
"Think of one thing to say."

"...You're weLcome?"

This, of course, sent Richie into another uncontrollable fit of sniggering. Within seconds he was wound into a convulsing ball on the ground.

"You-you're- urgh!" Eddie's hands worked spasmodically into fists before dropping to his sides. The clown's genuinely-innocently-baffled expression seemed to be working on him. The boy had seemingly successfully avoided punching him in retaliation. "Jesus, you're frustrating."

"That, and he's got his Georgie impersonation down pat now," Richie gasped, breathing heavy as he found his lost composure, and kept hold of it. Barely. "I mean, look at that! Shirley Temple couldn't do better."

There was a word for this.

What had Ben defined it as? Being compared to someone of apparent celebrity was a compliment, right?

"Thank yoU?"

Staggering, one last laugh leaving his system, Richie regained his feet. "Okay, dude, stop. We didn't call you here to practice your manners."

"We are a bit early, though." Reclining atop his bike, Eddie glanced at his watch. The change in topic was most welcome, from his point of view. "I don't know how I managed that, but I know Bill has the usual chores to do before he and Georgie can fly the coop."

Pennywise's already-off-center eyes drifted further askew in thought. "Hmm. Should I check on tHem?"

"Nah. Then they really wouldn't get anything done," Richie reasoned, arms folding behind his head. "And if you did, Eds and I aren't going a stone's throw around that place right now."

Pennywise blinked, eyes realigned. "How come?"

"You've seen their parents? If you think it's bad they don't pay enough attention to Bill and Georgie, it's even worse when they do. They're yessir-noma'am incarnate."

"You just made that up," Eddie accused.

"How else can I put it into words Stripes here will actually understand?"

Pennywise frowned, gaze turning flat not at feeling offended, but at thinking of Beverly, actually.

Versus the Denbroughs, there was no contest in who had the less-savory hand of cards. How she had retreated to the rooftop after four days of confinement, and how the entity had learned that, rather than phone her friends, lest they know the horror that was her home life, she thought avoiding everyone was the solution.

"There are worSe parents in DerRy."

Perhaps sensing how he had veered into dangerous waters, going by the clown's unusually-thoughtful silence, Richie wisely recanted. "Yeah, I guess."
"And not just among us," Eddie went on, his expression growing distant. "You gotta wonder, all the missing ones, they can't all be missing because Mom said 'no TV for a month', or Dad left the front door unlocked?"

"You're saying some of them wanted to go missing?" Richie asked. Adjusting his glasses, turning the sun's glare away, he was mercifully oblivious to their gangly companion's fleeting moment of jaw-clenching, gaze darting away almost guiltily. "Maybe. But that can't be said for most, Eds. As much as I hate my home life, I'd hate ending up in a ditch somewhere even more."

Swallowing the bitterness that was thinking an overgrown, rutty ditch was the best place any of the Losers could end up, associating with the likes of him, Pennywise forced a sigh.

"How much lonGer?" he almost growled.

"You know, maybe you should- "

Snap.

That was all the permission Pennywise needed to vanish.

Staring at the now-vacant space between them, Richie took in Eddie's bewildered expression and shrugged, mimicking it threefold. "What got inta him?"

Trundling down the sidewalk, steering his bike alongside Bill's, Georgie swung his leg over the frame, kicked to stand up on the pedals, and listened to Richie's recounting of the last two hours.

Two hours waiting for the Denbrough boys to finish the morning's dishes and tidying their bedrooms, and thus far, Pennywise had not returned.

"I hate it when he does that."

"We thought he was off to see you two," Eddie explained.

"He would have, eventually," Richie concluded. He rode in the street, practicing his role as the embodiment of kinetic motion, weaving aimlessly around a pothole. "Good luck guessing when. Stripes is his own man- beast, demon... thing."

"He's not a thing," Georgie insisted, so automatically and so fiercely the subject clearly brokered no further debate.

Smiling patiently at his brother's over-insisting tone, Bill brushed his bangs from his eyes. "Well, we know he'll find us when he's ready. There's no rushing that. Now let's get Ben."

Initially, the plan had been to recruit everyone, to resume the woodworking job that had sprung up, and quickly grown out of control, in the heart of the Barrens. And by 'woodworking' one would refer to the haphazardly-leaning hut made of branches, sticks, old leaf tarps, flattened cardboard boxes, currently standing tall in a thicket of close-growing oak trees.

While the Losers already had their perfectly-imperfect clubhouse in the form of 29 Neibolt Street, the appeal of constructing their own homage out of whatever refuse and building materials that could be cobbled together was too entertaining a project to pass up.

"Project" was too dignified a word for this sight, Stan Uris decided.
"Mess" was closer to the truth.

Completely and utterly.

"Think we should stop 'em?" he mumbled, chin resting in his hand.

While the others toiled, he and Beverly had opted to sit this leg of the construction out. They stood guard over the group's cache of backpacks, lunchboxes, and bikes. Six sets of hands trying to erect what a sorry-excuse-for-a-hut that was were more than enough.

Stanley sat in the crook of an overarching oak root, curving up from the ground like a giant talon, its tip buried in the soil. Claiming to be suffering from a sore back, he kept his hands clean for the sake of passing out snacks later.

Beverly leaned against a nearby pine tree, seemingly unbothered by the possibility of sap dripping into her hair, or staining her clothes. She had taken one look at the boys' endeavor and broken out a cigarette. In no way was she going to be associated with this farce of a structure.

"No, let them have their fun," she decided after a moment's pause. She exhaled slowly. "It's only a matter of time before they lose interest, or run outta nails. Pounding hammers is more work than entertainment."

"I guess so," Stan agreed. He reached up to wipe his nose, a mild dose of allergens having induced the sniffles in him. "Georgie said they were thinking of naming it."

"Really?" Beverly smirked. As if the hut ever would have a chance to reach a completed state, the younger Denbrough was already thinking of what to christen the sorry thing. Oh, to be six-years-old again. "What for? It's not like it's gonna survive the next big thunderstorm."

"Something to remember it by, I guess," Stan shrugged, then thought twice. A twinge ran up his back, just loudly enough to be heard. He hissed and gripped his shoulder. "It's fine, I'm fine." He waved off Beverly's suddenly-concerned fawning, struggling to his feet. "I just need a good stretch."

"What'd you do?" The redhead took a final drag on the cigarette, stamping it out amidst the wet pine needles.

"Nothing, I just slept on it wrong," Stan muttered, twisting his shoulders to one side, then the other. He sighed as something popped and realigned itself, and stopped aching so badly in the process. "Pen needs to lay off with the bearhugs."

"Ohh," Beverly smiled.

That had been a fun afternoon at Neibolt, as per Georgie's instructions, Pennywise had ambushed each of them with an unexpected embrace. The creature claimed it was just a show of fondness on his part, demonstrating to them how "well" he knew how to perform the act, and he was making sure each of them got "a fair share".

Why it mattered so much to him that he spent half a day on such an endeavor, that was anyone's guess.

Except maybe Georgie's.

But the little boy hadn't confirmed or denied anything.

The smile wavered as Beverly blinked, realizing just what was missing from their otherwise-perfect
equation.

That was what had felt so out of sorts about this.

And why Georgie didn't look so enthused with the idea of hammering sticks together.

"Pen, he... Where is he?"

What went unspoken was the flush of shame that rose inside her.

I forgot.

I actually forgot.

How?

Feigning a distraction, Stan scratched at his hair. The restrained look of alarm on his face said Beverly hadn't been alone in mistakenly-overlooking their mascot's absence. "Not sure. Richie said he split before they met with Bill and George. And that was this morning."

"Where to?"

"You think Richie wouldn't have told me if he knew?"

Reaching the same conclusion, the pair of sentries slowly glanced around, as if there were unseen eyes suddenly watching their every move in the "seemingly safe" thicket.

Or worse, it was as if none were watching at all.

Not... anymore.

"...Yeah, I don't like that, either."

Wait. Stop. Wait. No!

You don't want to - don't, no! Idiot, I told you to "wait"!

The animal in him wasn't listening anymore.

Almost as if someone had flipped a switch in his psyche, It was back in control, in body and mind.

And it very much liked where this afternoon was going. Nothing he told himself would stop the eager chattering of his mandibles, pre or post kill.

True, this was a major, major backstep on his part. But no one was going to know that. The Losers wouldn't know, and Derry certainly wouldn't care.

And even if they did, they would forget.

Maybe not forgive.

But certainly forget.

In time, he was sure he could even convince himself to forget.

Ribbons of torn cloth, the remnants of a once-pristine baseball uniform, adorned the four-year-old's
body like horrid garnish. Facedown in the stream, where she had been driven, it snatched the carcass up in both forelimbs, serrated mouthparts fastened securely to the back of the girl's neck.

Moving quickly on its remaining six feet, he scrambled for the nearby drainpipe.

Back to the sewers, back to the cistern.

Thunder rumbled outside, as if Mother Nature were voicing her wordless displeasure, driving him back underground.

He kept moving.

All the while, the half-spun threads of spiraling, conflicting, ever-intersecting logic (a simpler, saner person might call them his "inner voices") would give him no peace.

Idiot, idiot, IDIOT.

Shut up! I am not!

You weren't that hungry.

Ha! Says you. What's wrong with planning a bit further ahead?

"Further ahead"? Do you not see how skinny this twerp is?

Ohh? What're you gonna do about it, then?

Nothing, if you stick to your word.

My word. My word is my own. I can bend or break it as I see fit.

Bend or break. Hmph!

So you'd do the same to Georgie and not bat an eye? Or Bev? Or Stan?

That's different. They're different.

Sorry, bucko. At the end of the day, they're not that different. Pretend all you want. Ration all you want. You know this small fry isn't gonna keep you satiated for long.

Then what're you gonna do?

He practically threw the body aside upon reaching the cistern. Curling tightly in on himself, he fell to the cold stone floor, quivering talons arranged atop his armored head, creaky joints all atremble.

Three months.

This kill would suffice him for one.

If that. Maybe.

Still, it had to be done. Better to cull some hapless, fourth-born runt whose parents forgot to pick them up from tee-ball practice than hurt the ever-present cluster of eight souls still loitering in the Barrens.

He had his favorites.
Favorites weren't food.

They weren't.
Old School

Chapter Summary

...They’re still kinda-sorta not getting along.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Two-Bit”.

Because Tim Curry’s the man.

This kid took himself far too seriously.

That was the gist of it.

One could argue he had cause. To be so on-edge, every minute of every day. After all, how easy could it be, playing sheepdog to a gang of eight brats who had somehow made the do-not-eat list?

Goodness knew our original It had no such duties to attend to back in his own dimension. Nor had he ever pretended to.

Pretend.

This 'younger' (and certainly dumber) version of himself did a lot more socializing besides what was required. That is, too much. Any socializing whatsoever was to be considered, in itself, a lot more. All because, what, besides their fear and their flesh, humanity also had hugs, kisses, and scratches to offer?

Guh-ross.

Therefore, It would have liked nothing better at the moment than to visibly retch.

But, here in close company, that would be too obvious.

So instead, he smirked at the yarn being spun before him, and rested his cheek on his fist.

"You're kiddin'."

"Nyh uh, nope," the boy - this universe's equivalent of Georgie Denbrough - shook his head vigorously. Sitting beside him at the kitchen table, the kid's feet swung, back and forth, toes barely scraping the floor. "That's what really happened."

"Like love at first sight?"

"Sorta," Georgie pulled a half-scrunched-up face, like he couldn't decide whether to be disgusted or convinced first. "But we don't-"
Chuckling warmly, It dealt the kid a soft, harmless punch to the shoulder. "Didn't mean it that way, kiddo."

*Pop.*

Then there was the sound of bells, striding their way.

"Something I'm mi*Ss*ing?"

*Aaand right on cue.*

It raised a penciled-on eyebrow.

"Easy, Mama Bear, we're just talkin'."

Still, a protective arm threaded its way between them, a gloved hand catching Georgie's bicep. *Two weeks, on and off, and you keep actin' like I'm eyin' this one up the most.*

*Already had mine, thanks. You can keep yours.*

"AboUt...?"

Oblivious to the newly-arrived tension, or simply choosing to ignore it, Denbrough glanced between them, radiant smile returning. "The day we met, Penny. D'you remember?"

"Yes."

*Oop. Don't think I didn't see that little eye twitch, bucko.*

Despite the sheer unnatural nature of this 'friendship', it was strangely adorable to see just how invested this Being had become in one puny mortal.

Even if it was only a passing fancy.

Even if, in Its neck of the woods, things had gone *quite* differently.

But here and now, it was not wise to bring that up. No, sir.

*I especially liked the part where you scared him, now that was good stuff.*

"Where I scared him?"

"Yeah, I'mean, did you even know? Where your boat landed once it went down the drain? Or him, lookin' up, wonderin', 'Now, what's that noise I hear'? Bam! Nailed him right between the eyes, had to've. Laid him out like a rug."

Insert anvil-crashing sound effect here.

"I waSn't scared," Pennywise retorted, as flatly as flat could be.

But the resulting deadpan expression and tone had the desired effect.

Georgie took one look at his gangly guardian, pictured the scene as described, and went into a snickering fit, face held in his hands.

Again, was he amused or ashamed? Who could tell?
"She didn't hit you there, did she, Penny?"

"No, GeorGie. Our buddy here jusT likes to... embeliSh."

"Now, there you go with your five-dollar words again," It remarked, tapping a random sequence of gloved fingertips against the table, if only in pseudo-thought. With the same hand, he gestured at the silvery form that was so totally-opposite to his own. "Are you tryin' to turn into Ben, or is that happenin' all on its own?"

Sniping was just as good at this level as it was from on high. With the added perk of a third party. Then it was just friendly competition. Like snapping a wishbone.

Which being would earn the bigger half of Georgie's confidance with this story? Even if it was only being done to pass the time, to get this version of Itself so riled up was worth the price of admission alone. If only he'd stop being such a sore loser...

He may see the fun in it for himself. Just as It predicted, Pennywise gave a noncommittal huff and full-body twitch, a mental reset masquerading as an unconscious tic. Perhaps that was why he fancied bells. The delightful tinging did wonders for counterpointing an angry utterance or violent motion. How wonderful, in how contrived it was.

"Make up yoUr own mind on that, oLd man. We both knOw whatever I say, you'll just twiSt it to suit you."

Oh, you sulky imitation peppermint. Like you aren't guilty of that, too.

"What can I say? Nature of the beast, kid."

Georgie gaped, as if the once-conventional expression were a whole new, fascinating animal. "What does that mean?"

"What it is to be stucK in your ways, Georgle."

"Easy, bucko. I'm not meanin' to bash any ears. While you were busy pilin' up Zs, little Denny and I got caught up."

Gasp!

"You were sleeping, Penny?" Georgie glanced between them. To his credit, his eyes didn't get bigger. If anything, they narrowed in newfound contemplation. "You never sleep."

Just because you haven't seen him do it doesn't mean it don't happen, kid.

"I wasn't."

Aand there we have the painfully-predictable retort. Seriously, I could write a checklist for every reaction I've ever gotten out of you. And then a behavior manual to abide by, according to that.
In lieu of pouring more salt on that wound, It raised a prompting eyebrow, glancing up through the
tops of his sky-blue eyes.

*Two months, and counting... You catnap once, that's how it starts.*

"I wasn't."

"What kept you, then?" It grumbled, drumming his fingers upon his cheekbone for effect, feigning a
bored restlessness, in spite of the other's dismissiveness. "From the sound of your message, I thought
you meant to talk *today*, not next Tuesday."

Pennywise scowled, lip curling, but it softened as he turned back to his charge.

"Georgie, can you... excuse us, for a moment?"

The kid actually gasped.

"That was good, Penny! I should tell Stan."

It snorted with repressed laughter, covering his eyes with one hand, as the kid sprang from the chair
and raced out of the room.

"Honestly? They're gradin' you on manners. Oh-ho-ho, that is just as good."

Both palms hit the table with a *slam*. Dust rose into the air.

"What do you want, old timer?"

Grinning, It peeked out from between his fingers.

"Lighten up already, and I might tell you."

Brow furrowing, Pennywise bared his fangs and leaned in close.

"You'll tell me anyway."

"All right, all right, but I'm tellin' you before anyone else does, you fit *right* in with this whole
instant-gratification generation."

Pennywise huffed and drew back, crossing his frilled arms.

"This isn't the fifties. Of course I do."

"Pft. Well, then, I'm not breakin' any new ground." It gestured with an open palm toward the empty
seat. "So climb down off your high horse and let's jaw."

The taller Being's lip curled back in another mute snarl. The challenge in the older entity's motion
was as obvious as the nose on his face.

With another twitch, he glanced away.

"On second thought, maybe I don't want to know."

"That about confirms it. You're just as juvenile as your little buddies."

Eyes brightening to a livid orange, Pennywise's outraged stare was the picture of *say-that-again*. 
Deciding they had arrived at the actually-serious topic he had intended, It rose to his feet, hands poised on the table. "I mean it, one of these times, you gonna get into a situation you can't control with them. Through no fault of your own other than you don't know when - to - back - off."

Maybe the talking-with-your-hands and finger-jabbing-for-emphasis were a bit much.

But hey, cosmic-entity-clowns gotta clown sometimes, right?

"I told you befoRe, I don't neEd your help."

"And I'm not here to offer it again to only get snapped at. I just meant to say my piece. I know I can't go a more than a day in my realm without tormentin' somebody over somethin'. You need to loosen up."

He stepped around the table's corner, closed the distance. His gaze was just as intense as his unwilling-'understudy's', regardless of their sheer contrast in height.

"Starvin' yourself from humor can be just as bad for your health as anythin' else, bucko. Jus' remember that. Happy trails."

Vanishing from the immediate scene, with a noise that was less a pop than a crackling snap, It lingered long enough to eavesdrop from outside a kitchen window.

He didn't need to hear what came next.

Georgie Denbrough trotted back into the room, took one look at his grumpy-faced guardian, and bounded over to deliver a side-on hug. The height difference was even more apparent between them, as the boy could barely reach around Pennywise's skirted hip.

The sulky look instantly melted away, as Pennywise belatedly remembered to pat Georgie on the head, smiling that dopey, bucktoothed smile that said all's-well.

Giggling, Georgie grabbed for said hand with both of his own, and led his gangly caretaker back out of the kitchen.

It smirked, tapped his chin in thought.

Well, for better or worse, he had said his piece.

What could be the harm in sticking around a while longer, see how things shook out?

Kid was a kid.

Finding his way.

In his own way.

Meanwhile, he could still use all the help he could get.
Chapter Summary

Don’t mess with a man’s Wheels.

Chapter Notes

Little crack interlude is crack. Callbacks to “Racing Time”.

"That's them?"

Juicebox set aside, Georgie sat on the curb. His hands were braced on the grass behind him, as he looked across the street.

Looking on, from the drain beside the boy's sneakered feet, Pennywise glared up and through the sides of his yellowing eyes.

"The saMe."

If he was expecting to hear more from his charge, Georgie was sorry to disappoint. Regarding the two figures roller-blading down the opposite sidewalk, he felt nothing in the way of animosity.

Even if his guardian did.

The straw was back in his mouth by the time Pennywise spoke again.

"You know thEm?"

Georgie paused mid-sip, brow wrinkling just a bit.

Why did the clown suddenly sound so... critical?

"From school, sure. They're a grade ahead of me."

"And?"

"Shannon's... okay. She plays on the basketball team. Courtney, I don't know as much. I think I said hello to her, once?"

"Aaand?"

Georgie's expression went flat. Setting the juicebox aside, he leaned down to address the drain.

Even if, from Penny's perspective, he looked upside-down.

"And they're- girls. I don't know. What else is there?"
Pennywise's eyes flashed orange, the same shade as his hair.

"And they neArly stole your Hot WheEls!"

Georgie glanced up, frowning.

Across the street, both fourth-graders were just passing by. Skating to a near stop, Shannon offered a friendly wave before Courtney urged her to keep moving.

"They did?"

"At the paRk."

As he had been housebound at the time, Georgie didn't quite share in the creature's minor outrage. Not one iota of it.

"They couldn't have known it was mine, Penny. Calm down."

To that, Pennywise gave a brief, scathing growl. It echoed in the hollow space beneath the road.

And the next Georgie looked, the clown was gone.

No. Don't say he-

"Ahhiiee!"

From no less than three yards around, Georgie and various yard-going neighbors looked up in time to see the a segment of sidewalk before the pair of girls simply vanish, as if a sinkhole had opened up in the earth beneath the concrete.

To which Courtney and Shannon, unable to stop their blades in time, took a headlong tumble into.

They vanished from sight, to a dull thump, before hurriedly clambering back out.

The three neighbors rushed from their homes to console them. As no one else paid it any mind, Georgie tilted his head at the incongruous sound of distant demonic laughter echoing up from the drain.

Heaving a sigh to make Eddie Kaspbrak proud, he facepalmed.

Took another draw on his juicebox.

Really, sometimes weathering his guardian's vindictive side was almost too much.
...Sorry, Georgie.

You had to find out somehow. :(  

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Sleep With The Fishes”.

It wasn't that he was tired, exactly.

Georgie Denbrough had gotten more than enough sleep the night before, even if Bill had kept him
up sharing what meager fishing advice he was in possession of. For Georgie, the prospect of
spending an afternoon with Mike and Ben had held more appeal than the actual fishing plan.

And, as with so many other activities that summer, it wasn't that anyone had expressly invited
Pennywise along. Fishing stick in hand, Georgie had barely taken one step toward the creek before
his vision went dark.

Gloved hands were being held over his eyes from behind.

"Guess who?"

Both being a good sort, Mike and Ben took the intrusion well enough. All they asked in return was a
minimum of noise, and no splashing. No one was about to try talking the clown into leaving. It
would have made as much sense as bringing a hockey stick to a baseball game.

Brows lowering, Pennywise pulled his most disappointed face yet, but - seemingly-forever intent on
pleasing his mortal friends - he flopped down on the grass and went virtually silent.

What ensued was... less than exciting.

The water in the creek was crystal clear, cool, and pretty to look at. Peering down at it, Georgie
wrung his hands, only to keep them busy and burn off nervous energy. There were so many pretty
pebbles and oddities below the surface, just begging to be grabbed. But as they had gone through the
'trouble' of bringing him along, he wasn't about to disobey Mike and Ben.

Even if, in their minds, it was no trouble at all.

Together, they dug up a handful of earthworms.

Mike helped Georgie bait his hook.

Three lines were cast into the water.
And that was when Georgie started to feel sleepy.

The trek out to the creek itself hadn't been that tiring. The Hanlon farm was not that many square miles, even if it was mostly woodland. Hiking it, the boy could think of gym class sessions that had worn him down faster. From playing freeze tag, four corners, and keep away.

Or maybe watching Penny pretend to sleep was what did it (for he didn't, Georgie knew that much from firsthand experience; that first cold sleepover at Neibolt, he had opened an eye to see the entity staring vacantly off into the dark, unblinking; and said darkness under the furniture fort wasn't total, thanks to the glow of said eyes).

Right now, waiting for a fish, it just looked so appealing.

Jamming the baited stringstick into the muddy bank, Georgie excused himself.

There was a gap in the undergrowth Pennywise had, in effect, banished himself to. He hadn't said as much, but he had appeared as instantly-tired of the fishing endeavor as Georgie eventually felt. Without a word, he had slunk away and made a makeshift den out of the underbrush.

Curled up on his side, gloved hands arranged under his face, the clown's dark eyelids stayed closed. They didn't so much as twitch as a yawning Denbrough crawled up next to him, settling down with his back propped against the wide torso, nuzzling up against that poofy shoulder.

One couldn't ask for a better naptime partner.

Didn't matter how long it would or wouldn't last.

Next time Georgie awoke, the other boys' banter could best be summed up as amicable.

Until it wasn't.

"Oh, ye of little faith," Mike was remarking, though any actual offense he felt had to be minimal. He sounded like he was smiling.

"Oh, ye of too much faith in BS cosmic coincidence," Richie rephrased. His voice was a scowl.

"Pen's got nothing to do with how we're not catching anything," Ben defended. Neutral as ever.

"You sure about that, Hanscom? He looks... a little too relaxed, if you get my meaning."

"No, we don't," Eddie seconded. A bit aggravated, but Georgie had heard worse from him.

"Your loss, then. Keep working on that sunburn, Eds."

Georgie blinked his eyes shut, lazily stringing the new information together. His brow furrowed, but overall, he remained still.

When had Eddie and Richie shown up?

"What about those two? They'll be rejoining us at some point?"

"Yeah, seriously, guys. You bored 'em to sleep in record time."

Georgie cracked one eye open, glanced over his shoulder, toward the log/fishing bench.

None of the four other Losers glanced back in turn. Their faces remained turned away, focused on
the water.

Richie Tozier. Focused.

Now that was funny.

Georgie didn’t see the humor in it, however. He was frowning. He hadn’t thought boredom had been
the primary cause of this siesta. For him or Penny.

...Had it?

Inadvertently, Eddie answered the unspoken question with his next offhanded observation.

"He's... been putting up less and less complaint when it comes to protesting a suggestion like that.
Anyone else notice?"

*He? Me? Or Penny?*

"I have," Ben admitted.

"But, we didn't ask him to sleep. We just asked him to keep quiet," Mike clarified.

*Penny.*

"Finally, right? If only he was like that from the beginning," Richie grumbled. It was no real secret
that he and the clown were by no means on amicable terms. Not now, or ever, really.

"Shh! He might hear you."

"Oh, I know he hears me. He hears all of us, all the time, Eds. Except for when he visited you too
early that one morning- "

Something bounced off Tozier's skull.

*Thwap.*

"Don't mention that."

"Ow, okay. Not mentioning it."

"Sleeping, keeping quiet, do we have to say there's a difference?" Ben interjected. "Georgie may not
know the signs, but if it starts happening more and more- "

"Just say he's turning narcoleptic," Eddie threw in his own medically-inclined excuse. "That should
buy us some time while the kid looks up the definition."

"Bill said not to tell him. Not yet."

"We're running out of days to keep saying that, Ben..."

From that point on, their conversation ceased to be important.

*Nar-ko-lep-tick.*

One step ahead of you there, Eddie.

Georgie's frown deepened, and he gently turned his head to back to the right.
Expression peaceful, Pennywise continued to doze behind him, chest rising and falling as steadily as any bellows. With ruby lips parted, the gentle in-and-out drawing of air made a slight whistling sound through his teeth every few breaths.

He seemed untroubled enough.

It had something to do with sleep, that big word. Georgie may not have known what it meant, but what were the other Losers saying?

That Penny used to not sleep, only pretend, and now he's... actually starting to sleep?

Not all the time.

Just once and a while?

What did that mean?

For a very fleeting moment, Georgie thought he felt his life grind to a complete stop. It was a weird, frozen feeling. Like the world went on about its business for a few milliseconds, and he was falling behind.

Then, slowly, like an old engine restarting, both fired, caught, and stuttered back to their previously synchronized rhythm.

The satin fabric he laid against was perfectly warm. The grass beneath them was soft. The air around them was toastly, too (the thicket's shade took any baking-hot-sunlight edge right out of it).

But all of that did nothing to help the chill that settled in the boy's chest.

They were making it up. Mike and the others.

They had to be.

Something to scare him with. Kinda mean, in hindsight, but then, they probably hadn't expected Georgie to wake up and listen in. Bill always said things like eavesdropping and rubbernecking would get you in trouble.

One way or another.

But... if that were true, it was a pretty odd thing to be able to time such a scary topic with a random nap on a fishing trip.

Mindful not to jostle anything, Georgie shifted over. The back of Pennywise's long left arm rested beside him, pressing against his right side, bent elbow level with the boy's hip. It was heavy as lead, but after a brief struggle, Georgie managed to thread his hand underneath the frilly bicep, all the better to hug the arm with both of his own.

A flicker of discontent crossed the slumbering red-and-white face. His dark eyelids wrinkled, then relaxed. His upper lip curled, mouth corners turning down in a brief, silent grimace before smoothing out.

Georgie watched, waited. He didn't dare blink, lest he miss it.

Waited for his friend to rouse.

Wink at him, smirk, say everything was okay.
Scowl, squint, ask what was wrong.

Either reaction would be such a relief to see.

Anything...

But he didn't.

The nap was for real.

Like an illness, the mite of cold spread from Georgie's chest out to his fingers and toes. He shivered and pulled his legs in, as if bringing them closer meant he would feel warmer.

... 

So what?

Penny would wake up.

Georgie swallowed and closed his wet eyes, grip tightening.

He laid his head back down on his friend's shoulder, nuzzling deep into the billowy fabric.

He tried to feel warm again.

*What a bunch of liars.*
Chapter Summary

Stan tries to come to grips.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Reality Bites”.

Next time.

Stanley Uris had prayed there would never be a "next time".

He wasn't tough like Ben or Mike. He wasn't wily like Eddie or Richie.

And he certainly wasn't brave like Bill or Beverly.

Some days, he felt like he wasn't anything.

What a gyp.

Fate might as well have slapped a bullseye on his back the day he was born.

Stan was a shy thirteen-years-old. And it didn't seem to matter who he had befriended at all in the interim. Thugs, goons, bullies - one after another, they just seemed to take one look at his curly-haired self and pegged him as deserving nothing but a lifetime of thrashing.

Until one cold, muddy afternoon in May 1989.

He was actually spared that day.

Somewhat.

Spared from having to see too much.

Look away, Stanley.

The creature didn't say as much. With that mouth, it would be nigh impossible.

It simply stared, a split-second of meaningful eye contact. Brown against pupilless white.

But Uris could hear the words, like a invisible command rasping past his eardrums, stabbing deep into his mind.

Like a superficial cut before the actual aputation, delicate scalpels slicing before the bone-cutters were brought to bear.
He didn't stop to think, to consider, to overanalyze.

He just threw an arm over his eyes. Rolled over. Droplets of rain slid down his face.

Appeased, the creature struck.

"No, wait! AGH!"

The screaming ended before it could really begin, with a wet crunch.

Seconds later, it was followed by a distant splash.

The hammering sheets of rain falling around them practically swallowed it up.

Oddly enough, that was when Stan burst into tears. He hadn't cried at being set upon, targeted by a nameless drifter on the outskirts of Derry. He had barely cried out at being driven to the muddy ground.

Only now, with the immediate danger over, did his aching body seemed to catch up with his racing mind. He stammered at first, breathing uneasily, before the tears started to leech from his eyes.

With that first hurdle overcome, then the rest of the sobbing fit followed.

The air around them was chilly. He started to shiver uncontrollably.

A shadow fell over him, as did the musky warmth that accompanied it.

Something brushed across his prone body, lightly at first.

Then there it was, curving over his quivering back and head like an obscene, hellish umbrella.

A wide paw, with three claws. Protectively placed over him.

"You said you wouldn't," Stan wheezed into the earth, sullied arms wound around his face. "Next t-time, you said you wouldn't try to kill."

A low series of grumbling growls answered him. The creature shuffled closer, as did the warmth that surrounded it. The ground have a noticable heave as the heavy body dropped down to lay beside him, curling defensively around and over the fallen boy.

Later, the closest thing he could fathom to compare Its latest form to was a griffin.

A six-legged, half-leather-skinned, reptilian-looking alien griffin.

Like something that was drawn before there was a global consensus on what said creature was supposed to embody.

Blinking away his tears, Stan wiped his nose and looked up.

Less than two feet away, an elongated, leathery face lay on the road, resting on its spare paw. It was vaguely eagle-like in profile, with a broad, proud beak. Countless fangs jutted downward to either side of the tapered jaw.

Two sets of eyes, one situated behind the other, all without pupils or color, stared back at him.

They emoted nothing.
In the springtime downpour, especially at this late hour, there was no light to see by. Stan just assumed it was his own eyes painting It in shades of black and gray.

Gradually, his nerves settled. Then, like needlepoints jabbing outward from under his skin, they started to tremble all over again. He stopped, half-rolling over, already lamenting the filthy clothes he now sported.

The shirt he mourned most of all. Mom had just bought this polo four days ago, with her son's once-promised allowance (a deal reneged on for only the umpteenth time ever).

Now it was ruined.

Along with his trust, seemingly.

The creature's beak scraped against the mud, drawing closer. Nothing about it resembled lips through which the being could speak.

"N-no, don't. Don't come near me with that t-thing," Stan mumbled, almost delirious with denial.

He hadn't thought he would be this distraught.

Perhaps he had underestimated just how badly he had wanted It to keep to his word.

He had been one of the last to commit to the hug that day. Hesitation stayed him initially, as prior experiences made themselves heard again, but then a sensation best known as benefit-of-the-doubt guided him in. He had hoped the communal hug was as binding as a handshake between two businessmen.

Fate didn't give two shits about his hopes, apparently.

"Go away, Pennywise." Unthinking, Stan held up a quivering hand, palm out, and tried to feebly push the smooth muzzle aside. With the other hand, he tried to rise, to prop himself up. "Let me go. I gotta- get home."

There it was, that groaning growl again. So bass and overpowering, especially when you were practically underneath it. Rain continued to waft in from 'outside', pelting the alien face into a watery imitation of itself.

Red trickles still adorned Its jaw. There was a faint smell of copper to accompany them.

The strange eyes quirked, first away, and then back.

Then, appearing to come to a very necessary conclusion, it stood, paws stamping heavily, kicking up muddy footfalls.

Stan gasped. With the heat taken away, he cringed and wilted, shivering almost-violently in the unmerciful breeze. He forced himself to snort, wiping the residual snot out of his nose. It was hard enough to breathe with his nerves running full tilt. He tried in vain to wipe rain and mud from his face, and to find his feet again.

Never again would he take this back road in the spring, not during a thaw. There were still chunks of ice to slip on. Not ideal for walking, let alone biking. The scenic route was not worth the danger it concealed.

He stood, glanced down at himself.
"Oy vey, what a mess," Stan lamented, regarding his soiled clothes.

The griffin lowed again, as if offering its concurrence.

"I meant me, you putz."

At that the beast gave a little shudder, before its breath hissed rapidly, in and out, in and out, like its own choked version of distorted laughter.

"Sure, laugh it up. Just like I'm sure the others will laugh when they hear about this."

Something large prodded at the small of his back, nosing so forcefully he almost tumbled to the ground all over again.

Sighing, Stan swept drenched hair out of his eyes. He hadn't meant to voice that last part. Fatigue was getting the better of him.

He spoke toward the sky in general. What else could it do at that point, fry him with lightning?

If anything, that would be an improvement.

Warmth versus cold.

"I'm sorry, I know. You're trying. But what Richie said, it still holds. You flipped out."

He found his bike on the side of the road. Common sense said there would be no riding it the rest of the way home in these conditions.

Wings mantling, half-held off its sides, the creature padded after him.

It was still groaning.

Still pleading?

Thunder momentarily drowned it out.

Wiping mud off the seat, Stan stopped to glare at the monster again. The freezing rain was good for one thing: it kept his temper just short of boiling over.

"Look, if you're not gonna even bother taking human form so we can talk civilized right now, save it for later. I have to go."

Maybe, if he kept insisting with passion, he could convince even himself eventually.

It wasn't yet.

The creature loped to a stop, clawtips arched against the surface of the road. It seemed to glance away, tailtip flicking in discontent. With the back of one paw, it rubbed at its jaw. Distractedly, almost.

Standing with his bike, Stan could see it was the size of a rhino.

Just as bulky. Just as shortsighted. Just as potentially-dangerous.

Hands on his bike, Stan frowned.

How was he going to dismiss It?
He frowned. "Go- have your supper."

It sounded like something his father would utter, too distracted reading the paper to even appreciate the stellar-graded report card his son had brought home.

The creature seemed to react in much the same way. The beaked face ducked low, eyes wandering back and forth, like they were unsure of where to look.

Oddly, in some very-backwards sense of appreciation, Stan felt the slightest bit empowered by the tame reaction.

"Go on."

It was listening.

Actually listening.

He didn't even have to raise his voice.

Surely It was hungry.

The body in the ditch was only getting staler.

It stared at him with newfound focus, pondering the simple command for all of a minute. The wings stopped rustling. The tail stilled.

Drool began to drip from its maw.

Or that might have been rain. It was falling so thick, it could be freezing before it hit the ground.

Stan swallowed. He felt almost confident again.

Home was only three miles on.

"Thanks for the save, but I'm okay now. Go."

The griffin stood frozen.

Then, out of nowhere, it came to him:

"I won't tell the others."

It bolted.

Not the typical jump-to-invisibility gag either.

The beak parted, thick threads of drool hanging very noticeably between the fine-pointed teeth. Then the creature made a single, silent turn and leaped away, back into the dark beside the road.

Stan had started walking away before he realized it. The wheels of his bike made a steady clicking against the gruesome noises beginning to erupt behind him. Taking inspiration, he threw his leg over the frame, jumped up onto the pedals.

The downward slope of the road helped him pick up speed. Working his legs, breathing deep, the exertion got his blood pumping the way it was supposed to, defiantly warming his body against the cold.
There was frost on his eyelashes by the time he reached the outskirts of town.

Whether it had formed from rain or his dried tears, he would never figure out.

Foolish Stan. Getting upset didn't solve anything. There were things about this cosmic misarrangement that were just destined to remained plain old wrong.

No matter what anyone did.

It included.
Chapter Summary

Beverly meets a new face.

Chapter Notes

...Because it was only a matter of time before I did this, right?

The only thing worse than being constantly shoved aside was being constantly set upon.

Some days, Beverly Marsh had trouble deciding which of those two evils she preferred less.

Like now, outside the drugstore.

With Gretta Keene making an uproar for the rest of downtown Derry to witness.

And completely without said Derry's finest policemen in attendance, of course.

Way to be the center of attention, Keene, on or off the basketball court.

Why did it have to involve me?

"Bitch, I know you have them. Give it up!"

Flat against the bricks, held there by the hands on her biceps, Beverly scowled and glanced away. This was taking things to a new level she would have much preferred to avoid. But that didn't mean she had to give anything to her assailant to encourage matters.

As yet, all Gretta had done was growl, follow her target out of the store, and shove her against a wall.

Lame.

Dad had done worse.

"No. You look at me when I'm talking to you."

In hindsight, Beverly would later reason, looking away was the worst and best thing she could have done.

Gretta grabbed her prey, one hand splayed across the mouth, and shoved her face backwards, hard.

Beverly didn't have time to wrench away before her skull bounced off the bricks.

The high, involuntary cry that escaped her, there was no conscious control available to stop it with. Spots danced about and then swarmed before her eyes.
She expected to be roughed up.

Just not to that extent.

Momentarily, her vision went double, then dark.

And when she came back, seconds or minutes later, it was to the sound of an as-yet familiar - and somehow unfamiliar - voice.

"Hey!"

Accompanying the shout, she saw him - a blurry figure stepped out of the forming crowd.

"Lay off!"

Gretta snarled right back.

"Butt out, asshole. This is between me and her."

"Not anymore, it isn't."

Dazed, but no longer completely in the black, Beverly glanced up.

And nearly faded again, in sheer amazement.

Pen?

"And who the hell do you think you are?" Gretta spat, outrage still firing on all cylinders.

Forgotten as she was in those few seconds (and thankfully so), Beverly stared, eyes uncharacteristically wide. The stunning pain in her head seemed to vanish as quickly as it had been inflicted, as if it were letting her get a good look. She would later figure out why, but at the time, she attributed it to the numbing shock of what see was seeing.

That fair-skinned face, she knew it. But that was a disproportioned, round-cheeked, painted version of this. The brows, the cheekbones, the chin - it was a far more mature, clean-shaven slant on the same set of features. Minus the expansive forehead, and with slightly-outgrown, tussled auburn hair (not too unlike her own in shade, though more of a darker, reddish-brown), he was in every way a viable human counterpart to Pennywise the Dancing Clown.

Even his attire wasn't too far off. The gray leather jacket with its flared collar, an off-white undershirt, complimenting a darker-gray pair of denim pants. The single-breasted panels with their white-laced embroidery. The arms of the jacket ended in flared sleeve cuffs, with decorative red laces uncinched at the wrists. And virtually identical to the entity's most-preferred form were the black-and-white boots, sans the red pompoms.

But for as much as she recognized, Beverly didn't.

The stranger standing between them, practically over them, was the last person she would have expected to come to her aid.

Key word - person.

Here. In this way.

In such a public place.
Since when can he... do this?

Then she remembered to blink, to close her half-open mouth.

Pennywise was smirking at Gretta.

With a set of perfectly-normal, human teeth, that is.

But while his mouth smiled, his blue-green eyes said something altogether different.

The dead-on stare. The little head tilt. The smirk. The ominous glinting of the eyes. The off-balance cant in his shoulders.

Then Beverly remembered to breathe out.

The mannerisms were just the same.

*It is him.*

"Well?" Gretta spat, when the expectant silence became too much.

"Oh, who am I? At the moment?" Offering no more of an answer than that cryptic, cheeky response, the entity-in-plain-sight's disguise grabbed for one of Gretta's wrists.

Apparently, it hurt.

"Ow, hey!"

His smile abruptly dropped into a long frown. "Let go."

She quailed and struggled, for what good it did. With a wrenching motion, Pennywise managed to all but toss her aside.

"Hey, nothing."

Restrained.

That was a restrained reaction, coming from him.

Considering he probably would have liked nothing better than to shred Gretta to pieces on the spot.

The cheerleader kept her feet, now caught in the empty space between them and the throng of onlookers.

Glowering, Gretta stopped fawning over her pulled wrist, vented a furious snort, and moved to strike again. Took a step closer.

Watching her every move, the 'man's gaze never wavered. Without looking, he tossed an arm around Beverly and pulled her to shelter at his side. He took a protective step between them, barking a sharp reprimand.

"Get back!"

"Who the hell is this, Marsh? One of your boyfriends, come to save the day?"

Holding a hand to the back of her head, Beverly didn't dignify that with any words. Nor did she shrink back into hiding behind her defender.
Unknowingly, she just mirrored his glare, through the tops of her eyes.

To his credit, Pennywise figured out Gretta's spiteful queries weren't worth answering, either.

Without being told.

His upper lip curled, half in a snarl.

"What's the problem?"

Gretta fumed. With physical confrontation no longer an option, the girl hurled her accusation out for the world to hear.

"That bitch just ripped us off! I saw her taking cigarettes out the door."

No one in the crowd said anything to confirm this.

But nor was it denied.

Pennywise glanced down at Beverly's impassive face, but, wisely, he didn't wait for his attention to somehow be returned before he resumed glaring daggers at Gretta.

"And instead of phone the police, you thought that made it okay to accost her in the street?"

"Phone them? Over her?"

Gretta tossed her head like an affronted horse, nose in the air. Her hands went to her hips.

"She deserves a little pushing around. She's done it once, she's definitely done it before."

Eyes rolling, the entity tilted his head the other way.

"Oh, really? And where's your proof?"

"Check her pockets yourself, mister. Hell, strip her here, in front of everybody, if that's what it takes. You'll see that I'm right."

Pennywise scowled, dark brows angled even lower. Even without the red-and-white paint, the disgruntled look was still deep and profound, accented enough by his 'natural' features.

Unconsciously, he pulled Beverly even closer.

"All I need to see is a policeman on their way to this scene, so I can report my account of witnessing an assault, committed by yours truly." Deadpanning complete, he glanced to their collective left.

"And wouldn't you know it? There they are now."

Gretta's squinting eyes followed the pointing finger back across the street, to which two uniformed officers were indeed stepping out of a squad car.

"Now, what were you saying about stolen cigarettes?"

Beverly's accuser balked visibly.

Cops. That would mean filling out police reports, trouble with the court. Explaining to Dad how she had practically let it happen.

Tarnished reputations.
Gossip to weather at school.

And if it all turned out to be false?

"Grrr, forget it! She's not worth the trouble, either way." Sneering, Gretta leaned in for one last jab. "Get you back at school, instead, Beaverly. No white knights with pretty faces to save you there, remember that."

"What makes you so sure?" Pennywise interjected, flatly. "Keep harassing her, sister, and you'll be seeing this one again soon enough."

Still red in the face, Gretta wordlessly spun on her heel and marched back into the drugstore, without a backwards look.

That dealt with, Pennywise glanced around at the lingering crowd of gawkers. He seemingly didn't need to encourage them to move on. Instead, the two policemen worked their way to either side of the twenty-some people, dispersing them with a few choice, professional-sounding words.

Beverly exhaled slowly, mindful not to make an exasperated sigh of out of it, looking on. As the cops finally turned their way, her rescuer simply waved them off, like shooing away a pair of disruptive kids.

"It's taken care of, guys. Thanks, anyway."

Exchanging a look, both officers drew back and returned to their car.

Finally, with the immediate danger passed, and a whole round of new questions primed for asking, Beverly straightened up. She shrugged her way out from under the arm still fastened around her shoulders.

Then she belatedly rubbed at the sore spot at the back of her skull and spoke up.

"You didn't mean that."

Pennywise glanced sidelong and down at her. At hearing that, his face fell.

His eyes stayed blue.

But his voice started to crack.

"What? Why not? Who's gonna think twice if some distant cousin of yours has transferred in?"

Some thirty minutes later, Beverly got her true feelings out.

"...You're kidding."

Seated across from her at the diner, Pennywise snorted in amusement, set both elbows on the table, and rested his cheek against his fist. With the other hand, he mimed checking his bare, watchless wrist.

The passage of time had not gone unnoticed by him.

"Heh. Funny how you say that now, Bevs."

In the minutes that had followed, whatever flux his voice had undergone outside the drugstore had
smoothed itself out.

Of its own accord? Or was he simply willing that, with as much effort as it took to keep his current disguise?

Beverly set asking those questions aside in favor of voicing a more immediately-relevant comment.

"You can't pass yourself off as my cousin."

He frowned, wrist dropping back to the table with a clunk.

It sounded as dejected as he looked.

"No?"

"No."

"Well, when- the situation calls for it- "

"Which it won't," Beverly snapped, still on the fence of how to gauge this latest, arguably-weirdest-yet encounter. Idly, she stirred her straw in the ice-filled glass of lemonade before her.

As yet, she had not taken a sip.

Even if the entity had bought the beverage for her (veering ever stranger and stranger in doing so, as he continued to pass himself as perfectly-normal to various townsfolk and their waiter), she wasn't exactly thirsty due to excess chatter.

Where on Earth he had gotten the money, that was also pretty low on the list of questions she intended to ask.

"It's making my head hurt all over again, looking at you... like this," she admitted.

"Why?" Pennywise asked, sounding genuinely bewildered.

Could he just not sense the tension sloughing off her like melting snow?

"You don't... Since when do you..."

For once, she was without a clear idea as to what to ask.

Thankfully, he filled in the gaps with the approximate information.

"Not often." He turned his resting hand over, flexed his fingers, as if he were experimentally testing them for the first time. "And never for very long."

"Is there, a reason? Usually?"

He shrugged. "There's always a reason. I don't strut around like this for show."

It seemed offhanded enough, in the way he said it.

Beverly read between the lines anyway.

*And you gave him a good one today, thinking you could swipe that pack while you thought Keene was nose-deep in a tabloid.*
Wasn't this pushing things, though?

It was a creature of illusions and subtle manipulations.

Or... he was supposed to be.

Stepping out of the crowd like Clark Kent about to spring into action was not subtle.

All for her sake?

"You didn't have to."

Pennywise glanced up, fiddling with one of the jacket's undone cuffs as he was. It was much the same way Georgie Denbrough toyed with his undone shoelaces.

Hearing that, the cosmic being froze.

Then he raised an eyebrow.

Not smiling, not frowning.

Another recognizable tic.

*Houston, say again?*

"I mean, thanks for the save, but if you could, couldn't you have done something less- "

*Thud.*

The booth's unattended silverware tinked with the impact. The ice in the glass rattled.

Beverly almost jumped, almost leaned back in her seat.

He was practically glaring now.

One of his hands had hit the table again.

This time, it was curled in a fist.

"Obvious?"

He spat the word like it had somehow wronged him.

Even if she hadn't had a chance to utter it.

"I did what I had to."

The confusion had vanished. In its place wasn't... anger, exactly. But vindictiveness, and more than a bit of offense, had surfaced in his dour-lined expression. His eyes simmered, but the irises stayed their adopted hue of blue-and-green. No yellow to be seen.

"She was ready to smash your head in."

Beverly kept stirring, stewing, avoiding the heated look, now aimed at her forehead, for as long as she could.

The other half of the thought went unspoken.
But it was heeded all the same.

*It wasn't about the cigarettes. It was about everything else.*

"Most times, I can take care of myself," she explained. Or began to, before the inevitable cutoff: "And if I can't, then that's no one's fault but my own. I can't be dependent on you being there to-

Inadvertently, Beverly talked herself into more trouble with those words.

And this time, it was the untouched, unappreciated lemonade being pulled away.

"Beverly..."

He leaned closer, looking up through the tops of his eyes, shoulders hunched.

The long-suffering frustration, the look of offense was gone.

Another altogether softer, fonder gaze had taken its place.

Beverly blinked and stared, unable to help the color rising in her face.

She had never seen someone look so serious.

Dead serious.

About her.

"It's not being dependent when I take it upon myself to act in your best interests. Quit selling yourself short. You're no less worthy of help than anyone else is, no matter what that Keene *bitch* says."

Eyes widening again, Beverly held a hand to her mouth, but only because she didn't know what reaction was appropriate. To frown or to smile, she couldn't immediately decided.

The entity leaned toward the verbose when he was feeling critical. Short speeches weren't unfamiliar territory to him.

But at the moment, the novelty of hearing him cuss so flawlessly - for the first time - was enough to undermine the redhead's defenses.

She must have looked astonished.

Seeming to shake off the mood as quickly as he had donned it, Pennywise rolled his eyes, an nearly-self-depreciative roll, and turned away. He kept his hand curled around the sweating glass. The other fidgeted with the hair behind his ear, pulling at the reddish strands.

Fitfully. Nervously.

As if something alarmingly unpleasant had only just occurred to him.

"Yes, I swore. Don't tell Georgie."

Beverly scoffed, but it was with a smile that she said, "Only if you don't tell him I was knicking cigarettes again."

The one eye she could see swiveled back to stare at her.

"Deal."
The lemonade made a light scraping sound as it was sent back across the table, as smooth as a hockey puck on ice.

Relaxed, secure in the knowledge that they had reached a satisfactory bargain, Beverly indulged in a delicate sip before venturing forward.

"So... this is a new you I'm seeing. Does he have a name?"

With a slow turn of the head, his narrow-eyed look was the definition of saw-what-you-did-there. The irony of a reintroduction was not lost on him.

"You name something, you start to get attached to it, Bevs. Are you sure you wanna know?"

She didn't dwell on it but for half a second.

"I'm sure, dork. Let's hear it."

"Then... this, Beverly Marsh, is Robert Gray. If he's anybody to you, let's just call him a cousin, a few generations removed." Unseen by the other occupants of the diner, he flashed a sly, sharp-toothed smile and a wink. "Because there are worse things to be called, right?"
Close Call

Chapter Summary

Eddie can't catch a break.

Or, maybe he can.

Chapter Notes

Action practice is practice.

Eddie heard the car long before he saw it.

And very stupidly, he didn't immediately think to swerve off the road.

Then, with one wide-eyed glance over his shoulder, he spotted it.

"Shit!"

An awfully-familiar blue Firebird Trans Am roared toward him, riding the lane's extreme right shoulder. Gravel flew in its wake. With that one terrible look, Eddie could see a equally-recognizable set of faces leering at him through the windshield.

"Where you goin', Shrimp!"

Stuck deciding between fight or flight, Eddie froze. Logic said he had no chance of outrunning the sports car on his bicycle. Not on the road. It just wasn't good science.

But off road...

*Of all the days I pick this road to get to the Barrens by-

Belatedly, he remembered to lift his feet, jerk his front wheel aside, and pump the pedals. He almost got clear in time.

Then a corner of the angled front fender grazed his back tire.

A glancing blow, but given how much unrelenting speed and colossal weight was carried behind the hit, it did enough. The shockwave rattled him like someone had broken out a sledgehammer at full swing.

The bike's frame convulsed and twisted, pitching sideways and keening instantly to the left, practically knocked out from beneath him. Eddie tried in vain to swing his meager body weight that way, to somehow compensate. But there was no avoiding a spill.

With a tortured screech, the bicycle crashed. The pedal scraped against the asphalt with such force
and at such an aggressive angle, it snapped off.

Eddie wasn’t far behind.

On instinct, he threw out a hand to break his fall, and just managed not to scream (*that* loudly) at the jarring pain that rocketed through his arm as a result.

"Agh!"

His right wrist took the worst of the impact. The rest of his body seemed to pile up atop it, knees scraping the road. The air went out of his lungs as he landed, chest-first, atop his awkwardly-pinned arm. His chin bounced off the ground, teeth scraping the insides of his cheeks. He tasted blood.

Mercifully, there was no second bounce.

Laid out, Eddie wheezed and blinked the spots out of his eyes, dazed. His right arm went momentarily numb and tingly. Acting on automatic, he propped himself up on his still-functional left hand.

Then he heard the screech of tires.

He wrenched his head up.

Red taillights bore down on him.

Belch Huggins was gunning it.

In reverse.

Eddie gasped and spluttered, temporarily inured to the pain of his body by the total shock gripping his mind.

"W-what the *fuck*, dude?!"

Derry’s most infamous ‘bullies’ were half a step away from committing vehicular manslaughter.

Feeling halfway-dead already, Eddie didn’t stop to think beyond that. Somehow, on adrenaline alone, he managed to vault aside at the last moment, barrel-rolling to safety down the incline.

He came to a stop in the ditch beside the road. The loaded fanny pack secured at his waist dug into his gut upon landing.

Seconds later, the bent and battered frame of his bicycle cartwheeled after him. He covered the back of his skull with bloody fingers. With a metallic clack it landed in the grass, with its bent handlebars a mere foot from his face.

They pointed up into the air, like the feet of some parody of roadkill.

Like he almost was.

Eddie choked on air, dirt, and blood, unsure of whether (or how) to laugh at the madness of it all and scream in terror at the same moment.

He wholly expected to die then and there. Bowers would leave the car, climb down to stomp on his back, put a bullet in his head. Finish the job.
Finally assume his destiny as a cold-blooded murderer.

Instead, dimly, the felled boy heard Henry Bowers' last bloodthirsty crow as the Trans Am sped away:

"Teach you to use this road!"

It was perhaps another five minutes, as the pain kept buzzing along his nerves and the blood kept flowing, before Kaspbrak realized he was still alive. He blinked, wheezed, blinked again. Weakly, he pulled his hand from his head, feeling dizzy as he looked at the crimson smear on his palm.

His first thought:

*Mom's gonna kill me.*

The second:

*She's gonna stroke out.*

The third:

*Then rise from a coma and kill me again.*

Face lying sideways in the dark dirt, Eddie felt the tears sliding down his bruised cheeks and thought no more. His brain decided to shut itself off from everything for perhaps fifteen seconds, while his body kept twitching, crying, and mewling without conscious consent.

Then his back-up arrived.

Rather... unfashionably late.

"EdS!"

A shadow fell over him. He heard bells. He felt a hand seize his shoulder.

"C-c-hrist, Cackles, t-took yo-you long enough," he mumbled thickly, threads of spit and blood hanging from his lip, unknowingly borrowing from Tozier with that first slurred reaction.

Then the hand pulled, unthinking, and new agony raced up and down his body. Eddie gasped and cringed. Even if his wrist wasn't broken, the fractured ribs more than made up for it. "Ow, ow, no! Stop!"

The grip on him eased instantly. The shadow drew close, its owner practically crouching atop him. His quickening breaths were pitched and raspy.

"EdS, wHat- w-Hat hA-hapPened?"

Eddie closed his eyes and blew out through his sullied nose. His arm and torso throbbed, while his head was starting to clear.

Unlike Pennywise's voice. It was even more of a garble of syllables than usual.

Panic did not suit him.

"Bullies."
At that the creature let loose a guttural snarl, impossibly-low and feral. It felt for a second like the very air around them combusted, it grew so hot.

Something hit the ground beside Eddie's face, drawing the wounded boy's focus, despite the lingering pain. Inches before his eyes, the glove warped and split apart. A gnarly set of talons sprouted up in its place.

As sweet as the idea of Henry and his goons being ripped to pieces sounded, Eddie's concerns were far more immediate and selfish. He was thinking only of survival at that moment, not retribution.

"No, d-don't."

The snarling died down as quickly as it had started, leaving behind a warbly, confused voice.

"E-EdS...?"

"J-just- just h-help me up, would you?"

It took a few tries. The being's fresh-grown claws weren't made for dexterity, and even tore a new set of scratches in the shirt's shoulder when they grasped him. With his left hand, Eddie managed to struggle up. His body protested too loudly to stand, but just sitting on his hip was a welcome improvement from lying in the dirt.

He coughed and spit, trying to clear his mouth. Gingerly, he wiped his eyes with his undamaged fingers, using his tears in what little way they could be to clean the dirt away. "That's b-better. Jesus."

Down on all fours, Pennywise circled him like a fretting puppy, eyes wide as saucers. An oversized, violently twitching, fairly unhelpful puppy. Unsure of how to help or whether hugging his fallen friend would do any good.

He was whining about as much as a puppy would, too, unknowingly putting on a very good Stan Uris impression in doing so.

"EdS, EdDie, EdsIe- "

Despite all his misfortune, Kaspbrak couldn't help a tight, choked laugh (although as it made his midsection twinge). Unbelievable. Even after a near-death experience, he had to be the adult here.

"E-easy, dude, re-repeating my name like a stuck record isn't gonna do any good."

_I'm alive, aren't I?_

That's a start.

"W-what- what cAn I do? You neEd- "

"I _need_ a minute to think. I know, I look like hell. But this is still working." Eddie tapped his forehead for emphasis, eyes pinched in thought. He ignored how his hand came away coated in red. "Give me a chance to use it."

Pennywise jolted to a stop, expression wrought with concern and uncertainty. Biting his trembling lip, he drew back half a step, crouching with the road at his back.

_That's better._
With the worst of the agony behind him, Eddie took to reviewing the damage. Besides the countless scrapes and contusions, and the body-wide ache in general, his throbbing wrist was the worst of it. It hurt to breathe, but with each passing minute, the pain there grew less and less sharp, less stabbing.

*Not broken ribs, then. I'd be gasping like a fish out of water if they were.*

"Last t-time I ever use this route, Pen, you can count on that," Eddie lamented, with his left arm bent an awkward angle. He paused to swivel the fanny pack over onto his hip, making it easier to reach. Unzipping it, he found what he had hoped to see first: tissues.

His injured arm, he held flat against his chest.

The clown inched close again, still visibly restless. "EdS, I'm-"

"Sorry? Forget it, dude. Sorry doesn't help after the horse has left the barn."

Pennywise winced, hands wringing. Under 'normal' circumstances, he would have immediately pointed out the immediate lack of barns with horses in them being anywhere nearby. But in this instance, his being the panicky, late-arriving 'rescuer', indulging in banter about the literal definitions of human metaphors was the last thing on Eddie's mind.

He had wounds to see to.

Eddie hissed and gasped, fingers wielding a tissue, wiping blood from a gash over his brow. A fresh trickle began to seep as he dabbed away the half-dried coat.

He hadn't thought he bounced off the road *that* hard.

"Wherever you were, I'm sure I'll find out. But right now, I gotta- ohh..."

He breathed out, at once instantly bewildered and at ease, words flowing to a stop. Something had stolen them away.

There was a hand, now positioned on the back of his head, fingers splayed, pressing gently.

And just like that, it was as though the pain... sawed itself in half. There was no other way to describe it. Like holding an ice pack to your tender, oversensitive skull, only twice as effective.

The throbbing in his wrist died down, like his nerves had been temporarily disconnected.

*How did he...*

Even his racing train of thought slowed to a near-stop.

Staring straight ahead, Eddie could feel the scrapes inflicted on his thin skin, the blotches of blood drying cool against his limbs and face. All of a sudden he could feel all that more clearly than his own internal discomforts. His once-hitching breaths smoothed out even further.

How he had managed to avoid an asthma attack throughout this ordeal was anyone's guess.

And that "anyone" was currently off in a trance of his own.

"...Pen?"

Conversely, the entity wasn't breathing. Then again, did he really need to beyond practicing the illusion of it? He stayed crouched beside and behind Eddie, completely still, with a hand laid atop the
boy's head.

He was staring at the ground between then, trembling just the slightest bit. His eyes were closed. The pose was bizarrely reverant-looking, like some alien form of prayer.

Eddie blinked and twisted around, hair tangling in the process, still held underneath the long fingers as it was.

"Pen, what are you-"

"Relax, Eds. It won't work if you don't."

He had never heard the clown's voice sound so steady.

What won't-

"Relax."

Oh. Right.

Breathing easier, Eddie glanced around the ditch, unsure of what to make of this newfound ability his club's mascot had not yet revealed. Paranoia told him to be nervous. Manners said to be thankful, no matter what the feat involved. He was grateful for the balm on his injuries, but whatever 'magic' the entity was currently pulling from, it wouldn't heal all of the boy's hurts.

Would it?

Then, besides being unbearably achy, his gimpy arm was starting to feel itchy. Like an army of tiny, spiky somethings were crawling across - no, under - his skin, from elbow to wrist. Progressively.

Eddie tried to stifle a whimper as they came to a 'roadblock' - the fracture in his radius or ulna. Or both.

Pennywise hissed in kind, eyes still closed.

"That'S the worst of iT?" he asked.

Like that gave him some kinda insight on the damage without the aid of an X ray.

Eddie's mouth worked once before he found the words to utter:

"Probably, but without getting to an emergency room- oww. No, wait. What're you-"

"Sorry, EdS."

The pain abruptly spooled up again, running back and forth like a live wire, hot and stinging. Scowling, Eddie grabbed at his bicep with his good hand, shoulders tensing. Like that would keep the encroaching wave of agony from reaching the rest of his person.

No. No, no. Don't tell me he's trying to set it himse-

Fresh tears leaked out from between his eyelids as the broken joint moved back into alignment with a gentle snap. "Oww-ha-ow."

As quickly as it was done, the glove on his head withdrew. Then the arm it was attached to wound itself around his shoulders, gentle but firm. He didn't fight at being pulled in close.
You'll get blood on his suit, stupid.

So? Pen wouldn’t offer a hug if he didn’t think you needed one.

Eddie cringed, face burying itself deep against the silver ruffles. In seconds he was all but hunkering down into the unexpected embrace. Unexpected in that he hadn't realized how much he had craved the missing element of comfort, until now, and he certainly wasn't about to reject it.

With his good arm, he tried to grasp the clown's opposite shoulder.

"Shh, sshh, it's oKay. I'm soRry, EdS. That's the worst, doNe."

Eddie blinked his weeping eyes shut and breathed in sharply, a late-blooming sob muffled by the soft fabric.

No, not the worst, man. Not by a long shot.

He was still a mess. He still had to go home and face his mother and her uncaring wrath.

But... at least his arm had stopped hurting.

Around a minute later, Eddie got a grip on himself. He blinked fiercely, trying to remain calm. He wouldn't let himself panic, he wouldn't hyperventilate. He wouldn't start crying again.

He wouldn't. He would hang tough.

After a time, he twisted around, daring a feeble peek up at his eldritch friend.

"I s-still need an ambulance, man."

"Later." Eyes still shut, Pennywise's assured tone brokered no argument. Without looking, he lifted a hand and patted the back of Eddie's head. "The bleeding's stopPed. You can breAthe. Just reLax. No one will bother you heRe."

His body still claimed to be hurting. Other parts were in need of healing, as if they were jealous over what treatment his once-broken wrist had just enjoyed, but at that moment, Eddie didn't care for a visit to the hospital.

The tears started flowing over his cheeks again, but there was no sorrow to accompany them this time.

He could think of no safer place to possibly be than in that ditch.
Chapter Summary

Game time, Georgie.

Chapter Notes

Another of my top five favorite moments.

Because it had to be. I find them as tragic as I do cute.

This game was rigged.

And Georgie Denbrough made sure his friend knew it.

He frowned, pushed the spinning arrow away. Using the tip of his finger, as his arms were beginning to shake. At this awkward angle, he couldn't even muster enough strength to toss the instrument free and clear of the multicolored mat.

Placing his hand flat on the yellow dot, he glanced back under himself, through the gap behind his arm.

Pennywise grinned down at him.

He was still keeping both feet and one hand on the mat, but...

His limbs were stretched like taffy, held askew, joints bent in all the wrong ways. His boots stood twisted around, gloved fingers pointed toward his toes. His spine had spun around on itself like a wet rag. Twice.

Georgie frowned.

The creature was practically woven around him like a living pretzel.

For about thirty seconds, there was silence.

Silent, expectant staring.

Then:

"You cheated."

Pennywise snickered, bells tinging.

"I knOw."

*He's laughing at me.*
Sighing, Georgie looked up, at the overgrown foyer window keeping them hidden from view. The appeal of this private *Twister* session had all but petered out already. "I don't see how this is supposed to make me better at the game."

From above, blue, upside-down eyes slowly lowered into his line of sight. The entity frowned, but only to make it seem like - from the boy's perspective - he was smiling.

"You don't need to be betTer, GeorgIe. Just good enough to beat BillY next time."

Dejected, Denbrough gave up his awkward pose. It was starting to hurt. He dropped to his stomach with a *thud*, resting his chin in his hands, legs stretched out behind him.

"And I'm just as lame as when we started, aren't I?"

"Noo..." Still holding his arachnid-like stance, Pennywise patted the despondent pupil's head with his free hand. "No, you're noT."

Georgie's cheeks puffed out in frustration. "I am. I'm too small. The dots are spread too far apart."

That was the moment when a more-inconsiderate teacher would have said "it's only a game; move on".

Like a retracting tape measure, Pennywise unwound himself. The momentary din of his cracking imitation-bones returning to normal form kept the awkward silence at bay. Seconds later, he reclined beside the boy, balanced on frilly elbows.

"You caN't help that, GeorgIe. But isn't the point of the gaMe to have fun, even if you don't win?"

The boy's feet kicked idly. He traced the edge of one red circle with his finger.

"It's a game, Penny. Games are played to be won."

"Then... if you can't win, why not just enJoy for what it is?"

*Well. That's an awfully tolerant message of you. Makes me wonder...* Georgie grinned.

Here was his chance to laugh back.

"Beverly beat you, didn't she?"

Brows lowering, Pennywise scoffed through his buckteeth, glancing away and up as Georgie covered his face, rolled over, and flopped against the clown's arm, giggling madly.

"I stiLl don't know how."
Chapter Summary

...It isn’t even April.

Chapter Notes

Cracky sorta-Easter prompt is crack.
Because.

Eggs had started appearing around 29 Neibolt House.
And they weren't spider eggs, for a change.
Colorful shells, they stood out like neon signs in the dust and detritus.
 Didn't mean they were welcome.
Right now, the count stood at eight.
Or did it?
Wait.
Three in the kitchen, two in the foyer, one in the basement, three in the attic.
Nine?!
Hovering over them like a brooding hen, Pennywise stared the multi-colored collection down. As if staring at them alone would somehow solve the mystery. Some days, he almost almost convinced that prolonged exposure to his corporeal self was somehow imbuing the Losers with their own limited time-space manipulation powers.

Today seemed to be one of those days.
How that could happen, he didn't know. But just six shy months ago, It hadn't known himself capable of things like friendship and compassion either.
Or, the more they came to know him, perhaps the kids were just getting sneakier by default.
Yes. That was the more likely explanation.
Sighing, he took another methodical sweep of the room, down on all fours.
There!
Squirrelled away behind the trailing end of a curtain...

"AnotheR one?"

His face fell. Along with the rest of him. The floor practically heaved a nuclear cloud of dust into the stagnant air.

A few hundred physical pounds worth of cosmic entity dropping against the boards, expression distraught, would do that.

"Err... ShoO!"

Found out, the lime-green plastic sphere went bouncing its way into the hallway, clacking hollowly along the floor. The halves seperated as they hit the wall.

There wasn't even any candy inside.

He stalked back over to glare death at the gathered pile of shells again.

The house's second and third floors had no 'set' layout, save perhaps for the hobby room (Pennywise knew better than to alter that, after enduring a few switched knuckles and a lecture from Beverly about the importance of maintaining at least one space upstairs that did not vary with every visit; that, and Stan liked his puzzles to stay "where they WERE").

Point being, Pennywise didn't understand how the eggs kept turning up, when, by all rights, it was his personal domain somehow being infiltrated without triggering any of his transcendedetal tripwires. How do you sneak into space that doesn't exist?

Claws out, Pennywise growled in frustration and took a swipe at the pile of plastic, feeling something like satisfaction to see them scatter like a rainbow of legless mice.

Time to sniff out the culprit.

First stop, the Tozier household.

"Nope. Wasn't me, man."

The epitome of cool under pressure, and with months of jumpscare-enduring experience behind him, Richie barely batted an eye.

Until five minutes later, when he looked down the length of the bed and noticed the fiery-haired clown was still perched there on the footboard's edge, hands between his boots, stonefaced, hunched over like a circus' imitation of a gargoyle.

After a moment's staredown, Richie's eyes dropped back to the comic. "It wasn't."

"Then who couUd it be?"

"Shit, you're serious. Does it really matter?" The clown crossed his arms and waited another five minutes, letting his silence speak for itself. Sighing at the thought of actually considering the inane question, Richie leaned his cheek against his fist. "You try Eds yet?"

Eddie. Damn, damn confounding Eddie. Equal parts fierce and fragile, spastic and thoughtful.
And at that moment - cantankerous and confined to quarters.

"No! What gave you that idea?" Kaspbrak hissed, eyes narrowed. But only because the party he was addressing had appeared via the open slats in his bedroom closet's door. "I've been under house arrest for the past five days. When do you think I had time to sneak over to your crack den?"

"Eddie, is everything all right?"

"Fine, Ma!"

Fingertips braced against the door, Pennywise closed his eyes and tried to ignore the disgusted shiver he felt at hearing Sonia's preemptive wail. That accursed woman. Keep focused, save remedying that problem for later.

"RiChie didn't know, eithEr."

"Figures you'd peg him first." Eddie sighed and yanked the door open a fraction, all the better for the entity to see him roll his eyes. "You sure Bill or Georgie didn't have something to do with it?"

The Denbrough boys stared at him with mutual looks of confusion and despair.

Well, the despair was mostly on Georgie's part, to see his gangly friend so troubled.

"Who could it be?" The boy blinked and scratched his head. Naturally, being so good-natured, he was the only one thus far who took the matter to heart.

Atop the desk, somehow crouching there without disturbing a single article of clutter, Pennywise reached over to prod Bill's shoulder when the older brother didn't say anything for the longest time. "Billy, do you knOw?"

"Maybe." Bill glanced at his visitor through the tops of his eyes. Despite the fright the creature had given them, popping in through the open bedroom window, the older Denbrough wasn't immune to the appeal of a true mystery. "D-did you think of the least likely p-possibility yet?"

"Stop that! You're spooking them."

Visiting the Hanlon farm, Pennywise retreated to the rafters of the stable while the sheep milled nervously below, wrapping himself securely around one beam like a gymnast. A hoof to the posterior, he could go without.

Hands holding the freshly-broken gate shut, lest his charges barrel through it and escape, Mike glared up at his otherworldly intruder.

"I've got my hands full, Pen. Can't help you."

Nope. Definitely not Mike.

Whatever pocket change his grandfather paid him for wages, Pennywise couldn't see the humorless farmboy spending it on prank fodder.

At first, talking to Stanley seemed promising. The weather was ideal for birdwatching. The Jewish boy was in rare form, apparently feeling good about the species he might catch sight of today.
Until, without so much as a *Hiya*, a navy blue set of eyes appeared out of thin air, magnified tenfold in the binocular's scopes.

"Ahh!"

Stan flinched backwards, practically leaping off the stump, windmilled his arms and dropped to the ground with a *umph*, feet in the air.

Recovering, he frowned, listened (in that position) to the entity recount his story, and only had one thing to say.

He climbed to his feet.

"You *putz.*"

Reaching up, annoyance overcoming his fearfulfulness for once, Stan shoved his one-time student's head out of his line of sight.

"I've got better things to do than egg your house."

That left Ben and Beverly.

Oddly enough, they were both found in some proximity to the crime scene, returning to where their bikes had been stowed in the undergrowth by the chainlink fence. Both sported suspiciously-empty backpacks.

And they also bore similar hand-in-the-cookie-jar expressions when 29 Neibolt's missing mummer materialized in their path with a *snap* that sent nearby birds fleeing.

They both froze midstep, caught in his imposing shadow.

"Darn it."

Face reddening, Ben looked away from those yellow eyes first. The toes of his sneakers dug into the dirt. He all but looked the part of an unhousebroken puppy, held aloft by the scruff of its neck after its owner had discovered their latest accident. "That's the end of- Pen, ow, wait!"

Despite the boy's blabber of protest, Pennywise grabbed Ben by the sleeve, steering him around to reach inside the still-open backpack.

Inside, one scarlet-red egg.

"Finally!" Beverly, playing her role as Ben's polar opposite, took the discovery in contented stride, hands on her hips. Her eyes sparkled with mirth. "I was beginning to think you'd never get around to us."

Shoulders hunched, Pennywise stalked around to stand in front of them. He glowered at her from under lowered brows, fists clenched at his sides, like a wolf who had finally cornered a wily hare.

"It's not fuNny, Bevs."

"It is." Just to spite him, the redhead chuckled, plucking the plastic egg from his hand. She even had the *audacity* to twirl her hair around one finger. "*It is*, just not for you. Those calls, oh, you should've *heard* how Georgie cracked up when we told him."

"He did? I thought he was in on this, too," Ben mentioned.
"He couldn't be, until the end. Pen would've read his mind in a heartbeat." Beverly explained, rambling as if the steaming-mad creature were suddenly not there in front of them.

"Guess so."

Their hapless victim spluttered, words bordering on incoherent, utterly confused as to what to be most furious with, first. "You... she... h-he... whY?"

"What, only you can go klepto when it suits you?"

"Actually, Beverly, this would be more like klepto... in reverse. With Easter eggs in July."

"WhaT?"

"You didn't hear Stan compare him to a magpie the other day?"

Completely lost as to what they were continuing to banter about, the clown hissed in relent and facepalmed. Then glanced up from between his gloved fingers.

At the unblinking stare she received, Beverly shrugged and spilled her motive, or lack thereof. "No, we didn't really have a reason. That's the brilliance of it. But we thought you'd like the colors."

Or perhaps the show of driving the other Losers crazy with speculation was reason enough.

"That doeSn't explain how you hid them without me knoWing."

Though it spoke of his unadmitted involvement in first hatching the plan, Ben's smile paled in comparison to Beverly's. If hers were any more bright it could be like a star going supernova. And it, without a doubt, said she did not intend to deconstruct that enigma anytime soon.

Perhaps It had rubbed off on them more than he himself realized.

Still smirking, Beverly reached up to pat his cheek as one might a befuddled toddler. "Well, we all have our secrets, don't we, pal?"

Pennywise grimaced. Logic and all it stood for flatlined for him in that moment.

Tables turned, she poked him in the nose.

With one sharp nail.

"OuCh!"

"And you know, for all your supposed powers, you're pretty easy to fool."
Now, after almost seven months of having known It, the Losers Club had figured out a rough list of qualities their adopted mascot embodied and often exhibited:

A childlike tendency to exaggerate and jump to conclusions.

An insatiable flair for dramatics, to act more on impulse than considerate thought.

A penchant for whining until he got his way.

A latent seriousness in times of unease, that never let up until he decided it was time.

A raging temper that tended to burn everything else to a cinder when it was fed enough kindling.

And a tendency to forgo all of these aforementioned traits if it meant simply amusing himself.

Among other carnivorous-inclined qualities the older children had unanimously agreed not to discuss when Georgie Denbrough was present.

But this was being a little extreme.

Even for Pennywise.

"Hold still!"

Stepping through the front door of 29 Neibolt Street, hearing those two words - Beverly Marsh instantly knew there was trouble afoot. She stopped, frowned, and thought to set her bag down on the floor.

But that didn't stop her mouth from impulsively asking.
"What's... going on?"

The sight of the lanky creature, roughly dogpiled onto the floor by the likes of Richie, Ben, and Mike, wasn't in and of itself unusual. Not that long ago, they had spent an entire afternoon mock-wrestling in the yard, challenging one another to see who could stay on their feet the longest.

Why?

Because boys will be boys. No real reason required.

As things progressed, they had managed to rope Pennywise into their antics.

To which he had obliged, if only as an extraterrestrial referee. No one broke a bone or got so much as a black eye.

And as they inevitably had, he had been there to mend the hurts as they happened.

But in that case, no one had lost that much blood.

Not to this extent.

Now, there was a lot more red on them all than there should rightfully be.

Beverly stared, her mind momentarily stalling out.

It was like watching some bizarre, nightmarish rodeo unfold: only instead of a bridled bull, it was one of the clowns trying to be restrained.

Situated to either side, Ben and Mike had the most leverage. With their knees braced against his back, they kept him pinned flush against the floor. His right arm was wrenched around and held there by both their combined set of hands.

The other limb was positioned out of sight, held at an awkward angle, below himself.

Richie, arguably in the most dangerous position, laid across the back of their mascot's legs. His arms wrapped around the being's booted ankles, pinning them together underneath his own chest.

And, of course, there was the shouting. Collectively, they spoke over one another in their haste to pacify-slash-restrain the costumed beast. With his remaining hand and feet, he struggled, thrashed, tried to drag himself out from under their hold.

Instead of simply... teleporting out of their grip.

As they all knew he was perfectly capable of.

What was different this time?

"Pen, please, calm down!"

"Dude, stop! You're making a mess of yourself."

"And us," Mike added, turning his shiny-streaked arm over in obvious disgust.

Still loitering at a safe distance, not sure at all where to start approaching the problem from, Beverly glanced around.
The red.
On the floor. On them.
Is that blood?
Why?
Why so much?

For an entity who had assumed physical form only as a means to be visible to his mortal companions, that made no sense.

Before she could make further sense of the clue, Pennywise spotted her. His panicky, panting breaths quieted instantly.

Albeit, not by much. Enough to be downgraded from 'going ballistic' to 'barely under control', let's say.

He stopped struggling so violently, but that was only because the need to cringe and whine overcame him.

"Bevs, something's wrong."

"No, shit, man. Something's- " Richie interrupted himself, forcing a bucking leg back to the floor with a slam. His glasses jolted in the process, but stayed on. "Shit, ow! Quit fidgeting already."

At that time, Eddie chose to make his entrance.

With a loaded backpack, presumably full of all the supplies he had needed to retrieve from the kitchen. Over time, the club had gathered a hodgepodge of essential provisions to stash there.

"And quit- trying to run. It'll only hurt for a second."

"Nooo..." Pennywise closed his eyes in dismay, giving another useless, spastic twitch. He pressed his temple to the floor, red smearing his pale face. "No, no- it shouldn't be hurting at all!"

Why doesn't he just change, throw them aside?

"I mean it, Stripes, calm down. Let Eddie have a look."

"What happened?" Beverly finally asked, taking a knee beside Eddie.

"He slammed himself into a wall, that's what."

"I-I-I did not."

"No? Then how did... umph, this happen?"

Leaning over his shoulder, ignoring their patient's high-pitched whine of agonized protest, Mike wrenched the once-hidden arm into view.

Frowning, Richie pointed.

"Dude, the evidence speaks for itself."

Beverly's eyes grew round.
No, it doesn't.

Her stomach turned and she almost recoiled half a step.

Eddie saw it. But he never stopped moving, hands busy with readying a half-a-roll of paper towel. Gathering a sizable handful, he thrust it her way.

"Don't act the pansy now, Bev! Put some pressure on it!"

It turned out to be a profound, yawning gash in the once-silver suit. Running from shoulder to elbow, it was as though the wide blade of a machete had winged the creature's bicep, carving a deep trench in his arm. Underneath, dark red continued to bubble up and overflow in thick rivulets. It oozed through the fabric, spreading into a veritable puddle around their knees.

Puddling.

How?

Why isn't it... floating away?

Accepting the makeshift sponge with fumbling hands, she didn't stop to think (with the exception of voicing a silent apology).

She acted, slamming both hands down atop the arm.

Unable to pull away, Pennywise gave a miserable-sounding screech through his clenched teeth, turning his face aside from the gruesome sight. The influx of new pain stilled him momentarily. Mike's and Ben's combined weight kept him from wrenching free. Richie's hold kept him from rising.

Eyes closed, Beverly felt like doing the same.

How exciting. The last thing she thought she would be doing after school today was emergency room volunteer work.

Already, it felt futile. Pointless. There was too much blood and not enough paper towel to contain it all.

She glanced up, trying again to put the facts together. Looking past them, the splashes of red led back across the floor in a chaotic trail, to the opposite side of the room.

There was a telling crimson splatter on the foyer wall. Boards had broken and splintered under the force of some tremendous impact.

An impact she had somehow missed hearing while crossing the yard, presumably.

Frowning anew, Beverly glanced back down at the restrained being.

"Pen, look at me."

Belatedly, he did, expression still taut with discomfort.

"Talk to me. You ran into a wall?"

He winced, blue eyes darting about, but he appeared to hesitate out of sheer embarrassment (or was it confusion?) more than pain.
"I-I did do, do that, but it wasn't- I only- as I- I tried to step through the wall."

His rambling explanation utterly failed to satisfy Eddie.

"What? Then, how did- even- moving at that speed, how does this injury make any sense? That's blunt force trauma one-oh-one. Lacerations like this don't happen from hitting something flat!"

Kaspbrak’s thought process blurted itself out before he realized, with a shake of the head, what physics-defying madness he was putting into words.

Paper towel at the ready, he added his grip to Beverly's, in what little space there was above the wound.

"The hell is- you took a fence post through the head and lived, dude. I was there, but- How are you- this is- now, you're- you're bleeding like a normal person would."

All over the floor.

All over us.

Pennywise's dark eyelids clamped shut.

"I don't know, Eds."

"So, what the hell are you waiting for, man? Fix yourself up!"

He coughed, half in a sardonic, disbelieving laugh.

"I can't, Richle."

"What do you mean?"

The entity's eyes opened to angry orange slits, angling back over his right shoulder. Despite the pressure sitting on his lungs, he choked out another patchworked answer: "I mean, that's what's wrong, Ben. I tried, I'm still trying, but- nothing's- You don't have a word for it. Nothing's- right. Nothing's- listening."

"Listening," Tozier scoffed. "Kinda like you aren't to us, right now?"

"Let go." The entity coiled - with what little room to spare he had - and gave another ineffective thrash, bogged down by their weight. With every new bout of fight, he seemed weaker for it, less lucid. His once-frantic breathing slowed even further, as did his words. "Get off me, please. Bevs, please... That's not- not- helping..."

Beverly glanced up.

More and more, he sounded dizzy. Light-headed.

"Pen?"

"G-get... 'at's not..."

His voice slurred, fading to a near-stop.

Impulsively, Beverly reached forward, laid on hand on his cheek.
"Pennywise."

At her touch, his eyes diverged and rolled back, transitioning from orange to a blank, lifeless white, and slipped shut. His face went slack, tipping sideways to lie against the saturated floor.

Just as suddenly, the house around them fell silent.

After a few tense breaths, Richie dared to release his grip first. Uncaring of the half-coagulated puddle surrounding them all, he crawled forward on his hands and knees, to see for himself what the other Losers were quietly gawking at.

His brow furrowed.

"Did he just... pass out?"

"Heh. With this much blood loss, I'm not surprised," Eddie quipped, wide-eyed as a jackrabbit. While his hands stayed in place, he was glancing around uneasily at the ocean of mess. Ordinarily, the germaphobe would be rattling off the number of bloodborne pathogens they were all undoubtedly being exposed to.

But considering the 'nature' of their patient...

Though her fingers were sticky-wet and slippery, Beverly tightened her hold on the clown's arm. The smell of copper was _everywhere_. The warmth pulsing beneath her hand seemed less and less.

Pulsing.

*But that would mean-*

Her hand moved from his face to his throat, delving past the blood-soaked ruffles, feeling for the skin underneath with two fingers.

Still kneeling against their patient's back, Ben frowned. He stood slowly, cautiously.

"Beverly, what's wrong?"

It felt like stating the obvious.

Until Beverly stopped to consider just who's heartbeat she was checking for.

"He has a pulse."

"Well, of course he do- " Richie froze mid-comment, magnified eyes blinking comically behind his lenses. He just remembered who they were referring to. Exchanging a look with Eddie, he amended his words: "No, he doesn't."

Mike stopped mid-rise. "He's not... supposed to?" he asked, just to be certain what he was thinking was matching up with the others' thoughts.

"He's not 'supposed' to _anything_, Mike," Ben clarified. He stooped again, placed a shaking hand against the clown's mussed, fiery hair. "This corporeal form's an illusion. Besides what he looks like, the little things like blinking, swallowing, breathing, it's all done for show."

"Then, if it's for show, why is he still- "

"Turn him over."
The four boys jumped at Beverly's command. Heedless of the blood, they rolled their friend's limp, unconscious form over, onto his back, pulled him aside from the wall.

Tried to ignore the next leg of the bloodtrail that was left behind.

Beverly knelt again and leaned down, put her ear next to his unhinged mouth.

"He's still breathing."

Good thing? Bad thing? The hell is going on here?

"A tourniquet, that's what we needed. Damn!" Rooting through the backpack again, Eddie's latest search came up short.

"So what now?" Richie blurted out. He was the first to let go, and to stand up. And even then, he rested bent forward, hands on his knees. "I mean, do we leave? Do we stay? What's supposed to-"

"We need to get the bleeding to stop."

The vines had never been completely cleared from the foyer windows. Eddie raced over, slipping on wet shoes, and pulled four strands down. Raced back. Weaving them into a makeshift cord, he wove it around, tying it off just above the still-leeching wound.

Mike sighed, climbed to his feet. "Why didn't we do that from the start?"

"It was out of my reach." Eddie wiped his brow with the back of his hand. The motion left a warpaint-like smudge across his pale skin. He didn't appear to care. "And, for starters, you saw how he fought us on it. Like he didn't want the help. I've never seen him so freaked out."

After witnessing what she had, Beverly felt the numbness of adrenaline finally ease. Tears stung her eyes.

None of us have.

"Ben had to kick his leg out from under him," Richie explained, at a prompting look from Beverly. "And even once he went down, well, you were here for the rest."

"What about now, though?" Ben asked, palms spread. "I mean, none of us can even go anywhere looking like this."

"Homework's gonna have to take a number 'til we figure this shit out, Hanscom. Don't get ahead of yourself," Richie lectured, waving a finger pseudo-seriously.

"Looking like..." Beverly murmured, before remembering. She shook her head. "I don't think that'll matter. No one can see the blood but us."

There was some validity to the idea.

As Bill had once put it:

Our reality isn't their reality.

"Oh? Who wants to step outside and find that out first?" Richie hiked a thumb over his shoulder. "Easy. Just let me go fetch us a random bystander. 'Pardon me, good sir, would you mind telling me if you can see all the demonic clown blood covering my person right now'?"
"I'll stay," Beverly volunteered immediately.

Still on her knees, she willed the stinging in her eyes to go away. Grabbing the last few clean sheets of paper towel, she tried to wipe her bloody handprint from Pennywise's cheek.

He didn't stir.

Complete shutdown.

She had an inkling, a shadowy wisp of a thought, of what was going on.

Stemming from something only she was yet privy to.

Was it- possible?

Well, if something like It was as real as the sun in the sky, anything was possible.

But to share her theory with the others right now, it would be too much to explain.

And if she was completely wrong...

Well, let's not entertain that thought quite yet.

Without looking away, she asked, "Richie, you've got the least on you. Think you can scrounge up some more supplies?"

"For what?" Tozier spat, expression flat.

"For us. We're staying the night."

"It's a school night, Bev."

*Like you planned on doing your assignments, anyway.*

Hand on his hip, Mike facepalmed. "So, go if you want. I'll stay, too."

For that, Beverly looked up and gave a thankful little smile.

School nights were of no concern for a homeschooled kid such as himself.

Eddie heaved a sigh, grabbed for the discarded backpack. Zipping up the open compartments, he slung it over his shoulder.

Taking his meaning, Richie shook his head.

"Okay. We'll come back, bring what bandages we can find. Some water and snacks. A wheelbarrow full of towels. And the biggest bottle of bleach in the world. Dunno if it'll do any good, but I'll be working on my eulogy all the same."

He held up a bloody hand before any of them could voice the inevitable closing thought:

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Shut up, Richie."
Chapter Summary

Split much, It?

Chapter Notes

Callbacks to "Pull No Punches".

"He's gonna have a hell of a hangover."

"Small wonder why, after you bumped his head on the last step like that."

"Well, I didn't almost drop his leg and send us all falling back down to the ground floor, either."

"Guys..."

Tiredly, Beverly sank back against the wall. Her aching knees thanked her for it. But it was with some greater sense of relief that she regarded the sight of Pennywise, stretched out on the old mattress (feet hanging off the edge, because of course it was too small), bandaged up and safe. Arguably, she had done the most work, besides Eddie and Mike. Between hauling him upstairs, cleaning up what blood hadn't dried, and dressing the wound, they could at least look forward to falling asleep due to sheer exhaustion.

Exhaustion.

If and when he woke up, Beverly wondered if Pennywise would exhibit much the same feelings.

During said trauma treatment process, she had come up with a plausible comparison for said entity's uncharacteristic injury, and what it entailed.

A split seam. A rupture.

Like a doll played with once too often. The impact was the last straw. Its stitching had come undone, stuffing spilling out.

But once it was patched up, it would be as good as new.

Or so she hoped.

How the liberal amount of blood had not stained anything, but evaporated from the scene like water, that was an encouraging thought. It vanished from their clothes, the floor, the walls.

Like it was never there.

Even the smell seemed to dry up.
The worst damage done seemed to be having to cut away the left sleeve of the suit. Underneath was a very human-looking arm, with skin as deathly-pale as the entity's assumed face, with a bicep muscle that had just about been cleaved into two lateral halves.

To his credit, Eddie hadn't balked at seeing it. He dove in with both hands to wrap it up tight. Stitches were a foregone conclusion. No one was interested in delving that far into frontier medicine tonight.

Mostly because they didn't want their friend to wake up screaming.

He had scared them enough for one day.

Then the waiting game began.

Beverly opted to take first watch.

But in reality, she intended for it to be the only watch.

Procuring five sleeping bags, the rest of the party arranged theirs in the hall. Richie cracked jokes while they indulged in a cheese sandwich dinner (as, understandably, no one was in the mood for lunchmeat) and attempted to get some schoolwork done.

Beverly declined to join them. Instead, she spread her bedroll on the floor beside the occupied mattress. By flashlight, she managed to finish a few assignments, feeling drowsier and drowsier. Listening to the slow in-and-out lull of Pennywise's dozing breaths was relaxing in its own right.

The old house, once ever present with its never-ending clamor of groans and creaks, had remained silent.

And despite her best efforts, around eleven o'clock, Beverly remembered drifting off. While she laid safely bundled in the sleeping bag, she kept her head propped up on the mattress' edge.

For it was all the better a vantage point to observe her slumbering patient-slash-friend from.

She fell asleep looking at his closed eyes.

Sometime in the early morning, her vigil paid off.

At first, she woke to the sound of rusty mattress springs, creaking.

Then, to the motion of weight shifting around nearby.

And last but not least, there came a little, trembling cry and a heavy thump, as if a sleeping child had just taken a tumble off their bed in the night.

Beverly laid there, and didn't dare to move too much, too fast. She blinked the sleep from her eyes, pupils wide in the oppressive dark. Blindly, she felt for the flashlight tucked into the sleeping bag's side.

Off in the shadows, she could hear fabric rustling, hands and feet shuffling against the dusty floor. Boots scuffling, dragging.

Then there was another thump.

A groan.
Yawning, she was as far from afraid as one could get.

The monster slinking around in the dark was no monster to her.

"Pen, ahem, is that you?"

A shaky-sounding giggle answered her.

Tiny and unsure of itself.

"Not... not anymore."

And far from being disturbed by the scratchy, unfamiliar-familiar voice, she was comforted.

This wasn't the mascot as her greater club knew him.

This was just another one of his forms.

One that, as yet, only she had seen.

Finally, she found the flashlight, sat up, pushed the power switch.

Scanned around the room until she found him, huddled in the corner.

He had kept the costume. That she noted right away.

But she could tell, the side-on profile was definitely not that of Pennywise.

The healthier-toned skin. The stringy, reddish-brown hair.

This was someone only she knew.

He was shivering, head angled down against his collar, face shielded against the flashlight's glare. His injured arm with the missing sleeve was folded in his lap, adorned with its blood-soaked bandage. His right arm was curled defensively atop his knees, its still-gloved hand clutching his shoulder.

He lifted his head, opened his eyes.

"I told you, something was wrong, Bevs."

Just in time to see the glow get swallowed up, almost disappear entirely. She glimpsed the last vestiges of yellow vanishing from his irises, drowned out by a iridescent blue-green hue.

And far from looking happy to see her, the sorrow writ on his face broke her heart all over again.

"W-what do you mean?" Rolling free of the sleeping bag, she crawled closer. "This isn't wrong. I remember. This is Bob Gray, from the diner, right?"

"No." The entity's new eyes went wide before clamping shut again. He bared his teeth - again, very unremarkable, human teeth - and growled. In disappointment. In frustration. "N-no, this isn't me. This isn't right. This is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong."

Impulsively, he moved to stand, to get back on his feet. "This is not how it's supposed to happen." Before safely realizing it, putting weight on his bad arm brought him down again. He cringed and held his elbow, taking a pause to glare resentfully down at the injury. "That's wrong,
Beverly waited until he was comfortable, sitting on his knees, before speaking again.

"Well, Pen, whatever happened, you did a number on yourself."

*Scared the hell out of us in the process.*

*But that goes without saying.*

"Are you... feeling okay?"

The glare he sent her way was as intense as it was unexpected: edgy, vicious. Like a feral dog with its hackles up, teeth bared.

When all she had done was extend a hand for a comforting pat.

"I feel wrong. What more do you need to know?"

Rather than be intimidated by this mysterious response, Beverly frowned, crept closer. She felt like taking on that dare.

Tempting fate, maybe.

But she wanted some answers.

Bob Gray scowled back at her.

The flashlight beam, held as it was under his chin, did his deep-lined complexion no favors. With the facepaint gone, the high contrast shadows stood in its place, bringing out the rough angles.

Rough, compared to the round, almost-plucky features his original form sported.

"Define 'wrong'."

Mutely, he stared at her for quite some time, then - forced by the real, legitimate need to blink - he looked away, thought about it for even longer.

Beverly didn't bother to note how much time went by.

She simply waited.

Her patience paid off.

"Wrong, like... being stuck in a shirt that's too small. You can move, but not like you used to. Or with shoes on that aren't the right size. You can walk, but you have to mind your step more than you should. Like you could accidentally step out of the shoe, or step on the side of your foot and fall."

Rambling on, sifting through his thoughts aloud, seemed to help.

He glanced up, a terrible realization dawning on his face.

"Stuck. That's the word."

Beverly blinked as mismatched hands grabbed her by the shoulders. His eyes went wide again.
"That's it, Bevs. I'm wrong, and I'm stuck."

_Eureka, right?

He was just the same as before.

At once so childlike and so overdramatic.

It didn't matter whose face he had.

She smiled, what she hoped, was a reassuring smile.

"So... get unstuck."

_Your episode's passed.

_Easy as 1-2-3?

He frowned.

The simple reasoning behind her words, that he didn't need overpowered perception to see.

"Ohh, if only it _were_ that easy."

The now-wholly-corporeal entity let go of her as quickly as if he had touched a boiling hot kettle. Shoulders hunching up behind him, he regarded his two open hands with outward revulsion.

"Why isn't it?"

Blue-green eyes glared up at her again. "Because it isn't, Bevs. And you know better than to ask me these things." Distractedly, he plucked at his collar, the remaining sleeve of his suit. He pulled at the frill, its corded bells. The thing which had once fit him so well now seemed baggy and drab on that closer-to-normal frame. "This is still the same. That's not right, either."

Slowly, methodically, Beverly worked through her checklist of questions.

Eliminating possibilities.

Narrowing down avenues.

"Did you... expect that to change, to fit you?"

He crawled back to another corner, the flashlight beam following his every move.

There, at the opposite side of the mattress, were a pile of discarded rags and bandage remnants.

Rooting through it with one hand, he declined to answer until he had found what he was looking for.

The suit's missing sleeve and glove.

"It should have. _This_ is supposed to be as much a part of my form as anything else."

"So, why didn't it?"

"Maybe... no. That hasn't happened in- " He cut himself off, toying with the fingers of the glove. Then, frowning, he compared it to his current hand.
Unceremoniously, he pulled off the right one. Tossed them aside. Then he held his hands together, palm to palm, as if to make sure they matched.

That done, he pulled at both of his ears. Traced his eyebrows. Poked his own cheeks. Stuck out his tongue.

It was rude to stare. But Beverly couldn't help watching with a sense of awe and amusement. He was examining himself in the same way one might study a new outfit they had tried on for the first time.

Troubling as it might have been for the entity, she recognized the process for what it was.

She waved for his attention. "Pen?"

"Hmm?"

He paused, glanced up, index finger poised at the tip of his nose.

As if he were making sure his eyes were centered.

"Stop making faces and come here."

Glowering, he slunk down on all fours (his left arm no longer paining him as badly, it appeared) and crept over to crouch before her.

The gloves were left behind.

Intentionally or no, they served him no greater purpose now.

She stood the flashlight on the floor between them, balanced on its end, and crossed her arms. "Look. You can keep your secrets, if that's what they are. But for now, if you're... trapped like that, you may as well make the most of it. And for starters, that means getting the others familiar with you."

He scowled, raised an eyebrow.

Thinking twice of how confusing that must have sounded to him, Beverly slapped her own forehead, corrected herself. "This new you, that is."

"You... thought about this for a while already, haven't you?"

It wasn't an accusation, the way he said it. The gentle, softspoken tone was almost hushed, amazed.

Like he was confounded by the notion Beverly had (save for a few, indescribable aspects) virtually predicted such a mishap.

Confounded, in the best possible way.

"Richie and Eddie told me how it started, how scared you were. No, don't deny it." She raised a finger as he opened his mouth to protest. "It's okay to be scared when you're hurting. It's only natural."

"I-I suppose, but..." To that, the creature didn't have an immediate answer. He sat back on his heels. His fingers kneaded together, nervously almost. "But, this, it's not natural, Bevs. Not for me. I don't even really remember the last time it happened."
"It has? Before?"

His gaze went beyond-distant. "A long, long time ago. Before Derry. When the continents of this planet were still one landmass." He held a fist to his brow, wincing. "It hurts to think back that far."

"I can't even imagine, right?"

Hand still raised, he smirked knowingly, looking sidelong and up at her. "Wouldn't stop you from trying."

Beverly tilted her head. "What were you stuck as that time?"

The shadows on his face stretched as he frowned again.

"Oh, why? So you can tease me about it? I don't think so, Miss Marsh."

Beverly smiled at the perfunctory nose-flick the once-clown dealt her.

"Probably some small, single-cell speck of nothing."

"Hmph." He tossed his head, dismissive. "Think that if you want. I'm not confirming or denying anything."

Then the smirk melted away, as his eye noticed the bloody bicep dressing once again. Briefly, he toyed with a frayed strip of gauze tape before glancing back at her.

"No one was there to patch me up that time. How'd you know to?"

"I didn't. It just seemed like the right thing to do. I figured, if you had a heartbeat, it wouldn't do to let your blood just run out all over the place. You'd be needing it for later."

The smirk reappeared.

"That, and it was probably a slip hazard," he admitted.

"Smelled bad, on top of that."

He practiced an eyeroll a la Stan Uris. "Sorry. Can't help you with that part."

"I guess."

Then the smirk became a smile, conveying a silent thank-you to wrap up their latest round of banter on an amicable note.

"I'm sorry for the worry I caused you, then. All of you. I just- it's been so long since a split has occurred, I didn't recognize the signs."

Split.

So the condition has a name.

"And your first hint was not being able to pass through the wall?"

"Exactly."

Gently, she reached over to adjust the bandage's fraying bit of tape, smoothed it down.
"Yeah. Think you can avoid doing any more of that in the near future?"

"Ohh, no promises there. You don't know what it is to have this to cope with." He tapped a finger against his temple. "Bad enough sometimes when it isn't reformatted to fit a- a brain like this. Sometimes, it just does what it wants."

_That much about you hasn't changed, then._

"Well, if you have any say in the matter, try convincing it to mellow out for a while. This isn't your first time. And while I can see you aren't completely helpless, but that doesn't mean you're totally self-sufficient, either."

"No, I'm- you're right. Pretty much stuck between those two."

"Rock and a hard place?"

"Huh?"

_ Explain that one to him some other time._

"Any idea how long it'll be before you can morph back?" Beverly asked instead. Having some kind of timetable would help them plan accordingly. "I mean, the others will pitch in and help. But we can barely take care of ourselves some days."

"You don't need to remind me," he sighed, gaze drifting away. "I'll think of something. Starting with- " He looked down at himself, at his missing sleeve. "A change of outfit."

There we are.

A nice, simple problem to begin with.

Then they could move on to the bigger ones.

"Hm..." Beverly tapped her chin, thinking. _Well, he's on the tall side. None of us are really equipped to loan- wait._

Then, as the lightbulb went off, she snapped her fingers. "Got it. Follow me."
Chapter Summary

Human-ing.

...It's as easy as it isn't.

Beverly Marsh was many things.

But, when it came to letting her choose his temporary wardrobe, was she really the Loser most qualified for the job?

It stared into the mirror.

Robert Gray stared back at him.

A showered, rebandaged, with-hair-brushed iteration no less.

Without breaking eye contact, the entity tilted his head. Weird. He didn't think he looked half as irritated on the outside as his human glamour actually displayed.

The question currently lodged at the front of his mind seemed like something his host should be asking.

But she wasn't.

So he did.

"Are you... sure this is okay?"

Beverly's voice hummed before sounding off from the next room over. She was busy filling a backpack with a few sets of clothes, after all.

"Sure? Yes. Okay? Not really."

Gray scoffed. His blue-green eyes went half-lidded.

Beverly sounded hurried. Dismissive.

And she had seemed so confident going up the stairs. She hadn't balked on crossing the threshold of the apartment with a fretting him in tow. In no uncertain terms, she steered him into the bathroom.

He tidied himself up. A set of clothes awaited him, draped across the bathroom's drying rack, by the time he pulled the shower curtain back.

Beverly had seemed pretty sure of it all. May as well call her out on supposedly-recanting now.

"Well, doesn't that just fill me with confidence?"
"He won't miss those, trust me."

_I ought to trust that about as much as Stan trusts Richie._

But for Beverly, the entity would make an exception.

He always seemed given to, for her.

Hands still braced on the bathroom sink, Bob glanced down at himself.

"What about the ones you're packing now?"

He heard a door close. Persumably a closet door.

He must have sounded uneasy.

Even from afar, Beverly's assuring tone eased said misgivings. "No, really. It's fine. He practically lives in his work clothes. These haven't been touched in years."

"And if he comes home?"

"I told you, he won't, Bob. There was a septic backup at the hospital this morning. That'll keep him busy for at least day, maybe two. But just to be safe, we'll get you back to Neibolt soon enough."

Bob.

Not Pen, not any affectionate nickname.

She called his form by its name.

Even after that day outside the drugstore, then later at the diner, she hadn't managed it before they parted ways.

He looked up at his new reflection and frowned.

_Well, I guess that does it. I'm no longer to be excluded from your father's feelings on the matter of 'guests'. _

Rule number one:

No boys in the apartment.

Rule number two:

No boys in the apartment.

Rule number three and onward:

You get the idea.

He was no boy. Technically, this body was a little too mature-looking to be called boyish. Compared to the Losers, he arguably now appeared as the oldest, the closest to looking like a young, young man.

And that was appropriately so, given the cosmic being's age. There wasn't an empty field in existence big enough to possibly fit all those zeroes.
If he had had any luck with regard to this circumstance, it was that his current look wasn't too far off in build from Alvin Marsh.

Borrowing some of the man's casual clothes, though...

Again, technically, he wasn't.

Beverly was offering.

Once they were being neglected.

Now they were being repurposed.

Standing there with the black sweater and slacks on, Bob stomached the newly-permanent reality as best he could. There really wasn't any going back from here. The maimed silver suit and its accessories would be kept for secondhand material, if nothing else now.

The boots would do fine. Just had to lop the pompoms off.

Bob stuck his head out into the hallway, hand resting on the doorframe.

Beverly was walking by with a stacked armful of shirts.

"What if he does?"

She stopped, glanced up at him. "Relax. And knock it off with the impressions. I can tell already - the first was your Richie, and now you've gone 'Eddie' on me."

Good ol' Bevs. Quick as ever.

That was worth a reward. He may as well elaborate if she had figured out the basics. The name 'Robert Gray' had meant a lot of things over the years, but this latest version was as with-the-times as he could manage.

"They're not meant as impressions. For better or worse, Bevs, this form is an amalgam of all of you. In its behavior. Does it really matter who I should like at any given time if it means it's easier to pass for 'normal'?"

"I suppose not. Just don't go walking through any more walls, and you'll be fine."

"Or ditches?" he added, flatly. The memory of a little slip-up they had endured en route to the apartment had not left his mind yet. She had steered him the wrong way. And it was worth a dramatic finger-point. "Yeah, I still think you did that on purpose."

"Sorry." Beverly didn't laugh outright. But the twinkling in her eyes betrayed the repressed amusement. "Just seeing if your night vision is any better than mine."

Bob sighed, shook his head. "I assure you, it isn't. Just as inept, just as ill-suited, with all of your limited human faculties to go with it."

"That was Stan talking vicariously through you, wasn't it?"

"At this point, I'm just glad you're finding something to laugh about," the guest deadpanned. Even if he didn't see the humor in his present situation, Beverly was keeping things light in his stead. "This is all so... out of nowhere."
"Like when you eat lunch with someone, then two days later, you can't get out of bed?"

"I'm not sick, Bevs. Just- off-kilter."

She tilted her head.

"More so than you already were?"

Bob scoffed, hand dropping to his side.

_I guess I deserve that._

"Kinda like the others will be, once they see me. Do you think they'll..."

Beverly waited. But when he failed to finish the thought, she supplied her own word:

"Approve?"

Taken aback that they voiced it at the virtually same time, they stared at each other in astonishment for perhaps a minute.

Then she explained.

"I won't get your hopes up, but I don't want to say they'll embrace the idea, either. Not right away. We've all wondered about it, since meeting you. If you ever had cause to take human shape- _more_ human shape. Pennywise doesn't count."

Bob closed his mouth, glancing away. Absently, he scratched at the neck of his on-loan sweater.

How strange, to hear her refer to his last persona in the third person.

Even if he himself sometimes made a habit of it.

It.

Then again...

With a name like that, what right did he have to find _anything_ strange?

Amazingly enough, there was an old, denim jacket to spare, even if it was a touch too small to be buttoned up. Without it, the outfit felt too one-dimensional. Bob drew the line at Beverly's suggestion of him donning a tacky pair of cheap sunglasses, though.

And he protested it every step of the way back to 29 Neibolt Street.

The sun was just coming up, painting the front of the house in rosy-gold shades.

Almost cheerily.

Stepping inside the broken-down fence, Robert Gray felt nothing remotely like "welcome home" at the sight of it.

Backpack weighing on her, Beverly lagged behind. She had opted to carry the clothes, and he whatever meager groceries could be spared from the Marsh kitchen.

And she was still trying to make her point about the damn sunglasses.
"But you're supposed to be in hiding."

He sighed, ran a hand over his face. "For the hundredth time, I'm not in hiding, Bevs. Just laying low. Hiding would imply I have someone to hide from."

"But Greta knows you. And everyone who saw you on main street."

"Did I mention the little favor I did, wiping their memories after the fact?" He drew to a stop at the edge of the porch, turned back. "I can do that, you know."

"So, why the white knight routine?"

"Oh, you know me, Bevs. I've always had a weakness for causing a-scene!"

He turned around, intending to stride up the stairs and up to the door.

And he almost tripped over the person standing there.

Wide brown eyes, set in a very familiar face, stared up at him.

He managed to wheel aside, stumbling at the last moment, one hand thrown out to catch and steady himself against the porch railing.

"Oh! Hiya, Georgie."

With the other hand, Bob grabbed his own throat in shock.

The greeting had slipped out before he could catch it.

Beverly, leaning sideways to peer around him, didn't jump so noticeably.

On the contrary, she looked happy to see him.

"Georgie, hi! Bill brought you, too?"

Denbrough merely blinked, eyes still locked on Bob's face. It was as if he had gone deaf, too caught up in appreciating the 'stranger' standing before him to answer her.

In the span of maybe four seconds, he had figured out what was what.

And who was who.

"Penny?"

He breathed the name out, soft as velvet.

Bob flinched like he had suffered a gunshot at point blank range. A slight tearing pain in his arm certainly made it feel that way.

But despite his body's instinctive need to get away - to get far away, don't come back for a while - his treacherous voice cracked accordingly.

His lips even pulled up into a shaky smile.

"Heh. For better or worse."

"Penny, what happened?" Far from being intimidated by this appearance, Georgie stepped forward.
He grabbed the denim jacket's lapels, as high as his hands could reach. "You're- you're-"

"What are you doing here, Georgie?" Massaging his throat, Bob forced the inflections away. The most difficult part of this encounter was behind them, departing as quickly as it had arrived. No need to remain confused on who he was meant to be embodying.

Georgie said nothing more. He kept staring, gaping.

Bob glanced through the sides of his eyes.

As quickly as his little friend had seemed to peg his identity, the entity had figured out this was no coincidence.

"This is your doing, isn't it?"

Beverly shrugged, smiling an easy smile.

"I had Eddie phone the others last night, when he and Rich were gone on that supply run. Said to meet up before class. But they didn't know about what."

"About what, indeed."

Another voice joined them.

Even if its owner lingered in the open doorway, eyes round.

Bob recognized them instantly, gave a little sarcastic wave in greeting.

"Hey, Stan."

Behind Uris, no less than three other faces crowded the entry further on.

Stepping onto the crowded porch, Beverly waved them all in.

"Guys, inside, please. There's no need to make a spectacle out here."

Turned out, inside, the whole of the club had been assembled. Backpacks lined one wall of the foyer.

Feeling a bit like a freak put on display, Bob stepped past their owners, almost to the center of the room. He thought far enough to discard his backpack of groceries, then turn back and gaze down at the mismatched crowd of kids.

Beverly stood back, smirking.

Seven sets of eyes stared up at him.

And there was silence until Bob finally rolled his owlish eyes and glanced away. Sarcasm boiled just under the overhang of his frontal lobe.

Well, isn't this just nice and awkward?

I cannot say I'm surprised.

So why bother?

"Dude," Richie squeaked, arms slack. He had an unfair advantage over looking shocked, compared to the others. But no amount of cleaning his glasses would change the sight before him. "You look-
"You're-"

"He looks like a man. Like an actual man." Ben blinked several times.

"B-but how? S-since when-"

Sensing the others' reactions would be more of the same ramblings, Bob stepped forward, brows lowered.

At that moment, he didn't care if it meant stomping on Bill Denbrough's words.

"Y'know, I'm still here. And you can talk to me, not at."

Half the club took an uneasy step back.

Save for one small body that threaded his way past them.

Bounding his way right to center stage.

"Penny, no."

Bob flinched and shrunk away from the finger that jabbed into his nose. He resisted the uncalled-for urge to crouch, a purely submissive habit he typically gave into around the boy.

"No?"

"Change back. Right now."

Georgie had overcome his initial disbelief.

And decided for himself that he wanted his friend, as he knew him, back.

Stat.

Bob winced, hands wringing. Already he felt his composure slipping once more. While he would have liked nothing better than to honor that demand, he still felt too... snug. Too trapped by the contours of this current guise to dare change anything.

Not if it meant bleeding that much again.

He had told Beverly as much upon waking up.

A 'split' was not something he could force his way out of.

It had to happen on its own time.

"Georgie, he can't."

Thankfully, she was quick to jump to the entity's defense.

Georgie's head whipped around, looking up as she stepped forward to join the rest of them.

"W-what do you mean, Beverly? Of course he can. He can turn into whatever he wants, whenever he wants."

"Not this time," she said, gently, then addressed the group at large. Utterly unimimidated, utterly confident where they weren't. "Guys, this is Bob. Robert Gray. Unless something tells us otherwise,
he's... Pennywise's human counterpart."

"You're shitting me," Richie wheezed, laughter finally taking hold. "I mean, seriously? This? This? This is what came of that freakout he had yesterday?"

"He freaked out?" Stan asked, eyebrow raising almost to his hairline. "That hole in the wall over there have anything to do with it?"

"Oh, a lot," Mike deadpanned. "You missed the fun part."

While half the club deliberated, the other half zeroed in on their remodeled mascot.

"You changed, but a different kind of change?" Eddie asked. "Is this... permanent?"

Bob scoffed, crossed his arms, leaning back on one leg. "As permanent as a temporary tattoo is, Eds. It'll wear off."

"When?" Georgie piped up. Timidly, he stepped up, reaching ahead with a shaky hand. With it, he grabbed the edge of the denim jacket. "Penny, if there's anything we can do-"

"Just accept it for what it is, Georgie. I have."

"How did it happen?" Georgie kneaded the old, worn denim between his fingers. "I mean, I know you can change anyway. What makes this different?"

"It's... too much to explain before school." Bob blinked, realizing just what he had passed the blame of explanation off on. "School. Bevs, what were you thinking? You all have classes today."

And now they all have to worry about me, on top of your usual troubles.

Usual troubles...

That I can't do anything about in this form!

Why didn't that occur to me sooner?

"I don't," Mike pointed out, oblivious to the trapped soul's new inner turmoil, hand half-raised. "Lucky thing, too- Eddie said that dressing should be needing a change in a few more hours."

"We took care of it at the apartment, Mike." Beverly spared the farmboy an appreciative pat on the shoulder, before depositing her backpack with the others. "He should be okay until tonight."

"And it's Friday," Bill opined, neutral as ever. He had crossed his arms somewhere along the way. Then, with comedic timing, he glanced up at his watch. "Thank God."

Bob fretted, unnoticed, for another reason. He spared Georgie an uneasy look, to which the seven-year-old smiled.

There must have been something in his distraught expression that convinced the kid.

This wasn't something to shun.

This was worth understanding.

He took his friend's hand in both of his own.
"It'll be okay, Penny. You can have the day off."

"So. D'you have any ideas?"

Sitting at the kitchen table, Bob looked up, chin resting in his palm.

For the rest of the Losers, it was off to school.

Mike stood, alone, in the doorway.

No doubt he was ducking work on the farm to stay at Neibolt for the day. Work for which his grandfather would not be happy that he had skipped out on.

He seemed ready to help anyway.

Ideas?

"About what?"

"What to do about you, your situation," Mike gestured toward him, shrugging. "I mean, I don't know what the process involves, but it can't include sitting around on your ass, pouting."

"I'm not pouting."

"Stewing, then. I get them mixed up sometimes."

"Mikey..." Bob sighed, wrist dropping against the table with a clunk. Distractedly, he rubbed at his sore shoulder. The dried bandages crackled even from under layers of cloth. "There isn't really a manual for this, or a textbook, or a guide, or anything. I've spent every waking minute since yesterday trying to think of some plausible fix. But I'm afraid if I don't know, no one else in this universe would."

Hanlon ventured closer, brow furrowed. Besides taking in the entity's new appearance without any distractions, Bob thought it was a considerate look.

Considering what few options there were to pick from.

Opting for the most promising of them, Mike smiled. He snapped his fingers, as Beverly had. "I know. Let's go to the park."

"The park?" Bob repeated, squinting.

What good would that do?

"Yeah, I mean, you've been there before, with Stan. Birdwatching. If you can't change back into Pennywise, maybe you can change into something else?"

"Like a bird?" Bob deadpanned. While he knew he should have been thankful for the suggestion, it felt like a dud.

"Would it hurt to try?"

"You were here yesterday, Mike. You're that eager to relive it?"

"Hey," Mike's smile didn't waver. "You said yourself- there's no telling what may or may not"
happen. But you can't let that get you down in the meantime."

*It's not what might happen 'getting me down'.*

---

*It's what could be getting the others while we wait.*

*Or who.*

Bob didn't say as much. Mike was trying to be of help, even after suffering more than his share of slings and arrows. It wouldn't be fair to shoot the kid down for trying to be a good friend.

Not fair, not decent, either.

He tried to relax.

Admittedly, walking around in public was not so daunting, once you got going. So long as you kept your eyes to yourself and didn't act too out of the ordinary.

Bob couldn't help glancing around, almost exaggeratedly so. He was too used to being able to see everywhere, at all once. Crammed into this fleshy prison, the world around him just wasn't the same. His eyesight felt weak, and his ears were stuffed with cotton.

Maybe, Beverly's sunglasses wouldn't have been so useless after all.

More than once, Mike had to steer him back on course.

"Here, your treat," Hanlon joked, sliding a plate onto the picnic table in front of him.

Eyebrow raised, Bob sniffed and resisted the urge to push it away. The prospect of food agreed with his human insides, if not his mind. It wasn't his meager allowance being spent on a hotdog and fries in Bassey Park.

"Thanks, Mikey."

In no time, he had made a proper mess of his hands. Ketchup and mustard smeared his fingers.

Chuckling quietly, Mike offered a paper square next.

"Napkin."

"If you insist."

Wiping his hands clean, Bob tried to ignore the sun on his back. It felt weird enough being stuck in one form, never mind out in broad daylight where there was no place to hide.

Sitting beside him, Mike worked on his fries. "Bev wasn't kidding. You seem... pretty normal. I kept thinking I'd need to do things like show you how to chew, tie your boots- "

"How to use the bathroom?" Bob blurted out, flatly. He had been around long before indoor plumbing was even a concept, and there were far worse things to be afraid of then bowel movements. "Give me some credit, Mike. I'm no invalid."

Mike snorted, unable to stifle his smile completely. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

Bob rolled his eyes. "You were headed there. Admit it."
His companion declared the second verse: "Admit it, forgot it."

Then simultaneously: "Already quit it."

Together, they glanced at each other, scoffed, and openly ridiculed the inane exchange.

As they always found themselves doing.

"Honestly, how did that stupid saying catch on so fast?"

"Richie wrote it, that's how," Mike laughed into his palm. "Probably the only real worthwhile contribution he'll ever to make to society. So, we made it our own."

"Better our one-note Loser society, than none at all, I suppose," Bob agreed, French fry dangling from his lip like an imitation cigarette. It served to take the pseudo-grimness out of his statement.

"Kinda like you. Could you have picked a more pathetic bunch of kids to make your posse?"

Bob took the fry from his mouth, set in back on the plate. Just as quickly as it had lightened up, the conversation turned hefty and serious in turn. "You're by no means pathetic, Mikey. None of you are."

Hanlon smiled again, with no small measure of gratitude.

"And we know our own when we see one. No matter what face they have."

To and from the park was only an hour walk. By foot.

Mike forwent his bike in favor of keeping pace with Bob.

They talked more on the walk back to Neibolt Street than to Bassey Park.

It felt easier now.

"Y'know, if you were okay with that, you think you'd be okay with a little handyman work?"

"What do you mean?"

Later that day, Bob was sorry he asked.

Beverly was the first to return from school. She smiled at him, and it was as good a sight to come home to as any. "What happened?"

Sitting at the kitchen table once again, Bob held the ice pack to his forehead, hissing at the feeling of cold. The bruise wasn't quite a black eye, but one hoof to the temple was enough to convince Leroy Hanlon the 'new guy' wasn't farmhand material.

"Sheep and I don't get along, it seems."

Richie didn't have much to complain about there. Only thing that mattered to him was that he got a good laugh out of the story that was Mike's failed apprentice.

"Now I know you missed your calling as a rodeo clown for a reason."
Eddie was next. Shrugging off his patient's protesting whines, he donned a pair of rubber gloves. Then he undid the dressing to treat the entity's once-cleaved arm with a homemade remedy of peroxide and salve.

Bob bit down on the empty sleeve of his jacket, to stifle his cries.

"Well, you've got some kind of healing action happening. Without stitches, there's no way this would be holding together so easily."

"Ugh. I could've told you that without unwrapping anything, Eds."

"Or you could've fibbed and I wouldn't know the difference," Kaspbrak smirked. "Until you needed a fresh bandage. Then what would I think of you for not telling the truth?"

"You'd probably think, the airhead lied to me. Again."

"And you'd be right." Rewrapping the arm, Eddie's hands were far more gentle. "But I know you'd only say so to keep me from worrying so much."

Georgie was still feeling a bit critical.

But that was nothing compared to Bill's icy, ever-suspecting stare.

The Denbrough boys worked on their assignments together, as was customary. Sitting on the foyer floor, side by side, knees practically touching, they talked. They would compare notes, trade ideas. Complain about the wrongs their teachers had committed.

Normally, Pennywise would join them, usually only to watch the brotherly antics unfold.

Today, Georgie made an exception for Bob.

For as many multiplication questions, picked at random, the entity could answer correctly, he would stay.

A weird stipulation, but creative at least.

"Seven times... nine?"

"Sixty-three."

"Three times... eighty-nine?"

"Two-hundred sixty-seven."

"Eight times... fifteen?"

"One-hundred twenty."

"He can c-clearly run the numbers, Georgie," Bill finally interrupted, hopelessly taken away from his history essay. "What are you trying to prove?"

Solemnly, the younger Denbrough glanced sideways at the eldest of their three, sitting cross-legged beside him, a hand over his closed eyes. "Penny always gets them right. Without even looking."

Bob smiled, peeking out from between his fingers.
"We're never gonna finish this one," Stanley sighed, leaning on the hobby room table.

Bob stood, palms flat beside the thousand-piece puzzle, its borders already done. Each piece was no more than two centimeters square. The picture being assembled was a waterpainted version of the Great Wall of China, a almost-mosaic of greys, reds, and blues.

One third complete.

It may as well have been the Great Wall of Uris-Doubt.

"Would you sooner go back to studying the Torah?"

Gray flinched, belatedly remembering to catch the minute puzzle piece that bounced off his chin.

"Keep looking, Stripes. You always find them faster than I do."

Ben, oddly enough, seemed to be the only holdout. That is, in terms of accepting their club mascot's temporarily-premanent humanoid status.

He didn't say as much. But the newly-borrowed book the erstwhile 'new kid' was reading, titled *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, gave Bob reason to pause thoughtfully before passing by the open bedroom door.

---

You're not two people.

You're the same thing.

"Thing," Bob mused aloud, arms crossed. He was leaning against the rickety, boarded wall, heedless of the danger posed by splinters (or possibly falling back through it).

The backyard, this late in the day, was already dark. He was busy, resigning himself to the idea he would be spending the night in this rundown ruin. Ordinarily, it was of no concern to a hypersensitive, empowered being such as he.

Today was the least ordinary day he had endured since waking last year.

A thing.

You can pretend otherwise all you want.

Doesn't change the truth.

While the Losers Club toiled about their various school assignments and finalized weekend plans, he took the time to mope.

Like it or not, Mike, sometimes we all have to.

Perhaps it took being trapped in one form, and not knowing when he might shake the condition, for It to appreciate what he so often took for granted.

For even cosmic entities could become complacent with their lot in the universe, it seemed.

That said...
"Bob, stay."

He felt every bit like a disobedient dog, pining dramatically as their owner tried to depart.

At the same time, the entity didn't care.

Beverly was going back.

Back to the apartment.

The apartment that may as well have been on another planet.

He couldn't sense anything. Couldn't hear, couldn't see.

Couldn't know if she would be in danger-

Stupid, of course she will be. She's going 'home'.

For her, home is synonymous with danger.

"Will you at least let me walk you there?" he tried to bargain.

He followed her to the front yard's edge.

The rest of the club had already departed.

She had been the first to return, and the last to leave.

Beverly rolled her eyes, tolerant as ever of his whiny counterarguments. She bent down to lift her fallen bike back onto its tires.

Her necklace dangled with the motion, key and feather charm glinting in the evening light. It was still there.

"You'd be seen, Bob. It's not a good idea."

He leaned close, almost over her shoulder. "No more than me borrowing your Dad's clothes was. You-"

Her free hand gently clapped itself over his mouth.

"Shush."

Shoulders sagging, he obeyed.

Still let his eyebrows turn down in disappointment.

Regarding his woebegone reaction, Beverly shook her head, deployed the kickstand of her bike. Hand still in place, she explained, seemingly unbothered by how their day had come full circle.

That they were having this conversation twice.

"You're fretting over nothing. I told you, most nights it's 'grab a beer, watch the game, pass out and go to work in the same clothes the next day'. He won't even think to touch the dresser."

"What if he does?" Bob asked, muffled as it was by her palm.
Please. Please don't let anything happen to her.

Idiot. Who are you talking to?

Not so long ago, you were your own self-fulfilling promise.

Now you're outta the equation.

The torment must have read on his face.

"He won't."

Lips pursing, Beverly let go of his mouth to stroke his cheek.

"It'll be fine, Bob. This is just another one of those times you tend to overcompensate when it comes to worrying. Like when Georgie went with his class to the overnight stay at the museum. You worried for him, and he was fine the whole time?"

He was with his classmates. And still, I watched the whole time. You didn't know I did.

And now, you're choosing to ignore the very real fact I can't do the same for you.

Timidly, the trapped entity curled his fingers over her wrist.

His eyes never strayed.

"It's not... overcompensating when it turns out to be necessary."

Finally, her expression seemed to darken. Just a touch. A slight creasing around the eyes, a near-glance away at nothing. Her freckled cheeks tightened briefly.

Then she was back, defenses shored up.

Not sign of discontent behind those clear blue eyes.

He would feel better if he could see something there.

Some glimmer of fear.

Of trepidation.

So he would know she was on her guard.

Moreso than usual.

But that's not Beverly's way.

"I guess we'll just have to see, then, won't we?"

She moved to throw a leg over her bike.

Before he could think to take a step, one of her fingernails jabbed his nose.

"Stay."

He stood there, looking at the empty street, for a long time after she left.
He couldn't sleep.
He stayed up, pacing the floors. The stairs.
Trying to wear himself out.
Eventually, it did.
He laid there, on the old, repulsive mattress, letting his aching muscles and sore feet rest.
Eyes open.
His mind wouldn't let him doze off.
Perhaps it was a side effect, as Eddie often lamented. How a side effect of medication could oftentimes be worse than the ailment it was supposed to treat.
Being stuck in human form.
When your very essence was the epitome of freedom, of not being contained.
It had thought he had a grip on that notion. His self-control wasn't the greatest, no, but if Beverly could handle his frenetic episode and the resulting-neurosies it brought out in him with such grace, why couldn't he?
Was he really that... fickle?
*It just does what it wants.*
Like Beverly.
She always did what she wanted.
When she thought it was safe, when the risk was worth the reward.
Like going home tonight.
She could have stayed. No doubt there were some nights she snuck away while Alvin lay passed out on the couch.
And stayed away.
Her father 'worried'.
But only insofar as when Beverly was under the same roof.
He didn't dare misbehave in public.
That's what their own private little slice of hell was for.
In comparison, 29 Neibolt must have seemed like heaven to Bevs.
Speaking of Neibolt...
The house itself had remained silent all day.
Was it any coincidence the creaking resumed as its last remaining tenant prowled down the stairs and
stalked away into the moonless dark?

It may have been all for nothing.

Somehow managing not to become lost in the trek to Main Street, Bob had plenty of time to think.

Think about what to do.

What to say.

Wait.

What *was* he going to do?

He was... just a man, with only the clothes on his back.

No illusions at his disposal. No beastial forms to resort to.

Derry's nightlife paid him no mind, thankfully. Clad in black and blue, he all but melted into the dark. Avoided the streetlights.

Took the side streets.

He stopped short in the alley below the apartment, hand on the bricks, listening.

...Nothing.

Well, of *course* he wouldn't be able to hear anything from down there.

His shoulders hunched again, mouth twisting in half a grimace. He brought the other hand to his mouth, gnawing at a bent knuckle.

Stay?

Go?

Stay, then go?

Go, then come back?

He forced a sigh, willing his racing mind to slow down, to think logically.

This wasn't helping.

Not himself.

Not Beverly.

Indecisiveness was a choice in itself.

What good was he doing any of them, being so impulsive?

He could already see it, hear it.

Beverly scolding him for trying to play the hero.
It wasn't a hero.

It was It.

And she would expect him to understand that.

Besides Georgie, she was the one person whose expectations he wholly intended to meet.

The next morning, as most of the club assembled in the back yard, Bob saw the evidence of his error.

And, true to his old form and the new, Bob whined and fawned accordingly.

"Bevs..."

He found her loitering in the front yard, below the once-intact picture window. Cigarette almost spent, she glanced over her shoulder at him, then down at the bruise at the base of her neck. It was just visible, peeking out from under the tee-shirt's collar.

Her eyes glanced back up, but she said nothing.

Not at first.

"It wasn't about the clothes."

He had changed said clothes. Straying away from yesterday's overly-dark colors, he had found a gray tee-shirt, a looser, darker-gray overshirt and blue jeans.

The folded-up sunglasses were in his back pocket.

Friday had been cool compared to this Saturday.

The air was warmer.

And at the same time, he felt colder for it.

Not about the clothes.

"No shit- agh." Bob cringed, as his brain pulsed with a very real throb of frustration.

Frustration, at being so inept, so in the dark.

So unable to change anything.

He couldn't help a throaty growl as Beverly moved to step closer. He held up a hand.

"DoN't."

Gazing up at him, looking more worried for her friend and not for herself than the entity would have liked, Beverly stamped the cigarette out. She waited until things grew quiet again before speaking.

"He's over it, Bob. There shouldn't be any problem tonight."

"I should hope not," the entity sighed, emotions and voice steadied, hands dropping back to his sides. "If this is what it means for me to be stuck, I only wish it doesn't last too long."

Beverly tried to lighten things up.
Even if it was with a total misfire of a joke.

"Relax. You can't let that eat you up."

"She actually said that?"

Richie's response seemed genial enough, as if his companion was proving to be no real distraction. Meanwhile, his hands never strayed from the buttons. His eyes never lost track.

The metal pinball continued to bounce about the enclosed tray.

At that moment, leaning on said machine with his arms crossed, Bob didn't know what had possessed him to confide as much to Tozier.

Maybe it was the fact that the club's resident jokester simply had a knack for brushing off the overly-serious.

In his own way, Richie was good at coping with such heavyhanded topics. Probably better than anyone else would be, in certain regards. And he wouldn't let naysayers' doubts keep him from a good time.

Right now, Bob needed to hear some senseless banter.

If only to offset the gravity of everything else.

"Dude, normally, you're the one who does the most-eating," Richie stopped, flicking the pinball back to the top of the board with expert timing. "When she says, don't let something get to you, that's Bev's way of telling you to close your trap."

Nicely.

"I gathered that much," Bob deadpanned, fingertips drumming on one elbow.

*Dealing with it is another matter.*

"So, sounds to me like you need a distraction. Get a hobby. I've got mine. Bev plays keyboard. Ben reads. Stan counts birds." With another successful flip of a paddle, Richie glanced up, grinning as if his next three words were a dare: "Take your pick."

The cistern.

He actually missed the cistern.

Not only for its grisly pantry.

But because there was a whole tower's-worth lode of distractions down there.

Then again, venturing back into the sewers wasn't good for Bob's mortal-minded immune system. So that wasn't an option.

Nor was visiting any of the Losers at home.

Teleportation.
Yet another ability he had taken for granted.

Trudging back from the arcade (having inadvertently discovered he was no dartboard wizard, as Richie "soundly whipped" him for seven straight rounds), Bob was reasonably happy to run into the rest of the gang.

Until he wasn't.

Bill actually looked a mite panicked.

Pedaling hard, Denbrough had to dig his heels deep into the road before Silver came to a complete stop. His knuckles were white against her handlebars.

As white as his face.

"Bev's gone."

"Gone, shopping? What's so bad about that?"

Whereas before he felt suffocated by distress, now Bob was thoroughly confused.

And well on his way to feeling worried.

Leaning around the building's corner, looking at the plate-glass-fronted supermarket across the street, he had figured out Bill's meaning before Richie's question could be answered by anyone else.

Alvin.

Alvin was with her.

Since when does that man go shopping with his daughter?

Since... never.

"When did this happen?" Bob hissed through the side of his mouth.

From below and beside him, Bill dared a look for himself. "About a-an hour ago. Alvin turned up on Neibolt Street. He didn't see the rest of us, upstairs in the house, but Beverly, she- she was-"

"Out there, smoking," Bob finished, voice thin and lame, knees almost going weak.

*Alvin hates it when she smokes.*

*He's told her to stop.*

*She says she has, before.*

*He's caught her, knows she was lying.*

*And now he's... taken her shopping?*

*What gives?*

Whatever domestic ploy the janitor was pulling now, it had to be because a worse fate awaited Beverly, once they returned to the apartment.
Unless...

No.

No, that was too crazy to consider.

Looking on, the rest of the gang stood in the alley, mute, with their bikes ever at the ready.

Only Richie dared to call the entity out on his fraught-slash-ponderous expression. "You thinkin' of doin' something, Stripes?"

"Something," Bob repeated, distant-sounding even to himself. His palms felt clammy. "Before they go back to the truck. We have to do something."

Before he could descend further into his would-be-ravings, someone grabbed the sunglasses from his pocket. Gray couldn't help a startled yelp as he was unceremoniously yanked down by two sets of hands - Eddie and Bill.

Sunglasses at the ready, Richie threaded them onto the entity's startled visage.

His blue-green eyes disappeared behind the black lenses.

And in his high, falsetto-British voice, Tozier declared:

"Get in there!"
Infiltrating the supermarket was easy.

Getting his friend's attention was not.

It took a few minutes, and he almost lost track of his target, growing more agitated with the possibility they would depart the store before he could intercept.

Then, there they were.

"Bevs."

Peering around an end display full of greeting cards, Bob cleared his throat, lowered the sunglasses down the bridge of his nose, and tried again.

With a little more appropriate volume.

"Beverly."

Behind her, Alvin Marsh straightened up from where he had been scanning magazine covers. A half-filled shopping basket sat by their feet.

Forgetting its importance instantly, Marsh glanced Bob's way, instantly, frowning over the top of his daughter's head.

Almost glowering.

He was still in his work clothes.

"You need something, buddy?"

The entity felt his breath stall in his chest.

He put the glasses back over his eyes.

Well, this is as far ahead as I thought.

...Run with it?

"Uhm, just saying, hi, sir."

"Hi?" Marsh spat. He wheeled around, all but pushing Beverly aside to make his way closer. "Hi, meaning, you're eyeballing my daughter?"

Bob tried not to cringe. While they stood at practically the same height, he could already tell he was outmatched. Up close, it was clear. Alvin Marsh had the husky, tried aura of a man who had seen
one or two barfights.

Maybe he hadn't started nor ended them, but he got a fair share of swings in.

"Hey!" A rough hand clapped itself over the cowering 'teen's' shoulder. "You go deaf just as fast? Answer me when I'm talking to you."

"Daddy, it's fine."

_Thank you, Beverly. Thank- wait. No, what are you doing- stay out of this!_

Unspoken as this thought was, she did nothing of the kind.

Bob managed not to quail as Beverly stepped over to stand between them.

"It's okay. This is Robert. He's a friend from school."

"A friend, huh?" Marsh rounded on her, smiling a very sarcastic smile. "A few-grades-above-you friend? Why haven't we met before?"

Bob balked. The hand moved from his shoulder to the sunglasses' temple. "Let's have a look at him, then."

"N-no, please, I-"

The lenses were lifted. The entity cringed. The fluorescent lights bloomed around him before dying back to a tolerable luminosity.

Alvin sneered. "Well, now I see why you need _these_. Look at your mug. With that lazy eye, it's no wonder you keep 'em hidden."

_Lazy...?_

Bob felt himself shiver in dread.

Eyes diverging.

Not a good sign.

_No._

_Not now._

"Daddy!" Beverly seethed, snatching the glasses back. "You're being rude."

_"I'm the rude one? Doesn't matter if you do or don't know this boy, Bevvie. No one trying to beckon you away without me knowing can be up to any good."_

To be fair, the man wasn't raising his voice more than any other shoppers. Merely speaking heatedly.

But the nature of their exchange was already drawing a few curious stares.

A few too many.

Bob swallowed, blinked his off-centered eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Bevs- Beverly. I-I'll just go."

He was starting to feel warm.
Warmer.

What else can I do?

Any more and- no, no, why now?

He almost committed to the idea. He almost thought to walk back out.

To face down the other Losers, demand they come up with a different plan.

Then Marsh opened his mouth again.

"You do that, punk. And don't come sniffin' around my door anytime soon. Wherever she knows you from, my girl's done with you."

Bob had just thought to turn away, then froze.

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Your girl?

Slowly, the entity felt his hackles rise.

Heat spread under his skin, growing hotter.

Your girl.

The way Marsh said it.

Your girl.

Talking about her like she's not there.

Playing at being a 'good father', but no one knows what you do to her behind closed doors.

The jeering she puts up with, with no one to turn to.

The half-rotten food she has to eat.

The filthy apartment in which she can't wait to escape.

That bruise on her neck isn't anyone else's work.

You don't deserve to call her your own.

"Is she?"

Marsh's brows dropped. He scowled.

"Come again?"

Bob scowled right back. Gently, he took the sunglasses from Beverly's limp fingers.

Placed them back on his face.

"Beverly's her own girl. If she's done with me, she can say so for herself."
Waiting in the wings, he could almost see the other Losers.

Standing there. Slack jawed.

Wondering just what the hell he was up to.

The entity almost didn't know.

"Why, you- "

Bob held up a finger, frown easing only a fraction. Then he turned back, just managing to keep the growl out of his throat. "How about it, Bev? Let's make it perfectly clear for him. Here and now."

Her eyes darted, almost frantic, but her face didn't falter, didn't flush. "Bob, this isn't- "

It was as though a whole different entity had taken command of his voice.

And he just let them keep speaking.

He tilted his head. "Are you, or are you not, your own girl? You're always telling me how much of a prick this man can be. How he can't stand to let you out of his sight for more than a day. How you wish you could just not have to deal with his attention, his overprotectiveness."

The market grew quieter around them. More and more eyes turned their way.

Face reddening, Marsh's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. "Bevvie, this isn't the place- "

"Oh, I think it's exactly the place. Somewhere she can finally say what she feels, without having to worry about you cuffing her over the head for it. Bruising her arms. Doing worse."

He leaned forward, practically chest-to-chest with his foe.

His eyes burned behind the opaque shades.

"Don't act like it hasn't happened, old man."

Caught in the attention of so many unwanted townsfolk, Marsh faltered and stammered. "Look, whatever does or doesn't go on, that's our private business. And if you don't leave in the next few seconds- "

"Only a few seconds, Daddy?"

Finally cottoning on to her protector's meaning, overwhelmed by the erupting intensity, or merely caught up in the freewheeling insanity that was this long-anticipated confrontation, Beverly stepped forward.

"I'll make the most of it, then."

At that, the entity almost lost his grip on the performance.

Almost.

*Bevs, what are you-*

She improvised.

A fair hand made its way behind his neck, pulling their faces close.
Way too close.

She was smiling at him, eyes almost... sparkling?

With what?

Glee?

Amusement?

Triumph?

Madness?

All of those things.

He could only stare in astonishment, mouth gaping open.

"Guess this is goodbye, Rob."

She pressed her lips to his.

And It felt his mind *explode.*

... .

... .

... .

... .

... .

.

How they got from the supermarket back to Neibolt Street.

It didn't know.

All the entity could remember was jolting back to awareness, sprawled facedown on the foyer floor.

Like he had just relived his splitting episode all over again.

"Idiot. Wake up. We know you're not in a coma."

Someone was slapping his face.

First one way, then the other.

No, not any someone.

*Eddie?*

Coughing, the entity blinked, feeling the familiar, caked-on makeup covering his assumed-face. The
soft fabric of a familiar costume.

Before he could make total sense of it, Georgie Denbrough saw fit to interrupt the moment.

He scampered across the room to take a flying leap.

The form known as Pennywise coiled up and wheezed under the new pressure, landing squarely on his back. Arms wrapped around his neck from behind.

"Penny, you're back!"

Laughter bounced around the room, all the better to compliment his overjoyed cry.

*How? How am I back?*

"For beTter or worSe," the 'clown' choked out instead, speaking on automatic, his voice a shadow of itself. His fingers curled. "Get off."

Mercifully, one of the onlookers saw fit to intervene.

Laughing.

But intervening all the same.

"Georgie, easy. He only just woke up."

*Mikey.*

The weight on his back disappeared. But Georgie didn't go far.

Pennywise wheezed again, caught- *trapped* in another tight hug.

Amazing that a child this small could leave him so breathless.

Ineffectively, he tried to pry the kid off. Never had his arms felt so pathetically weak. "Georgie, pleAse, spAce, I need spaCe."

*Space enough for which there isn't enough in existence.*

*Ever.*

*In the history of anything.*

Waking up from hibernation was nothing compared to this.

At least then, the cosmic entity had a clear idea of what to *do.*

This, by comparison, felt like trying to reassemble one of Stan's puzzles.

After Richie had set off a cherry bomb atop it.

Speaking of Tozier...

He was still laughing.

On his back, legs in the air.
What a riot.

"What's so funny, Trashmouth?"

Richie kept cackling. Being of no help whatsoever.

Typical.

The other Losers were laughing, too.

Albeit not as much.

Unsurprisingly, Ben got ahold of his mirth first. "Nice to see you're still in one piece, man."

"Details, Eggboy," Pennywise sniped, attempting to make a snarl out of his voice, but it came out more of an impotent gasp. Georgie snickered against the beast's ruffled chest, head burrowing under his collar. "What happened?"

"You levelled the supermarket," Stan deadpanned, lounging by the front door.

Pennywise blinked, hard, irises rapid-cycling from here we go - blue to yellow to orange to white to orange to yellow than finally to blue again.

He coughed.

"What?"

Deadlights.

He had used his Deadlights?

"He means, you stunned everybody," Mike explained, still chuckling.

"Yeah, I mean- what was that? That light trick you did?"

Pennywise didn't feel like explaining.

He felt like sinking back onto the floor again.

Maybe, through it.

*Probably filled a whole wing of Juniper Hills Psychiatric, that's what I did.*

*And the next one they planned to add.*

"Like the milk was made of plutonium, or something," Stan waved a hand, uncaring as if his joke were actually accurate or not. "Someone dropped a gallon."

Georgie burst out laughing- or tried to. The collar muffled his peals of giggles fairly effectively.

Nearly soundproofing him.

Nearly.

Still on his hands and knees, the entity coughed one last time, then finally made an effort to stand up.

This was met with resistance.
"Oof!"

He almost fell flat on his face again.

Almost.

There was something between him and the floor now.

The creature didn't account for the fifty pounds of boy still wound around his neck.

"Ow! Penny!"

"Georgie, seriously, g-give him some room. Before someone really does get hurt."

Bill, grim-faced as ever, moved in, helped his brother struggle out from underneath his near-catatonic guardian.

Belatedly listening, Pennywise couldn't help thinking someone and his name were one in the same.

Then, without giving himself pause to consider, he crawled back to his feet. He braced a gloved hand on the foyer wall.

The same wall with the new hole.

No, wait.

He looked, frowning.

It was gone.

As it... should be?

*I'm back? Like, really, really back?*

He paused.

Listened.

Stared.

Yes.

Everything...

He could see, hear everything again.

Derry.

Every last square inch of it.

Including the parts that-

Ugh, no.

Don't look that way, nope.

He shook his head, straightening his senses out as much as his disheveled attire. He pawed at his
hair, mussed as it was all over again.

Like his form had reformed inside a box, only to fall out when Fate decided "nyh uh, that's enough of a timeout".

Insanity.

Every last despicable atom of this ordeal.

Plain and simple.

"Where's Bevs?"

Richie was still laughing.

Mindful to project his voice over that racket, Mike called across the room as if there were a canyon between them.

"Upstairs!"

And, just as he thought she would be, Beverly Marsh was perfectly composed about the whole thing. Except for one little minor factor.

That, they proceeded to circle each other and enthusiastically argue about it into the very small hours of Sunday morning.

"You made the first move!"

"Only after you put on such a great speech, Castro."

"I was waiting for a smack upside the head. When you didn't, I-I-"

"Like it would have helped anything."

"You never even tried."

"Don't you start with the whining."

"Whining is the least of what I've done!"

"You're hopeless, Pen!"

"New information, please!"

And on and on they went.

Our reality isn't their reality.

Right, Bill?
Chapter Summary

...You’ll see.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If he were to regard our chapter's title...

Pennywise wasn't so sure about the meaning of the phrase.

Less what it meant to any one of the Losers when he "invaded" the eighteen-inch zone that surrounded them. Times like that, his mood-detection senses were effectively muted. Their reactions were so varied and entertaining, he couldn't help himself on most occasions.

But when it came to Georgie Denbrough deciding to test the limits of what it meant for him...

Sometimes, Pennywise just wasn't game.

To tolerate the violation of his own physical space, that is.

Like when he had tried to work on a jigsaw puzzle in the hobby room upstairs at 29 Neibolt Street. Reclining on his stomach, with a curled fist propped against his cheek, he prodded the disjointed pieces about.

Perhaps that was where he first went wrong: in lying on the floor, instead of sitting at the table Stan had insisted on.

The finished puzzle wouldn't be that big.

Then, forewarned only by the sound of light footsteps racing up the hallway, and into the room, a sudden, lung-crushing weight landed on his back.

A normal human would have 'deflated' instantly, collapsing forward on their arms as the wind was knocked out of them.

It did no such thing.

Without so much as a twitch, Pennywise deadpanned his rebuke.

"Not right nOw, Georgle."

_Thump._

Something dropped against the floor beside his arm.

The half-finished puzzle jumped as if a small earthquake had rocked it.

Were he here, so obsessively-focused, Eddie would have hit the ceiling.
Blasé, the creature’s left eye panned sideways.

Then down.

Being able to focus both on a distraction and your intended task wasn’t as much of a perk as you might think.

"I saiD, stop it."

Georgie grinned up at him, undaunted. He was lying on his back.

He looked so just like a rambunctous puppy, with its paws in the air.

"No, you said, 'not right now'."

Pennywise scowled.

What a time for this kid to turn pedantic.

That was what Ben had called such strict adherence to literacy, right? Or was it Mike?

"I'm buSy."

"Doing a puzzle?" Georgie sat up, glancing belatedly over his shoulder at the half-finished work in question. Stating the obvious, he was practically setting the hapless question up for no answer. When his friend declined to respond, he shook his head, still smiling.

Then he crawled back the way he came, out of sight.

"You can work on that anytime, silly."

Set upon, Pennywise frowned at nobody, feeling hands climb their way up his back once more. He checked the urge to glare over his shoulder.

Hands, with a set of knees.

Silly? When I'm trying for 'serious'?

Georgie’s innate sense of balance was good enough, he was in no danger of slipping off. And even then, the distance back to the floor wasn’t that perilous.

So Pennywise snorted and looked away to practice an eyeroll (something else he had picked up through enough conversations with Stanley).

Then Georgie climbed off.

Dismounting to starboard instead of port.

And just as quickly, he pounced again.

"Oof!"

Pennywise didn't account for the small pair of arms latching themselves around his neck.

Needlessly tight.

Choking him mid-inhale.
"Quit being a grump," Georgie giggled in his ear, heedless of the clown's wide-eyed, wincing expression. Even if the face was just for show, as the child could do the entity no real lasting harm, the clown couldn't hope to keep a blank face there and then. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

*And I am, most times.*

*Just not right now.*

Pennywise communicated as much nonverbally, with a slow, sideways-panning glare and a winded-sounding growl.

Taking the hint, Georgie relaxed his grip, gaze turning apologetic.

"Sorry."

He was still smiling.

But when the boy failed to withdraw his hands, Pennywise made the (second) mistake of gently prying one, then both off his collar.

"We'll play later, Georgie. For now, I told Stan I'd finish this."

That said, his eye turned back to the puzzle. Both of them.

He blinked, frowning anew, glanced around.

Rose up.

Wait.

The piece he had been holding.

Where was it?

Blinking again, Pennywise reached over to skim through the nearest pile.

And Georgie proved more persistent than most of the Losers would give him credit for being.

He aimed for the floorspace between the being's frilly arms.

*Thud.*

The little jagged pieces gave another slight bounce at the impact.

Conversely, Pennywise reared up on his palms, hastily putting some new, much-needed distance between their faces. The six-year-old had practically landed on top of his gloves, in front of his red nose.

*Georgie, seriously-*

The entity's new bout of glowering and growling didn't phase him whatsoever.

"But I can only stay for so long today, Penny. Please?"

Pleading. The kid was resorting to pleading now.

"Not rigHt- oomph, leT go!"
Sitting up unexpectedly, Georgie went for the neck again.

Pennywise fell as far as his elbows, just barely avoiding crushing the tyke under his gangly frame. The sudden weight had caused him to pitch forward. And heedless of the body slam's accidental nature, there was one awkward scenario he would rather not have to explain to Bill.

Ever, hurts mended or no.

One skinny arm hooked its way around his neck, underneath his collar, one above and over the shoulder.

Now there really was no getting out of this.

"Gotcha!"

Georgie's amusement was clear, however muffled it was against the satin.

Richie would be cursing a mile a minute, were he being subjected to the same kind of unrelenting attack.

There was no point in trying to top Tozier there.

So, question number one.

"Why are you being so- so clingy?" Pennywise demanded, neck canted at a sharp angle, trying in vain to see the boy's face, effectively hidden under the ruffles as it was now. Far from returning the hug, he tried to wedge his hand under one arm, to somehow work it loose without hurting the kid.

Was this really karma in action?

Getting him back for all the times he had 'attacked' the Losers in such a fashion?

He resisted the urge to scoot backwards. There was no point. As much as there was no need to drag Georgie across the floor, it could only result in more accidental injuries.

And just to add insult to injury, he couldn't sense anything, too unfocused by his newfound irritation as he was. The kid's otherwise-jolly mood effectively masked whatever other emotional hints the cosmic entity might have picked up on.

Therefore eliminating any chance of him formulating a more effective plan in removing Denbrough from his... person.

Bracing one glove against the floor, he managed to get the opposite boot positioned underneath himself, even if Georgie kept him on one knee (practically leaving the boy standing on tiptoe). Half-standing, the clown had better leverage to work with.

He brushed his fingers against clothed ribs in warning, tantalizingly almost.

Tickling, in this instance, was a last resort.

"Don't make me do something I'll regret."

"Don't go."

Then, like a levy had given way, Pennywise froze.
The emotional buffer of good humor vanished.

Burying him like a ton of bricks.

In its place was... nothing but unmitigated hurt, heartache, and anguish. That all but stole the creature's second wind away, the very same air he pretended to need just to appear more human. Pressed right up against him, Georgie's proximity made it feel all the more overwhelming.

It felt vaguely like being run over by a speeding bulldozer might, only to eventually peel yourself up off the pavement with a dazed look.

All Pennywise could do, for about ten seconds, was blink profusely and half-stand there with his mouth hanging open.

Before his voice saw fit to retake its place in his constricted throat.

Even then, it didn't sound right.

"W-w-what?"

He heard bells.

Something was trembling.

And was Pennywise ninety-percent sure it wasn't himself.

"Don't go, please."

He struggled to break free again, halfheartedly, torn again between being too firm and too ineffectual.

"Georgie, I-I don't- let go, for goodness' sake. I can't talk to you like this."

"You didn't want to talk before."

He kept pulling.

"And now, you've got my attention. But all you had to do was- "

"Keep you here long enough?"

Pennywise frowned, unseen as it was against the kid's back, gloves stilling. The high tension in his shoulders eased, just a bit.

Now, what was this?

The amusement had returned.

Not as strong as before, but there.

Like a second helping of the same meal, once you were over the initial tastes-so-good vibes.

What was Georgie playing at?

Patience. You're done for the day.

Pennywise picked a spot on the mouldering bedroom wall to glare at.
Time to break out the ultimatum.

It wouldn't be the first time he had teleported out of a tight spot.

"You have three seconds to tell me what's wrong, or I'm gone."

He said what he did without thinking.

And that was the third and final straw to break both their backs.

By uttering just the wrong buzzword, at precisely the wrong time...

He sent Georgie into tears.

He froze again, but instead of feeling like the rock solid glacier, grounded against the earth, he felt like a fragile icicle.

Hanging out there. Thinned by the wind. Prone to snapping with the tiniest pressure.

Instantly, the strength went out of his arms. They dropped at Georgie's sides, long fingers hanging limp.

Stunned.

Stunned was the only word to sum up how horrible the clown felt in that instant.

He had never made his friend cry before.

Not even on accident.

His mind cartwheeled, pinballing frantically between the next half dozen feelings that assailed him. Not settling on any one of them.

Breaking through the momentary numbness, Pennywise sat back down, heavily, now on both knees.

Thereby letting Georgie stand on his own two feet.

Even if his own knees had gone weak.

The sobs weren't that loud, really. Broadcasted into his torso, rather than open space, Pennywise felt more than heard the hitching, whining breaths. He felt the sharp intakes of air in-between, and the anxious gripping of his fingers against the suit.

Hesitantly, at a loss for what else to possibly do or say, he wound an arm around the boy's quivering shoulders. He paused. When it wasn't shrugged off, he raised the other, palm resting flat against the boy's back.

Now he didn't dare hold him too tight.

After a few dry runs, his hitching, apprehensive voice found itself again.

"Oh, no. No, n-no, no. Geor- what did I- I'm sorRy. Georgie, I'm sorry. Don't cry, pleAse. No."

He may as well have not said anything.

Never had his rambling words felt so awfully, completely useless.
What?

What had he done?

Not being able to see Georgie's face, he could only imagine.

Imagine, and wait.

And hope.

Hope against hope it wasn't anything that couldn't be undone.

Neither bothered to note how long it was before the murmurs and the crying abated.

The ancient house around them seemed to grow deathly quiet, sensing in its own way the torment unfolding within its walls.

Finally getting ahold of his jangled nerves, Georgie shifted and pulled away, albeit still held delicately in his friend's arms.

To the clown's quiet dismay, it wasn't enough of a change to be able to see the kid's face.

Georgie simply repositioned himself. Instead of weeping into the clown's collarbone, he laid his head up against a wide shoulder. He kept sniffling, occasionally whimpering, face turned outward.

Unwinding an arm, he sighed, shakily, and wiped at his wet cheek.

"They said you're gonna go away."

No.

Pennywise wanted so badly to refute those six planet-shattering words.

His glowing eyes clamped themselves shut.

His throat closed.

The numbness washed over him again.

No, not this.

Lamely, all he could manage to choke out was:

"Who... who did, Georgie?"

Sniff.

"Billy. A-a-and the others."

The creature hissed quietly, torn between grief and simmering anger.

It's too- Why? When? Who blurted it out? What brought this on? Why did Bill tell him? Did he? Did they all? I said I would. I was going to. I-I had to, yes. But- When the time was right. How could they? Why now? Why, whY, wHyy?

Wisely, he kept all of these impulsive thoughts to himself.
It wouldn't do him any favors to voice them.

Georgie wiped his face again, still pressed close. His right arm never lost its grip.

"They said you'll go to sleep. And you won't wake up."

With his eyes still closed, Pennywise couldn't identify the tortured, involuntary sound that escaped him then.

It might have been a laugh, or a sob, or some bastard hybrid of the two.

*Won't wake up.*

Somehow, that was kinder than the truth.

His arms tightened.

Georgie held his breath and listened, raptly, for some kind of response beyond that. Then, eventually, he found the courage to ask.

Haltingly.

But he got it out in the end.

"You won't- w-wake up- will you?"

Pennywise swallowed hard, thinking long after the fact to reopen his stinging eyes. Now he was starting to shake.

His eyes. It was all he could do not to clutch at them. They felt like Patrick Hockstetter had poured kerosene into the sockets and set them ablaze.

The crux of it was, there were no tears.

Tear ducts.

He had long since forgone the idea in this form.

That was only fair, after causing as many of them in others as he had.

No means of relief for him there.

And beyond that, they wouldn't actually fix anything here and now.

Speaking.

Speaking was the only way to get through this.

"No, Georgie, I... I will. After a while."

He winced.

The little excited jump Denbrough gave may as well have been another iron post to the face.

Like the reality wasn't really as bad as life had led the kid to believe.

"So... so, I'll see- umph."
Gently, he quieted whatever Georgie was going to say with a soft push from a splayed hand, placed behind the boy's skull.

"Shhh. Let me... let me finiSh."

Obediently, always obediently, he did.

"No, Georgie. I'll wake up, but... but you, Bill, everyone, you won't remember me."

He kept his words as monotone as possible, free of inflection.

When so many other times, he wouldn't give a care as to what he sounded like.

Now, more than ever, it mattered.

That snapped the boy out of his tragic trance.

"W-what do you mean?"

At long last, Georgie reared backwards just enough for them to look at one another.

Now, writ large upon his features, mixing with the potent cocktail of sorrow and disappointment, was fury.

Arms unwinding, Georgie grabbed his guardian's face with both hands, grasping his pale jaw. His fingertips didn't dig as deep as Bill's had.

But it almost smarted.

"You liar. Don't say that. Of course we'll remember you!"

Pennywise had never seen the kid look so vehement, so fierce.

He almost smiled at the novelty of it.

"I wish it were a lie, Georgie. In some ways, I wish this all was a lie. But it isn't."

Confusion gradually took the fury's place, standing center stage.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have done, what I have."

"What are you talking about, Penny? What do you mean, when you say we won't remember?"

"You know I'm not human."

Lacking any viable alternative, Pennywise went for bluntness, as he had not all that long ago, when this same boy had confronted him with similar questions in this same house's basement. Explaining in flat tones, it was all the entity could do to keep, to will his voice to stay steady.

"I don't- rest like humans do. Every twenty-seven years, I wake, for a year, and then I sleep. Anyone I've ever... met, they always forget me. It's what has always happened, since... since forever."

Georgie said nothing.

He just stared, dark, soulful eyes wider than ever.

Listened.
Frozen.

Hearing this confession was as close to seeing Its' Deadlights as the boy would ever come.

But then...

Would a mild dose of them in this case be... merciful?

No.

Shame on him for ever thinking that.

For all the child's good naturedness, Georgie was tough. Attuned.

As tough as Beverly.

He didn't need Deadlights to see him through this.

"And, after everything that's happened, it... makes me wish meeting you had somehow changed
that."

But wishes don't always come true.

...Least of all for something like me.

Cautiously, Pennywise let a gentle hand settle against Georgie's cheek, brushing the wet skin with
his thumb.

"I can only say... I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I deceived you. You can hate me all you want. I won't hold it
against you. You've been so kind for not holding me... against me. I can do no less in return."

Wordlessly, Georgie reached up, grabbing the hand's cuffed wrist.

Almost desperately.

He continued to stare.

Unblinking.

Pennywise blinked instead, slowly.

What now?

This was as far ahead as he could go.

"So, you tell me. Tell me what to do."

...

"Don't sleep, Penny."

For almost a year, he had worked on honing his appearance, practicing his assumed-mannerisms.

The deep sigh that followed was as human as it got.

"Georgie..."
"Just don't sleep. You're not human. Who says you have to?"

Pennywise gazed down at him for a while, expression remorseful.

Trying to fathom an answer.

Or the closest thing he could find to one.

No one. But the universe has rules. Rules that even I have no control over.

If I could not sleep, it'd be the same as saying your solar system's sun wouldn't have to shine the next day.

Sometimes... there just is no choice to be had.

"I'm sorry. It just doesn't... work like that."

Hands still in place, Georgie went worryingly-still and quiet again. Throwing any more of a low-key fit was pointless, and he knew that. With his tears spent, he could only breathe and slowly, ever so slowly, grow calmer and calmer. To let his heart recover from the stress that had been foisted upon it.

And to think, let his brain absorb everything.

As much as he may not have wanted to.

It.

He had only known the entity by his alias for the entirety of their friendship.

But somehow, in that moment, Georgie put two and two together.

It.

It doesn't work like that.

"I wish you did."

Of all the ways the being could have responded...

Pennywise managed only a weak chuckle, eyes falling shut.

"Me, too."

His knees were sore.

But in the grand scheme of things, they hurt the least of all.
Nothing in Derry, Maine happened by accident.

Except... when it did.

"Kid! Get outta the road!"

Reaching for the paper boat, held just out of his reach, Georgie Denbrough didn't see the sedan turn the corner.

He heard the driver's voice before he saw it.

And, bald tires slipping on the asphalt, the sedan didn't so much turn the corner as hydroplane around it.

Georgie's head jerked sideways, over his extended shoulder, eyes wide. In that instant, the sensation of rain pelting him, of cold water running over his legs, simply vanished. He swore he could feel his pupils shrink in the sudden glare of the high-beam headlights.

Belatedly, his ear caught that strange voice, so oddly pitched before as it had spoken to him from the gutter.

But the warning it cried out with now was clear as a bell.

"Oh! WatCh out!"

Georgie's right hand was still outstretched, elbow-deep in the gutter.

Frozen in that awkward half second before the fear for his life set in, the pain jarred him back to reality.

The sharp pain of - what felt like - a jagged-toothed beartrap closing on the inside of said elbow.

Next was the tremendous pull of weight grabbing on from below, the pressure on his joint doubling in awful, nerve-numbing intensity. It yanked him downward, flush against the curb.

Acting on automatic, Georgie's left hand thought to brace himself on the drain's upper edge.

Before his face could connect with the wet cement.
"Ow!"

From behind, he felt heard the loud hiss of water kicking up.

The car passed through a recess in the road. Heavy drops from the puddle were flung back into the air by its spinning tires. Mist flying from the wheel wells, the driver had the audacity to honk as the chromed, rusting corner of their bumper just missed their would-be target.

Georgie belatedly thought to yell in fright, to cover the back of his head with his left hand. He turned his head away from the oncoming water.

The spray washed over him like a wave, combing its way up into the air only to crash on the beach.

And just as quickly as it began, the ordeal was over.

Stepping on the gas, the sedan continued its flight down the street.

Around another corner.

Out of sight.

The rain kept on falling as though nothing had happened.

Then, after a few tense breaths, the vicelike pain around his elbow eased.

The boy laid there, facedown and spread-eagled against the curb, with his arm overstretched - down in the dark where he could no longer see it. He thought, blinking in a slow, dumbfounded manner, about how he was hurting, heart hammering, for several more seconds before he finally wrenched back.

To get up on his knees.

To try and stand.

Only to fall down and cry.

Cry as he never had before.

In pain. Alarm.

Fear.

His shoulder ached. And something warm was running down his arm. His elbow, the rain slicker there was torn.

Wisps of red leaked from the myriad of punctures in the yellow rubber, trailing down his forearm. They were whisked away by the raindrops as quickly as they appeared.

He was hurt.

Bleeding.

There were bound to be as many holes in his skin as there were in his slicker's and sweater's sleeves.

Like he had been stabbed by the business-end of an oversized pincushion.

Wincing, he held up his maimed arm.
Turned his hand over, gingerly, palm up. He flexed his fingers.

That had hurt.

But his arm was still there.

Sore, but there.

When it had felt, for just a split second, like it was being scissored off.

_by what? What could have done this?_

_It's as though some... some animal tried to-

Not giving the boy a second longer to process the fact, to wonder just what had caused this injury, Fate hurried onward with its business.

"Hey."

Georgie flinched, looked up.

Scooted backward on his knees, clumsily, as his galoshes slipped uselessly.

Held his bleeding arm to his side.

Pennywise had crawled out of the drain.

Somewhat.

The clown had emerged as far as his belted waist, leaning on his elbows, hands flat on the road.

That ruffled suit, now the trembling boy could see just how colorless it was. He hadn't been able to see much of it in the dark, shadowy drain. The onslaught of rain only painted it a darker shade of gray.

But never mind that.

How the clown had managed to squeeze through such a narrow space, without hurting himself, much less ruining his makeup or costume...

Georgie would think about that later.

As before, he was too transfixed, gazing into those blue irises.

They had seemed to glow from inside the drain.

Out in the meager daylight, they were just as impossibly vibrant.

With locks of wet, stringy hair hanging in said eyes, the clown's expression was almost unreadable.

Almost.

Then Pennywise frowned, brow furrowing with concern.

"You... okAy?"

He spoke softly, almost too soft to be heard against the rain. Like he was apprehensive to even ask.
And it was a simple enough question.

Georgie's lip trembled at hearing it. He clutched at his arm, impulsively.

He sobbed again, hot tears sliding down his cold cheeks.

"T-h-they di-didn't see me."

He couldn't say anymore. His shoulders were shaking, too fraught with nerves, too overcome by emotion.

Then, after a spell, when he got ahold of himself.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye.

Through his moist eyelashes, he looked.

Gloved fingers, toying with the loose corner of his hood.

Pennywise was still there.

He no longer looked concerned.

The frown had creased into a scowl.

He was glaring.

With eyes that were once blue - now they were yellow, a turbid amber-yellow, veering closer to orange.

And his voice, whereas before it was soft and comforting...

Now it was half a growl.

"BrighT yellow, and they couldN't see yOu."

Slowly, as if just remembering he wasn't alone on that flooded street, the clown glanced up.

Up and through the sides of those ugly, yellow eyes.

"Go home, GeorgIe. I'Ll take caRe of it."

Take care of...?

The boy's head jerked up again.

Alone.

He's leaving you alone.

No.

There's still-

"Wait."

Impulsively, Denbrough reached out with his left hand, to grab the clown's shoulder.
His fingers closed around a handful of damp satin.

Pennywise stopped short, black-rimmed eyes widening.

"...WhaT?"

They stared at each other for another short while.

Enough time for Georgie to watch - from close up - as those irises slowly darkened from yellow back to cerulean.

From the insides out.

Like two suns being eclipsed in different directions.

The child's chin started to shiver.

From dread, from cold.

Some combination of the two.

Even as he startled to tremble, he couldn't help but wonder at the strange, lilting expression Pennywise was starting to bear.

_Why does he suddenly look so... scared?_

No.

Maybe not downright scared.

But certainly uneasy.

Just a little.

Fearing for your life always made things, in the moment, seem more exaggerated than they really were.

That one of those things, here and now, was a _clown_...

Or had the appearance of one...

You get the idea.

Instead of asking about it, Georgie's mouth said something far more innocuous.

"My... boat. Do you still have her?"

Pennywise squinted at him, striped cheeks puffing up in newfound thought, red nose wrinkling.

"HeR...?"

Shakily, Georgie smiled.

The last few tears slid from their ducts.

And just as soon as it had started, his chin stopped shivering by the time he spoke again.
"You always call boats she."

All things considered, looking back a year later, a scratched-up arm was the least of the damage he might have suffered that day.

Were it not for It.

And they'll tell you I don't care anymore
And I hope you'll know that's a lie
'Cause I found what I have been waiting for
But to get there means crossing a line
Post-Op

Chapter Summary

You don't need to know it all to be safe, Eds.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to "Close Call".

Eddie sighed, idly spinning the overturned bike's front wheel in somewhat-fond remembrance. The spokes made a weak, slow-paced ticking noise as they rotated.

It was more than the rear wheel was capable of.

There was a Trans Am-fender-shaped ding in the frame. Silver gleamed where the black paint had been scraped away. The right pedal was still missing.

His bike was in worse shape than him.

At least, physically.

Right now, the brace on his right wrist was the least of his concerns. Getting mobile again was the biggest.

Even if he wasn't in the best position to do anything about it.

How?

He wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, anyway. The few tools he had strewn about the grass were purely for show. He knew enough about bicycles to patch tires, mend brake cables, and that was about it. This kind of repair was well out of his league, and budget.

Maybe it was for the better, him being stuck at home until further notice. This was the first venture out into the yard he had dared in a week. Even then, he kept to the shaded, tree-lined side of the house, hidden from clear view of the neighborhood.

He didn't want the rest of the Losers to keep their distance, but right now, it wasn't that they had frozen him out, either. Just that getting past Sonia Kaspbrak was nigh impossible. Eddie didn't blame them for withdrawing after the first five unsuccessful tries.

He couldn't. Not one iota.

That aborted meeting was at the back of all their minds. And the reason why it had been curtailed, even more so. Everyone was sticking close to home now.

Bowers was still on the prowl.
Only in that sense was Eddie remotely thankful for having an overzealous-guard-dog-of-a-mother.

With the worst of his injuries healed, Eddie squeaked by on the excuse that he had simply crashed his bike. *How* he had crashed it was irrelevant. Sonia didn't know, much less care to. One look and, wordlessly, she had shoved him into the passenger seat.

They returned home two days later, long after the doctors declared the once-break was nothing more than a mild wrist sprain. But not after completing a full battery of exhaustive testing and unnecessary exams.

And that had been a week ago, now.

There was only so much he could do to stay busy.

Sonia forbade him from using the phone.

"Trying to fix your bike behind by back? That deathtrap is better off broken, Eddie, as are you for not being able to go anywhere."

Not her exact words, but they were approximate enough.

Every book in his room, he had read thrice. There was nothing new on TV. All the board games in the house required at least two players, and Mom wasn't willing to oblige there. Solitaire was a reliable fallback at first, but after he had won ten consecutive hands, Eddie had stopped. This was not the kinda activity you wanted to excel in, especially not so early in life.

Most infuriating was the fact that, the one person who *could* visit him - for whom bullies and overprotective mothers were of *no* consequence - hadn't.

That was... annoying, to say the least. Goodness knew Eddie had endured far longer spells confined at home with no consequence in the past.

But even as little as ten seconds consisting of a "how are you, Eds" would be *such* a relief from this monotony.

Not to mention...

"What kept you?"

Eddie gripped the useless wrench in his hand, drummed it against his opposite palm. His eye never wavered.

Without making so much as a hint of sound, Pennywise crouched down beside him, balanced on his fingertips and toes. His expression was remorseful, resigned.

Like he knew there was no avoiding the wrath about to be let loose on him.

He practically invited it in.

Lashing out, Eddie grabbed the clown by his pale jaw.

He kept his voice down, but hissed through clenched teeth.

"*Answer* me, Dingles. You can do *that* much, right?"

Pennywise glanced away, his morose expression faultering, before he dared to look back.
"I'm sorRy, Eds."

Sighing a heavy, aggravated sigh, Eddie let go, pressed the same hand to his forehead. "And quit apologizing. It gets pretty hollow-sounding, pretty fast, when you don't back it up with anything."

At that, Pennywise said nothing. For a moment. Then he simply dropped into a sitting position with a soft thump on the grass, long legs splayed before him.

"You mean, heRe, or... out on tHe road?"

_God. Even when he isn't dancing for real, he's dancing around a tricky subject._

This conversation was not bound to be a short one.

Eddie scowled. Long-festering frustration had left him feeling bold, vindictive. Being unfairly cooped up had him craving release. He was long past feeling grateful for the healing spell that had been cast upon him.

Now, he wanted some answers. Closure.

Blasted peace.

He gestured with the wrench, talking with his hands as much as anything else. "Both, Einstein. I didn't hallucinate that delayed-arrival crap you pulled. Every time Georgie's about to sneeze, you're there, ready to hold a finger under his nose. Every time Beverly needs a cigarette, pocket change somehow finds its way into her pants. Why didn't I get the same consideration, then or now?"

"...You reaLly want to know?"

"Kind of, a _lot_, yeah!"

Pennywise cringed, fingers pulling restlessly at the inner edge of his collar. "It's juSt- I knoW how easiLy... freakEd out you can get, EdS. I can't _not_ knOw. Most days, you're so sensitiVe. I didN't-want to maKe it worse. I was afRaid I'd hurt more tHan help."

'Disbelieving' didn't begin to cover Eddie's initial reaction.

Instantly, his hackles stood back on end.

"That's _it_? You were worried you'd do more harm than good? That's why you stayed away so long?"

_Then and now?_

"For now, yeS." Pennywise's eyes diverged, the way they sometimes did as if he had neglected keeping them on track. "YouR mother was- "

"_Don't_ talk about her."

It wasn't that he was feeling defensive. Not about Sonia, not at all.

Rather, Eddie was sick of being stuck in her proverbial shadow.

Every minute of every damn day.

For a _week._
He was sick of being coddled.

By anybody.

Least of all, this... thing. This infuriating, not-human, dolled-up mockery of life.

"When?" Eddie snapped. He tossed the wrench over beside the upside-down bike.

"What do you-"

"When did you sense the trouble? When Belch's car hit my bike?" With his good hand Kaspbrak pointed to the still-visible scrapes on his chin. "Or when my face was getting up close and personal with the asphalt?"

Pennywise stared down at him, unblinking, unmoved by the boy's dramatics. No one had ever asked the clown to explain, much less confronted him on the mechanics as to how his senses worked. Would he elaborate, or sweep it under the carpet marked "cosmic know-how only"?

"At the corner."

"What...?"

"When they turned the corner, and spotted you," Pennywise admitted, his voice as vacant as his expression. "That's when I knew."

"And you... you didn't try to stop it?"

The blank sheet crumpled. Maybe it was picking up on the boy's repressed anxieties. Or maybe it was all him.

He fumbled again in explaining: "There wasn't- I couldn't- There was nothing to be done. Not without endangering you."

More than I was already? Nothing? Absolutely nothing? You can manipulate the very fabric of Derry, but you couldn't stop a Trans Am with a blown oil line or a flat tire or something?

"You're unbelievable." Eddie shook his head, and he held up a hand before the clown could retort. "No, I mean it. You're really, completely un-fucking-believable, man. All the things you claim to be able to do, how you've helped us, and the one time I need you to do something, for me, you don't. And why? Because you think it'd give me a little fright? I can handle fear, you moron."

And it was that insult that struck the proverbial match.

Pennywise blinked, blue eyes centering abruptly.

"No, you can't."

Eddie blinked in return.

He breathed in, held it.

They stared each other down.

No.
No, his palms weren't starting to feel a little sweaty.

No, those weren't his ever-jumpy nerves beginning to twitch.

"Yes, I can."

His resolve was as rock-solid as before.

No, his voice wasn't starting to crack.

In one smooth, near-levitating motion, the clown crawled forward, over his own legs. As if it took him virtually no energy to accomplish the feat.

Within a second, he was there, directly above Eddie, leaning down, painfully close. He stood between the boy and the sun behind the trees, throwing his face even deeper into shadow.

Save for the glowing eyes.

"No, you can't."

The insistence didn't sell his words.

The near-instant feeling of dread did.

The world on their peripheral seemed to slow to half-speed.

Eddie's brown eyes went wide, round. He reared back on reflex, elbows wobbly as he tried, unsuccessfully, to keep himself from toppling backwards onto the grass.

He just managed not to scoot away.

Fear.

Like the pain. How he took it away-

Now he's-

Undaunted, Pennywise leaned in, closer than ever. He braced his hands flat against the ground beside Eddie's shoulders.

With a weak, protesting yelp, Eddie laid flat against the ground, hands poised before him. It felt like a vain gesture already. What little, pathetic good they would do to fend off this creature- shield himself against the imposing presence- from whatever he was intending-

"W-what are you-

Less than three inches of air separated their faces.

Pennywise's irises flushed yellow, from the inside out.

A soft growl overlaid his words.

"Now try and say you're not afraid."

Eddie quailed, even as he wouldn't- couldn't- look away.

For a split second, he was sure he could see himself, reflected in the shine of those eyes.
"I- don't- You- "

"I spared you, Eddie. By letting you get hurt, I spared you from seeing something far more terrible, had I intervened in the way you think you wanted. Something I could have erased as easily as your pain, but between the two, the physical pains leave the lesser marks behind. On your mind, on your soul, on everything."

A gloved hand seized the boy's chin, firmly.

The eyes burned and changed shade again, darkening to a molten orange.

"Would you rather I hadn't?"

Eddie gasped deep, held his breath.

He didn't. He didn't know.

He didn't know what he would 'rather', not when there wasn't any 'rather' that could have possibly been better.

Then he swallowed, whimpering softly at the unfairness of it all. How he couldn't look away, how he couldn't get away from home, how even his eldritch friend was somehow caught betwixt some moral cosmic dilemma when it came to deciding how to spare him more hurt.

Weirdly enough, Eddie also thought of school at that moment. The school he had been indefinitely-excused from while he 'mended'. His assignments, the essays, were the first comparison he drew.

Like erasing a word written in pencil, a pencil that you had pressed too hard against the paper...

You could only erase so much. The lead could be buffed away.

The imprints that were left behind on the page...

You couldn't erase those. You could write over them, but if you looked - really looked - you would always see them.

More often than not, though, you just ended up starting over with a fresh sheet of paper.

And it wasn't like Eddie Kaspbrak could just save up enough money to toddle down to the department store and pick out a fresh set of 'sanity' like it was a new outfit.

Still looming over him, Pennywise squinted. He tilted his head slowly to one side, then he let go of Eddie's chin.

It was a look of almost-satisfaction.

That a harshly-delivered lesson had been absorbed, albeit reluctantly.

And not without a small amount of regret at having to take the brutal tone he had.

His eyes softened.

Eddie understood.

"Does that make enough sense for you?"
Gradually, the air cleared. The smog-like atmosphere of tension lifted, like the atmosphere after a storm had blown itself out.

And rather than leave the boy there, cowering on the ground, Pennywise offered Eddie a hand, which was very reluctantly accepted, and helped him sit back up. His eyes darkened back to a cool, neutral blue.

Then they sat side-by-side, regarding each other in awkward silence for another moment.

With a rattling sigh, the clown wrapped his arms around his knees, gaze distant. "I'm sorry for not doing more, Eds. For staying away. But you didn't know what you'd be asking of me."

"I- I only don't know because you won't tell us," Eddie stammered, voice thin and trembling (albeit less than the rest of him still was). "Is it really that bad-"

With a sharp turn of his head, Pennywise glared down at him again, eyes narrowing.

"Never mind."

*If he says I'm better off not knowing, maybe so.*

*After all, knowing too much is usually the cause of my hysteria.*

*But you can't just not-*

"You asked me to not."

Eddie blinked, befuddled anew. "What?"

Frowning, Pennywise offered the waiting half of his reasoning up for consideration. "The bullies. I wanted to go after them. You asked- told me to stay. So I stayed."

*Only because I... I didn't want you to leave.*

*That was before I knew you could heal anything.*

*But, still... you did stay.*

"Things could have been worse, Eds."

With that said, the air seemed to remember to fill the void it had vacated between them.

A gentle breeze stirred the trees above their heads like it finally thought the scene safe to return to.

Fingers running over his wrist brace, Eddie supposed it could have been. Worse, that is. Besides avoiding death, he had avoided needing a legitimate visit to the emergency room. He had avoided having to explain the lunacy that was Henry Bowers trying to run him down.

He had even avoided some schoolwork as a minor fringe benefit.

Silver linings, right?

"Thank-you, then. I'm... I'm sorry, too. Just, being stuck here, looking at this every day- " Eddie gestured toward the bike, still standing broken before them. The apology sounded as lame as he currently felt. "It was on my mind."
Pennywise stared intently at the damaged frame, eyes shifting back and forth. Apparently talked-out, he had zeroed in on the next most pressing matter present in the yard.

Then, after a moment's contemplation, he sat up, crawled closer to it.

Hesitating one last time, Eddie followed on his hands and knees.

He almost hoped.

He almost dared to hope that the entity's healing feat would work on inanimate objects.

"I don't suppose you found-"

Producing it like a slight-of-hand card trick, out of thin air, Pennywise suddenly held up a rugged piece of plastic.

Its cracked reflector plate still shone.

"You mean this?"

Eddie balked, but not unhappily, recognizing the part instantly.

The missing pedal.

"Yeah, that's it! Can you-"

Grinning smugly, Pennywise laid a hand against the black frame.

"Already thought of it, EdS."
Killing With Kindness

Chapter Summary

Ben tries to make things right.

Chapter Notes

Post "Taste Test".

Ben could see it in the way Victor Criss slumped in his chair, head down.
The guy still felt like hell.
For more reasons than just the physical hurts.
Why else would he be cooling his heels at the town library?
He was no bookworm, or half-decent student.
The once-associate of Henry Bowers would have to be feeling out of place here.
Whatever anti-school stigmas the old building was associated with, no one could deny the appeal of its peaceful atmosphere. To the right person, it was a sanctuary from the social chaos outside.
And right now, Criss was one such soul.
Frowning, ever-contemplative, Ben Hanscom lingered in the hallway, hands on his backpack straps. With his work done, he had intended to leave, to be home before dinner. Spotting the back of a familiar golden-blonde head one study room over from his own had stopped him mid stride.
They had not crossed paths since what happened at the creek.
Mostly because the offending party had been hospitalized for almost two weeks.
But here it was, four weeks after the fact, and Criss was at the library.
Alone.
Still.
At the moment, Ben could fathom no better scenario to patch things up in.
Or at least to give it his best try.
Softly, he rapped on the open doorway with his knuckles.
"Victor?"
Criss jumped like he had been caught napping in class.

He twisted around in his seat, saw who it was, and winced.

Ben frowned.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"Get lost, Hanscom."

And rather than turn back to his still-open books, Criss made to stand, as if he meant to leave. He moved to grab his backpack, straightened up too fast.

Ben felt a twinge of guilt as the older boy cried out, clutched his shoulder. The backpack was dropped before its straps had cleared the floor.

He waited a spell, then stepped closer, pulling the door shut behind him.

"Easy. I just want to talk."

His gentle words were met with a snarl.

"There's nothing to talk about, new kid. I-I don't remember much, but I remember this happening because of you. So scram!"

Ben kept his distance.

He watched as Criss put on a show.

How he retreated around the table as he spoke.

Trying to seem angry, irritated.

When he was really scared.

His eyes were as wide as tea saucers.

Hands resting at his sides, Ben waited.

After perhaps two minutes, Criss relented. Somewhat. He breathed out, shakily, and took another half-step in retreat. His back hit the bookshelves lining the wall.

No where else to go.

The freshman knew better than to get closer, once someone was backed into a corner.

*If only he knew there was nothing to run from now...*

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

Criss didn't say anything at first.

He blinked, mouth unhinging just slightly. His memories of what the attack involved may not have been... complete, but the part involving him driving Ben down the hillside, that had to be clear.

Painfully clear.
"...What?"

"About the other day. I don't know what happened, either, but whatever hurt you, it... had to be because I was there."

Criss closed his mouth, shook his head, locks swaying.

"That... that makes no sense, Hanscom. Both of us were there. What would make you more appealing to a bear than me, besides having more fat on ya?"

"I don't know," Ben shrugged, nonplussed. "Even certain bears have certain tastes. You ever read about them? Polar bears eat seals. Black bears eat berries."

Criss made a sound best described as half scoff, half laugh. He let go of his shoulder, tried to cover a cringe as he folded his arms. "And the one that got me, what was it? A kodiak?"

"You only find those in Alaska."

"Point is, new kid, I don't need your sorries. I'm doing- just fine."

Ben frowned.

Fine.

*You've been running on your own ever since.*

*Studying alone, lunches spent alone.*

*If that's your idea of 'fine'...*

Pushing the matter further wouldn't yield any positive outcomes.

"Well... good. I just wanted to say that, then. Thanks for your time."

Somehow, as he turned his back to open the door, Ben knew he was safe.

That he was in no danger of being set upon.

Here and now.

Or later.

Peace almost-made, he wandered out the library's front double-doors. The sun was just starting its late afternoon fall.

Victor Criss emerged an hour later, backpack at the ready. His right wrist, he had crammed between the strap and his chest, so it would not swing so much at his side. Without Henry and the others, he faced a long ride home.

Stooping, he stopped short of unlocking his bicycle.

Tied to the seat was a single red balloon.

As he stared in disbelief, it slowly rotated his way.

Revealing a smudged *sorRy* scrawled on its far side.
Written in - what appeared to be - black Sharpie ink.

Below that was a simple, dotted set of eyes and a frowning parenthesis of a mouth.

: ( 
Bill Denbrough blinked and froze, halfway through penciling in the letter V, as - without warning - the black Sharpie landed atop his notebook. The marker rolled, bounced over the spiral spine, and came to a stop.

He frowned. The freshman already had an inkling who had borrowed it (without asking), but upon its apparent-return, he was willing to forgive that.

For a price.

He sat back, twisted around in his chair.

"What were you doing with that?"

The creature halted midstep, then glanced belatedly back over his shoulder.

Then, just as smoothly, looked away.

"NotHing."

Georgie sat on the bedroom floor, with his back against the closed closet door. He smiled and said nothing. Held in his cupped hands, the quivering tan-and-white hamster could only squeak and hide its face as Pennywise took a seat beside the boy. Somehow, he managed not to jostle their surroundings in the process.

"Good. Now you can hold Tim."

Conversely, the gangly entity held up a flat palm, in refusal. The other arm, he folded across his chest.

He was still looking away, brows held low. The expression was dually downcast and considerate at once.

"No. KeEp him for noW, GeorgIe."

Sitting at the desk, Bill frowned and raised an eyebrow.
Just what did he miss out on hearing about during that snack run?

A few days later, he figured it out.

"Denbrough."

Bill flinched. His locker closed with a light *clank*.

Hidden in the narrow space behind the door was a flat-faced Victor Criss.

*Sneaky bastard.*

The freshman breathed in and swallowed, hard. Uttering his first kneejerk thought out loud could only land him in more trouble. He managed not to step back, to make his nerves too obvious.

"Victor, hi."

Nerves.

Why bother feeling nervous?

If he was in any trouble at all...

*This has something to do with the Sharpie. It has to.*

"Sorry," Criss deadpanned, sounding anything but genuinely contrite. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's... okay. I m-must not have heard you." Trying to appear casual, Bill shrugged into his backpack straps. All at once, his schoolbooks seemed about ten pounds heavier.

Truthfully, the hallway was quite busy. A hectic din of shouts, shoe soles squeaking against linoleum, and slamming lockers sounded off all around them. Most of the students were on their way out after the day's last bell. Only a few dozen or so stayed for the official afterschool study hall.

Others went to the library.

As Bill had intended to.

But now, it seemed, he would be a few minutes late joining Beverly and Ben.

"Yeah..." Criss's sharp eyes slid away before refocusing on his 'target'. "Mind if I... talk a moment?"

*If I minded, I'd be long gone already.*

*Let's see if Bowers is waiting around a corner somewhere.*

Bill almost glanced away.

On his peripheral, he saw It.

There was a brief flash of yellow light from the horizontal slats of his closed locker.

From that, Denbrough knew he had backup.

There was nothing the sophomore could pull that wouldn't go unchecked - immediately, if not later.
"All right." Bill nodded in the vague direction of the exit. "Walk and talk, then. I've got somewhere to be."

"The library?" Criss pegged it with the first try. "I should've guessed." Undissuaded at how he had done just that, he followed as Bill threaded his way toward the nearest staircase.

"You meeting someone there?"

"Someone"? Not, "the rest of your Loser pals"?

"Yeah," Bill admitted, in return for the lack of spite the slightly-older boy spoke with. He seemed to be behaving... unusually civil.

"I won't take too much time, then. It's... about something that happened at the library, actually."

Picking their way down the stairs, Bill waited until they had reached the ground floor and ventured outside.

"W-what would that be about? You need a study buddy?"

They walked along the thinning-out concourse, toward the sidewalk.

"No," Criss denied, a little more sharply and too much akin to his old self than Denbrough liked to see. "I just wanted to know- Hanscom, what was his gag?"

"Gag?"

"With the balloon?"

Bill turned back, raised an eyebrow.

The balloon?

Criss frowned at the muted prompt, but explained. "It was... tied to my bike. With the word 'sorry' written on it. And that was after the new kid cornered me in one of the study rooms. I know he runs with you."

Knowing there was no snowball's chance Ben could ever corner someone about anything, not with malicious intent, Bill almost rolled his eyes. The calling card and exactly who had left it was obvious enough to any of the Losers. Instead, he brushed distractedly at his trimmed bangs.

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about that, Victor."

The younger boy froze at the feeling of a hand clawing into his shoulder.

Spinning him around.

"Bullshit."

Criss' dark, aggressive eyebrows, so contrasted against his combed-over blonde locks, were lowered, the better to match his narrowed eyes.

"The thing stayed."

Bill almost gaped.
This factor, he hadn't counted on.

He blinked.

"Wh-what-"

"After I cut the string. The damn thing, stayed, there. It didn't float away."

*Way to muddy the waters, even in an apology, Pen.*

*You might as well have made the thing follow Victor home like a lost puppy.*

Bill shook his head, brushed at his bangs again.

"Look, whatever it did or di-didn't do, Ben couldn't have had anything to do with it."

"Bull - *shit*. Everyone knows the new kid's one of your gang now. If anyone knows what he's been up to-"

"Y-you can ask him yourself," Denbrough interrupted, in a newly-dredged-up bout of fearlessness. He put on his bravest face, standing up to the once-bully who suddenly seemed all the less intimidating without the likes of Bowers or Hockstetter at his side.

"And e-even if you didn't, what's the problem? You have something against balloons?"

At that Criss snorted, rolled his eyes. "Balloons are for *kids*, Denbrough. I just..." He paused long enough to shrug - with only his left arm. The irritation seemed to leave him in that moment. "I don't know. I wondered if... it was him, I guess."

Bill waited.

When the older boy failed to offer more, he shrugged back.

"A-And if it wasn't, what's wrong with a nice, anonymous gesture? It may have just been someone's idea of a late sympathy card."

The eye nearest him glanced over before angling away again. "Pft. Yeah, better late then never, I guess..."

*More than you got from Henry, I'm sure.*

On a whim, Bill hazarded taking a half-step closer.

He thought about declaring as much, but that would be like throwing more fuel on a simmering spark.

Best not.

Not right now.

"Was there anything else?"

Without looking up, Criss stepped back.

"No, I... I guess not. See ya."

The sophomore turned away, headed in the opposite direction from the library.
Denbrough watched him go.

At the end of the block, the blonde-headed figure vanished around a hedge.

Bill blinked, spying new movement.

There, perched very obviously atop the stop sign at the same corner, was a bird.

A big one.

It was a blue-black-feathered crow.

With white patches.

For a moment, Bill swore it was staring his way.

The next moment, he was certain.

*Nothing, indeed.*

Then the magpie took off, white-shouldered wings flashing in the afternoon sunlight.
Chapter Summary

History doesn't always repeat itself word for word, Vic.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to "Sharpie".

No.
No.
God, no.
Not again.

This can't be- This can't be real.
Victor Criss didn't try to be the hero.
He was nothing.
No, less than nothing.
A coward.
Like always.
Just like Henry said.

Only in this case, playing the coward was the best thing he could have done.
Covering the back of his head, the teenager kept hunched over as he was behind the maple tree, cringing.
He wished he could close his ears as tightly as his eyes.
Those sounds...
The deep-throated snarling, the keening cries in between.
He knew those sounds.

I knew it wasn't a bear! I knew!
But at the same time, he didn't dare look.
Look for himself.

Refresh his memory.

He had barely scrambled away in time to not look.

It was coincidence. It had to be.

Who else could have known of Bowers' plans for a rendezvous?

Their meeting place in the Barrens, south of town. Victor had attended only out of some vague hope that, yes, he wasn't as excluded as he thought. These past five weeks, they had just been... a break from the gang's activities. Today was the day he would be welcomed back.

Instead, it turned out to be history repeating itself.

Somewhat.

"Run, Henry! C'mon!"

"He's all yours, Crissie! Hah, should'a known you were mixed up in some freaky shit like this!"

Another tree-shaking roar drove them away.

Victor kept his eyes closed, his head covered, and bad shoulder pressed against the trunk. He heard the rustling of bushes, of their branches snapping, as the remainder of the gang fled into the undergrowth.

At the same time, he heard- felt the footfalls, heavy as an elephant's. He could imagine the dark dirt being churned up as the massive creature prowled the breadth of the small clearing. Apparently, it had given up pursuit in favor of the one prey item that had stayed behind.

Pushing its face through the branches, Criss heard the breathy rasp of leaves on exoskeletal armor.

To his horror, the snorting sound drew close.

Closer.

Even closer.

Victor breathed uneasily out, dared to open his eyes.

Then, with a loud scrape against the maple's bark, there they were.

Those horrid sets of eyes.

Two pairs of them. One set larger than the other.

All that same, ugly white with no pupils.

Staring right at him.

Sitting atop a flat, insect-like skull, six feet long.

With a tapered jaw that was overflowing with fangs.

What was worse.
The face had turned his way.
And Its mouth opened, tilted down in a parodic, hellish-looking grin.

*Hiya, Victor.*

The obscene greeting was only in his head, thank goodness.

As before, Victor didn't try to play the tough guy.
He shrieked and threw himself aside, stumbling over the maple's root.

"N-no, no, please! *No!*"

To his dismay, in his panic, he went the wrong way around the tree.

"Oomph!"

He almost ended up facedown in the dirt, next to one of the beast's spindly paws.

Those *claws*...

He knew them.

Inches from his face, from miles away, it made no difference.

He would know them anywhere.

All four sets of them.

A spider crossed with a crocodile with the talons of a wolverine.

Such a hodgepodge of traits, this thing exhibited.

Downright *alien*.

He was dreaming. He had to be.

*Someone, anyone, please wake me up now.*

Before he could think to move, he was pinned again.

The nearest paw lifted, landed square on his back. The claws encased his bad shoulder like the bars of a cage.

Something blew against his neck, ruffling his green-camouflage-patterned shirt, his hair.

A hot, wet gout of air.

Of which Mother Nature had nothing to do with.

Criss clamped his eyes shut, used his free hand to cover the back of his skull.

Alas, this was no dream.

Today.
Today was the day he would die.

He was certain.

Any moment now, that awful face would open its mouth, tear his head off.

Feast on his remains.

He stopped struggling almost as soon as he had started, wheezing, breaths thin and high. There was nothing more he could do.

_Please. If anything, please, don't let it hurt._

_*It hurt enough the first time._

_All this, over some lousy pocket change!*

Then, just as out of nowhere as when the creature first appeared:

"Stripes, that's _enough._ I mean, really? They're gone. They've _been_ gone."

Victor's eyes snapped open.

That voice.

. . .

He gasped.

_Tozier?_

The kid stepped into the clearing with all the composure of a Ringling employee.

In the ultimate case of incredulity, he simply strode up to the bus-sized creature and slapped its segmented leg.

Like he was... scolding it.

Then he just shook his head, looking down at Criss, almost pityingly. "Talk about taking your act too far. He's gotta be pissing himself by now."

Happens to all of us when we die, Tozier.

Or think we're about to.

The massive body's armor plates clinked together as the beast repositioned itself before them. "R-RiChle..."

Undaunted, the Trashmouth dealt the beast a light, backhanded smack to the jaw.

The creature's jagged mouthparts rattled, growling in a staccato rhythm, spit dripping from the fangs.

But it did not strike back.

"Don't Ruh-Ruh-Richie me. Go on." Tozier hiked a thumb over his shoulder. "Get lost. Come back when you've got a set of lips that can speak half-decent English."
Victor laid there, one with the dirt, arms sprawled before him, beyond dumbfounded, for several minutes after the alien stomped away.

He scarcely thought to keep breathing.

Richie, to the opposite effect, stood there and waited, hands in his pockets. Weight shifted to one leg, he looked absurdly casual about it.

Then, frowning, he finally spoke again.

"Get up, man. It's not your first time."

The little shit.

Was he being glib?

"The- the- the... the *fuck* is going on, Tozier?"

Gasping, Victor shakily thought to regain his feet.

"I mean, what- w-where- who-"

Heaving a sigh, Richie dropped a shoulder and gestured toward the nearest stand of trees. "Guys, a little backup now, please?"

Victor balked, almost thought to run again.

Seven awfully-familiar figures, emerging from various hiding places, stepped into view.

Among them-

"Hanscom?"

Ben strode forward first.

"It's okay, Victor. You're safe."

"Safe?" Criss squeaked.

Even as he watched, feet rooted to the forest floor, the club fanned out to encircle him.

To trap him.

And to be fair, they called themselves out on it.

"Could we get any more dramatic about this, Ben?"

"I wasn't going for dramatic, Stan, but since we're all *here* -"

"Are you okay?" The smallest of the club, about a head shorter than Kaspbrak, stepped up to Criss.

*Denbrough's little brother.*

*What's his name?*

"Your face, it's-"
Victor didn't hear the rest. Stunned all over again, he reached up, blinked and hissed at the discovery, and wiped his suddenly-stinging cheek.

His fingertips came away bloody.

He didn't remember hurting himself in the fall.

"Eds?"

"Already working on it, Mike."

One of them scoffed.

"Why waste the Kleenex? You know Pen can-"

"Not just yet, Stan. We still gotta get past first base right now."

Tissues? Bases? What?

"The fuck is going on here?"

Richie waved a finger. "Criss, please. Mind your language. You're in the presence of a minor."

"Technically, we're all minors, Rich."

"And I've heard you say worse," the younger Denbrough interjected, though not snidely.

Tozier sighed, rolled his eyes. "Throw me under the bus, why don't you, Georgie..."

Slowly, carefully, Eddie Kaspbrak stepped up next, hand outstretched, holding a tissue in offer. "Here."

Victor finally tried to step back, then thought twice of it.

He was encircled.

There was no where to step back to.

"No...?" Eddie frowned, glancing past him. "You still sure this was a good idea, Ben?"

"I'm sure." Hanscom's steady eye didn't waver. "Victor."

He stepped right up to the petrified sophomore, set a pudgy hand on his arm.

"It's okay. You're safe."

Victor could only blink and stare, feeling blood slide down his cheek.

"Maybe the more times you say it, the more he doesn't want to believe you. Like a safe word you didn't-"

"Beep-beep, Richie."

"Henry and the others are gone," Bill Denbrough finally spoke up, from the relative-back of the pack. "You can relax."

"Relax?" Victor squeaked, feebly. "What, with that- t-that monster still around? And the rest of you?
"We're not here to hurt you," the homeschooled kid - Mike Hanlon - reiterated. "You did enough of that yourself."

"Th-then what, what do you want?"

"For you to clean your face off, for starters," Eddie almost-growled, tissue still outstretched. "Don't make us hold you down and wash it out with peroxide."

Stanley Uris scoffed. "He could handle that. He's been through worse."

The only girl of the group - Beverly Marsh - tugged on his sleeve and hissed, "Not right now."

Worse?

How do they- 

"This is your doing, Hanscom?" Victor zeroed in on his would-be advocate. "You- your club knew we'd be here?"

"We did," Ben stated, simple and succinct as ever. "We were told."

"By who?"

"Him."

Scowling, Victor followed the pointing finger's path, back toward the maple tree.

And he couldn't help it.

He blinked hard at what he saw there, head rearing back.

"The fuck is that?"

Something red-and-white peeked out at him from around the side of the trunk.

Criss blinked, squinted.

Blinked again.

Despite the overall lunacy that was this encounter, he recognized the sight as a face - a painted face.

A kind-of-human face.

With a red nose. Red lips.

And a sheepish-looking blue eye set in a shadowed socket.

Then, with a white-gloved hand, the figure waved.

Shyly, almost.

"Hiya, ViC."

10 Minutes Later
"...Is he usually this quiet?"

"Pft. You tell us, Stripes. If anyone knows him outside of being a thug- "

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh- umph!"

The screaming cut out as the palm of a gloved hand clapped itself firmly over his mouth.

Victor Criss went silent, eyes held wide.

The red-and-white face, introduced by the Losers as Pennywise, frowned at him, eyebrows lowering.

Then, with his opposite hand, the entity held up an index finger before his own lips.

"ShuSh."

And, as if taking their cue from this, most of the Losers Club broke out in uneasy laughter.

Georgie Denbrough most of all.

Already sitting on a log, he all but tipped sideways and off onto the ground, holding his sides as he giggled.

"Sorry, again." To his credit, Ben Hanscom didn't so much as crack a smile, as neither Bill or Beverly had. "I wouldn't of thought you were afraid of clowns, Victor."

"A'm'nt."

Pennywise tilted his head, face screwing up in confusion at the indistinguishable muffle.

"WhaT?"

Momentarily overcoming his fit of panic (the latest of many that day), Criss reached up from where he sat, yanked the offending hand off his mouth.

Tossed it aside.

"I'm not."

And even if I was, this thing is about as much like a clown as a wolf is a lapdog.

Still snickering, Richie mimed wiping a tear of mirth from his face. "Could'a fooled us."

"Just what the fuck are you, man?" the once-bully spat, so acrid that the humanoid alien in question flinched backwards, dropping into an even deeper crouch. They stared one another down, tension renewing, with interest. "I mean, of all the freaky club mascots out there- "
"Hey!" Predictably, Georgie was quick to spring to his guardian's defense, jumping up to his feet to race over between them. His frown was scornful, to say the least. "Be nice. Penny's not that bad."

"Not that- " Victor's words were instantly drowned out.

The creature-in-costume half-lunged toward him, growling low with those red lips pulled back, needle-teeth bared.

Eyes narrowed and yellowing.

"Penny!" Utterly unafraid, Georgie grabbed for the clown's upper arm with both hands, tugging on his satin sleeve. "Penny, no! That's not nice, either."

Without looking away, Pennywise retorted with a grumble of, "Neither iS him calliNg me a freAk."

"Well, this is going splendidly already," Stan sighed, reclining against the maple tree with arms crossed, watching everything unfold through the sides of his eyes.

Like he couldn't bear to face it head on.

Anxiety overcome, Victor scowled, dared to lean back in.

Right at a nice biting range.

But he had something to conclude.

"You're the thing that attacked me in the creek."

Sighing, Pennywise drew back, teeth retracting. He glanced away and said nothing, guilty as charged.

Ben stepped close and leaned down between them, hands on his knees. "Since you didn't accept my apology, I thought the least we could do was... show you what he really is."

"Show me?" Criss parrotted. "And you're telling me you knew Henry was gonna meet me here today, because this thi- he knew?"

"And we thought it might be worth it to intercept before you made the mistake of rejoining your old pals," Beverly declared, stoic as a statue.

And just as immovable.

She stood sentinel, watching the woods around them.

Ever on guard.

"Mistake?"

"Lucky thing, too." Richie took a seat on the abandoned log. "Five weeks is a little long to go without so much as a phone call, in't it, Vic?"

Criss rolled his eyes, stopping short as Eddie held out an unopened Band Aid, which was reluctantly accepted. "Oh, you bug my house's phones, too?"

Leaning against the maple tree beside Stan, Bill shrugged. "We didn't have to. Pen c-can hear whatever's happening in Derry, whenever he wants."
"Call it an unfair advantage," Eddie quipped. He patted the longfaced entity's billowed shoulder, not unfondly. "He has his uses."

"Like now," Ben interjected. "Are you so sure Henry wasn't gonna jump you?"

Everyone present knew of the Bowers’ disturbing penchant for carrying a weapon at all times.

A knife, preferably.

"Henry's my..." The once-automatic response died on Victor's lips. His expression dropped. "But, then again..."

Richie shook his head, adjusted his glasses. "Dude, claim whatever you want. It sounds to us like you've been cut loose. All things considered, that's the least worst thing that could'a happened to you today."

"And what, you're looking to adopt?" Criss spat, practically scooting backwards on his hands. Or hand, let's be clear. His other held the Band Aid. "All because of what your pet clown did to me, you feel bad, and this is your idea of an apology?"

"Go back to Bowers and you'll be worse for it," Beverly glanced back over her shoulder, cool as ice. "Pennywise there doesn't think too highly of Henry."

At that, said entity glanced sidelong at Victor, snickering softly, red mouth turning up in a wicked little sneer.

They may as well have hung a sign around his neck.

_Doesn't play well with bullies._

Victor stopped short, caught in the act of doctoring himself, Band Aid now applied to his cheek.

Glancing slowly around between them all, he decided further attitude was not necessary.

Not necessary, in that he couldn't get away with it.

Not among his new... crowd.

He wasn't eager to feel the sting of those teeth again.

Instead, Victor just dropped his hands and muttered:

"You guys keep some _weird_ company."

Stan's eyes rolled skyward. "Don't we know it?"
With old spokes clicking, Silver coasted to a stop.

Bill frowned, seeing what awaited him at the end of his destination's driveway.

His would-be bodyguard, reclining where he had been against an oak tree, smirked in return, and straightened up.

"Fearless leader, your reputation precedes you."

And this was said with the unnecessary flourish of a stage bow.

No, seriously.

That wasn't hyperbole.

He bowed.

Bill closed his eyes for a moment, praying for patience.

_Fearless._

_Yeah, right._

_Is he trying to mock me, or encourage me?_

Knowing It, both was the more-than-likely answer there.

Still, Denbrough decided it was best to figure it out later. There were bigger issues afoot. Breathing in, he bit back an urge to sigh, shoulders falling, and tried to look busy as he wheeled his bike to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

_This._

_This is what I set myself up for._

_Rather than having the rest of the club at my back, it's everybody rolled into one._

_Robert Gray._
Said character was outfitted in his typical pleated leather jacket, with its red laces and buttons, and the usual gray denim jeans and pompomless boots.

All that was there.

Plus the one extra imitation-accessory It couldn't seem to bare letting go of, a little gem courtesy of Miss Beverly Marsh.

Those tacky sunglasses.

Please.

As if the cosmic entity needed an inane momento of the splitting episode to remind them all every time he assumed this form, it came with a ticking clock.

A clock with a broken minute hand, no less.

Just to make things all the more uncomfortable.

Bill sighed then, and made to step off his bicycle.

"N-nice to see you, Bob."

The incognito entity tilted his head down, blue-green eyes peering over the top of the black lenses, and he shrugged with one shoulder. "Or Rob works. Whichever you prefer."

Just because Bev calls you that now doesn't mean the rest of us are so keen.

Scowling, Bill allowed himself a bout of fuming irritation.

To patience, or not to patience?

That is the question.

... 

Okay. To hell with pleasantness.

He leaned closer, still holding the Schwinn by her handlebars.

Like keeping the bike positioned between them made the difference all the more apparent.


Not human. Human.

Virtually indistinguishable.

Unless something happened that would utterly wreck Its illusion.

Like addressing It head on, as Bill did in that moment:

"I prefer you invisible."

Sarcastic.

But it got the point across.
"Aww..." Gray flinched, bare hands wringing, as if the words alone could wound him. The glasses slid down the bridge of his nose. "BilLy, you don't mean tHat."

*Get a grip on your own speech affliction there, Stripes.*

*And knock it off with the kicked-puppy face.*

Bill frowned, staring the being down with narrowed blue eyes. While his thoughts remained very sardonic, his voice was level.

"No, I do. This is probably the one time you're better off not seen, and instead, you're- you're-"

While the teen faltered to a frustrated stop, Gray's expression went flat. Into Its usual not-smile, not-frown.

Then, when awkward silence found them, he offered up his own interpretation of the statement's latter half:

"Here, in case anything goes wrong."

Bill grit his teeth.

*Which you know it will.*

Unknowingly or not, at the same time, they both glanced sidelong and up the dirt driveway. As if it were a dreaded path to the executioner's block.

About to be walked all in the name of peace.

On such a lovely, sunny May afternoon, the Bowers household almost looked picturesque, standing all alone at the top of the rise. A warm breeze stirred the woods around them. Framed by oaks and hemlocks, one could almost mistake it for the abode of a kindhearted farmer.

When nothing of the kind resided within.

Much less no one.

Sighing again, Bill belatedly thought to guide his bike over to the mailbox, then deploy Silver's kickstand.

"Is his Dad home?"

"No squad cars have been by," Gray recalled, just as suddenly-serious. His hands stopped fidgeting-mostly. He reached up to indulge in one anxious collar-tug. "Today, or last night. Or the night before that."

Bill couldn't claim he was surprised to hear as much.

He read between the lines.

Burglaries. Assaults. Fraud.

Jaywalking.
Who knew what behavioral strings the entity had pulled to keep the police of Derry so preoccupied lately?

Also, intervention or no, the demands of the job often kept Butch away for days on end. In Henry's case, it was an unsavory set of edges that made up the same proverbial sword.

With his father away, that meant young Bowers had plenty of time to do as he pleased.

Oftentimes, that meant finding trouble. And if there was none to be found, he made his own.

And the word on the town grapevine was that, whenever Butch caught wind of said troublemaking escapades, he took it out on his son.

Time after time.

Exacting whatever due the juvenile criminal justice system couldn't take.

"Due process," Bill finally muttered under his breath.

Gray raised an eyebrow, glancing back and down at him. "Say again?"

"Something Henry's never had from Butch. A chance to explain his side of things, and then be judged for it."

Funny, for being a 'man of the law', ol' Oscar doesn't practice it very well in his off time.

And while there was every possibility under the sun that It already knew all this...

Putting it to words was easier than simply saying, "Well, I don't need to tell you, oh-so-supreme being."

Slumming with the mortals of Derry as It did, this was one of those times where a more-human perspective and treatment was equally gratifying to both parties.

As such, Gray didn't teleport his way up the driveway.

Thoughtfully, mindful to walk at the same speed, he simply followed Bill's lead.

Halfway there, he spoke up again.

"D'we have... a plan B, if this goes sideways?"

Bill just managed not to scoff. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans, trying to seem relaxed.

Kept walking.

Even as he wanted nothing better than to jig to a balking, cowardly stop.

There goes the all-powerful It, asking me do we have a plan B.

How did they ever come to a point in 1989 where that felt almost natural?

Oh, yeah.

Because said entity had made it so.
The driveway was just long enough that the pair could discuss that much, before there was no going back.

But they weren't there to discuss the nature of their relationship.

A certain person awaited them inside the house.

That was the intent here.

To talk to them.

Not one another.

As prone to overthinking as he could sometimes be, Bill paused.

Then he turned back, shrugged and went with the first thing to occur to him.

"Not really. I f-figured winging it would be best."

"Improv, huh?" Rob supplied his own word. After a moment's pause, that could either be seen as him being wholly doubtful or subtly appreciating Denbrough's inner genius, he grinned and pushed the shades back up his nose. "...I like it."

John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, eat your heart out.

As such, when the cat lounging on the porch hissed at them and bolted, Bill knew they were on the right track.

The insane, totally-warped, farther-than-out-of-left-field track.

Hands still in his pockets, the freshman watched as said cat fled into the nearby shed, then turned back to his blank-faced company with a sly smirk of his own.

Oh, waiter.

A little laughter to offset the oncoming tension, please.

"I'd be scared of that face, too."

Rob frowned sharply, brows lowering to match.

"Hey."

Whether his offense was feigned or real, what did that matter?

Stifling his laughter, Bill exhaled, steadyingly, and lifted a hand to knock on the doorframe.

Only to have the screen door swing out and barely miss his nose.

"The fuck are you doing here, Denbrough?"

The shock of it sent the visitor-slash-peacemaker stumbling back. To the very edge of said porch. He nearly had to windmill with both arms to keep his balance.

The surprise was more jarring than the rush of nerves that came with, finally, being face-to-face with Henry Bowers.
"Oh! Henry, hi."

Predictably, the sophomore didn't stop there, seizing the front of Bill's plaid shirt in both hands. He seethed through his teeth in much the same way the cat had hissed.

"Don't 'hi' me, you stuttery twerp. You're trespassing."

Thankfully, Rob declined whatever need there was to banter in favor of defusing the introduction before it could explode.

With one stride, he cleared the steps to put himself between them.

His hand dwarfed Bowers' shoulder as it settled there.

"Him and I both, Hoss. Easy. No need to bring out both barrels at the same time."

"What?" Henry looked over, then up, newfound alarm settling across his face, as if he had just noticed the third party present. "And just who- the hell are you?"

With hands raised, showing empty palms, Bill didn't try to fight, to wrench away.

Even if it took every iota of self-control he had not to.

"Henry, please, we're just here to talk."

The policeman's son gaped a moment longer, before finding something else to demand: "We- you- since when- "

Rob tilted his head, blasé as could be. "I think a little introduction's in order first, Billy."

And while Denbrough felt the beginnings of childish offense, at being assigned such a juvenile sounding nickname, it turned out to be just what the doctor ordered.

"Billy?" Henry choked out a disbelieving laugh, turning back to leer at his prey. "So there is someone who calls you that."

At that Rob made another head tilt that seemed to indicate a rolling of the eyes, sighing dramatically to match. "Yes, shocking, isn't it?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" the bully fired back. "He's always gone on about how he doesn't like to be called that."

Bill frowned, momentarily overlooked as he was.

_No, I haven't._

...Okay, _maybe in grade school._

_But I've outgrown it._

_If only we can outgrow this rivalry so easily..._

Feeling a bit braver for it, he reached up, grabbed Henry's leather-braceleted wrist.

"If I let you call me that, does that mean we can talk? Just for a moment?"

For a moment, it seemed like a roundhouse slug across the face was the more likely answer he would
Then Bowers grinned.

Let go with both hands.

"I don't need a cheap gimmick like that to lure me in, Denbrough."

Sidelong, he glared up at the would-be bodyguard looming over them.

"But I'd like to know this chump's name before we say anything else."

Far from flying off the handle in a screechy outrage, that a mortal dare address him so derivitively, it showed some all-too-rare restraint.

Rob kept his cool.

Calmly, he reached up to take the sunglasses off his face.

Take a good look, kid.

And be grateful that's the worst you would ever see from him.

"Brazen little guy, aren't you?"

"Henry, this is Rob," Bill interjected, before Bowers could fathom a retort. "He's- a friend."

Not Bev's cousin.

Not a relative of mine.

Just a friend.

Keep things simple.

Civilized-like.

"Friend? Y'mean, an out-of-towner?" Raising an eyebrow, Henry spared another moment to give Gray a thorough look-over. The embroidered, flare-cuffed jacket was certainly distinct enough to warrant it. "Figures you'd only have friends from outside Derry."

Rob merely shrugged, folding his sunglasses to pocket them inside said jacket. "Hey, when this is what you have to pick from, why argue with that?"

Henry's face screwed up in suspicion. "What?"

Bill breathed in, tensing.

Don't start with the dancing.

Underhanded insult is still an insult.

Bowers may not have been the best of his class, the quickest draw in the proverbial west.

But implying Derry wasn't populated with the kind of people that would associate with the Denbroughs, only to be told that Derry natives aren't even worth knowing, considering Bowers' heritage-
"Ow! Bill?!

Said freshman shook the pain out of his knuckles, almost grimacing.

That had felt like punching a brick wall.

"Don't e-even go there."

Rob bared his teeth, took half a step back. Fitfully, he rubbed at his offended chin, brushing a thumb over his lip.

Which, of course, wasn't split.

Looking on, Henry smirked at the performance, and folded his arms. "Got a mouth on him, does he?"

Bill shook his head, bangs swaying.

Oh, if only you knew.

"Sometimes."

"Hm. I know the type," the bully lamented, almost thoughtfully.

Rob scowled, turned away with a huff. His shoulders hunched.

Knew the type was more appropos.

Rest in pieces, Patrick Hockstetter.

Henry gave the memory of his missing friend a brief pause before the usual smugness took over again.

"Well, since we got that outta the way, what brings you two here? You know we don't do much entertaining here on the farm, Denbrough."

Looking at the older boy's stance, Bill folded his arms in kind.

Tit for tat.

"I just wanted to ask you something."

"Yeah? What about?"

"About Victor."

Henry scoffed. "That pussy? He isn't worth the time of day."

"B-be that as it may, I- we just wanted to be sure," Bill amended his words mid-sentence. "That he's not, running with you anymore? Is he?"

"Pft. You hear what I just said? Course he's not." After another pause, the once-leader of the now-much-diminished gang hiked an eyebrow. "You came to ask about that?"

Not, "oh, no, we didn't try to run Eddie down the other day".

Not, "that wasn't your kid brother Avery Hockstetter practiced beating up on".
"Stan didn't need to get new tires for his bike 'cause I slashed them".

The list went on.

Bill sighed softly through his nose.

He could feel the repressed fury rolling off of It like magma out of a volcano.

Even if the mulleted teenager before them was somehow 'numb' to it...

"I did. Even if, nothing else gets resolved, I just- just wanted to be sure you weren't gonna trouble him any more."

"Since what went down in the Barrens? You bet your ass I'm not."

"Why? W-what-"

Henry only shook his head, throwing his hands up in a you-wouldn't-believe-it move.

"Guy's bad luck, man. Gets attacked by a wild animal twice in the same season? Let's just leave it at that."

"Hmph. Guess that's fair."

"Yeah," Henry shrugged, matter dismissed insofar as he was concerned. "Anything else? I mean, I don't know what my old man might do to ya, he catches anyone around here."

"He feel the same way you do about visitors?" Rob half-growled, glaring out from under lowered brows.

This was met with a quirky dare-ya grin.

"He's with the police, Stretch. You don't wanna get on his bad side, might earn you an extended stay in Derry's jail while they lose the paperwork for your preliminary hearing."

*You know what that is?*

Bill blinked, glanced away. Weirdly enough, he felt a little flush in his cheeks for presuming Henry stupid enough that he didn't know.

Well.

It made sense.

You couldn't grow up the child of a lawkeeper without learning something about court procedure.

Even if you were a thug.

Rob rolled his eyes, straightening up - out of immediate punching range. "Oh, don't worry. I didn't plan on rocking the boat."

No more than you already have, that is.

"Maybe I'll see you around," Henry went on. Challenging as ever, he leaned in. "Might add a few patterns of my own to that jacket."

The entity's expression went a noticable shade darker.
Conversely, the edges of his irises went brighter.

Spotting it, Bill grabbed his friend's elbow and backpedalled.

Peace talks would have to stop there.

"Oh-kay, Henry, thanks for your time."

The last thing he needed this meeting to end on was the unfolding of another unsolved missing persons case.

With a huff of "whatever", Bowers stepped back inside.

The screen door closed behind him with a open-sounding clack.

It was a very tense three minutes as they trekked back out to the road.

Letting go of the silver sleeve, Bill went to retrieve his bike.

Around the same time, Pennywise snarled:

"That litTle- "

"Easy, easy," Bill instantly turned back (gratified to see no hint of the demonic-clown-now-posing-as-a-human). "You knew it'd be tough."

"Yes, buT- agh." The disguise tossed his head in irritation, fingers curling in a mimickry of claws (but thankfully not sprouting into them). A bit of spittle flew from his sharpening teeth as he hissed in outrage. "Bullies. They're so- revolting up close."

*And to think, he used to be a stone's-throw away from that.*

Bill smiled, tolerantly.

This was the best kind of irony imaginable.

"Yeah. It's the s-same thing we put up with at school on the daily, Rob. You've seen it. Nothing different."

Inwardly, he tried to keep his musings just as positive, just as encouraging.

It would pick up on that.

*Like now.*

*Keep that form.*

*Don't wig out on me.*

*Come on, you're past that tantrum point.*

*Be a...*

*Well.*

*Be a man about it.*
Breathing hard, the entity stared at him, probably pondering much the same thoughts. His features gentled ever so slowly, before he straightened up. Sighing, he paused only to shrug deeper into his beloved jacket.

"Ahem. If you say so. What about- now?"

"I don't know. I think that's as far as w-we could've gotten."

Nonplussed, Rob didn't think to contradict that. He simply wiped his chin with the back of his hand. Then, with a carelessness Richie could appreciate, wiped it clean against his light-gray undershirt.

"Y'think anything good came of it?"

"...I got to hit you."

Rob paused, midway through unfolding his precious sunglasses. Frowning, he considered his options for a response. Finally, he settled on a unfazed snort and put the shades back over his eyes.

"YesSs, there's thaT. You're weLcome."

Still smirking, Bill gazed back up the driveway. The house looked the same as before. Outwardly.

But inwardly...

Yeah, I think something better happened there, too. Maybe not immediately. But Bowers will think twice of messing with any of us for a while.

Flipping up Silver's kickstand, Bill opted to walk back down the road toward town. With Robert Gray still at his side. Not with Stretch watching from around every corner.
...This had to happen at some point. They do outnumber him after all.

Another of my top five moments to want commissioned, if I ever find an artist who’s waiting list isn’t three years time...

"Get off."

"Nyh uh!"

Eloquent, Georgie.

And, for a time, that was as far as their argument went.

Under the guise of sulking, Pennywise bared his sharpening teeth in a silent snarl and considered his very-limited options. He feigned a sudden disinterest, lying in situ for a moment upon the bent-down sawgrass. Ignoring how he had been duped into such a position, he did his best to also ignore the sounds of muted giggling, going off right behind his head.

Arms folded before him, he half-hid his face and considered.

He couldn't struggle too fiercely - that was what his 'attacker' wanted.

He couldn't teleport away - that was... too easy (shh! no, that wasn't the first don't-do-this rule out of the kid's mouth).

Speaking of kid, he couldn't call out for-

"Oof! Georgie?!!"

That almost hurt.

Said boy merely laughed, rolling off his guardian's back in a half-hearted somersault, ending with the pinning of one long arm against the ground. While he was more than capable of throwing this youngster aside, Pennywise didn't dare.

That was part of the game, he supposed. To get free without being too rough.

And no resorting to cheap cosmic-being-exclusive tricks.

With his opposite arm, the entity went for a less harmful route. He tried to raise himself up off the ground.
He made it approximately halfway, what with having no free hand to pry Georgie off his opposite shoulder. The boy's weight, latched on as tightly as he was, effectively kept his target from standing.

With a weary growl, his hostage tried to barrelroll his way free, but only managed to wrench halfway over before flopping flat against the grass again.

Eyes closed, Denbrough leaned against him and continued to giggle helplessly.

Pennywise scoffed sharply, unable to help half a smile from forming.

Damn infectious laughter.

Being infectious.

*How did I let myself get here?*

"Honesty? *This* is how you pass the time with Bill when I'm not around?"

"Not like we used to," Georgie explained. With a lurch, he managed to retake his place, torso lying against Pennywise's back, sneakered feet braced against the ground. "Not since the last time Dad yelled at him for it."

So, small wonder why said escapades would find their way to 29 Neibolt Street's backyard.

No matter what the property's resident imitation-clown had for doubts.

Oh, what? And you think *I'm* a safe stand-in?

"Ohh, goodY." Grimacing, Pennywise craned his head around, peering up through the side of one eye. "You say that, and it makes me think Bill will be lecturing *me* soon enough."

"You wouldn't hurt me, Penny. It's fine." Unpersuaded, Georgie threaded his arms around the alien's neck, under the collar. "Now, up!"

Pennywise frowned. Compared to the boy's other requests for piggyback rides, that one came off as rather demanding.

Almost rude.

...For *shame*.

Georgie knew better.

Lips curling back in another snarl, the entity turned his face away and let this once-rhetorical growl make itself known.

"Errr... *no.*"

"Penny!"

"I said, no."

"We can have popcorn afterward!"

"Nnnn-no."
"Please?"
"Nope, you had your chance for that before."
"Errr... mpp!"
(That one came out rather muffled for some reason.)
"WhaT?"
"I said, up!"
"In what language?"
"The same as before, silly."
"That- whatever it was, that wasn't English."
"Was, too!"
"Was not."
"Was, too- infinity! Now, up!"
"No."
"Last chance!"
"Gr. No."
"Hmph. Don't make me call in backup."
"Back- Backup...?"
"Guys!"
Then, from the back door, they swarmed.
With a single, unanimous warcry of:
"Dogpile!"
Pennywise wrenched his head around to stare in sheer disbelief, irises flaring a vibrant red.
Red means stop, gang.
Cease and desist.
Aw, crap.
Dogpile.
He didn't need Ben to give him the definition.
It had nothing to do with canines.
Seconds later, their vicious intent was clear.
"No! No, no, no! Not- omph! Hey! Not everybody aT once! No! Ow! Quit!"

His protests were largely lost in the ensuing racket of laughter and overlapping shouts.

Just as his corporeal form was practically lost under a new blanket made of seven human bodies. Their combined weight would have reduced a normal person to a wheezing, helpless mess.

Struggling fruitlessly, their so-not-normal mascot still gave his all to escape.

Eyes wide, all he could seem to manage were a few petty lurches, twists and useless bucks.

Clawing at the ground did no better.

Thankfully, it wasn't quite the whole set of Losers who joined in on the festivities.

Beverly was either incredibly smart to sit the fracas out, or doubly-dispicable for watching the torture unfold.

And not do a damn thing to stop it.

Playing referee, as it were.

Ref, call a foul.

Approximately three minutes into the fight, he finally caved and tried to rally some assistance.

"Bevs, help."

Smiling, she crouched down before him.

"Sorry, buddy. But you had this coming."

"No, I- ow, heY!" Brought up short, Pennywise winced as a shoe planted itself on the side of his face, practically standing itself atop his temple. He recognized the striped sock as Eddie's. Growling, he shrugged it off. "No, I didn'T."

From somewhere in the pile, Richie's cheery voice stopped laughing long enough to fire back:

"Yeah, you kinda did, dude."

Struggling anew, their victim managed to unpin one arm, to somehow begin to claw his way out from under the pile.

"According to you, TraShmouth, I always- ouch- do."

"So?"

"So, can we be moRe specific? Why thiS, why now?"

"No reason. No, scratch that. You are the reason."

"Eeerrm. Makes no senSe."

"I know, right? 'Nonsensical' needs your picture in the dictionary, Pen."

"Just liKe 'veracious' needs yours, Eggboy."

"Yeah, truth hurts, doesn't it?"
"Aggh!"

His freed glove split and reshaped into a set of three dark-skinned claws.

Raising an eyebrow, Beverly smacked said claws across the knuckles.

"Bevs!"

She all but wagged a finger at him, ridiculing,

"No, no morphing. That was a rule."

Face still pinned against the ground, Pennywise glowered as best he could.

Glowering wasn't as effective when you had to aim upward, it seemed.

"No, Georgie said, no teleporting."

Glancing back, he spied a few vulnerable ankles.

Within playful-scratching range.

Or, rather...

"Ah-ha! No, no tickling, either!"

"Damn, man, put those things away."

"I mean, tentacles? Can you get more creepy?"

"More creepy, you say?"

"Don't tempt him, Eds!"

"No! N-next time, you do as Georgie asks. Deal?"

"He didn't ask nicely."

"I heard him, he did!"

"Only after I said no three times, Stanley."

"What? I can't ever not be polite?"

"Nope. 'Cause then I'm somehow to blame for it."

"Well, see what happens when you don't cut him a little slack?"

"A whole lotta hurt!"

"Don't get sing-songy on us, Rich."

"Zeppelin, sing-songy? Blasphemy!"

"Ow! Hey, I'm not your next target."

"You will be soon enough, Mikey. Ouch! GrrR... Off, all of you!"
While the yard itself had been mostly-cleared, the undergrowth standing between said yard and its chainlink fence had been left alone.

The perfect vantage point from which another otherworldly presence could observe, lying sniper-style amidst the leafy branches.

There, they could watch, and despair.

And just continually head-shake in disappointment.

"For cripe's sake, kid. Didn't I tell you they'd bring you down, eventually?"

Not to leave you out, audience.

Our dear, classic alter It sighed, leaning his cheek on his gloved fist, sky-blue eyes dropping shut.

All the better to not continue to have to look.

With the other hand, he hiked a thumb toward said scene.

"You saw it. Two-Bit? Old School? I tried."
Damage Control

Chapter Summary

Sepsis is no joke, Richie.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Storm Warning”.

Face half-buried in his pillow, hands folded underneath the corner, Richie Tozier cracked an eye open. Logic said he had no chance of actually seeing what he thought he would.

Eff logic.

Even without his glasses, he could instantly tell just who it was that had intruded on his long-overdue sleep.

"Dude. This couldn't wait until morning?"

Against the fuzzy blue wallpaper, poised beside the dark blur he knew was his dresser, stood a tall, disproportioned, silver shape. As Tozier watched, the crest of orange atop its skull turned at the sound of his voice.

His way.

After a moment's pause, his visitor stepped closer, leaned down.

The bedridden boy felt something brush against his forehead. The glove's fabric wiped away a wide swath of sweat.

That felt almost nice, like dragging a cold compress across your skin. Without any of the irritating chill.

Sighing, Richie let his eyes drop shut.

Let it happen.

He hadn't even the energy to snap in defense.

"You should be in the hospital."

Richie managed a scoff, and opened his eye again, glancing up. Focusing on something seemed to take his mind off the minute shivers racing across his skin. "A little fever isn't gonna kill me, Spooky."

Pennywise went quiet again. He stood there, stooped over, eyes just off centered enough that one
couldn't pinpoint exactly where he was looking.

Then he glanced over, directly at the closed window beside the bedstand.

Richie seethed, weakly, hearing the panes slide against one another.

All too suddenly, the room felt a few degrees cooler.

The early, before-sunset evening air outside was warmer than the acrid air under his sheets, seemingly. Or maybe it was just the relative cold of his limbs, compared to his core, making it feel that way.

Still, he wasn't going to take this babying treatment lying down.

*Yeesh. Mom or Dad didn't even fuss this much. Get lost, Bozo.*

Lacking the strength to growl as much, Richie went for his next-best argument.

He tried to sit up.

"What did I just- "

The hand stayed his progress, pressing gently down on his shoulder.

"Just for a miNute, Richie. A little air won'T kill you, either."

With a sigh the ailing teenager caved, dropping back onto the pillow. He closed his aching eyes, mindful not to clench his eyelids too hard, trying to pretend he wasn't momentarily dizzy from that.

What was up with this? How was it that, after escaping the sewers he had been lost in for untold hours, it was only *after* he got home he had started to feel so crummy?

Not during a much-needed shower. Not during a long-postponed snack raid.

Why now?

He opened his eyes in another nearsighted squint.

"What are you even doing here?"

Pennywise stared him down another long, silent moment, before lifting a small, black object into view.

"FounD your glasses."

Richie frowned, raising an eyebrow.

Balanced as they were between two fingertips, there they were.

"...Thought you said they were broken."

At that the entity merely shrugged, then made a slow show of setting the folded frames down on the bedstand.

"I was mistaKen."

Glowering in the bedstand's general direction, Richie was tempted to reach over and grab them.
And while his brain thought that a prudent idea, to restore his vision, his body protested too much to move.

"They're still broken, aren't they?"

_You just don't wanna say as much._

Pennywise moved again, slowly, deliberately. With a slight ting of bells, he unfolded the frames, then slid the temples back into place, threading them onto Richie's face as carefully as one would thread a needle.

At that the teenager blinked, sharply, taking a grateful breath as his vision went crisp and clear.

Just as suddenly, his fever didn't seem so heated.

The tremors stopped.

And, for the first time in maybe eighteen hours, he could see perfectly fine again.

Inverted, Pennywise frowned at him.

But from the boy's upside-down vantage point, it looked like a smirk.

"You tell mE."
Chapter Summary

Magpies aren’t carrier pigeons.

But it could be.

Chapter Notes

Little filler inspired by some PM RP.

Ben Hanscom wasn’t the type to complain, much less laugh outright. Not when he was trying to concentrate. And at that moment, on the second floor of Neibolt House, he needed every ounce of focus he possessed.

He did, for his patient was being less than cooperative.

Meanwhile, Richie and Eddie were doing the laughing for him.

Snickering, Richie shook his head and commented for the umpteenth time. "Goddamn. If you didn't know better, watching from behind, you'd think Ben was doing something unspeakable to him."

"Wouldn't stop you from talking about it, Rich," Eddie snorted, arms crossed. Hiking a thumb over his shoulder, it was though he couldn't decide between run-of-the-mill exasperation or mundane apathy. Here they were, the Losers Club, with another funny idea.

For their funny, nonsensical mascot.

"Case in point, this? How could you not have a remark ready?"

And, for once, Ben beat Richie to the punch in commenting first:

"Ow! No, no pecking."

Beverly, looking over Ben's shoulder as she was, let the fracas go on for perhaps three minutes before deciding to put an end to the needless struggle. Hadn't their mascot reluctantly agreed to help, anyway? To take this form upon being asked?

Leaning on the table beside him, she smiled patiently and reached over, set her hand down on the quivering pile of feathers.

"Pen, hold still."

Lying on his back, legs in the air, the magpie shot her a poignant stare. The beak clacked once, but at her touch and command, he stilled, one leg finally stretching out for Ben to take hold of.
Up until that point, the crow-lookalike had been, in a word, fidgety.

Finally rigged, the magpie jumped to his feet, claws clacking on the table’s surface. He took several experimental steps and hops about the table. With exaggerated abandon, he thrashed his leg, trying in vain to dislodge its new cargo. The little, thin metal tube, with a minute letter rolled up and tucked inside, fit snugly against the black-skinned limb.

Affixed with two tightly-wound twist-ties, it wouldn't go anywhere if someone didn't untwist them first.

After a time, he gave up, and also gave into the curiosity he had held at bay for so long.

"Oh-kay. What am I supPosed to do with thiS?"

Ben exchanged a look with Beverly, before stating the painfully obvious: "You deliver a message."

"WhaT? I can do thAt on my oWn?!"

"Oh, can you?" Eddie challenged. "Because I seem to remember us trying this once before, and you flew the wrong way."

Richie rolled his eyes. "I thought he got into a fight with another crow."

At that, the black-and-white bird scoffed through his sharp, ebony-black beak. With a little, pouty flick of those patched wings, he turned his back on the four teens.

"Hmph. It was a matTer of digniTy."

Facepalming gently, Ben had to repress a laugh.

"Hah!" Richie didn't bother to quash his mirth. "Really? I didn't know you had that in you."

"Microscopic, but there," Beverly quipped, stowing the needle-nosed pliers back in her backpack.

Wing-flicking again, the magpie's feathers puffed out and he wheeled around, beak agape, as if aghast.

"Hey."

Ben shook his head.

"Just bring it to Stan. He'll be proud, and glad. It's his birthday."

Hearing this, their would-be message carrier cocked his head, glanced at the wide-open window. It was as bewildering a command as it was probably an outrageous claim.

Stanley? Having a birthday, away from all of his friends?

How could that be?

With a running leap, the magpie launched off the table, took three flaps to clear the short distance to the window, and was gone.

"Five bucks says he loses the goods en route," Richie proclaimed, the moment after.

Eddie frowned, having turned back to opening his backpack, intent on retrieving his books. Ben and
Beverly were already doing the same, arranging their papers and pencils on the table.

"Five bucks says he doesn't."

"Can't you just be happy he's on his way?" Beverly asked, glancing over her shoulder. "And Stan doesn't have to turn fourteen feeling like we aren't thinking of him today. Better late than never."

It was already approaching five PM. A ill-timed flu had kept Stan Uris home from school, and his parents ever-on guard. There was no getting past the front door, for today, or maybe a few days to come.

So plan B.

Use the Losers Club's equivalent of a homing pigeon to pass some kind thoughts along.

While he found the idea amusing, Richie wasn't so convinced of its validity.

And their mascot's subsequent cooperative-uncooperative behavior had done nothing to foster confidence on Tozier's part.

As no one else felt the need to rant, he made up for the collective lack of spite, with an overabundance of his own: "And, y'know, it wouldn't be so late if he didn't act so flip-floppy at first. Like, 'oh yeah, I'll help you out. Or, nope, changed my mind. Let me fight you every step of the way, until the end when you pull just the right heartstring, then boom! I'm off.'"

"..."

Beverly finally sighed and drew a chair up to the table. "You know that's just his way, to protest what he doesn't know and then take off, once you explain it. Even if the protest makes no sense."

Richie smirked. "Makes no sense. Put that on a shirt."

"We could get him one, though," Eddie piped up.

And from there, the ideas between the two just began to snowball:

"Or a board to hang around his neck."

"Why a board, when we have a lovely, roomy forehead?"

"With a lovely permanent marker to go along?"

With her back turned to them, Beverly opened up her biology book. Panning to a dogeared page, she paused long enough to listen to the first few rounds between Tozier and Kaspbrak, then made her disagreement known with a shake of the head.

"...I've given up on that question already. So I'm not gonna ask."

"What?" Ben asked, seated beside her, elbow-to-pudgy-elbow.

"If they're ever gonna grow up."

Hanscom snorted softly. "Pen's gonna grow up before they do."

Tap.
Tap, tap.

...Tap, tap. Tap.

...Tap.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap-

Crack.

"Oh! OopS."

Little chip in the glass?

...No, he won't notice.

...Later. Fix it later.

"StanNy? HeLlo?"

Undoubtedly, his voice was muffled by the closed pane.

Perched on the narrow strip of wood, It stood flush against the second-story window, feathered chest pressed on the glass. The message cylinder was still tied tight to his narrow leg, but the real pain came in the fact that there being no easy entry points to the Uris house.

Key word - easy.

Why couldn't this just be easy?

Like, well... like It hadn't made it easy for Ben, before Beverly interceded.

But this window, it was the only one to Stan's bedroom.

Wait!

Was that him now?

Sssshhh- clunk.

"Pennywise?"

Backpeddaling off the windowsill, the magpie fell from sight with a startled cry of, "Awk!"

With a few frantic wingbeats, he recovered, returning to his previously-held perch with a poignant caw.

No, that wasn't karma in action.

Standing back at a safe distance, heavy, belted bathrobe on, Stan Uris scoffed and smiled at his unexpected-slash-expected visitor. "Now, what brings you around in such a fine, fluffy fashion,
today?"

The overseas crow only tossed his head, glossy neck feathers puffing out, before hiking up his right leg in offer.

*Like it isn't obvious enough, Stanley boy.*

Stan obliged the messanger bird with a throat-scratch, drawing a pleased warble out of him in the process, before delicately untwisting the ties from his limb. It hopped back onto the windowsill's edge.

Thought twice.

Then he turned around, fluttering back into the opened room.

At which Stan gave a little, surprised laugh, but - rather than demand he depart immediately, lest Mom or Dad see - the boy made space for his visitor at his desk all the same.

Whatever the message contained, just the appearance of a friendly face was a gift in itself, it would seem.

No matter what their temporary disgruntlements.
Chapter Summary

Notice any similarities, Pen?

Chapter Notes

As suggested by You Are What You Eat author, Alice_of_the_Ashes. <3

Mike Hanlon worked as the butcher shop's errand boy.
The awful irony of it was, he didn't even like the idea of killing.

It was just his job, running to and from Derry, the basket of his bicycle loaded with wrapped portions of meat.

Living with his grandfather meant working for Leroy, more than it did just seeing himself through adolescence. That he worked as hard as he studied, it was just expected of him. Being from the dutiful upbringing he was, Mike didn't complain.

He just did his job.

When the reality was he would rather spend time playing with the livestock than slaughtering it.

As such, one April afternoon in 1989, when Mike retired early from the fields with a blanketed bundle under his arms, neither Leroy or the other hands objected. They had seen this scenario before, in other apprentices, and maybe even one or two of them were guilty of having done the same thing in their youth.

What hadn't happened in their youths was the spontaneous appearance of a shapeshifting cosmic demon.

While It favored the appearance of a clown, this was one of those countless instances where he behaved nothing like one. At present, he acted more like a spider monkey. Perching on the edge of the disused barn stall, hands between his feet, the humanoid creature just stopped short of jumping right to Mike's side.

Mike barely batted an eye.

He was busy.

Sitting cross-legged in the corner, the straw-covered blanket spread across his lap, he held a lamb.

One-armed, he kept his forearm underneath the little quadruped, hand braced between its forelegs.

With the other hand, he held a bottle, which the animal suckled noisily at.
Expression blank, Pennywise waited perhaps a minute before rapping his gloved knuckles against the stall boards beneath his boots.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

The bells on his forearm tinged accordingly.

"Mikey?"

After one last pause, Hanlon glanced up.

The look on his face...

Pennywise slowly closed his mouth, and sat back on his heels. The chipper greeting he had planned to voice didn't seem so appropriate all of a sudden.

More telling was the strong feeling of forbidding disappointment that filled the stall like an unseen vat of water.

"What- Mike, is everything okay?"

One of Georgie's lectures sprung to its mind.

*"Just because you can sense our moods doesn't mean you can't ask us about them first."

Bill's metaphorical explanation was far more succinct.

*"Don't jump the gun."*

At that moment, Mike seemed to appreciate the effort for what it was.

He smiled thinly, apparently glad to see a familiar face, but there was no happiness in his eyes to back the motion up.

Pennywise's red-lined expression drooped and he ducked his head. His orange locks seemed to sweep themselves further back, as a nervous dog might pin its ears.

"Is- is this... a bad time?"

"No, it's okay, Pen." Mike nodded sideways at the vacant space beside him. "Make yourself at home."

The lamb's eyes stayed shut, lips still fastened onto the bottle.

It made no acknowledgement of the silver-suited creature that warped into view directly beside them.

After the Losers tried to turn 29 Neibolt Street into a veritable animal shelter, It was no longer the biggest fan of said kingdom.

If he had ever been to begin with.

So, while he was a mite curious, the entity kept his corporeal hands to himself, tilting his head sideways at the sight of a baby sheep. It seemed so at ease and untroubled, cradled in Mike's arms.

Why change that image?

Rather...
Why did Mike seem so repressively-upset by it?

Well, the best way to find out was to ask.

Georgie said so.

"Mike- "

"I found her like this," the homeschooled boy began his explanation, tone as vacant as his long-distanced expression. "We lost another one last night."

Pennywise squinted, head-tilting the other way. "Another oNe?"

This was met with a heavyhearted sigh. "One of the ewes. We've had problems with wolves lately."

Wolves.
The species from which domesticated dogs had been derived from.

They weren't a common sight in the woods of Maine, but that was a given.

Humans didn't typically like seeing them around their livestock.

So the wolves kept their distance.

As It used to.

Before he allowed himself the chance to get closer, to take another look at the same species he had manipulated, and preyed on, for so long.

Everything was relative.

Mike was clearly disappointed at the loss of a viable animal from his flock.

But beyond that, with the glistening in his dark eyes, there was clearly more to the story than just "oh, lost another one".

Details would have to wait a moment longer.

Something.

There's something you're supposed to say.

Where, for a human, it would have been second nature to offer condolences, another awkward minute ticked by before Pennywise thought of the right words.

"I'm... sorry, MiKe."

Slowly, hesitantly, he set a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Before Hanlon had a chance to answer, the lamb's ears flicked. Then it took a final, airy pull on the emptied bottle and let go, with a poignant bleat that ended in a hiccup. The animal's furry chin and throat, off-white as they were, dripped with leftover milk.

Mike managed a watery laugh at the sight.

With the edge of the blanket, he began cleaning the lamb's face.
"It's okay, Pen. Thanks. I'm not- that upset."

"Don't lie," the entity retorted, with only a bare fraction of his typical forced-bluntness. "There was something speCial about that... ewe?"

Mike scoffed, shook his head. Probably to keep the tears from falling.

Trying to be the tough guy.

And failing miserably.

"No, I- I mean- it's dumb. Pops says I shouldn't get at-ttached. That this is just part of what we do."

Then, with a sniff and a cough:

"I just- it's always tough. Losing one."

His voice wavered.

All the while his hand never stopped.

Face clean, the lamb glanced passively between them both, seemingly unbothered by the very strange, very not-human presence staring it down.

Then it bleated again. The sound echoed hollowly throughout the old barn.

"You saVed tHis one, though?"

"Yeah. She was wandering around on her own out there," Mike went on. "I mean, even if, back here, it's just- prolonging the inevitable- "

"You don't know that," Pennywise interrupted, simply, not unkindly.

While he had never run an abattior, the entity knew something about resource management.

You didn't kill all the livestock you had every season.

You wouldn't have a farm for very long if you did.

This lamb might not make the grade, depending on its pedigree.

(How uncanny that the Losers, knowingly and not, had underwent Its own version of the same process?)

Whether the outcome there, telling Mike as much now might lift his spirits.

Just a little.

Or it might not.

The kid was already bummed out about losing the lamb's mother.

Nothing could be done to bring the animal back.

But what if...

Still teary-eyed, Mike looked up, feeling the gloved hand, still resting on his shoulder, tighten briefly.
"It's Friday," It pointed out, cryptic as ever. His irises glowed yellow from beneath, like a fire, threatening to rise. "Are you on watch tonight, too?"

There was no moonlight to see by.

Lost in the dark, air rifle slung over his shoulder, Mike was almost reluctant to point his flashlight out, across the field.

From the sound of things, the light would only illuminate what he already imagined was happening.

And it sounded horrid enough.

The sheep-snatching wolf, an omega-turned-stray cut off from its own kind, didn't last long.

At first, there had been a lot of snarling, yelping, and yapping. The initial growling, on both sides, quickly escalated into a high, pitched din of fury and panic.

Outmatched as it was against a true werewolf, their quarrel as as brief as it was bloody.

Then, with a final yipe of a deathcry, it was over.

Without a backwards look, the entity slunk away into the dark.

Mike's flashlight found the wolf's eviscerated corpse minutes later.

Seeing that was closure enough for him to rest easy.

Meanwhile, It trotted to a stop at the shadowy treeline, on all fours, sides heaving. In the dark, all the outline his hunchbacked frame had resembled was a long-legged bear. With the back of one large paw, the creature wiped at its bloodied lips. Drops of red pattered against the ground, those that didn't mix with the leftover, frothing slobber.

Honest work, farming.

Honest as It could be brutal.

When the being had cause.

How unfortunate that, no matter what good he did, his sole cause was simply to be hungry.

For fear, for flesh.

For the occasional vote of approval.

Whatever collateral damage he inflicted, on the townsfolk of those whose loved ones went missing...

That was... just collateral.

He could still pull strings, erase memories.

To what end?

It wouldn't change his sleep cycle.

Nor more than associating with the Losers would.
With them in the picture, it would just make the months in between now and then not seem so... pointless.

Derry got her due from him.

In the form of Its own lonely existence.

No one else could hope to understand.

But he would cope as best he could in the meantime.

Head hanging low, the werewolf snapped its jaw shut and loped off into the trees.

He wasn't without his own kind of suffering there.

Because fair was fair, right?
Chapter Summary

How do you explain this one, Georgie?

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Crossing A Line”.

Holding his maimed elbow, Georgie Denbrough stood at the foot of the porch, staring up at the overhang of his own family home. The wind had picked up in the time it had taken him to walk back. But no amount of lashing from it could move his feet at that moment.

He was stalling, yes. There was really no choice, though. His arm was still bleeding. Not profusely, but enough that he couldn't easily cross the foyer without getting red drops all over the carpet.

Mom was still playing the piano.

He could see so, through the window.

It didn't matter if her eyes were on the note sheets.

Being Mom, she had a sense for when messes were being made.

A sense that couldn't be evaded, most times.

One glance up at him and it would be off to the hospital.

Georgie didn't want that.

A hospital meant more adults.

Adults who would ask him to explain what happened.

...How could he?

Then, considering his options, the boy came up with a plan. Simultaneously, he felt for the pocketed radio with his left hand, just managed to pull it free without dropping it, and eventually maneuvered the device around. One-handed, he was barely able to push the transmit button down with his thumb.

"Billy?"

His struggle paid off.

Almost instantly, a familiar voice crackled back.

"Jesus, Georgie, where are you? I've- "
"Downstairs, on the porch. Be quiet."

There was a pause as Bill considered the uncharacteristic interruption.

Then there was a click, as the static ceased.

Moments later, there was the muffled sound of feet, racing down the stairs.

Quieting as they reached the ground floor.

Then the front door opened.

Still in his plain, gray pyjamas, Bill took one glance at his little brother, saw the blood on the boards, and went absolutely pale.

"Georgie, what-"

"Shhh!" Fiercely, the six-year-old stepped up, tossing the hood of his yellow slicker back. His breath steamed in the cold like an angry gust of fog. "Get a plastic bag and help me to the bathroom. Hurry, before Mom sees."

Somehow, the Denbrough boys managed the impossible.

Sneaking a would-be mess of horror show proportions past their mother.

As it turned out, that was the easy part.

Bandaging a joint as crucial as an elbow was not.

For that, they had to improvise.

"Stay there."

Georgie obeyed and remained kneeling where he had been guided to stop, leaning over the bathtub's edge, arm outstretched. The bloody plastic bag sat in the basin beside him. From over his shoulder, he watched his older brother search for supplies.

With shaking hands, Bill tried to keep his face calm, while he rummaged through cabinet after cabinet. Pilfering from the fully-stocked First Aid kit in the garage was not an option (not with Dad sawing away in there). For as time-sensitive a situation as this, they had to make do with alternatives.

Not that Georgie was feeling dizzy, or trembling, or showing even the vaguest sign of shock.

Weirdly enough.

His arm hurt. It had hurt worse when he had partially disrobed, shrugging out of the rain slicker and ripping the damp sweater off. The motion pulled on his torn skin. He had bled a bit more, and like it or not, the now-stained cycling sweater would have to go.

But that was about it.

Even the bleeding seemed to slow, the longer he crouched there.

And simply not looking at it made it easier to accept, somehow.

Eventually, the hunt paid off.
Georgie's expression still fell at the sight of his brother's would-be solution.

"Cotton balls?"

Undeterred, Bill found a perch, to sit on the tub's edge, plastic bag in hand. Inside were an assortment of white, fluffy spheres.

"Rags won't work. We can't t-throw out any we'd use. Mom would notice."

Brow falling, Georgie let his cheeks puff out, daring an uneasy glance at the closed door behind them. "But- this'll take so much longer."

The bag make a soft crinkling sound as it was opened. They soaked one of the swabs under the faucet, mindful not to run it for more than a second.

Lest Mom or Dad hear.

"Not as long as waiting for it to s-stop on its own would. Here, let me- oh, Jesus."

Reaching into the tub, Bill stopped halfway.

He went pale again, as he had on the porch, and swallowed, hard. His eyes went rounder, but they didn't veer away.

Watching this reaction unfold, Georgie frowned. He hadn't thought the older boy was in any way squeamish.

Not about a little blood.

*Just because you're taking a closer look at it now doesn't make it any worse.*

"It's not that bad, Billy."

"It's- it's not that, Georgie. Just- " Gently, Bill took the wounded arm by its wrist, slowly and carefully positioning the limb parallel to the tub's wall. "What on- what did this?"

The patient shifted on his knees, trying to relieve the numbing tension developing in his legs. His shoulder was starting to grow sore, from holding up his arm for so long.

The not-easy-to-answer nature of the question didn't sit well with him, either.

"I don't know."

*Or, I do, but-

No.

He could tell the story... like it was.

Bill would take one look at him, report directly to their parents, and say something like, "*Mom, George needs a hospital. No, not that kind. A head hospital."

Not that they had even gotten to that part of the story.

But then, the boy didn't see what had caused his wound.

So, how fair was it to assign blame to-
"Ow! Bill!"

"Shh!"

His brother glared, but only briefly. Then his brow relaxed, frowning sympathetically. Undoubtedly, Bill was distressed as he was at the thought of causing any more pain.

No matter how well he hid it.

"Try to stay quiet."

Georgie squeezed his stinging eyes shut, and forced himself to look away again. He bit his lip, tightly, breathing tight through his nose.

He didn't need to watch, to look at the narrow, lemon-wedge-sized tears in his skin, to see the raw muscle was exposed underneath.

Or to see his blood being dabbed up by the cotton.

For a while, Bill operated in silence. Save for a few anxious gulps of air, he kept his nerve while he attended the wound - pausing there, stroking elsewhere.

Sniffling, Georgie did his best to stay calm and still. To ignore how uncomfortable this ordeal was becoming.

He thought of other things, instead.

Thought back to what had happened.

The rain.

The cold.

The boat.

The car.

The... clown.

Surreal, all of it.

How could he even hope to begin explaining?

Without sounding completely looney?

Georgie shifted on his aching knees, folding his left arm over the tub's edge. He leaned his head down against that elbow, a makeshift pillow. After a moment's delay, he sighed, opening his brown eyes.

*Start with the boat.*

"You're not mad?"

Reluctantly, he glanced back.

Bill's hand still held his brother's right wrist, supporting it, while his left hand kept cleaning the mostly-dried blood away.
His eye didn't waver.

"...About what?"

"The boat?"

Bill paused, looked his way.

"When you come home, looking like this?" He shook his head, and resumed dabbing. "That's the last thing on my mind."

Georgie sighed again, but this time it was with a measure of relief. Very short-lived relief, as it turned out.

"I'm just wondering, why- why are we in here, taking care of it? Why didn't you want to tell Mom or Dad?"

But even as he asked a difficult question, Bill tried to make it more bearable.

He let go of Georgie's wrist, to let his brother's arm finally rest in the curve of the water-flecked tub. The patient breathed in, held his air, then let it out slowly. Eyes darting, he tried to cobble together a sufficient explanation.

"They... they wouldn't believe me. Neither will you."

Bill smirked, not unkindly, using a new cotton ball to clean his own hands.

"How can you know that?"

"Don't get in my head. I- you would have had to have been there."

That was met with a shrug. "So, just go st-step-by-step. You left the house...?"

"...I left the house. I followed the boat. I... hit my head."

Bill snorted in amusement.

"What?"

Half-smiling, Georgie couldn't help feeling a little humored as well. "Those sawhorses, down the street? I forgot they were there."

His brother paused, brushing the younger boy's bangs aside. Finding no apparent injury there, no bruise or scrape, he nodded.

"And after that?"

"The boat, she... crossed the road. Went down Witcham. And that's where- she went into the drain."

"You couldn't keep up?"

Georgie scowled, good humor lost. "I tried."

"It's okay, I'm sure you did."
Don't talk down to me. That's where...

Sighing heavily, Georgie thought to blurt everything out, as he had thought it happened. Then he merely turned around to sit on the floor, back against the bathtub, while still keeping his arm slung over the edge.

His knees couldn't take any more abuse.

But at least the cuts didn't smart so much now.

After a pause, Bill sat down beside him, side by side.

And, inavertantly or not, he gave his kid brother a perfectly-reasonable excuse story for his injury.

"Is that h-how you hurt yourself? From reaching into the drain after her?"

Georgie's head jerked up, eyes wide.

Yes! I did, but-

He breathed in to speak, then stopped.

Should I?

Should I tell him?

No, it wasn't fair.

Whatever it was, that he had seen in the drain, held a conversation with, what he had thought was a very vivid, very peculiar hallucination that, at the time, was only because he had bumped his head-

Whatever Pennywise was, he had kept Georgie from being run over.

Nothing else could have grabbed onto him from there.

Nothing else could have... hurt him.

But still, that was only the first time they had met.

They weren't strangers, not anymore.

How could he blame everything on the clown being there?

Had he not been there...

Well, Georgie wouldn't have gotten hurt.

The car wouldn't have had a chance to run him down.

He wouldn't have been reaching into the drain at all.

Pennywise had offered the boat back.

Kept him from being run over.

Whatever he was, he had done the boy three wrongs and two rights, all in the same moment.
Three to two.

No... there was a third right.

Pennywise could have easily run away after that.

Like he was never there.

Instead, he crawled out of the drain.

He stayed, when Georgie had asked.

And he made sure the kid was okay.

Okay enough to walk home.

That evened things out, didn't it?

Georgie blinked sharply, shaking the thoughts as he remembered where he was, who he was talking to now.

Fiction's better than truth, in this case.

Especially when I can't tell how much of that encounter was fiction versus truth.

"Yeah, that's what- happened."

Bill smiled at him, a fuller, more-satisfied smile than the nervous ones before.

"And you di-didn't want Mom or Dad to know? Think they'd whup you for it?"

Georgie squinted, shrugging with his one good arm. "I thought you would, too."

"And you hold my word above theirs'?" Bill raised an eyebrow, but he didn't sound bothered by the notion. "Good to know."

Peace reached, they sat beside each other for a time, both letting the story sink in.

For their own reasons.

Bill closed the bag of swabs, reaching for the box of bandages next.

Georgie waited until his arm was in the process of being wrapped before venturing forward.

With a far less troublesome subject.

"Can we... can we make another one?"

"Another what?"

"Boat. I never did get her back."

He managed not to wince, during dinner. Thankfully, Mom had made a stew. You could drink from the bowl rather than spear the meat and potatoes with your fork, soak up the excess broth with a breadroll.
Georgie finished his quickly, to keep his movements to a minimum.

Excused from the table, he wandered back upstairs.

Bill promised, yes, they would make another boat.

*Tomorrow. For now, you get some sleep. That arm's gonna be tender for a while.*

Moments later, Georgie reflected on just what had become of the original vessel.

He had lost her.

So had Pennywise.

In their mutual, muted haste to understand each other, both parties had neglected to keep track.

Following an awkward pause, Pennywise had pulled himself back into the drain.

Fretting over his arm at the time, brushing rain out of his eyes, Georgie hadn't seen *how*.

He assumed it was a trick, some contortionist-based feat that would be almost-painful to watch.

The next time the boy looked up, the drain was vacant.

And despite calling after the clown like a lost pet, Pennywise didn't return.

Faced with that, Georgie didn't expect to see the boat again.

Or his new... acquaintance, really.

Opening the door to his bedroom, Georgie found the light was off.

Feeling along the wall with his left hand, he reached up and flicked the switch.

With a disbelieving laugh, he spotted it.

*Her.*

She sat there on the bedstand, resting easy between the Slinky and LEGO turtle, with her tapered bow facing out. Her waxed hull gleamed yellow in the light, not a crease or a crack to be seen.

Dry.

Which was appropriate, her captain decided, once the initial shock had worn off.

After all that, nearly sinking on her maiden voyage, the girl would need a spell in dry dock.
Disciplinary Action

Chapter Summary

You done messed up, Rob.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Taste Test” / plot hole fix to “Sharpie”.

"Change back."

"But Georgie- "

"Now."

From the look on Denbrough’s face, Rob Gray knew he had lost the argument.

Immediately.

It didn’t matter what face It had worn to their covert, one-on-one meeting at the park. Strolling up the path, toward a thicket not far from where Stan had 'rescued' the baby chickadee, our entity-in-disguise hadn’t felt uneasy, per se, and to that end, he hadn’t detected any uncomfortable vibes emitting from the trees around.

But upon reaching the rendezvous, Georgie had promptly scowled at him and crossed his arms. The boy’s bike stood nearby, leaning against a pine tree.

It was a precaution. Rather than walk, if need be, he would have the speed to be able to shake Bill or any of the rest of the club before they could fathom just where their youngest member and the club mascot had spirited away to.

As yet, the grade schooler might still need it.

To be able to race back, to say that, "Yes, we talked. And I don’t care if you didn't want me to hear it."

For better or worse, Georgie wanted to know.

The truth.

About what had happened to Ben, and thereby Victor Criss, a scant week ago.

He had, apparently, put the pieces together.

Or if not, he wanted to know just what had gone down.

Why everyone was suddenly walking on eggshells around Pennywise.
When before, they hadn't seemed to have any qualms.

No big, glaring ones, anyway. Everyone was still a touch uncomfortable around the entity, as well they should have been. But, until now, they had tolerated his company, even as he had come to crave theirs.

As much as It wanted to avoid said confession...

It was the lesser evil of two confessions currently festering upon his psyche.

After much agonized deliberation, now faced with this scenario, Rob winced behind his sunglasses, and belatedly attempted to step back behind the curve in the undergrowth. All too abruptly, it didn't seem like a good idea.

No. Not here. This is too- out in the open.

Even if they were effectively-lost in the stand of trees. He felt exposed.

Rightly so.

Undaunted, Georgie raced over. In a repeat of their first human-to-human-imitation encounter, he grabbed the lookalike by his gray jacket's lapels. It would have been funny to anyone who didn't know better, the sight of the grade schooler trying to pull a high schooler down to his level.

Face to face, neither of them had cause to laugh at that moment.

"Nyh uh, you stay. Change back, and tell me what happened."

"Ha-happened?" Rob swallowed, eyes darting, stalling. This form's stutter was by no means an exclusive feature, not when he was feeling nervous in general. Prolonged exposure to the Losers simply made it so.

Every twenty-seven years, there was a different Robert Gray to be seen.

1989's was more of a mixed bag than any iteration previous.

Particularly with regard to how he rotated through one borrowed-persona aspect, to the next and the next, with an uncanny resemblance to normalcy somehow threaded down the center.

Being normal, by human standards, was as easy as it was not. The reality of it took some getting used to, every time he donned this body.

Right now, the sweating in his palms felt real enough, as did the shaking induced by his nerves.

So it made sense to hide his quivering hands under the jacket's flaps, hunching his shoulders as if he were suddenly chilled.

No chance of that on a sunny day like this, usually.

But in the shade...

Georgie glowered, expression darker than It had ever seen him, and gave the lapels a poignant tug.

A second later, they were at the same level: eye-to-shaded-eye.

Rob didn't have to stoop.
He let himself, anyway.

"Don't play dumb, Penny. You did something. Bad."

Can't lie to him.

Won't make him just forget.

That leaves...

"Y-yes, I did, but-"

Frowning, Georgie let go of the lapels, grabbing the sunglasses away with both hands.

Rob winced again, blinking sharply at the harsh change in lighting, like things were altogether too bright for him now.

Instead of the typical blue-green irises, inhumanly-yellow eyes were revealed. A second later, they flushed blue, like spilled ink spreading across parchment.

Watching this, Georgie tilted his head. His frown began to ease. Seeing that, the change in color, it was if it were all the confirmation he needed. Apparently, it served to confirm that his eldritch protector was still there, somewhere inside the human disguise.

But even then, the boy didn't let up.

And continued with the third degree treatment.

"Why else would you be hiding, like this?" Georgie shrugged, looking the being up and down. "Beverly told us you can be Rob only every once and a while."

And this is one of those 'whiles'.

Why not just let me be about it?

The disguise forced himself to sigh instead.

He had attended this meeting to reach some kind of understanding, after all.

"I- Georgie, talking to you, like this, is- iT's- eaSier tHan- " Voice slipping, Rob wheeled away with a growl. If emotion didn't get the better of him before this encounter was over, he would be amazed.

In the worst possible way.

Peering up at him, the six-year-old's expression kept evolving.

Gone was the initial irritation and impatience.

Slowly replacing that was a blush of contrition, and concern.

As if the kid had something to be sorry about, for prodding as much as he was daring to. For seeing his friend this troubled, and here he was, making it worse.

Seeing it, Rob balked. He took a half-step aside, then a full stride away, hands kneading in distress. He had to tell himself, repeatedly, to keep them to himself.

Lest he lash out and strike something, rather.
More and more, he was feeling like that something.

One good punch upside the head would do it.

To think he has somehow driven this boy to such an uncharacteristic state of agitation and then realize Georgie thought he was in the wrong for it.

*Georgie is the last one in this town to have something to be sorry about.*

*Putting up with all my haywire episodes, especially.*

*I'm the one who should be sorry.*

*I am. About a lot.*

*Not just-*

"Penny."

Fretting as he was, the entity didn't notice the impending hug before it had commenced. Arms latched themselves around his waist, and held on.

Rob flinched, glancing down in alarm. Automatically, he pivoted his arms back and away.

Like someone touching him would suddenly undo the very seams of his appearance.

Georgie didn't look back.

He had tucked his head against Rob's torso. Though now a bit closer in height than usual, the top of the boy's head didn't even reach his friend's elbows. His hands scarcely reached all the way around his side.

"It's okay."

Rob couldn't help his sense of sheer disbelief, mouth dropping open. He thought to teleport away, then thought not to. Caught in the middle, he could only do one logical thing.

Stay.

The hug was as helpful as it was... undeserved, he felt.

*Monsters aren't supposed to get hugs.*

Eyes darting again, the entity bit at one of his knuckles, impulsively. Not hard enough to draw blood, but tight enough.

...Okay?

*How can-*

"Whatever happened, I'm sure you didn't mean it."

*I had, too, though.*

*Ben was in trouble.*

"No, I- I did m-mean it, Georgie. But I- "
The kid stopped him with a nod against the jacket. The pleated leather creaked as it was pressed.

"You're feeling bad about it now?"

Words failed him completely then.

Blinking slowly, Rob only managed one despondent nod, shoulders sagging, and glanced away.

Eventually, the hug relented.

And he looked back down.

"That's okay, too. Feeling bad comes with being good, like you've been," Georgie explained, patiently, all smiles and kind, glimmering eyes. It was as though he knew the hug, not being returned, was nothing to be offended by. "It's how you know you made a mistake."

It thought to growl, to say something childish like but-I-don't-make-mistakes (despite all the evidence to the contrary), but Rob shoved the impulse back.

Stammering, he fretted and paced the short width of the trail.

"But- this one was... I d-don't know how to..."

He stopped, feeling a hand settle on his elbow, giving it a consoling pat.

"Fix it?"

Slowly, Rob glanced back down at Georgie, eyebrows low.

Along with his mood.

"Was someone else hurt? Because of something you... did?"

The words, whichever ones he picked, would reveal too much. He couldn't use them.

So he only nodded.

"Did you say you were sorry?"

Rob closed his eyes, shook his head.

Thankfully, it wasn't taken the wrong way.

"You can't say you were sorry."

Then it was Denbrough's turn to pause, as he considered an alternative to his proposed solution.

"I know. We'll show them you're sorry."

Rob could only sigh.

Long and deep.

When his eyes opened, he felt it.

The irises. They were back to yellow.
A dull, bland, half-dead-sunflower-petal yellow.

And when his voice cracked, he didn't think to check it.

"HoW...?"

Doing his part, Georgie simply smiled again, unaffected by the mopey reception his plan received. He grabbed one of the flared cuffs and gave it an encouraging tug.

Then he pressed the folded sunglasses back into his friend's hand.

"C’mon. We can be back home before Bill gets outta school."
Itsy Bitsy

Chapter Summary

She’s a beaut, innit she, Mike?

Chapter Notes

Because.

Okay, with apologies to any arachnophobes out there.

"Mike, look what I found!"

Now the homeschooled farmboy wasn't squeamish about much.

He had watched his grandfather slaughter livestock, clean fish, dress kills.

But having a glass canning jar come sliding laterally into your field of view, containing a very animated, very jittery wolf spider -

Now that would make anyone jump two feet backwards.

Backpedaling over his own feet with a yell, Mike Hanlon only managed to not end up sprawled on the floor.

Instead, he stumbled back to stop next to a giggling Georgie Denbrough.

The kid was developing his own affinity for jumpscare. That was almost worrying.

"Georgie, what are you-"

"Isn't she neat?" Denbrough grabbed for the jar on the table with both hands. The spider inside jigged again, spinning hopelessly around in place, unable to escape. "I found her under the porch."

Wonderful. And now you want to show 'her' off?

Mike didn't know whether to sigh or to laugh first.

"I thought- you were scared of spiders, man," he recalled, adjusting his abandoned kitchen chair, still intent on retaking his seat.

"I used to be," Georgie replied, brown eyes still glued to his captured prize. The spider stilled, and stared back. Standing high on six legs, the remaining two were angled up, poised as if to lunge at him through the glass. "Not anymore, though."

"Oh? And what brought this on?"
Mike thought he already knew.

It typically had something to do with a six-foot-tall extraterrestrial these days.

But instead, the teen was actually surprised for a second time.

Georgie looked up. "From Ben's last set of books. For one of his science projects, he had to make a display chart, comparing all the spiders of Maine. Beverly did the drawings. I helped them color the pictures."

He held the jar up for appraisal again. "And this one's a wolf spider. They don't spin webs."

Reminding himself there was no actual danger, and of the need to be a good listener, Mike leaned in to peer closer.

The arachnid was large, as spiders went, around the size of a silver dollar. Her segmented body was a dark, rustic brown with two black dorsal stripes and yellow legs. As Mike watched, he thought he could spy the set of eight eyes atop the spider's head, poised above two twitchy mouthparts.

"Just a wolf spider? Or do you know the proper name?"

"Uh..." At that Georgie frowned. He tapped his head in thought, but came up empty, shrugging. "I'd have to look again. Ben already took the books back."

"That's okay, kid. I was only wondering."

The spider flinched and raced about its prison once more. It even overturned in its haste to go nowhere, suddenly resembling only a flurry of kicking legs.

"How long were you planning on keeping her?" Mike asked, though he dreaded to hear the possible answer. "She doesn't look very happy in there."

"Not long. I just wanted to show her off." Confirming what was already a given, Georgie glanced back in the direction of the front door. "Do you think Stan might know the name?"

Mike scoffed in amusement. "Oh, undoubtedly. Our Mister Naturalist-in-Training. I don't know how much of a fan of arachnids he is, though."

"She's not so bad," the younger boy pointed out. The spider righted itself, turned in place, front legs curling under its body. "Penny will let me keep her, here in the house, I mean. There are plenty of spiders already in the basement."

"And she'll be the queen of them all."

"Yeah!"

Mike snorted, holding a hand to his face. Oh, to be six-years-old again.

Still, entertaining the absurd notion was proving to be harmless enough.

"You'll want to think of a name for her, before you let her go. Who knows? Maybe you'll run into each other again."

"That's silly, Mike," Georgie objected, half-frowning with newfound doubt. "Spiders can't recognize people."
"You know that for sure?"

"Well, no, but- "

"You still ought to give her a name," Mike interjected. "Something to remember her by. She's quite the find, no matter what."

*And how you caught her without getting bit - let's just not tell Bill about that, shall we?*

"Itsy."

"Itsy?"

"Bitsy. Itsy Bitsy, like the rhyme," Georgie nodded, decision made. He held the jar before his face, nose pressing on the glass. At that, the spider leapt toward him, body-hugging the smooth surface. "Itbit, for short."

Mike chuckled and turned back to his open book. The name would give him something to laugh at when the economics assignment became too droll.

*Itbit, huh? Points for originality.*

"You should show Pennywise, if he's around," the farmboy remarked. "Y'think he likes spiders, too? He's got so many of them here already, I don't see why he wouldn't."

Had he turned around, Mike would have seen the sly, knowing smile stretch across Georgie's face.

As well as how 'Itbit' spun around again, and - with a very deliberate certainty - knocked against the glass jar with one tapered leg.

Once, twice, three times.

Mike didn't hear that.

Much less the tiny, tiny voice crying for assistance:

*"MiKey? A litTle help hEre?"*
Chapter Summary

Georgie gets to be the voice of reason for once.

Chapter Notes

Post “Cut Loose”.

"He bit you, too?"

Victor frowned, hand frozen where it was, unseen as it was under the collar of his shirt.

He glanced back, ignoring how his loaded backpack swung percariously with the motion, threatening to slide off and into his bent elbow.

School had gotten out a while ago. Almost on a whim, he stayed for the study hour (despite how the infuriating calculus made his brain throb), then started the long trek across town. He had hoped to avoid the worst of the springtime rain in delaying as he had.

Scowling, Criss felt drops of water slide off his chin. In the last five minutes, the rain had seemed to intensify. What a time for someone to catch him gimping along. Days like this, when the weather was crap and the barometric pressure was somewhere around the bottom of the gauge, his shoulder hurt the most.

A dull, underlying throb that never seemed to go away no matter how long he massaged it.

Surgery, what little his parents could barely afford, had only helped fix so much. The muscles were healed, but scarred. The nerves connecting to them were destined to remain tattered.

"He did."

Because it still hurt, maybe that was why Victor felt the need to growl out an answer, even if Georgie Denbrough had asked only out of empathy's sake.

Hiking his own backpack up high, the grade schooler trotted up the sidewalk to join him. He made the motion seem as carefree as a gazelle trotting up to walk alongside a hyena.

Then Victor blinked, sharply.

He thought twice, about what the kid had just said.

*You, too?*

*Meaning...*
"He... he bit you?"

Both knew to which *he* was being referred to.

So they needed not say the entity's favored name.

Georgie nodded, eyes still squinting, sympathetic. Unafraid, he reached up, and patted the once-maimed arm's bicep.

"When we first met."

"Wh-what... why?" Victor blinked again, shook rain out of his eyes. "You're nice as they come. Why would he-"

At that, Denbrough smiled bashfully. "He did it to save me."

"From what?"

"A car," the boy explained. "The day I met him, it was at a storm drain, on the edge of the road. A car went around the corner, and-" He shrugged, then held out his bare right arm, rotated up. "Penny pulled me down against the curb, to get me out of the way."

Victor frowned, looking down at the tender-looking elbow being offered for his inspection.

No scars. Not a single, white scratch.

Instantly, the sophomore felt a flush of jealousy. His own deltoid and trapezius muscles, the skin there bore more than a few raised, semi-circular scars across their span. Like a shark had somehow taken a flying leap to grab him in its mouth.

He breathed in, about to accuse Denbrough of making things up, but then thought his impulse over. The jealousy died down as quickly as it had flared up.

Slowly, he let go of his shoulder, and shrugged his backpack into place.

Georgie wasn't a liar.

And he wasn't telling Criss this to try and hurt him.

"He tried to save you," Victor shook his head, voice going flat. "And he didn't think to use his hands?"

They started walking again. Briskly.

Undoubtedly, the rest of the club had already made the meeting at the town diner.

"He didn't, not at the time," Georgie went on. He had to half-skip to keep up with the sophomore's long strides. "Billy wasn't happy about it."

Criss snorted. "No, I don't think he would've been."

"It's okay. Penny said he was sorry, later," the younger boy added. "And it took a while, but I think Billy's forgiven him."

"If he bit you, how come..."
Victor trailed off.

His mind went as momentarily-stiff as his permanently-damaged nerves.

It felt lame to imagine asking, let alone actually putting into words.

Undaunted, Georgie helped with the question's second half.

"How come there aren't any marks?"

They came to a stop at a crosswalk.

Traffic continued to rumble on by, heedless of the pedestrians.

Not heavy traffic, but consistent enough they would have to wait to cross.

Georgie glanced up from under the edge of his baseball hat.

"He fixed that, too."

Victor stared down at him, standing there dumbfounded once more, for a second. Or two or three.

The rain was starting to soak past his jacket.

He didn't know how to respond to that.

Then, without warning, Georgie broke out a beaming smile.

"I told you, he can be nice. And he can do the same for you, if you want."

The high schooler snapped out of his trance, hissing a flat refusal through his teeth.

"Nooo, thanks. I-" He stopped mid-rant, seeing how Georgie's expression fell. "I-I mean, I don't... think I've quite forgiven him just yet."

The words didn't quite satisfy him.

So it was no big surprise that Georgie looked very dubious upon hearing them.

Victor ducked his head, cheeks flushing in the cold.

"...Sorry."

Mollified, for the moment, Georgie gave his newest friend another smile.

It was not as radiant as before, but there.

He patted his arm again.

"It's okay. You will."

The traffic cleared.

Peace made, they continued on across the street, side by side.

The rain seemed to lighten along the way.

As did the throb in Criss' shoulder.
Reaching the diner, Victor wrote the conversation off as to-be-concluded.

For it was weird, weird company he was running with nowadays.

Good.

Better than before.

But weird.
Chapter Summary

Tensions are getting a bit thick.

Just a bit.

Chapter Notes

Takes place later on the timeline. Post “Close Call” / “Damage Control”.

Beverly Marsh could handle her own.

Most days.

Then there was mitigating countless disagreements between Eddie and Richie.

No easy task.

Not even she was exempt from the occasional flub there.

The duty seemed to rotate throughout the rest of the club, although Marsh was admittedly overdue for her 'turn' in mending diplomatic ties between Kaspbrak and Tozier. After spending a long weekend kept to the apartment, it wasn't exactly all her fault for missing out, either.

Still, at the first sign of discontent brewing in the background, she wisely kept her silence.

Always better to step in and clean up the fireworks after they explode, anyway.

They stood silent with their bikes, peacefully, for the longest time, half in the shade beside the road. The day around them was bright and sunny, nothing about the weather conditions suggested anything amiss.

Then Eddie had a compulsive need to blurt out:

"Well. That's it. I've committed murder."

"Damn, if that ain't inconvenient," Richie mumbled, automatically. While the other three stood astride their bikes, he had struck the most dramatic pose of all: leaning forward with elbows braced upon his handlebars. His hands held the sides of his face as casually as if he were propped up upon his desk at school.

"It's only been twenty minutes," Stan pointed out, unknowingly throwing more fuel on the sputtering spark of impending conflict. His eye never wavered, as he went over the list of 'artifacts to find' that he had composed the night before.
"I shouldn't have sent them that way," Eddie lamented, in his paranoid way, that more often than not, led to hysteria. He was clearly starting to fret.

Beverly didn't bat an eye. Rendezvousing on a Sunday for a scavenger hunt in the Barrens was good and bad. Good in that the sideroads around Derry were mostly clear of traffic, making way for bicyclers such as themselves. Bad in that thugs like Henry Bowers held no candle to the sanctity of Rest Day.

Getting together without anyone suffering an injury en route was the tough part.

But, so far so good. This road was empty, and they had pedaled the route without so much as a lost eyelash between them.

Until the quiet, apparently, became too much in itself.

"They knew the score, Eds. If they had a problem with your choice of meeting point, someone would have said so."

"Ben's too nice to have said anything. So's Mike. Bill was never in love with this idea to begin with, and even Georgie would have rather gone to the beaver dam instead of scavenging. Even if nothing has happened-"

"Sheesh. Give it a rest, Eds. Just because Bowers jumped you last time and we weren't there-"

Eddie's shoulders tensed, color rising in his cheeks. "What? You think I'm being unfair?"

"Not unfair. Just as paranoid as your old lady. When are you gonna get over that?"

"Probably around the same time you decide to grow a brain."

"Already got that. I can't help it if you have a problem with the way I use it."

"Far as I can tell, you never have."

"But I've got said organ between my ears. Does that mean you'll get over yourself now?"

"You do the same, I'll consider it."

"The same? Now that's unfair."

Then Eddie launched into the frantic-rushed-storytelling phase:

"Yeah, unfair! He almost ran me down, then backed up to take another stab at it. I'm lucky I didn't break my wrist. Seriously, I don't know what his beef is with everyone now - besides the usual existing-in-general part - but if he's taking it out on any of the rest of us, because of me, it's just-"

"Re-frigging-lax, Eds. You gotta have some confidence, sometimes."

"I've got confidence- confidence I screwed up, majorly!"

"Y'know, it's kinda difficult already to inspire any kind of confidence in you," Richie fired back. He sat up abruptly, fingers clamping down on the handlebars. "Not when you're always pulling this jittery-rabbit crap."

Stan glanced up from his list, eyes shifting. "It's only been twenty minutes, guys," he repeated after a beat, for lack of having anything more pacifying to say.
Not that trying harder would have made a difference.

Richie paid it no mind. He had started into his own rant, and no one was gonna stop him.

"I mean, does it ever get old? The nagging? The constant worrying? The nerves? All the time you waste preparing, over nothing? Don't you get tired of listening to yourself?"

"No more than you do, Trashmouth. I'd think we're actually pretty even when it comes to that."

*Settle down, you two.*

Again, Beverly declined to speak, to emote anything. Nothing she could have said or done at that moment would silence both parties satisfactorily. Silently willing them to find peace was the next best alternative.

Even if Stan, apparently, had his doubts. Preemptively, he shuffled his bike backwards, a meter behind the others.

"Even? We're as even a basketball shoe versus a bowling shoe."

"Really? You're comparing us to footwear now?"

"Beats worse things I could think to compare us to, Eds. But I won't. Don't wanna offend your sensitive little eardrums."

"And I supposing *I'm* the bowling shoe? Hanging out with the old folks at the alley much now, Rich?"

"You'd fit right in there, what with how you act like you've *lived* already. When you've barely branched out at all."

"Compared to you, that's not a bad thing at all. How many times have you been sick this past year?"

"Last time doesn't count!"

"Oh, are you gonna ignore how you were bedridden for two weeks on account of a sewage sundae? You're lucky you didn't get blood poisoning!"

"Still more excitement I've had in one day than you've enjoyed your whole life."

"Excitement? Visiting Derry's underground waterpark is your idea of excitement?"

"You take what you can get around here, Doctor K. And sometimes that means lowering your standards."

"As if you had any to begin with!"

Finally, Beverly had cause to frown. There would be no settling down of their own volition from this point onward.

*Christ Almighty. Even when they're expressing concern, they manage to make it something to argue about.*

"Both of you, knock it off."

Kaspbrak and Tozier both turned her way.
And in doing so, she got a good look at the mutual expressions of outrage they bore.

But they didn't stop at that.

They climbed off their bikes and kept on heckling.

Now that they had found a new target, who knew when they would stop?

"Oh, you think that'll settle everything, Miss Marsh? You speak, and we just drop that like it never happened? I don't think so."

"What does she know? Nothing ever seems to go wrong for her."

"A right princess, she is," Richie spat, segueing into his British aristocrat-voice, as if inflecting an accent would make his words more deadly. "Can't do any wrong, except when she does."

"Like the smoking. Does it without any thought for the rest of us. Secondhand smoke is just as bad."

"Always seems to get away with it, though."

"Oh, don't worry, Rich. She won't get away with it when we're on our deathbeds forty years from now, undergoing chemo for lung cancer."

"If her standing back from everything doesn't get us killed before then, you mean."

"Just like- "

Snap.

With a sound that was like frosted glass cracking as it was struck by lightning, Beverly barely turned an eye up at the silvery silhouette that materialized between herself and her friends-turned-attackers.

Attackers who balked, instantly.

"Shit!"

"Oh, f-fuck."

There was something comical in how their cries of alarm overlapped.

But Pennywise didn't do so much as giggle.

And his voice was oddly monotone when he asked:

"...Is there a problem, Beverly?"

Said redhead didn't respond for some moments. Her freckled face was flushed a deep rosea hue, right up to the roots of her hair.

Only her eyes were angled downwards.

Her voice sounded soft and hollow to her own ears as she said:

"No, no problem, Pen."

A blatant lie.
But instead of rounding on her about it - unknowingly strengthening the favoritism argument in the process - the entity simply glanced at her, irises blue, and frowned.

"So, that begs the question..."

Then, as unexpectedly as always, It whipped around to snarl, fangs out, at Richie and Eddie.

"What's your problem?"

Both teenagers quailed instantly, faced with those burning orange eyes. They latched onto each other's arms, fidgeting in their dumbfounded haste to use one another as a hiding place.

"What? Cat got both your tongues, now?"

Pennywise didn't give them another instant to hesitate. Grabbing each boy in one clawed-out hand, he pulled them in close, so they could get a good look at the definition of livid.

"MayBe we ought to let Bevs have the next word?"

Before either of them could protest, Beverly finally gave something like a command.

"No."

The agitated chiming of bells stilled instantly.

"No...?"

Beverly just shook her head, ran a hand through her short hair.

Richie and Eddie were both quaking with fright at this point.

"No, it's not worth it."

After a proverbial eternity, Pennywise heaved a long-suffering sigh. His collar and frills, puffed out in agitation as they were, seemed to deflate with the change in mood.

Mistakenly, the boys tried to pull away.

Only to brought together one last time as It leaned down between them again.

"That was uncalled for. All of it."

The creature paused for effect, letting the words sink in.

Then he let go of Richie's and Eddie's shoulders.

"It's okay to be jumpy. Just... don't take it out on each other."

A simple lesson.

Why did it take hearing all that for it to be said?

Exchanging a sad, ashamed, downright defeated look, Richie and Eddie finally found something to agree with on that.

"...Sorry, Beverly."
"Yeah, sorry..."

There were lots of things she could have said in reply.

Deciding to pin that forgiveness note for later, Beverly just gave a weak, unperturbed laugh.

The sight of Uris' bike, abandoned beside the road.

Usually situated on its kickstand, now it was lying on its side like a lost doll.

Its owner, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen.

Then a suspicious-looking pile of leaves in the undergrowth quivered nearby.

"...You can come out now, Stan."
Chapter Summary

Georgie's version of a trust test.

Go.

Chapter Notes

A sort-of sequel to "New Heights".

After the dogpile debacle, Pennywise vowed to himself to never (temporarily never) let the Losers Club put him in such a position again.

No. He hadn't gotten himself there, in agreeing to entertain yet another puppy-eyed suggestion from Georgie.

...Okay, maybe he had.

But as these self-made promises tended to go with It, when he considered the parameters of what constituted his friendship with Georgie Denbrough - it turned out that this was another one instance in which he would be willing to forgo a stupidly-decided vow.

Yes. Under the right circumstances, he always would, especially if it made the kid laugh.

And at the time, it seemed harmless-slash-safe enough to humor him.

Until it wasn't.

"Pfft. Told you you'd get stuck."

Georgie frowned, straining to keep his grip.

Hang in there, kitty-poster, anyone?

No, he wasn't the best climber in his class. But you never got better if you didn't practice. And the jungle gym at the school was in every way easier to shimmy around on than some random oak tree in the Barrens.

Besides, if he could chalk any kind of reasoning up to the endeavor, he'd go with "What the heck? Sometimes things were just there for the climbing."

And Pennywise certainly wasn't volunteering the pleasure of his company for just any old reason, especially not if it meant the entity was in for an afternoon of roughhousing or piggyback rides. He claimed he had endured enough physical abuse as of late to keep his mortal friends happy.
So, yes, in a way, this was karma come calling.

Did it really have to come with such stinging, ridiculing commentary, though?

I know what'll get his attention.

Wordlessly, Georgie sighed and shifted his grip. His shoulders were hunched up, practically pressing his ears into the sides of his head. The branch he had slipped off of, and now dangled from, some ten feet off the ground, was sturdy enough to support his weight. The seven-year-old's lower body and legs hung free, while his arms - wrapped tightly over the top - bore the brunt of keeping him suspended from the tree limb.

He didn't cry. Or panic. Or thrash in a newfound fit of anger.

Instead, he felt spontaneously... inspired.

"Stuck, Penny?" Georgie challenged.

Somewhere below him, he heard a ting and a rustle of fabric. Followed by a giggle-like scoff.

"Heh. That's what it looks like from here."

And you're not about to teleport up here to help?

Because I got myself here?

Fine.

Please, let this work.

"Okay, I'll get unstuck. Catch!"

Throwing caution to the wind, along with common sense, the boy closed his eyes and let go.

Gravity did the rest.

Somewhere in the few seconds it took to drop, Georgie thought he heard a high-pitched, disbelieving yelp that sounded suspiciously-like his own name. He had a brief vision of what he must have looked like, freefalling the perilious ten feet back to the rough, muddy ground.

Somehow, the landing he found himself in was both soft and rough.

It felt soft in that it wasn't the hard, unforgiving earth that broke his fall.

But the landing the body below his own took was appropriately jarring.

For both of them.

"Oof!"

"Umph!"

A strong pair of hands snagged him by the armpits. Denbrough gave an involuntarily cry as he found himself whirled around unexpectedly. Then again as the momentum of the haphazard, spinning save sent them both crashing to the ground.

Thump.
Blinking, Georgie lay there, sprawled lengthwise atop his friend's midriff, for several dazed seconds before he thought to open his eyes, to take stock of where they had ended up. Then, with a stuttering little laugh, the boy blinked one final time and opened his eyes fully, looking first at the arms woven tightly around his shoulders and chest.

Finding they wouldn't budge, he looked up.

"Ha! Teach you to make fun of me."

Glaring over the edge of his collar, chin tucked against his chest, Pennywise scoffed. The noise alone said he was clearly fighting a smile, despite the entity's best efforts to be somehow irritated or affronted at being reduced to an impromptu crash bag.

"Hmph."

Apparently, the relief to see that this stunt hadn't ended with broken legs trumped any anger he might have felt.

With a sharp, seemingly-effortless lurch, he sat up.

Still ensnared in the clown's arms, Georgie gave another yelp at the sudden change in orientation, now sitting in his rescuer's lap as opposed to atop his chest.

He didn't get a chance to say more. Instead, he laughed again at the gloved finger that jabbed his nose in retaliation.

"You little imp."

*Hey, I learned from the best, didn't I?*

Giggling softly, Georgie only nuzzled his way under his friend's collar in reply.

Why?

Because, like the tree, it was just *there*.
Counterstrike

Chapter Summary

Vigilante justice, anyone?

Chapter Notes

Post “Post-Op”, pre “Taste Test”.

Someone had messed with his flock.
Someone had to pay.
The wrist was healed. And the bike was fixed.
Eddie didn't need to know what came next.
Of the four most likely suspects, one - It had managed to lure one to his territory.
Using bait.
Itself.
Easy.
To Patrick Hockstetter, it wasn't so much about dangling a carrot as it was dangling a whole, helpless bunny.
Literally.
The only risk It took was in playing the role of said bunny.
Nose quivering, he stopped, reared up tall on his hind legs, and looked back, made sure he was still being followed.
"Eh, what's up, Bugs?"
Charging along through the undergrowth with all the recklessness of a bull who had seen red, Hockstetter raised the pistol and drew a bead on his hesitating target.
"Take that!"
There was a sharp crack, followed by an explosion in the dirt. Inches away.
The rabbit mistimed his leap, rolled clumsily, got up and kept running.
When had Bowers started loaning out his weapons?
No matter. He was almost there.

Thankfully, Hockstetter was as clueless as he was demented.

And as tenacious when it came to procuring a new addition to his morbid collection.

Paws slipping on the wet rocks, It ducked underneath a tangle of creeping vines and vanished into the open sewer pipe.

"Oh, don't think you're getting away that easily."

On the contrary...

It wasn't planning to get away at all.

Sweeping the curtain of vines aside, Hockstetter stopped at the entrance. This late in the day, with the sun falling ever lower, half-hidden behind the treetops, he was visibly reluctant to enter such a dark, forboding tunnel.

But he had chased his prey this far already, hadn't he? Wasted three bullets?

The fourth one would make or break this hunting trip.

And there was always plan B.

"Only one way out, Bugs, and that's through me."

Well, aren't we just confident as confident can be?

Weapon in hand, Hockstetter stumbled inside.

He didn't see the waiting predator taking shape in the dark.

The once-fuzzy lips lifting into a harsh, toothy sneer.

Or the claws splaying out against the bricks.

Eyes widening, Hockstetter heard the earth-rumbling growl before he saw anything.

Another set of eyes rounded the bend, lighting the dank, dirty cul-de-sac around them with a lantern-like glow.

And only then did it occur to the high schooler to try and turn back.

"What the fuck is- thag!!!"

A three-fingered hand caught him by the throat.

Impulsively, his finger tightened on the gun's trigger.

It ducked again, hearing the bullet ricochet off the bricks over his head. There was a brief orange flash, illuminating alien features. Then he grinned, with a mouth full of fangs more hideous than any deepwater angler fish.

"WelcoMe, PatriCk. NiCe of you to dRop in!"

There was a satisfying thump, followed by a splash as Hockstetter's frame was bounced off a wall,
then held there. It felt blood, warm and sticky, flow over his hand.

And besides the overwhelming confusion, there wasn't much to sense. Hockstetter was still too
dumbfounded to be fearful.

Yet.

He would be.

He would be so afraid.

It didn't plan on doing away with this one just yet.

Patrick stumbled as the pressure around his throat disappeared. He fell against the wall, spluttering,
breaths increasingly panicky. Despite his aching head, he could see, look around, try to find where
his attacker had gone.

As quickly as he had been set upon, he had been released.

Why?

Who was in here with him?

Two minutes ago, he had been chasing a damn rabbit.

Now he felt like he had been accosted by a werewolf.

*Ohh-ho-ho, not even close!*

It struck again, from behind.

With the flat side of his claws, he swept the hapless teen aside. There was another dull *thump* as he
bounced off the moss-covered bricks, then fell alongside the tunnel wall, facedown in the shallow
water.

It paused, pupilless eyes catching a glint of light on the ground, illuminating the barrel of the fallen
pistol.

He tossed the weapon into the mud, well out of reach.

*Bowers won't be getting that back.*

Dazed, but still not quite out, Hockstetter struggled to rise again.

The only greater effort seemed to be his insistence on speaking, mid-beatdown.

"Th-the f-f-fuck is g-going on? Who's- urg!"

*I could write a few pages for the dictionary, all these new sounds I'm learning.*

It hissed at his own wit, cackling, claws seizing his prey from behind.

"What's$ss$ going oN? Oh, noThing much. OnLy a litTle- just deSSerts!"

This.

This was familiar.
He had toyed with his food in the past. It was always sadistic fun, seeing how much the human body could endure before it expired. Young, old, male, female - each and every one had its own set of limits. Its own sequence of wounds to be inflicted.

Its own due to be exacted.

It spun his prey around, grabbed his delicate throat.

Oh, how they would sob and scream and wail.

"W-what t-the fuck, dude?!"

Distantly, an echo of Eddie's thin, agony-addled cry grabbed the alien's ear.

Just before the Trans Am nearly made a speed bump out of him.

Thinking of this, the glow of humor It felt abruptly winked out.

_The fat one. He'll be next._

_See how funny it is when a car tries to run him down!_

It made even this form feel sick, to think Eddie had been in such peril. Sick, and frustrated. That It couldn't do more without causing his fragile friend more pain.

Belch Huggins had been driving. But It was sure Hockstetter had been laughing and yelling encouragement the whole time.

"DiD yoU thInk it was fuNny, PatRick?" It snarled. The raging anger suddenly drowned out nearly every other emotion, every other impulse. "It'S no fuNnier than wHat you're enDuring nOw!"

Mumbling incoherently, dazed, Hockstetter teetered between consciousness and darkness.

It squeezed, feeling cartilage crumble under his grip. The teen's labored breaths grew high and thin as his airflow was pinched, almost cut off completely.

Already? A couple of tumbles and that was it? Lights out?

It didn't think so.

He leaned in, hissing into a bloodied ear.

"DoN't freT, thouGh. You'Ll see the huMor in thiS befoRe I'm donE with you."

______________________________

No one would miss this kid.

No, not kid.

It scoffed.

This _thing_.

What fumbling acts of kindness and hesitant, unpracticed mercy It had shown in the last few months was more than Patrick Hockstetter had shown in the fifteen years he had walked this planet.

There was nothing resembling humanity anywhere _in_ him.
Might as well make yourself useful in death, moreso than you were in life.

It waited.

He could afford to.

The spider with a fly caught in his web.

Ideal.

Hockstetter wouldn't get away.

Night had fallen by the time the battered teen regained some shattered, slipping-and-sliding form of consciousness. Maybe an hour after the first leg of the bait chase had ended, he snapped back to 'life'. He stumbled out of the pipe, slipped as the gnarly vines snagged him, and fell in the river.

Watching from the trees above, hissing laughter chased him along the bank.

As did It.

Nothing was sweeter than letting your meal think they had gotten away.

Only to pull the rug out from under them.


It reminded him of swimming.

Swimming, exposing yourself to leeches.

Never. Never would he go willingly, not casually.

He wouldn't try to ford the river to save his life.

That said...

Oh, I'll 'leech' him a lesson, I will.

Before Hockstetter could regain his feet, something lunged out of the water beside him. It moved far faster than it had any right to, being completely legless.

Something dark and fleshy and utterly repulsive.

It latched onto his arm, from shoulder to elbow.

Through a battered, broken mouth, Hockstetter managed to scream.

He needn't even turn to see what It was.

He remembered.

He'd know that feeling anywhere.

A thousand teeth, fastened tight to your skin. Raping, digging, carving their way into your flesh in search of a vein.

From where they would just drink and drink and not stop.
Worse than the feeling of his limb going cold, rapidly drained as it was of blood, was the sound. There, right next to his head.

The awful, wet-sounding gulps.

He flailed and twisted for all he was worth.

"L-let go! Plea-agh-ahh. No! S-stop! No more!"

It didn't listen.

It held on.

To him, tasting the spiked, hot blood was like sampling a fine vintage drink.

But then, if he drank too much, too fast, Hockstetter would just pass out again.

No fun in that.

With a groan the oversized leech released its hold. The limb it had affixed to was already black and blue, skin wrinkled dry, a shadow of its former form.

The attacker shifted. Moments later, It stood on eight legs, forward claws flexing and scissoring tightly in anticipation. This body was meant more for function than for fear.

Still, It would do with what he had.

He leaned in close, jeering.

"Aww. No mOre? But wE've juSt ssstarTed, PatRicK."

Clutching his dead limb, the teen rolled over, dared to look up at the awful insectoid face. He shivered, teeth ratting uncontrollably. It was bad enough to have endured a blood transfusion from hell.

What was this demonic vision staring down at him now?

"Wh-what ar-re you? Wh-what do y-you want?"

Amazing that Hockstetter could slur anything resembling English with all those missing teeth.

It bared its rows of fangs, indecisive.

Smirk or snarl?

Instead, It chittered and stove downward with one extended talon. The claw pierced clean through a shoulder, pinning the fallen teen against the creekbed below.

He waited until the latest bout of wail-like screaming had abated, then the creature spoke, segmented mouthparts clacking loudly, shrill and in disbelief.

Disbelief that he was being asked such a preposterous thing.

"I AlReady weNt over thAt. ShaMe on you fOr not lIsTenIng!"

Hockstetter quailed and squirmed, grasping pathetically at the gruesome wound, fingers slipping in his own blood.
It panted, deep, rapid breaths cycling in and out. His innards felt far too warm, borderline overheated.

Even now, his body kept shaking. His mind kept racing. The anger kept raging.

Nothing he had done so far seemed to satisfy the fury.

Satisfaction.

How long before he would feel it?

Eddie had asked It not to retaliate.

Not at first.

It hadn't. Eddie had been hurt. Helping him was more important at the time.

Now he was safe, confined to his bedroom, but physically safe.

Bah.

Satisfaction.

Who should have cared about that?

Already there wasn't a lot of fight left in this boy, this thing.

Even now, this close to death, Hockstetter's brain somehow thought knowing who its attacker was mattered.

He was scared, yes. But now, so lightheaded, so dazed, he couldn't appreciate feeling scared.

It leaned in close, serrated mandibles spreading wide.

He had had his fun.

There were still three more bullies to account for.

"AnD EvEn if I toLd you, it'D haVe tO be ouR litTle secrEt."

A secret to take to your grave.

So, enjoy it while you can, Patrick Hockstetter.

All two seconds of it.

Before, with one swooping bite, the boy's battered skull disappeared into the monster's gullet, snapped off at the neck. A thick gout of blood, interspersed with bits of bone and brain matter, dripped from Its gnashing teeth.

Then Its claws went to work, digging, ripping, tearing.

Moments later, he dragged the vivisected body, still barely strung together by its stripped extremeties, back to the waiting tunnel. A crimson trail was painted along the muddy bank.

For the first time in months, It would dine well.

The Losers wouldn't have trouble from this one again.
The next morning, the babbling creek had washed even the deepest bloodstains from the sand and rocks.
Chapter Summary

You go, Vic.

Chapter Notes

Gifted to me by FF.Net's SkyHighDisco.

"There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it."
— Alfred Hitchcock

It had been anticipated, and therefore dreaded, every waking moment of every day, since his unofficially joining the lot of Losers. Victor would have much preferred the circumstances where he wouldn't have to look over his shoulder wherever he went, whether it was across the street to the store, around the neighborhood, or walking to and from school.

But those weren't the circumstances, here and now.

Still, Fate likes to deliver the knockout punch only when you least expect it.

Like, for instance, when you're finally done with a rough, dreary-rain Monday, with the mental exhaustion of your Physics and Geography tests (both of which he had given his fair, hardest try at, rather than blow them off) still fresh in your mind. And now you only want to gather the things from your locker in peace.

Then you shut the door and are greeted by a very mind-freezingly familiar face on the other side of it.

Make that two. Belch was still unable to walk around for himself, as it seemed.

Eyes widening, Victor only managed a mute gulp, taking a single, uncertain step back.

"Why, hey there, Crissie." The greeting sounded as fake and polished as a lovely marzipan coating on a very badly-burned cake. Henry's narrowed green eyes didn't say otherwise, either. "It's been a while since we last saw each other, hasn't it?"

To that, the blonde-haired boy mustered a halting, greeting nod and (barely) enough control of his voice so it wouldn't waver. Too badly.

"He-nry."

"Where've you been all weekend, huh? You hiding?"

You're seriously asking me that? After we were attacked by... what we were?
Criss couldn't say as much. He didn't dare. He just swallowed again.

"Wh-what do you want?"

Henry's eye twitched. It was the same tic that occurred during times when he would feel provoked or exposed — or both — and usually the reaction heralded very unpleasant repercussions to anyone who saw it.

Now Victor found himself where he had once thought he would never be before — on the other side of that twitch.

The side that promised hurt, rather than having a hand in it.

Then Henry smiled. Not the ordinary, lazy smirk, either. It was a single, arching crook of the lip, hiding a plutonic bomb of disbelief and ire at not being able to get a full grasp of the situation. His eyes didn't agree with the motion, either.

"I'm sorry. I think I'm going deaf." The obvious head-case-of-a-guy before Criss lifted two idle fingers up to his ear, cynically. "Because for a second I thought you sounded like one of those motherfucking losers."

Victor felt every nerve in his body twinge and jump, spastically, even as he fought hard to not let it show on his face. Or at least as little as possible.

If someone told him a week ago he'd be being compared to the thing- make that, the people he had spent half his life tormenting, he wouldn't have believed a shade of it.

_People at the diner. They must have talked._

_Town this small, of course they did, idiot._

Glowering, Henry leaned closer.

"I asked you something."

"I- I think I did, too."

"What?"

Victor flinched.

Not at the biting tone.

After so many years of knowing this guy, this thug, it was just a reflex. One he would have to work on shaking.

Starting now.

"You talking back to me?"

"I- " Despite his visual and verbal falters, Criss was somehow able to keep still when Henry made another firm step forward. He knew recoiling another step would only draw another forboding eyetwitch. "Why- why do you care? You never called to check."

_Not once._
The mulleted teen scoffed, burly shoulders tensing, and drew himself up to his full height. Only a half-filled hallway seemed to be stopping him from doing anything more rash.

"Care? Who do you think I am? Some desperate preteen who can't wait to call her boyfriend?"

Somewhere on their peripheral, Belch stepped around, moving with far more speed than someone his size should have been capable of. Spotting it, thinking of what was due to happen, Criss belatedly thought to move away.

But not before his poor reaction times failed him.

A wide, meaty hand seized his bad shoulder's bicep, wrenching it sharply back against itself. Suddenly, his elbow was bent somewhere alongside his spine, half a twist away from being dislocated.

Buckling, Criss tried in vain to pull away, feeling the delicate, semi-severed nerves complain loudly with fresh-wrought pain. He breathed in sharply, eyes closing tight, but he didn't cry out.

That would've only earned him worse.

_Bang!_

His eyes snapped open again.

Henry had slammed a hand against the locker for effect, causing nearby students to jump in time with the metallic rattle. And finally, the passing bystanders started to take notice of the drama unfolding within their ranks.

All at once, the hallway seemed half as quiet as before.

"And who do you think _you_ are, expecting me to give a shit?"

There was no reasonable answer which would successfully drill itself into Bowers' head, and stay there.

Victor knew this.

Still, there was something else that prodded him to glance around, to find who was watching, really watching, and look down the hallway. For some unfathomable reason, even with Belch there, a wrist-turn away from twisting his damaged arm, Criss wasn't afraid of being struck from behind.

There, a dozen or so lockers away, observing from amidst a stilling sea of other students' faces, was Bill, backpack on. His hand was still poised on his own locker door's edge, facing him.

They locked gazes. The look in Denbrough's blue eyes didn't signify anything Criss could've read with certainty, but it offered no suspicion, or hostility. Not anymore.

For a split second, the sophomore thought he spotted a shade of remorse.

Despite how their exchange had only lasted half of a second, Henry didn't brush it off as anything accidental. Several telltale eye-flicks between the two distanced parties were enough for the strings to be tied together.

And for Bowers' look to turn even more livid.

At his mute cue, Belch tightened his grip.
The old pain sang again, not as intense, but smarting enough to elicit a cringing wince.

"What the fuck is going on, Criss? With you? Why are you off the grid?"

And, strangely enough, rather than be intimidated, further than he had ever been until that point, Victor felt an odd, overwhelming sense of calm come over and close in on his mind like a giant, all-absorbing wave. Like, suddenly, the world around him had been insulated, and there was nothing to be afraid of anymore.

Nothing out there was worth being afraid of.

When he turned to face his former 'friend' again, his expression was the projection of the said image, and his mood didn't feel any more wrong for it.

It felt... right.

Brows lowering, Victor didn't know where the feeling came from, but it gave him the ability to take an unhesitant, defiant step forward and speak up in a low voice.

His dark eyes locked against Henry's green ones, and he kept them there.

"Why? You ever ask yourself where Hockstetter went, Henry? Or what it was exactly that made me realize the error I was making, running with you all that time? Did you ever ask yourself what's changing, all around you? Have you really been that blind?"

His head gave a single shake, eyes steady, never blinking. "There's something bigger than you, Bowers. And it's already picking your type off, one by one, all around this town. And it will keep going, until you'll be the only one left. That's what it is. That's what's gonna be. And you know it. I don't care what you do to me, here and now, or what comes later — it's your fate that's inevitable."

Staring him down, Henry looked like he didn't hear a word of it. Or that was maybe what the guy wanted. Not to believe his ears. Perhaps it was the unpreparedness of what he had heard that caught him off guard.

The factor of the former gang member, Victor Criss, who once was always somewhere in the background, barely seen or felt, who used to only be useful as a statistic to make the gang somehow feel more valid, more real.

To be faced with him belting out such a long-suffering speech, it should've nearly made Bowers splutter in surprise.

Like now.

Instead, the policeman's son leaned against a simpler alternative.

"What are you saying? You're trying to turn your back on me?" he hissed, equally quiet, their faces still inches apart. "I don't remember telling you to do that."

Victor only smirked, feeling both a little mad and a mite satisfied for risking it.

He wrenched closer, almost nose-to-nose, and spat:

"I don't need you to tell me anything."

Delivering those final words, the once-member of the notorious group finally wrenched away from Belch's slackening hold, and turned around on his booted heel. Ignoring the shocked looks of their
loitering classmates, he marched down the hall, striding with a newfound certainty, that had never been there in the past.

No, this was a new one.

But he wasn't about to take himself out of it now.

The crowded hallway didn't try to stay his progress. Obediently, they simply parted before him.

Hurrying after, Bill caught up with the older boy and when he reached Criss' side, he was wise enough not to say or ask anything as they continued to depart. He didn't have to.

He had seen everything.

Left behind, Henry didn't agree, not one bit, with what was unfolding before him. His breaths turned high and rapid and his eyes were two bolts of lightning that were ready to combust with zero remorse.

All of which Criss was thankfully oblivious of. But to ignore Bowers' voice, which propelled itself after him for the whole school to hear, he couldn't be.

Didn't mean he wouldn't try, though.

Another test to endure.

"No. You can still turn around, Criss. Get back here and I'll just assume you had a good sense of humor." When both boys didn't falter, the voice rose higher in pitch, stepping out from behind its own delusive wall. "I-I'm serious, Criss. Don't you dare walk out! Criss!"

Face blank, side-by-side with Bill, the steady tempo of Victor's step never lost its pace. It didn't speed up, and it certainly didn't slow down.

If this was what walking away from an old life felt like, Victor agreed with himself he would do it all over again.

For this, it was worth it.

Despite the voice behind them turning into a crazed shrieking that shattered more than his ears.

"You're a dead man, Criss! Do you hear me?! YOU'RE A DEAD MAN! DEAD!"

Without a care for his bad shoulder, Victor reached ahead for the oncoming stairway door, slamming a closed fist against the bar. The sting of his damaged nerves, crying out at their unfair abuse, numbed him momentarily. Eyes forward, he held the door open long enough for Bill to pass by him, and then follow.

As it swung shut, Henry's cries were swallowed up by the renewing din of the hallway.

A dead man.

Sure.

Maybe he was.

After all, weren't they all?
"Kid... Kid... Kid."

Georgie Denbrough had a thing about addressing people by their names. In his mind, it was rude, that someone would try to get your attention without using your name. There was no good reason for not using it if you knew it.

He didn't answer to Kid.

Far as he knew, it was no name of his. First, middle, or last.

But, knowing that Richie would continue his mantra until someone acknowledged it (or exploded into an overcharged fit of annoyance; we're looking at you, Eddie), the six-year-old glanced up from his open word search book.

"Hmm?"

Richie sat cross-legged upon a beachtowel, a full round of cards held between his fingers. Having gotten Denbrough's favor, he scoffed and glanced up, raising an eyebrow.

"You might wanna tell your clown to heel."

Blinking, suddenly bemused, Georgie thought to stow his pencil behind his ear.

This comment bore some investigating.

"What?"

Richie pointed past them, toward the water's edge.

"Look."

Obediently, Georgie glanced over, following the direction Tozier's outstretched finger indicated.

And he promptly frowned at what he saw.

"Hey! Penny, stop that!"

How the entity had managed to soundlessly slink away from the group, crouching down at the
creek's edge, that much was not unusual. For as much of a tinging racket as his suit's bells could make, those moments tended to come and go. When he willed it, he could be as quiet as silk whispering upon glass.

And this was one of those said times.

Word search abruptly forgotten, Georgie rolled to his feet and approached.

Pennywise's head tilted down, twisting around to look back at him. The remnants of a once-leering grin seemed to freeze on his face, then crumble, as he froze in place, guilty as you please.

That is, the clown didn't completely freeze. He looked down first, then snatched his hands back, hiding them deep in the folds of his silvery costume. Then he went still, eyes wide.

Left on the bank, his abandoned prey could only spin to a dazed, rocking stop, its four feet stretching and flexing uselessly, clawed toes pointed upward. Balanced atop the crest of its shell, the Eastern painted turtle was not an ideal spinner top stand in.

But It was apparently making do with this reptilian find instead of conjuring up one.

Which, after the incident with the balloons, they knew he could easily do.

"Animal cruelty," Richie quipped, even as Georgie stooped down to gingerly grab the turtle in both hands. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Makes two of us, Rich," Eddie deadpanned, taking a card from the deck without so much as a scoff. "Why else would Bill ask us to babysit them?"

You, babysit us?

Or was it the other way around?

Either way, coming out to the Barrens for card games and word searches- couldn't we have done that in town?

Georgie was about ninety percent sure it had to do with his new friend, somehow, someway. Everyone was treading far too lightly around him, still. And it had already been two weeks.

It wouldn't be long before winter meant they'd be stuck at home.

Would It visit them there?

And pull these kinda antics in the process?

"That's not nice, Penny," he lectured instead, unmoved by the older boys' comments. "Spinning him around and around like that, it's just mean. What'd he ever do to you?"

"...ExiSted," Pennywise hissed cryptically, narrow eyed, a thin thread of drool dripping free as he scowled. All too abruptly, he looked less affronted and more annoyed at being deprived of his plaything. And from the predatory curve of his back, the way his ruffles seemed to puff out, whatever he had been aiming to achieve with this ridiculous activity, it hadn't satisfied him quite yet.

It didn't matter if his irises were still blue. His mood didn't always reflect in the color of his eyes, particularly when he was in the market for denial.

Georgie frowned, turning the hapless turtle over in his hands. He didn't know what his friend's
apparent-grudge against this animal was, but this afternoon hike into the Barrens, it was supposed to be a friendly outing. Granted, Penny didn't have much practice with those, having always lived alone (or so he claimed, for as long as he could remember).

But he needed to be shown this was wrong.

"No."

Pennywise flinched and blinked, apparently flustered at the touch of a finger, unexpectedly flicking upward against the tip of his nose. He spluttered, almost incoherently, and half-stood from where he once knelt on the bank.

"N-n-no?"

"No," the boy repeated, firmly. "You don't pick on someone just because you can."

Stooped over like a drooping scarecrow, Pennywise's irritated mood seemed to deflate. The flare in the ruffles eased down, as a bird's feathers might settle after it was startled.

Then he broke out another goofy grin.

"Oh? What if hE starTed it?"

"You- A turtle started it? What?" Georgie repeated, unable to help a bewildered chuckle at the random turn of subject. He shook his head, thinking to finally set the turtle, with its clawed feet pawing eagerly at the air, back down on the ground. "What sense does that make?"

Richie sighed somewhere in the background. "You do know who you're talking to, right, Shortstop?"

Eddie scoffed, shuffling cards to and fro. "Give him time, Richie. He's the only one patient enough to try figuring Dingbat out."

"Hey! His name is- mph!"

A glove clamping down across his mouth silenced Denbrough mid-pronouncement.

Pennywise only smirked at the youngster's outraged stare.

"They kNow. It's oKAY."

Glaring upward, Georgie frowned against the dirty fingers pressing on his face, but not without feeling his own bout of playful irritation.

_That was for the nose-flick, wasn't it?_

And then Eddie found it timely to look up at them, and balk.

"Ugh! Georgie, salmonella- get his hand off your face!"

"Salama-what?"

"No, really. You don't know where that glove has been."

"EdS- "
"Don't look at me like that, Screweyes. Wash your hands off, now."

"How can you even tell he's looking at you, Eddie?"

"Same way I can tell what cards you're holding now, Rich. You tipped your hand."

"No, I- HEY!"

Unfettered as ever, the painted turtle crawled past Georgie’s feet and returned to the water. It disappeared under the creek's gently-running surface with hardly a ripple given.

Much less with a care paid to the comradely bickering now ensuing that its presence had instigated.
"Whatever you do, don't... fall... asleep."

Lying on the floor below the couch, as had become his custom, Pennywise smirked behind his cuffs. Not at the line's multifaceted content, but it's most-determined delivery.

At just over an hour, the pattern of death established in this movie was more than apparent. As such, the creature let his askew eyes fall halfway shut. Drowned in the blue glow of the television, it was impossible to tell what color the irises were.

The Denbrough boys' sat with their legs folded under themselves, curled up beside one another atop the couch. The younger of the two had his arms firmly wrapped around his brother's left. And his reactions were far less nuanced.

"No," Georgie whispered, more to himself than his fellow movie-watchers. "No. Don't lay down on the bed." Then, seconds later: "No, no, take the headphones off."

Glasses having slid down the bridge of his nose, almost to the tip, Richie had fallen asleep some time ago, sprawled in the nearby recliner. Despite several instances of bragging, proclaiming how many times he had seen the original *Nightmare*, apparently the lure of seeing Georgie Denbrough watch for the first time was not enough to keep Tozier awake.

But even as the seven-year-old commented to thin air, and the movie proceeded despite his misgivings, Richie's mouth seemed to twitch into a smile.

Gasp!

"No, they didn't hang the phone back up."

"I-it'll be okay, G-Georgie."

Pennywise scoffed quietly, one eye rolling back to glance in the general direction of Bill's voice.

*Why you gotta lie, Billy boy?*
Then, as the buildup progressed, and call upon unanswered call brought the tension to its frenetic apex:

"I'm your boyfriend now, Nancy."

"Ahh!"

The couch cushion springs gave a little lurch. After all he had seen until that point, the shrill squealing of metal claws on a hot water pipe wasn't enough to spur Georgie to motion.

A tongue unexpectedly extruding from the receiver of an unplugged phone made him jump.

He didn't watch as Nancy Thompson dropped the phone. Or how she raced down the stairs to pound against the house's front door, only to find it locked, keeping her from reaching her boyfriend, Glen, across the street.

Just as he was dozing off, no less.

Georgie didn't want to see, apparently. He was too busy scrambling down from his seat.

"N-no, no. No!"

Tina Grey's death had let him know just what kinda movie he was in for, despite how many claims he had made to Richie, saying he'd "be brave" enough to see it. Being cut to ribbons and dragged all around the ceiling of her bedroom, the youngest boy had watched that from between his fingers.

And scarcely anything else since.

Figuring out what was to ensue, Pennywise raised a striped eyebrow, but he sat up on his elbows, wordlessly lifting an arm in preparation.

A moment later, Georgie dropped down against the carpet beside him. With shaking hands, he scooted halfway back under the couch, shuffling sideways to take shelter below the clown's raised arm.

Said creature waited a moment before adding in an almost-malicious, Krueger-like hiss:

"Plenty of room for you, too, Bill." Almost malicious.

He was only kidding, of course.

The couch squeaked again, presumably as Denbrough scooted back. He may not have seen the film as much as Richie, but the vibe it gave off was enough to keep him a safe distance away from the screen.

"Ugh, n-no, thanks."

Eyes round, Georgie glanced up, seconding his eldritch friend's offer.

"Billy, c'mon. He'll get you, too."

"W-what? Who?"

"Krueger!"
"Please. It's just a m-movie, Georgie."

"So?" Like that was all the reasoning he needed, the younger boy wedged himself tightly against Pennywise's chest, grasping his resting arm with both hands. As the music swelled and Glen was yanked down into a newly-formed pit below his bed, Georgie whimpered, using both hands to shield his eyes behind a ruffled cuff frill.

Once they had had cause to think It was the stuff of movies, too.

Gloves still braced on the open bedroom doorframe, Pennywise sighed, expelling the stale, hot air that had stayed enclosed in self-made lungs for so long. The following inhale of cool air both soothed and stymied his gloomy turn of mood.

It had to be past midnight by now. No longer was he feeling smug and kind-of satiated, enjoying the proximity of the Losers' fear (and nothing else). The movie was over. And that was where It's amusement had ended.

Damn Tozier. That film, not a good call to bring a kid this young to watch. And Bill would probably tell the Trashmouth as much tomorrow.

Once he had slept in long enough, that is. Saturdays, he tended to.

If he didn't, Pennywise would.

It had taken two hours to talk Georgie into climbing under the blanket of his bed. And another to get him to close his eyes for more than a few minutes.

Now, thirty minutes into his hard-won sleep, the kid had settled enough to draw the green, silky-hemmed blanket up to his neck. His pinched, fraught face was half-hidden under his pillow, hair already tusseled by so much fitful tossing and turning.

Freddy Krueger couldn't get him there.

To Georgie, It's word was as good as law. And after declaring it was indeed safe to retire for the night, the entity had promised to keep watch.

Meanwhile, back in the reality that was Derry, Maine...

Pennywise scoffed, half in a long-repressed, insectoid chitter. He hung his head, grimacing, sharpening teeth gnashing together once with a clicking *snap*. It was a hollow exercise, to bite down on empty air, done only to get the reaction out of his system.

His version of a yawn, if you will.

One he had found himself doing more and more of lately.

His shoulders hunched involuntarily at the thought. Using the back of his hand, Pennywise wiped away the drool spilling down his chin. After a time, it ceased flowing.

His eyes blazed yellow-orange as they reopened, pupils narrowed to slits, trimmed as thin as the bladed fingers of Krueger's glove. No amount of deep breathing made them burn any less.

*Don't fall asleep.*

How maddening.
To want so badly to rest.

And yet not.

To both envy and somehow-admire Bill and Richie, for being able to rest easy, with the likes of It still traipsing around.

...Still.

*You set yourself up for this, remember?*

*Quit your whining.*

*It only makes it worse.*

Scowling, Pennywise just managed to resist the urge to claw the doorframe like a discontent cat. Instead, he raked his fingers down the side of his face, clawtips peeking out just far enough to scratch a new set of red lines along his cheek and jaw.

Better that than the Denbroughs' property. It wasn't right to take his frustrations out on the house his friends sometimes-called home, whether he was able to undo the damage or not.

Instead, he straightened up with a shake of the head, collar tingling, and whisked over to his usual place, beneath Georgie's bed.

He had said he would stay awake.

He said he would try.

*...Easier said than done, Nancy.*
Craving Change

Chapter Summary

Your turn, Bill.

Chapter Notes

Part 3 of the “Crossing A Line” thread.

"Come on, Michael, he came back."

Bill Denbrough scoffed softly and shook his head.

Why was a hazily-remembered line from that Spielberg movie suddenly jumping to mind?

Sitting cross-legged at the foot of his bed, Bill decided not to dwell on it. Instead, he turned the boat over in his hands yet again. Up until that exact moment, it- *she* had been holding all of his attention, for what-had-to-be the past ten minutes.

That amount of time had passed only for one infuriatingly-simple reason.

He couldn't decide what to ask first.

After the first few minutes, his little brother had apparently decided he was in need of a distraction. Fast. At present, Georgie sat on the floor before the closet, beside the hamster cage. Besides the ever-constant patter of rain on the windows, the only sounds were of the happy squeaks now being emitted by their pet.

It wasn't every day Tim was treated to so many sunflower seeds.

Bill frowned, glancing up at long last. The chitter of teeth against the shells and of feet rustling through the cage's wood-shaving bedding were all he could hear. Besides the enduring storm outside, there were no other audible cues to act on here.

"You f-found her like this?"

With his once-perpetual smile fading away, Georgie glanced up, stopping short of threading another striped seed between the cage's bars. To be fair, the younger boy had waited until they had both had a good night's sleep before unveiling his unexpected find the following morning.

But far from being confused by it, the kid seemed entirely too content, almost pleased to be proven a liar.

Maybe because... he hadn't *been* lying?

Bill wasn't going to dare accuse his sibling of such.
Not without figuring things out first.

As best he could.

"Yeah, just like that." Closing the container of treats (much to their hamster's disappointment), Georgie set it aside, then crawled the short distance back to the bed. With his good arm, he pulled himself up onto the edge, to sit beside Bill's knee. "She was on the bedstand. But she wasn't there before dinner."

"Then, what are you saying? S-someone snuck into the house... to return her?" Bill shook his head again. He turned the paper boat around once more, impulsively, as if spinning her around and around would somehow make her vanish. Or seem entirely less confounding. "Impossible. The front door stayed shut the w-whole time we ate."

"I was there, Billy. I know." Biting his lip, Georgie reached out, to stay his brother's restless hands. When he did, reluctantly, the six-year-old pointed to the name written on the paper boat's bow. "But that's your handwriting."

It... is, but...

Bill breathed in, thought to sigh, and didn't.

Disbelief wasn't going to solve this mystery.

Asking about it would.

Which included voicing the difficult questions, as well as the easy.

"W-was she... was she outside the whole time?"

Georgie blinked, brows furrowing. "What?"

"On the p-porch. Did you stash her there, because you were a-afraid of what would happen? Because you went out without permission?" Bill waited, then added, "And then you brought her in once we were all asleep?"

"No."

Oh-kay. Here we go.

"Then how... Georgie, you know better than to lie."

Georgie blinked again, his expression darkening almost immediately. He glanced down at his arm, still bandaged as it was under his new sweater's sleeve. After a moment's pause, he kicked his feet and leaned forward, aggressively, as if he were intending to stand up from the bed and leave the room.

And potentially not come back.

"You won't believe me."

"Hey."

Bill grabbed him by the elbow.

"I didn't say you c-could-"
"Go?" Scowling, finding his retreat brought up short, Georgie twisted around to face him. Besides irritation, there was an undeniable amount of puzzling reluctance in his brown eyes. "I didn't lie about getting hurt, Bill. How it happened, I just... I-I don't know how to explain it."

"Start with this, then," Bill offered, holding the boat up for appraisal. "You said you lost her."

"I did."

"And you hurt yourself, from reaching into the drain to t-try and get her back?"

"I... did."

"Then how did she get back to the house?" Bill asked, bluntly point blank. "Unless... you had her with you the whole time, there's no way she could have."

At that, Georgie did wrench away, forcefully. He stepped back, frowning, holding his maimed elbow, looking like the very definition of defensive.

"I didn't."

Now, Bill wasn't the easy-to-anger type of kid, not about most things. And truthfully, any arguments he and Georgie had ever weathered were very few and far between. Somehow, despite their age gap, their thoughts and feelings therefore just about coincided on partically everything.

But this...

Why the reticence? Didn't Georgie think he would be believed?

Bill sighed at that thought, to think that whatever had happened, it was something he somehow couldn't comprehend. Or that it was something he couldn't do anything about.

Didn't his kid brother want to tell the truth?

Need to?

He had to.

The biggest flaw in being inherently honest was that you were, by default, very bad at holding on to lies.

So, just what was so hard to fathom about this?

"All right. I-if you don't want to tell me, fine. I won't b-bring it up to Mom or Dad. But keep this." Deciding to bargain his way through this disagreement, Bill held the boat out, grasping her by the stern. "For now. And wh-when you're ready to tell me, then we'll make another one."

Georgie gaped at him a moment, stunned quiet by a who-knew-what slew of emotions. Without more details, it was impossible to say what he was thinking about, and feeling as a result.

But, with a single, darting movement and no words to accompany it, the grade schooler promptly grabbed the boat and scampered out the open door.

Still sitting on the bed, Bill frowned, watching him go.

He heard footsteps, padding quickly down the hallway, followed by the sound of another bedroom's door closing.
Silence reigned in the vast space of his own bedroom once more.

Then, as if making his own dismissive feelings known, with a gentle clatter, Tim the hamster went for his plastic exercise wheel and began to run in place.

Like he had no notion of squeaking again anytime soon, either.

Bill scoffed at the sight, eyelids dropping halfway shut.

"Y-you, too?"

---

The late summer flu was practically gone from his system, thankfully.

But taking the void it left behind was no small shortage of queasy nervousness.

The pathology was practically a repeat. Following a short episode of uncharacteristic moodiness, Bill remembered trudging home from school on Thursday afternoon feeling less than one-hundred percent, physically. What began as a slight headache in study hall had progressed to an almost-dizzying pain between his temples.

And unknowingly or not, Derry's weather had appeared to mirror his impending illness. The skies had been cloudy, a swirling gray expanse looming over Derry that apparently-promised a big storm was on the way. But only by Friday morning had the winds kicked up, sculpting the formless void into a canvas of proper fat rainclouds.

He left his covers for the first time as sheets of cold October rain began to lay siege to the streets. Drifting aimlessly between his bedroom and the upstairs bathroom, Bill didn't remember doing much else throughout most of Friday. Other than enduring his headache, plus the cold sweats, stomaching the hollow, unique pain that was a lack of appetite, and spending far too much time sitting on the bathroom floor, only an arm's reach away from the toilet.

So what if he had been excused from school?

Compared to that mind-and-body misery, his classes didn't seem that bad all of a sudden.

He didn't remember because he didn't want to remember much else. By Friday evening, lying in bed, thinking morosely of the dinner he was missing out on, there came a distinct eff-this-noise moment. With a grunt, Bill simply pulled the blanket over his head and shut his eyes.

If nothing else, he was determined to get a good night's sleep out of the ordeal.

By Saturday, as the rains fell harder and harder, he was feeling marginally improved. Mom obliged him with a few slices of lightly-buttered toast. He even managed to brush his teeth without gagging.

Just when he thought he had shaken the worst of it, a new bout of nausea drove him to his knees beside the bathtub.

Stomach acid through the nose.

That stings worse than any hornet could hope to.

Several body-wracking heaves, used tissues, and encore-tooth-brushing later, Bill stepped back into the hallway, only to find his little brother lingering there beside the door, paper binder held in both hands.
Georgie had steered clear of him up until that point, not that Denbrough could fault him for it. Contagiousness was a concern at first.

"Maybe arts 'n' crafts will help keep your mind off it?"

But now, ploughing through the latter half of his sickness, he took the timidly-offered suggestion to heart. He indulged in a nap through lunchtime just to be sure, that there weren't any more puking episodes yet to endure.

Then they began work on the boat.

Surprisingly, it had seemed to help.

Now, almost forty-eight hours later, Bill felt ill all over again.

Sick with worry.

But again, he tried to keep his mind off it. After braving a cheese sandwich with a few slices of apple, he thought to take a shower, to change out of his well-worn pyjamas. The water's heat both soothed his aching muscles and cleared his much-abused sinuses. The fresh set of nightclothes felt wonderful to slip into.

Stepping out of the bathroom again, barefoot, intent on depositing his old garments in the downstairs hamper, Bill stopped short.

Georgie's bedroom door stood at the end of the hallway.

It was open.

Inside, the light was off.

No. Please tell me he's just downstai-

Chancing a quick, dreadful peek inside, Bill balked at the sight of the empty bed.

No brother.

No boat.

He hurried back to his own room, pushed the door open, and promptly dropped his laundry.

The **S.S. Georgie** sat on the foot of his bed.

Scratch that.

She laid there on her starboard side, halfway capsized.

Deciding it wasn't just anywhere her captain had spirited away to, Bill felt a surge of anger, twisting into a tight braid with his growing concern, like two mismatched snakes trying to outconstrict one another.

Both would have their heads lopped off in short order if he had anything to say about it.

Sighing, he grabbed the discarded boat and stalked over to his closet.

"**Georgie!**"
Bill normally never raised his voice.

But as the oppressive rain drummed down on his bright blue slicker's hood, flowed over his shoulders, and everything else around as far as the eye could see, he saw no other alternative. He had to shout just to be heard.

Which his brother did.

Found out, Georgie jumped and whirled around, still half on his knees. He was crouching on the shoulder of the road, right in the gutter. Wearing the same yellow slicker as yesterday (which had proven surprisingly salvagable), there was nowhere he could hide on such short notice.

Boots splashing in the runoff, Bill stepped down from the sidewalk along Witcham Street, breath steaming in the cold. Besides dizzy with righteous fury, the sight of this was just as thoroughly confusing as his sibling's rebellious bout of misbehavior.

"Just what the hell do you think you're- doing?"

Five strides away, his feet stopped, nearly of their own accord. The rest of him lurched forward, pitching percariously before hastily regaining its equilibrium.

Georgie stayed where he was, expression blank.

Reaching out to him from - what Bill soon realized was an open-access storm drain - the underside of the curb, a spindly-looking, five-fingered glimpse of something white hastily retracted back into hiding.

From where it had been... reaching out?

"What- what was that?"

No.

Not the first thing he thought of.

That couldn't have been a hand.

Could it?

Frowning back at him, eyebrows pinched, Georgie declined to answer. He only turned back around, leaning down on his hands again.

"Penny, it's okay. That's just Billy."

Said teen shook his head, blinked hard.

Who is he-

"G-Georgie, what are you- get- get away from there."

He should have thought his commands through more thoroughly.

With how quickly they were shot down, he may as well have tried talking a badger away from an open jar of honey.

Nope. Mine.
And you can't tell me different.

As it was turning out, his brother demonstrated no intention of budging from his inane position just yet. Still crouching in the gutter, he only scowled and motioned for the older boy to come closer.

"No, Billy. You, come here."

Despite everything sane and self-preservation-based telling him not to, Bill stooped down, reaching out to grab Georgie's good arm. His fingers felt numbed and clumsy already.

Whatever irrational sense of danger drove him to intervene, it proved to be both the right and wrong sense to listen to.

"You're-no, g-get up, you're getting all wet again. So-so am I. C'mon, Mom will notice we're-gone... this... t-time?"

Time.

Which seemed to sputter to a dumbfounded stop, and stay there.

For at least half a minute.

Glancing briefly into the dark void, Bill hadn't expected to see anything.

There usually wasn't anything to see.

His lack of expectations proved to be his undoing.

From that one look, he practically fell down onto his hands, knees weakening with disbelief setting in with all the force of a sledgehammer. What he saw down there made utterly no sense, and if he were to recount the story later (as he would, to his three closest confidants, a few scant days hence), there might have been something funny in the way his eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

Then and there, the blue eyes staring back at him certainly seemed amused enough.

As did the grin that stretched out beneath them.

"Ohh, she will? You sure about thaT, BiLly boy?"

"Nooo, she won't," Georgie interjected, as if it were a perfectly, insanely-natural thing to respond to, that shadowed face. "When I left, she was napping."

"Georgie."

Still staring into the drain, Bill couldn't help a stunned wheeze, as if he had suffered a blow to the gut. Mentally, it certainly felt like one had hit home.

"What- what is- "

He felt someone reach up and pat his shoulder.

"Penny said he was sorry, Bill. It's okay."

"Suh... sorry?" Blinking, Denbrough finally thought to shake the rain out of his eyes, to brush his bangs aside. Opening his eyes again, he hoped he was seeing and hearing things wrong.
All at once.

Like this was some happenstance illusion that would banish itself once he got his bearings straight.

Instead, he was met with the same bizarre visage, leering at him in the near-dark.

"The hell is- Wh-what are we looking at, Georgie?"

He couldn't turn away, only glance through the sides of his eyes.

Georgie went quiet for another poignant few seconds. The kid's scowl had resurfaced.

"...He's not a what."

*Well, no, of course he- it- this is not!*

Like someone had flipped a lightswitch in his head, Bill felt his worry and annoyance return, twofold.

He frowned, glaring over his soaking shoulder. Water continued to stream off the edges of his hood.

"That's n-not what I meant."

"Well, that's what it sounded like."

"I didn't- Georgie, what is going on?"

The scowl melted, as if the rain itself were washing it away. Georgie chanced a look at the still-smiling face in the drain, then decided on his answer.

"I just wanted to say thanks."

"For what? And what do you m-mean, he... he's sorry?"

"Hey."

"Ah!" Bill jerked backwards on his knees, feeling something - that was definitely not either of Georgie's hands - tap the back of his.

Later, he would recognize the feeling as that of someone's fingertip.

"I'm stiLl here, y'know."

On a whim, borne of a desperate, instinctive reflex, Bill dragged his cupped palm through the gutter water, sweeping a handful of it into the drain.

Using the only weapon at his disposal.

Because what else could he do?

Hand still outstretched, the face closed its eyes tightly against the incoming splash, twitching as the cold drops splattered against its brow and cheeks. Then, with a slow, ominous parting of the eyelids, it glared back at him.

Stomach dropping, Bill had hoped the apparition would just run, like some kind of startled animal.

Far from it.
The once-navy-blue irises began to brighten up, turning yellow at their edges, and the grin's upturned corners abruptly dropped.

"Hmph." The gloved hand sharply retracted back into the dark. "Now that's not very nice."

"Billy!" Appalled, Georgie socked him right in the shoulder - not that it could really hurt. "You-no. That- you say you're sorry."

"Georgie, honestly? Get a grip. You want me to believe this- this-no, t-there's no way-"
Stammering to a frustrated halt, Bill grabbed for the front of his sibling's slicker, pulling him close.
"Are you for real? This is the drain you lost the boat in?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Then what are we looking at?"
For a time, the only sounds were of the rain, pelting the two's coats, and the concrete around them.

"He saved her," the boy finally mumbled, chin dropping to his collarbone.

Bill held his breath until spots began to shimmer before his eyes, then sighed. He could tell where this conversation (that he would never in a million years could have imagined himself having) had turned.

And now that it was underway, there was no steering it back onto the same road again.

They had to follow this detour, like it or not.

"Who... who is he, George?"

"Billy, meet Pennywise."

The face hesitated at first, loitering right at the shadow's edge.

Steeling himself, Bill breathed in, held it, then leaned closer. His brow was level with the upper lip of the curb, he ducked so low.

As if he were parroting the move, the face leaned down to match, right into the light, and smiled timidly up at them both.

A clown.

The damn thing had the face of a clown.

A paler-than-pale, cheetah-striped, bucktooth-faced one.

"Hiya, BiLly."

Numb.

After every other emotion bled away, that was the only way he could feel.

Lamely, all the teen could find the energy to do was sigh through the side of his mouth:

"Hiya? He doesn't sound that happy about it."

"Well, why should I bE?" Pennywise huffed, donning enough spontaneous irritation to make both
boys jump. With a cat-like fussiness that was long overdue, he finally thought to paw his face dry-drier. "After you splash me in the face, that's just rude."

"Rude?" Bill scoffed, eyes narrowing. This, this couldn't be happening the way it was. But somehow, his mouth kept operating. "Don't make me laugh."

"But that's what he does," Georgie insisted. "Clowns are supposed to be funny."

Except when they're not.

"How many clowns you know hang out in gutters, Georgie?"

Because I can assure you they don't.

No matter what act they're with.

"Not... not many."

"Well, there you go. Either this is some freaky ha-hallucination we're somehow both having or- "

"You're dreaming?"

Pennywise smirked at the annoyed glare Bill sent his way.

Interruptions.

Also rude.

"Silly. You'd have to be asleep first."

Georgie actually giggled at that.

"Yeah? How do you know we're not?" Bill challenged, despite knowing there was no science to support his argument with. At the moment, testing this creature's grasp of the literal versus figurative seemed prudent.

Let's see how much he really wants to joke around.

I doubt whatever this... why he's here, he's not just hanging around because he enjoys the conversation.

Before the entity could reply, Georgie shook his head, casually almost. By all rights (or wrongs), he was looking more and more comfortable with their situation. Like he couldn't even feel the frigid water soaking his hands and lower legs, the longer they sat there.

"It doesn't matter, Billy. I just wanted to tell him thanks, for saving the boat. And he kept me from being run over, too."

"What?"

Aghast all over again, Denbrough stared at his younger sibling as if he were something the teen had never seen before.

To his further astonishment, Pennywise seemed to second it.

"...Uhm, Georgie? You may have not needed to tell him that part."
"But it's what happened, Penny," the six-year-old reasoned, apparently unaffected by the ramifications of blurting the true version of events out. "Wouldn't you want him to know?"

"Not... not exactly."

"You said you were sorry. It's okay."

Denbrough blinked.

"Sorry? For what?"

"My accident, Billy. Penny hurt me by mistake."

... Neither of them could begin to say how, seemingly.

To his credit, Pennywise tried.

Even if it was in only repeating what the kid said.

"It... it was an accident?"

But the way the being said it...

Like he didn't know the meaning of the word.

Or he did, but was reluctant to call it such.

No. Something's... something's not right.

Besides everything else.

Something besides the everything that's wrong with this image.

Slowly, cautiously, Bill drew back, shuffling sideways to grip Georgie's left elbow.

And he was unable to not suddenly think of the state of the right one.

Which, for over an hour, he had methodically cleaned with cotton balls, then wrapped as best he could.

When, had they gone to the hospital, not kept this from their parents, a proper series of stitches would have been the first choice.

"An accident?"

Something innate, a little ever-protesting voice of doubt, told Bill things were not as either boy or clown claimed.

It didn't matter how contrite Pennywise presently looked, blue eyes peering up from under striped eyebrows.

Wait.

Those eyes.
Were they pointing opposite of each other?

"I'm so sorry, I... I didn't mean it."

"And that means it's okay, right?" Undaunted, Georgie seemed ready and willing to let bygones be bygones. When his brother failed to respond, the six-year-old frowned, reading his passive, ponderous expression for what it was, below the surface. "He was only trying to help."

"Be as it... may," Bill muttered, slowly, formulating (what he hoped) was a clever plan. Something to get them out of this fantasy and back to reality. "We can't... just stay here in the rain like this."

"You mean, you can't?" Pennywise piped up, anxieties apparently set aside. "Georgie said you were sick, yesterday."

Said boy gasped as if just remembering this himself.

"He's right!" Clumsily, he stood, tugging on his sibling's sleeve. "Bill, c'mon. If Dad hears you were out in the rain-"

Exactly as he hoped (sans the clown's unintentionally-helpful prompt), Bill rolled his eyes and 'let' himself be pulled up from the road.

*I tried to tell you.*

*Just had to get you to listen long enough.*

To his dismay, though, his little brother stopped long enough to stoop, and spare their inexplicable visitor a parting wave.

"We'll see you later, Penny. Maybe after the storm's over?"

"Heh... sure. You know where to find me."

"Cool!"

Bill tugged his hood down against the rain as they walked back up the street.

All the better to hide the distraught, beyond-worried expression that creased his face along the way.

*Not cool, Georgie.*

*This is so not cool.*
One For The Team

Chapter Summary

...Fancy seeing you here.

Chapter Notes

Pre “Catch And Release”.

Shameless retool is shameless.

In the wintertime, there were only so many places one could sneak away to for a smoke, especially if one was underage.

Which Beverly Marsh was.

And there were even fewer viable places available when a snowstorm kept you from leaving the school. Beverly had dressed for the marginally-better weather upon walking the distance from home that morning. But now, before the last period of the day, she was facing the stress of ever-infruiating math class, the general friction-filled atmosphere that was the high school hallways, and the knowledge of trekking home in a blizzard. She took one glance toward the restroom door and made up her mind.

Now or never.

At least, as far as "never" represented her reaching a boiling point: snapping at someone, be it a student or a teacher, with regrettable consequences.

Worst of all, Gretta or one of her pack of ingrates were never far behind. Word travelled fast around school when you were trying to hide in plain sight.

Fate let Beverly take only about three blessed drags before she was found out.

"Ugh!"

Bang!

Already tense, shoulders up, Beverly couldn't help a jump. The stall's door strained under the force of the kick, but the lock held firm. Her percaious perch on the edge of the toilet was hardly ideal, but with a slow sigh she leaned back.

Relax. It's not the first time.

These drive-by jabs, Gretta only goes on for so long.

"Are you in there by yourself, Beaverly? Or do you have half the guys in the school with you, huh,
Frowning, Beverly wordlessly snuffed the cigarette out against the stall wall, barely registering the little flare of heat against her fingertips. She could just imagine Gretta's pigish, overly-made-up face, sneering at her from the other side of the door.

*Typical. "Hey, girls, let's get together and tell Marsh what a natural-born ho she is. Again."

*Get some more original material, Keene. Then I'll start listening to you.*

"I know you're in there, you little shit. I can *smell* you. No wonder you don't have any friends."

Beverly breathed in, sharply, finally settling on an appropriate rebuttal. Hopefully, this one was self-deprecating enough to satisfy Keene's temper.

At least for a time.

"Which is it, Gretta? Am I a slut, or a little shit? Make up your mind."

Wait.

Was that the sound of a sink being shut off?

"You're *trash*. We just wanted to remind you."

Belatedly, Beverly thought to look up at the sound of scraping. Her eyes widened, realizing what that rustling, plastic something was, peeking over the stall's wall. It was the equivalent of a trash can, about to vomit its watered-down refuse all over her.

Thinking quick, she bent over, reaching for the backpack by her feet.

Marsh didn't get a chance to straighten up, to lift it to shield herself.

She heard the spill start to ensue, the wet splat of its contents spilling forth.

But not a drop of it touched her.

A warm shadow overtook her, as if someone had deployed an umbrella by magic, keeping her effectively covered in the process. Realizing just who it was, standing astride her back, Beverly just managed not to cry out, startled though she was by the creature's appearance.

In hindsight, she would think it a totally expected thing to do on his part.

Arms held out, keeping Beverly sheltered beneath his torso, Pennywise's back took the worst of the fallout. He was the one who ended up drenched in a slop of wet paper towels, unspeakable oddities, and used hygiene products. It was nothing too bad really, compared to the content of the reeking sewers he so seemed to favor.

Still gross, by Beverly's standards. She couldn't help another flinch, one of sympathy. The worst of the garbage slid right off his suit, raining down on the floor around their feet.

After a tense beat, she chanced looking up, only finding Pennywise didn't care to return her gaze. He was too busy glaring death at the stall door, eyes set to a simmering yellow, water dripping from his chin. His mouth drew back in an ugly grimace, but he showed some restraint. He didn't so much as breathe in to growl.
"At least now you'll *smell* better."

And with the stealthily-executed rescue complete, Gretta gave one last victorious huff, nose presumably-hiked in the air, and strode away.

"Let's go, girls. Have a nice walk home, Beaverly."

Both stall occupants waited in silence, poised, until all three sets of shoes had departed the scene. The sounds of the hallway outside peaking as the door was opened, only to die down as it closed again.

Then Beverly chanced letting out a heavy sigh, dropping her backpack to the floor. Twisting around, she looked up.

*Are you crazy? They might have seen you!*

The readied reprimand died on her lips, seeing the open concern her eldritch friend now regarded her with.

He said nothing, only raising a wordlessly-prompting eyebrow at her.

His irises cycled to blue.

*You good?*

Beverly managed a weak chuckle and a smile at the sight, reaching up to pat his striped cheek.

"Thanks."

Eyes narrowing, clearly promising revenge to be served at a later date, he grinned.

"AnytiMe."
Reflash

Chapter Summary

It’s no Mr. Chips, either.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Coping Mechanisms”.

Carelessness.

When all was said and done, Mike Hanlon decided that was word he would use to describe what had caused the fiasco. There was no one to villify, to point fingers at, not anymore. Doing so would have only made things worse.

What happened, it wasn't unlike something as simple as a stray cigarette butt being recklessly tossed from a car window. Something so ordinary and benign-looking that could still potentially cause so much chaos.

Whoever might have reason to throw it certainly had it in their power to care, or not. They might not care enough to put it out, that was, or if they did, they would stick it in the ashtray, where the spent filter belonged.

But at the same time, did caring about who that person was help fix anything right now?

No.

No, it didn't.

It hadn't rained in four weeks. Mike was no expert on the climate of Maine, but to him, appreciating the stale air he woke up to counted for something. Day after day, as it got drier and drier, it didn't take much schooling for him to realize the fire danger was high.

His grandfather Leroy certainly didn't need to tell him. He could see that Mike saw for himself. The hired help on the farm seemed to take note of the harsh transformation in their surroundings, too. More and more smoked cigarettes were being forcefully stamped into the hardpacked ground, as opposed to being casually tossed in buckets.

And the livestock were certainly affected. They stayed by their troughs. More and more, they went to eat their feed, as opposed to grazing in the water-starved pastures. In a way, that made rounding them up at night easier.

But there were always stragglers.
"C'mon, Chip."

The lamb was no Mr. Chips, the farm's last great sheepdog, with his tattered ears and lolling tongue. But his namesake was charming in his own right.

The rest of the flock grazed easily that evening, having found the one remaining green patch on the southernmost edge of the farm. And while there were a few slightly-older lambs among them, this one had no mother to follow anymore.

After a few weeks of bottle-feeding the orphan, Mike had hazardously naming him.

Him, before he had realized the lamb was no girl, as he had initially assumed.

News of it soon reached Leroy's ear, as the only gossip that spread faster than what was said in Derry was what you could hear on the Hanlon compound. Thankfully, he only said three words:

"Happy birthday, Mike."

Which it was, coincidentally.

And for once, he said it without a scowl. Leroy explained, calling it a just reward for his grandson taking care of the wolf that had pestered their property for so long. While the middle-aged man still warned his grandson against getting too attached, as life was ever subject to change, Mike couldn't have been happier.

Yeah, this was a textbook example of indulging a soft, sentimental fool with a prize he (in actuality) hadn't earned. But Leroy didn't know that. For the time being, Mike was content to write it off as a guilty pleasure.

His partner-in-crime would also be happy to know something good had come of his intervention.

But while Mike and the other Losers had enjoyed the entity's company in town and various locations throughout the surrounding woods, It had yet to return to the farm.

Which was fine. The animals tended to get all jittery when he was slinking about, moreso than they already were.

Not Chip, though.

"Hey, I said, c'mere."

Bleating, the lamb gave one last gleeful kick and trotted over. He was still on the bottle, and would be until his first set of teeth grew in the following year. Familiarizing him with the herd, whenever he wasn't confined to a paddock, was just as essential as hourly feeds. Mike thought he had seen the orphan animal trying to nurse from other ewes, to no avail. They usually brushed him aside in favor of taking care of their own offspring.

Ergo, it fell to him to keep Chip fed.

Compared to his other chores on the farm, this one had quickly become his favorite.

Patting his leg in invitation, Mike clicked his teeth. His other hand held the bottle, the last one to be taken fresh from a portable cooler. "C'mon. One more, then we gotta get the rest of you on the move."

Thirty minutes before sundown, it was a straight-enough shot back to the barn. This flock was some
fifteen animals large, and they had all walked the path to and from the structure enough to be familiar with being rounded up.

So had Chip, who spent more time playing about by himself than any normal sheep rightfully would. Mike supposed it was something only a herbivorous quadruped could appreciate, being able to buck and run about a field and find something entertaining in it.

Mr. Chips had liked to run, but typically only if a stick was thrown for him first.

Whereas the lamb pretty much entertained himself, occasionally bounding back to lay down by Mike's feet for a nap, to which he usually got a pat on the head. The farmboy always kept a paperback book in his pocket, to open whenever he allowed himself a break that involved a chance to sit down. When it came to enjoying those moments, Hanlon could fathom no more perfect an afternoon arrangement.

But, again, as life was wont to do, things changed that evening.

For the worse.

But not as bad as could be, thankfully.

Maybe because he was so focused on his four-legged charge, Mike didn't see the rest of the sheep beginning to stir. One after another, their heads went up. Their noses started twitching. Then as one started to mill nervously, hooves stamping at the ground, the others followed.

Then, announcing its arrival with a rattling, slobbery-wet snarl, the wolf loped into view. There was a somewhat-broken down wooden fence that ran parallel to this edge of the field. The interloper had used it for cover.

Turning the corner so sharply its paws kicked up dust, the predator went for Chip.

Mouth falling open, Mike balked, dropped the bottle. He scarcely had time to whip his head around before the wolf lunged, jaws agape.

"No!"

He thought to say that before he thought to move. Quick thinking failed him in that moment.

It didn't.

The entity whisked into view, like a shimmer of heat bringing a mirage to life, hazy, before dialing into focus. Screeching, a sizable white blur intercepted the wolf, bowling them both over into a wild tangle of flying fur, thrashing limbs and snapping teeth.

Eyes wide at the air-churning cloud of dust, Chip froze, legs askew. The lamb would have been as good as dead, his fight-or-flight reflex hadn't yet kicked in.

Impulsively, Mike reached down, grabbing him up in both arms.

The rest of the flock bolted, bleating frantically and crawling over one another in their haste to flee. The remaining lambs stumbled, one almost cartwheeling into being trampled under so many churning hoofs, but all three eventually managed to follow their mothers back across the field.

Meanwhile, the two combatants had broken apart.

The wolf was already done, panting with exertion. With a wheezing whine, it drew back, dripping
red, limping, favoring a foreleg. One of its ears was gone, reduced to a ragged, bloody hole in the side of its skull. The skin behind its head was torn and flopping loose, revealing the muscle underneath. Blood soaked its neck and chest, leaving its black fur with a matted kind-of shine.

Mike almost felt sorry for it.

It didn't.

The form was no true wolf. Nor was it the next closest monstrous comparison to jump to Hanlon's mind - a werewolf. The thing was big, barrel-chested, but too spindly at the waist, a lengthy, spike-ridged tail stretched out behind. It loped like an emaciated bear, with twice as many legs. The skull was long, flat, and angular, sporting a long underbite of a jaw, with no visible eyes.

Half-covered in shaggy silver fur, with flanks made of reticulated off-white scales, this thing looked more like a hybrid: an eyeless, crocodile-jawed wolf that had hatched from a spider's egg.

Impossible, in other words.

And now there was a fair amount of blood coating It's face, and more was revealed as the jaw opened wide in a shrill, chittering roar, drool dripping out in thick strands. Swallowing anxiously, Mike stepped back at the sight of so many rows of recurved teeth.

*Like a shark.*

Ben had seen the same kind of maw, a shy few months ago, when the shapeshifter had pinned Victor Criss down in a creek.

But that creature had been the size of a bus.

This was... this wasn't *as* bad as It could be.

Still unearthly, still strange.

Still wrong.

**Run, Mike!**

Hanlon jumped. Chip gave a little mewling bleat in return and flinched, but did not buck his way free.

Those two words.

He hadn't thought them, or said them.

But... had he heard them right?

Heard?

Who was speaking?

**Go!**

Stupidly, Mike thought to try doing as he was being 'told'. He stumbled back another step.

Right over the bottle sitting on the ground. The heel of his boot slipped against it, and with twenty-five pounds of lamb in his arms, he lost his balance.
"Omph!"

He fell hard, landing in a heap. Chip bleated again, high and loud, and twisted his way free, hooves spearing against Mike's workshirt before he alighted upon the ground, staggered clumsily, then ran for the hills.

Half-sprawled, Mike looked up in time to see the wolf had changed targets. Disregarding its opponent, the wounded canine snarled again and charged for the fallen boy. Its yellow eyes bore down on him.

Closely followed by its parting teeth.

*Look away!*

With an alien yowl, of either fury or warning, It intercepted again.

Appearing to the right of frame, just like out of a movie, It caught the underside of the wolf's neck in his terrible mouth. With the first two sets of legs, he forced the animal down on its shoulder. The snarl tapered into a high, panicked whimper as it kicked and tried to thrash free.

Clamping down, It didn't spend any more time posturing. Teeth sinking deep, the entity twisted his head and pulled back. A mouthful of fur, flesh, and the veins were torn out, leaving nothing but a gaping, horrific mess where the wolf's throat once was. The thing died with a wet gasp, treachea expelling a mist of blood before the body collapsed atop itself.

Only then Mike did think to look away, to cover his eyes, shivering in disgust and terror. The surge of nausea that followed, he swallowed back as best he could.

All in all, it couldn't have been more than a couple minutes since the herd fled.

But in the hot, breathless quiet that followed, save for the pitched, animalistic panting of his otherworldly rescuer, Hanlon figured out what he had heard weren't his thoughts at all.

They were someone else's.

...*I told you to-*

"LooK away."

The wolf's corpse had been drug aside. Now, the thing that killed it was sitting there in front of him, a horrible, unrealistic something that crawled up out of hell. All eight limbs were bent outward, then folded around himself. Sunlight glinted yellow where it refracted off of the still-wet blood on his lips.

It was staring him down.

Or it seemed to be doing the best it could, without any eyeballs.

Then It's jaw parted.

"You diDn't."

Mike blinked, swallowed, blinked again. Belatedly, he thought to wipe cold sweat out of his eyes.

"Wh... what?" he finally stammered.

"MiKey-MIke." The voice was both familiar and not to hear, without the face that matched it. It
almost sounded like it was tutting in disapproval. "You didn't lisTen."

"P-Pen," Hanlon's mouth worked twice before he found his own voice completely. He wasn't sure what to call this thing, much less what say first. "You... you saw what happened. You..."

He stopped, deciding with a sudden firmness what he wanted.

What he needed.

_Ben was too nice to ask you to, after Criss. Or in shock._

_But that was a wolf you attacked, not a person._

_Give me something I can recognize._

_This is needs to be said to you, in person._

That is, the person It most associated himself with being.

"Can you... change b-back? This is, that face... ugh, it's a little too freaky."

"...Look away and I wiLl.""?

Mike compromised. He held his aching forehead, covering closed eyes in the process. Through his shuttered eyelids, he thought he saw a flash of light, but that could have been a trick of the late-day shadows.

Then, against the choking dust and heat, he smelled something new.

_Mints._

_Something tapped the top of his head._

_Ting, ting._

"Mmm-Mike."

Hanlon chanced a peek between his fingers.

_Crouched down on his hands and knees, back in his typical full costume, Pennywise smirked back at him. His blue eyes had just rolled back into place._

_And the wolf's blood was still on his face._

"I'm doNe?"

_Are you?"

"_Fuck, man," Mike sighed, explosively, mind abruptly clearing. "You can cause a scene when you want._""

Pennywise's smile dropped, albeit only for a moment. He sat down almost dejectedly, legs sprawled out to his sides. He spared the wolf's limp corpse only a cursory glance, as if he were only just noticing it, splayed in the blood-soaked dirt behind him.

Then, with an almost-guilty-looking grin, he turned back and merely shrugged, palms upturned.
"...Sor-Ry?"

Just like a kid.

Trying to shrug off something they didn't think was so important all of a sudden.

"Forget it." Brushing the loitering near-death experience off, Mike tried to do the same to the dust on his clothes. For the moment, resuming his chores could wait. He had to start making heads or tails of this debacle. "I mean, thanks. You- I- Jesus, I-I didn't think we'd see another one again so soon."

*Two wolves in almost three months.*

*Any coincidence there?*

"Mm-mayBe."

As out of nowhere as ever, Pennywise speaking up gave Mike another small jump.

"W-what?"

The clown tilted his head to one side, then glanced down at his own face, one eye after another. With an exaggerated slowness, he wiped at his stained mouth, making the gesture seem absurdly thoughtful in the process.

His fingers came away smeared with red.

"Maybe... it's a coincidenCe."

"Even if - w-when did you start reading minds?" Mike blurted out, as he couldn't think of any other way to ask about that than directly. "Have you... always been able to?"

"Yes?" Pennywise's questioning stare didn't last long before it devolved into a smug half-grin. "Hmph. Took you this long to realiZe?"

Mike bristled.

It didn't matter if he had set himself up for feeling annoyed. Maybe it was the heat, or his nerves, or the jumpiness-inducing aura that always seemed to follow this creature around like a shadow.

But quite suddenly, the farmboy felt the rare need to snap.

"I've been busy, as you well know. So, yeah, it did. Just like it took us a while to realize what you were capable of."

Hurtful words.

But undeniably true.

Shoulders hunching, Pennywise winced, hands wringing anxiously.

"Sorry, Mike. I- That was... no, yes, you had a fronT-row seat."

Yeah. *To a show I didn't want to see.*

This was met with an almost-derivative whine.

"I tried to tell you to look aWay. You didn't."
A fair point. It wasn't unlike how the entity had taken disposed of the first stray wolf to start taking sheep.

But there was more than one way to handle such a pest.

"No. I didn't, because I didn't think to. We humans don't listen or act so good when we're scared," Mike explained, tightly, still with an edge of anger. "You have to know that."

Those odd eyes darted in opposite directions.

"I... do, but..."

"But nothing, man. You're not stupid. You can do better, and that means being smarter. Next time, if there is a next time, don't end it in blood. For once."

Knowing It, that sounded like an unreasonable demand.

But if the creature had proven anything to himself, or the club, in the last eight months, it was that their eldritch mascot would listen to the lessons he was told. He would at least try.

Try not to be such a savage.

Even now, it was a work in progress.

He would need reminders along the way. Sometimes gently, sometimes harshly. Whatever worked.

_Humor me._

_Call it a late birthday present if you want._

Hearing that thought, Pennywise's eyes centered.

After a pause, considering countless answers, he went for simplicity, nodding once.

The same way Hanlon sometimes found himself nodding toward Leroy.

_Yes, sir._

At that moment, all Mike could bring himself to do was nod in return.

He stood up before the clown did.

"Oh. Just- one more question, MiKey."

"...Shoot."

Pennywise smiled up at him, timidly, and raised a striped eyebrow.

"WherE's Chip?"
Richie finally has a reason to say thanks.

Reluctantly as ever.

"God - damn - It. ...Yeah, you. Can't win with you. Can't give you advice. Can't count on you to wait. Can't take you anywhere. Can't expect you to leave well enough alone. Can't think you'll behave yourself for five minutes. Can't imagine this would have ended well, with you involved."

And were he left to his own devices, Richie Tozier would continue to rattle off an ever-more-impressive list of "can'ts" related to one Robert Gray.

But as yet, the entity-in-disguise hadn't found reason to whisk away. He simply stood there, leaning on the side of the brick building, one arm folded against his chest. The other hand was occupied, busy holding a thoroughly-bloodied handkerchief to his nose.

It was a crucial piece of equipment, in hindsight. What blood it had sopped up couldn't float away. The cloth kept more from flowing out.

And, for the moment, Rob was rendered mute.

Save for a still-furious glint in his iridescent eyes.

Pausing to take in the sight for what it was, Richie shook his head, for what-had-to-be the fortieth time, and ran a hand through his hair.

He resumed pacing.

"Should I go on?"

10 Minutes Earlier

"Ha! And that's why you'll never win."

In victory, Richie tended to gloat. Because why not? As yet, he hadn't bragged his way into trouble, regarding the arcade game tutelage he occasionally obliged his social club's incognito mascot with. Gray's visits to said arcade were more seldom than any 'typical' appearances he made around town.
In terms of 'finding a hobby', this hadn't proved to be an instant win with him.

But whenever Richie had reason to be there (which was always, now that school was out), he never didn't get a thrill out of besting Robert Gray in most every game of choice available.

Today, Rob took one sullen, sideways glare at Tozier and frowned.

"I might've had a chance if you didn't unplug the damn thing."

"Shhh!" Stooping down between Street Fighter and the next-best-arcade-game-beside-it (or NBAGBI, for short), Richie hastily reconnected the cable with the wall. Said machines booted back up as if nothing had been amiss at all. Straightening up, Tozier turned to land an affectionate punch on his understudy's leather-clad arm. "God, you're such a fuckin' buzzkill sometimes, Stripes."

"...BuzzzzkiLl," Rob experimented with the new word, hissing it between his teeth, grimacing. Then, following a statue-still pause: "Is that what it means to murder bees, or something?"

"The hell?" Richie scoff-laughed, words safely lost in the din of the crowd as it were. "What? Or something, my dude. What a thing to say. Really, I thought this 'you' was supposed to be normal."

"Normaller," Rob clarified, glancing over his shoulder. Most of the arcade players were closer to Richie's age and corresponding height. If being a head taller than them made the entity appear in any way self-conscious, the feeling didn't show.

He was better about that, blending in in general. Especially now that he wasn't drooling by the gallon. To be so close to so many likely potential meals, perhaps that was just the human practice in him showing.

Thankfully.

(...Yes. It had been some time before Mike stopped following him around with a mop.)

No. This afternoon had proven to be pretty sedate, Richie mused, taking count of what quarters he had left to spare. Maybe because it was so busy the two of them weren't trading insults per usual.

And whereas bantering with the likes of Eddie was always done with an easy familiarity, pestering It in the same caliber was not nearly so harmless. The first deritive quip about Rob's attire Richie had chanced ("Oooh, laces and buttons plus pleated leather equals girlist-biker-wannabe-eeever"), Tozier had had to duck to avoid the very-real claws that swiped at his head in retaliation.

In short, no, they didn't always like each other.

But, from Tozier's eyes, this was certainly better than going it alone in town.

Not to mention...

"Awww, fff-uck."

"What?"

Richie missed seeing the bewildered eyebrow that Gray lifted at the sight of Tozier ducking behind him. It wasn't that the bespectacled teen knew he would be safe there. Common sense said it was more likely he'd be tossed right back into whatever fray he hoped to avoid. That would happen sooner than he could ever convince Rob to change his name to Hiding Spot.

But it was certainly safer than standing out in the great wide open when Henry Bowers roughly
shouldered his way through the front door of the arcade.

Peering around, Richie heaved an aggravated sigh and ruffled his hair, trying to think quick. There was only so much crowd in between them and their newly-arrived adversary.

Shit. Would it kill Fate to let a friendly face show up in his life every now and again?

"BowersSs..."

That is, an actually friendly face.

As yet, Rob still didn't count.

Not when he was still as prone to animalistic fits of misbehavior as he proved to be in that second. The yellow glint in his eyes was very much not the reflection off a nearby game's display window.

"Dude, forget it, forget him," Richie hissed, with a sleeve-tug for emphasis. When the taller 'teen' failed to move, he tugged harder. "There's the back door. Gotta adios, auf wiedersehen, sayonara, arrivederci-"

"English, Richie."

"Time to am scray! To-day!"

And just like that, It listened.

When you least expected him to.

Richie blinked.

His fingers were empty.

Rob was gone.

Leaving him in plain view of Henry.

"Tozier!"

Breath stalling, Richie balked, taking a few hasty steps back.

Almost stumbling against two fellow arcade goers, he wheeled and bolted.

Behind him, Henry voiced a wordless holler of fury and gave chase.

While his panicked breaths left no room to complain with, inwardly, Richie ranted as hard as he could.

Shit, shit, shit- you- are you kidding me, Bozo? Tell me you're kidding.

...You're not kidding! You fucking candy-apple-sucking scumbag! You over-bedazzled-bell-wearing-candy-cane!

You just left me flying solo with Derry Public Enemy Numero Uno?!

You did! You left!

Provided he got out of this one with his innards, including brains, intact, Richie was so very done
with sort-of tolerating their crackbrained mascot.

Yep. He would be sure Bill revoked It's status as club mascot as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Like a timely escape.

Escape.

Oh, yeah!

An escape would be nice, too!

Richie knew this block of Derry better than any other. He knew, having used the arcade's back entrance, past the restrooms, as many times as he had the front door. The set of alleyways met from at least five different directions.

He had a chance. There was no way Henry had enough backup to cover all the exits.

Just had to pick an alley and go.

Scrambling past the last few customers, Richie put both hands out to clear his way. The door violently bounced off the wall as he blasted through.

"Ha! Eat my dust, Bowers!"

Seconds later, hinges screeching in protest, the door banged again.

"You're dead, Tozier!"

"Only if you catch me!"

Compared to the din of the arcade, the trash-laden alleys were practically church-quiet.

Except for the echoing gasps of Richie, peeling away as quick as he knew how.

Closely followed by Henry's pounding footsteps.

Wanna know the trick to having a fast mouth?

Having an even-faster pair of feet to go with it.

So fast, he could afford to think on the run.

Who knew what was driving Bowers today?

Richie wasn't about to stop and consider, so he made the best of where he was.

Why? What is it this time?

What's on the motive menu for today? Revenge? Jealousy?

Roid rage? Coke ravings? Meth? I wouldn't put it past you to try that shit out! Juicer and a head, if you weren't already!

Whatever brains you had left, they're for sure scrambled now!
And killing me isn't about to help you put them back together.

Didn't think you'd want to anyway- your old man would just stir it all up, once he hears you've pulled this kinda fuckery again!

He won't care.

Richie almost stumbled, almost slowed down.

The hell?

Where had that comment come from?

It- it hadn't sounded like him.

Too mellow, too succinct.

Too not-out-of-breath.

Too-

He wheeled around a corner, making it out onto the bustling street.

Someone grabbed his arm.

Heart momentarily stopped, Richie glanced back.

"Gotcha! You little- oof!"

Just in time to see Henry's leering face get clocked to the ground, bringing the heated pursuit to a stop.

He was hit by a fist, attached to a very familiar gray, red-laced sleeve.

Reeling back, Richie almost tripped over his savior's foot.

"You! You stupid-"

Flick.

Juvenile as a nose-tap tactic was, it effectively derailed his beratement. Blinking furiously, Tozier scowled.

"Not now, RicHie," Rob half-growled, before sparing their new companion a smarmy grin. He half-bowed to hold out a helping hand to the same teen he had just blindsided. "My, my. Henry Bowers. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Said bully thrashed, slapped the hand away, and fought his way back to his feet. Through his splutters, he was unknowingly repeating, verbatim, Tozier's most pressing questions.

"The fuck is- you? W-where did-"

Drawing new focus on his target, he stilled, then took a few deliberate steps closer. "Tozier."

"Hey, chill! I don't know what your beef is now, Bowers, but you- hey!" Richie jumped back, even as Bowers threw an unsuccessful punch, one that was succesfully held at bay by one of Rob's arms. "Step off, man! Really! We're just trying to talk."
Henry seethed. "So, talk, you pussy. Tell me all about how you losers trashed my Dad's cruiser!"

Of all the absurd allegations in all the absurd world.

Both man and entity-in-man-disguise shared a bewildered look.

"What?"

Their accusator bristled. And he kept raging even as more and more eyes started to turn their way.

"Yeah, and this was after you poached Criss!"

Richie shook his head, unable to believe that is what this fracas had been all about. "Uh, we didn't poach jack shit, man. So Victor's done with you? Big fuckin' whoop! He can hang with whoever he wants. And whoever out there who's stupid enough to trash a police car to begin with? Huh! Well, it isn't us."

"Well, if it isn't you, maybe it's Stretch here."

"...'Stretch'?"

"We've met before, Richie," Rob grumbled, by way of an explanation.

As if I didn't already know.

With impeccable timing, too spot-on to be coincidence, the human-faced It motioned away from his temple with two fingers, held together in mock salute.

Richie squinted at him, almost thinking to back over his own feet.

To take off running again.

In alarm.

No, you... You heard that?

Every last word, Trashmouth.

Fuck, you're in my head?! Get out!

I'm not in it.

But you hear me!

I hear everyone's minds, you twit. Don't think you're so special all of a sudden.

Even if I was - no, scratch that, I am - this, this what you're doing now? It's the kinda specialty I can live without.

The good news? Their new bout of communicative silence seemed to defuse Henry for a blessed moment.

The bad was that, Bowers took the opportunity he was given - a moment to exact an unjust toll.

"How 'bout a compromise, then?"

"Ow!" Almost buckling sideways, Rob stumbled half a step. The hit wasn't enough to knock him off
his feet. But by the clench of his jaw, the red blood now leaking from his nose, the punch had landed with some force.

Chest out, the mulleted bully advanced on Richie, stooping down to snarl in his face. "Your out-of-town friend better watch his ass, the next time he thinks to interfere. And the same goes for the rest of you fags. I hear one peep about who wrecked that car, that it was you--the lot of ya are dead meat."

Tozier swallowed, sweat leeching out from behind his ears.

But he managed to retort without looking away.

"Ss-s-speak for yourself, Bowers."

"Hmph." Piece said, Henry shouldered his way on by, no doubt walking his way to his next item on the 'Torment Derry' agenda. Passersby on the sidewalk, eyes wide, parted to let him depart. Mostly because they didn't want to suffer the same verbal-physical treatment.

Glaring after him, Richie almost missed seeing the Trans Am that pulled up, passenger door swinging open.

Lucky thing, heading out the back. At least there were only so many places a sports car could follow you.

And if only the same limitation applied to helpfully-unhelpful shapeshifters.

"Errr, just wait 'tiL I- "

Hand out, Richie dragged his glowering, snarling company back into hiding around the corner - or did his best to. "Dude, back up. Up, up, up." In the same breath, he unveiled a stowed handkerchief. Ungodly annoying as this encounter had proven to be, they didn't need to have to explain floating, coagulated drops of blood to any curious bystanders. "Here. Get that to stop first."

"...Thanks."

Thwack!

"Ofl!"

"And that's for ditching me!"

Which brings us back to the beginning.

"Go on? No, please. Why stop there?" Rob asked, eyebrow raised, in a half-muffled voice. Punched twice in the nose, that was of no real consequence to him, really. But trying to apparently-appease Tozzer, he kept the rag to his nose. "I thought one hit was enough."

"Ha!" Richie kept pacing, still working off the remnants of his jangled nerves. "For you, one is never enough, Stripes. And Beverly's switched your knuckles so many times, you can't say I'm wrong about it."

"Heh heh. Tou-ché."

"I mean, fuck... Fuck! All this, over a stupid car? That's for Butch to give a shit about, not Henry."

"Tch. I figured that out for myself, Richie."
"But it bears repeating. Over and over again. Until it starts making goddamned sense."

Which you continue to not.

Rob frowned at him from behind the rag. Then his eyes closed.

Very, very deliberately.

You know I can-

"Ugh!" Despite knowing it would do no good, Richie stopped, clapped his hands to his ears. There was no blocking it out.

So weird, having a conversation with no words.

No verbalized words.

Seething, he closed his eyelids tight, ignoring how stupid it make him look in the process, to focus.

Yes, moron! I know, you can hear me. I heard you the first time.

Just making sure.

I don't want to hear you, though. If I did, I'd ask!

I know. That's why I'm talking to you like this.

Ohhh! Fuckin' telepathy. Just when I thought you ran outta tricks, too.

It's one way. That doesn't make it telepathy for you.

Ugh. Fuckin' gyp, that.

Nyeh nyeh-nyeh.

Shut up!

Just be glad I haven't been this forward about it before.

Do the others know?

Mike does. And Eddie. And now you.

Showoff.

Considering everything I can do, this is the least showy thing.

Still weird.

To you, maybe.

Does this mean I can peek into your thoughts, too?

You're welcome to try. Though it'd probably leave you a drooling, jibbering idiot.

So. Give me a look.
...See?

Agh!

What was that?

Lights. A reflection of Deadlights, anyway. Any more direct and your mind would have fizzled a bit there.

Because, what? All those times Ma said, "don't stare at the sun too long" - this is what she was talking about? That's what would happen?

"Or worse."

"Ahh!"

Richie jumped again, half-dancing away from the voice that was suddenly right beside his ear.

With imitation-blood smeared on his nose and lips, looking not too far off from his usual painted-up self, Rob smirked at him.

Fucking sneak.

"There. You learned something new today. Now, shall we go warn the others about Bowers, or not?"

Richie scowled, thinking belatedly to lower his hands. He was tempted to select "or not", but he couldn't think of a good reason to not spread the word. Then Bill and the others would know to keep an eye out.

Upon not hearing an answer, verbal or otherwise, the entity only cocked an eyebrow, voice lowering to a rumble. "You're welcome, by the way. Better for Henry to rearrange my mug than your's, isn't it? Heals faster."

"I guess, especially if you think it's an improvement over how you looked before. ...Yeah, I said that, Buscemi. After you, then. I'll catch up. Just... keep an eye out for me on the walk back to my bike."

Pop.

Just like before, gone in a blink's time.

Richie waited until his nerves had settled, somewhat-fully, before mumbling one very seldom-used word to himself.

Because, as yet, he wasn't convinced It had earned the right to hear it to his not-face.

Much less to be called a real friend.

"...Thanks."

Ha! Heard that, too!

UGH!
"You went after the bullies."

Pennywise froze, left eye slowly panning over to regard the figure standing in the doorway.

The right continued to gaze out the second story window.

He didn't so much as flinch, otherwise. Not for the first time, he was caught unawares by one of the Losers.

But that didn't mean he would take his eye off Neibolt Street.

"You should be asleep, EdS."

There wasn't much point to a club sleepover when one of your invited party thought it necessary to trapse around the house long after everyone else had turned in.

Thankfully, it was only the one teen.

From the sound of it, the others were still dozing in their sleeping bags on the ground floor, blissfully oblivious.

Clad in his long johns, short brown hair disheveled, Eddie Kaspbrak looked less like he had awoken because of a bad dream. Rather, he looked more like he couldn't sleep because his racing mind just wouldn't let go of wakefulness long enough to let him.

Not with a pesky, educated guess keeping him up.

He stood there on the threshold, with his arms crossed, gaze firm and unwavering.

Looking at him, Pennywise felt briefly like a child who had snuck out of the house, only to return to find Dad wide awake and waiting to hear their confessional as to why.

Which wasn't too far off a comparison, when one considered all the variables here.

Except the roles were very much not conventional, and very reversed, indeed.

"You went after someone. That's how you got hurt. Before."
At that the corporealized entity felt his self-made skull twinge in remembrance, a barely-there phantom pain at worst. But he wrung his hands instead, rather than clutch dramatically at his head, wincing at the awful memory.

That wasn't the issue.

He sensed nothing from Eddie but pure, undiluted suspicion.

And no small measure of prickly irritation.

He wouldn't be finding any sympathy for that with this Loser.

Not without blurting everything out.

Which he wasn't wont to do.

"EdS, now's noT a good time. Go baCk to bed."

If only It felt as convinced of his own words as he tried to make them sound.

The composure behind them was lacking. And it didn't escape the notice of Eddie's Bee-Ehs meter (as Richie once dubbed such a sense, of being able to tell phony words from genuine).

"And now Hockstetter goes missing?"

Brushing the already-open door aside, Kaspbrak crossed the room, to take the empty space across the windowsill. Arms crossed, he braced a shoulder on the wall.

Conversely, Pennywise took a deliberate step back, half-blending with the shadows that the moonlight couldn't banish. Feeling the burn of scrutinizing eyes, the creature averted both of his.

While it was tempting to leave the scene altogether, something stayed him.

Not a need to confess, no.

But, unlike before, Eddie clearly wasn't going to drop the topic anytime soon.

"Nice try, playing dumb, but right now, you'd be smart to tell me what you did, before the others get wind of it."

Blinking, Pennywise couldn't repress the full-body twitch that jolted through his form.

*Who says I have to?*

What began as a half-formed laugh devolved into a scoff of disbelief.

"Pah. Sssmart? How does admitting to it changE how intelligent a choice it was or wasn't?"

"Because I thought you were smart enough to not make a big deal of it."

"Not maKe a- " Flabbergasted, Pennywise shook his head. "Eddie, they tried to kiLl you."

The teen's darkened expression sidled away, briefly considering his near-fatal traffic incident, before refocusing on his rescuer-turned-unwanted-avenger.

Clearly, they were still not on the same wavelength when it came to seeking due retribution.
Or if there was even a need to seek it.

"Yeah. But I'm still here."

"You can't have forgiven that so easily."

Despite their hue, Eddie's brown eyes burned with their own kind of intensity. "I didn't say I had, Dingles. But since when do you remember hearing me say, kill for me?"

"...I don't."

"Exactly." Eddie drummed his fingers against his arm, trying in vain to settle some unfolding internal debate. "You dolt. I know, after so long, you had to be... starving. You weren't thinking clearly."

"Oh, it was perfectly clear, Eds," Pennywise harrumphed. If he had to quantify his reasoning in percentages, maybe seventy-percent of what had driven him was hunger. That was one aspect of the entity's ever-present dilemma no amount of denying would make go away.

The remaining thirty had been a potent mix of fury and vindication.

For him, the next course of action couldn't be more clear, more obvious.

Something had to be done.

To make sure it couldn't happen again.

"It was. I couldn't pretend it wasn't."

*And the young people of this town are already far better off without Hockstetter around.*

*You'd have to agree on that.*

Scowling up at him, Eddie still looked less than appeased.

Bolstered by a fresh flare of anger, he stepped forward.

"Bullshit, man. You just- make up the game as you go. You're your own self-serving agenda, it doesn't get much better when you're of as infinite capabilities as you claim. But no. Something as simple as deciding what you eat, that you can't change?"

....

*No more than you can expect a tiger to forgo raw meat in favor of hot dogs.*

Turning the matter over in his ancient mind, seemingly for as many times as the entity had had eons, it finally settled on a reaction.

One that was anything but overblown or unreasonable.

He scoffed again, and leaned down.

And instead of growling, he simply whispered:

"You're still here, aren't you?"

To his credit, Eddie didn't balk in fright or anxiously scampers backwards.
His eyes darted, but the continued lack of answers didn't affect the germaphobe as it once had.

...is it really that bad...

"Pft. I- I suppose."

Deciding that was close to earning acceptance as he would get, Pennywise sharply glanced away, slowly wringing his hands.

Then, reluctantly, he let them drop to his sides, and looked back. Adding a touch of unwanted-revelation to those words was the least he could do.

Not too little. And hopefully not too much.

"Just count yourself... lucky you caught me on a good year."

That said, It didn't linger, not to laugh, smirk, despair, any of those feelings. He didn't want to behold Eddie's reaction in person. It would only lead to more bitter questions.

The entity simply stepped back and let the shadows take his place, vanishing from mortal sight.

Leaving the teen with only empty air to talk to.

Vaguely, he thought he heard a soft, distant-sounding utterance:

"...What? A good yea- hey!"

Eddie jumped as the bedroom door behind him, seemingly of its own accord, slammed shut.

Before, with a slow, shy-sounding hinge squeak, it creaked open again.
Rare Gems

Chapter Summary

Hummingbirds, anyone?

Chapter Notes

I don’t care if handfeeding hummingbirds wasn’t a thing in the 80s. It is now.

"You... sure this isn't dangerous?"

Again, coming from It, no other five words in the history of mankind felt more redundantly asked than those.

Sitting nearby, leafing through his well-worn bird guide, Stan Uris scoffed to himself. On the one hand, he could opt to respond. On the other, he knew not responding to one question - that alone wouldn't stop the inquisition from unfolding.

No more dangerous than the chickadees were.

Then again...

Ultimately, he went for the former.

"Ordinarily, no."

"No?"

Effin - parrot. The guy is a six-and-a-half-foot tall parrot that sometimes looks like a magpie.

...And countless other things.

Ignoring the very-tempting urge to scoff, Stan gave his best shot at honest answer there, before giving up about halfway through. "No. But, given this is clearly abnormal behavior... oh, I don't know. You tell me. They typically don't follow people around."

Lord knows why this one has taken a shine to you.

...No, I get the feeling even He doesn't know.

Like Georgie and that beaver.

"Me tell you?" Pennywise's voice repeated, followed by a slight ting. "Would that I could, StanLey."

Well, that's as close to an answer as I've got, too.
"H-heY, q-quit that."

Stan glanced up, through the tops of his eyes.

Hummingbirds were in no way dangerous to people.

Unless you happened to be an eldritch abomination posing as a clown.

Then there was no hope for you, apparently.

The first specimen to turn up had done so five minutes ago, and still hadn't left. The damn thing, apparently, found his shiny eyes more hypnotic than a cup of artificial nectar, held in the flattened palm of his hand. Or the nearby bushes of annuals, those were proving far too mundane for this enlightened bird now.

(According to Mike, as long as the intruder wasn't a luna moth, it was welcome to roost on It's face.)

Going cross-eyed, holding his inane pose, the clown looked positively five times more ridiculous than usual.

With its dainty feet, the hummingbird - barely two inches long from stem to stern - managed to keep its grip. With short, jerking motions, its shimmering head turned to and fro, as it regarded one glowing eye, then the other, and back. To its credit, the tiny avian kept its needle-sharp beak pointed up, as if it somehow knew what a danger it posed.

Though he continued to hold still, Pennywise winced as his visitor's wings revved up, disappearing momentarily into a buzzing blur, before refolding against the hummingbird's sides.

Watching it ensue, Stan couldn't imagine anyone being able to stand that kind of rapid-fire fluttering, right up in their face.

But Pennywise could, apparently.

"What- what kinD is it?"

Despite the sheer bizarreness unfolding before him (which he would later write off as the usual-variety bizarreness that was 1989), Stan bit his lip in thought, panning through his recollections for the scientific name. Those always served to get a funny look out of his eldritch 'student'.

"...Archilochus colubris."

There. If only reading from the Torah were as easy.

Or amusing.

Please, Uris, admit it. It is kinda funny.

Eyebrows raised, eyelids half shut, Pennywise spared the thirteen-year-old the most exasperated of looks. Rather than go for the shortest answer out there, here comes another in-depth birding lesson.

Hang on. We'll get through it together, folks.

"...Yes. And in EngliSh?"

C'mon. That's too easy a joke.
"That was."

As is this.

Pennywise frowned, brows lowering to better compliment his black-rimmed eyes. With his free hand, he reached up, slowly and stealthily enough that the transfixed hummingbird did not stir.

Not until it was brushed aside with the gentle sweep of a gloved finger.

Wings buzzing, it zipped away, quickly lost against the greenery of the park.

"Nooo, it wasn't."

Smirking, Stan shrugged, dismissively blasé as you like. Crisis over, now awaiting the next one, he turned back to his book.

"Well, for me, when it comes to birds, they're one and the same."

"What was thaT, though?"

*Here's a big one for ya.*

"Binominal nomenclature."

"Ss-suR-sorRy?"

Stan snorted and shook his head, managing to pass his resulting laughter off as another sound. "Don't get so flustered. It's the... universally accepted standard for naming various species. The first half indicates what genus they belong to, the second is their specific epithet."

*Universally* accepted, Uris?

It probably thought not.

But if he did, the creature neatly set voicing that comment aside in favor of actually considering his teacher's words.

He continued to hold perfectly still, hand angled with its wrist bent, like an inverted Egyptian hieroglyphic, as the hummingbird came winging back. A bright patch of red on its throat the only visible indicator it was there besides the blur of green it resembled. It buzzed about them in a circle, hovered here, jigged sideways, announcing its return seemingly, before alighting upon a gloved finger. With one last look around, it started lapping from the cup.

"And... everything on the plaNet... hass one?"

"Yeah. Every species Man knows, at least. Like that? Its common name is the ruby-throated hummingbird."

"ComMon..."

To that, Stan raised an eyebrow. Like "yes, you know the meaning of the word". He refused to be baited into any more unnecessary explanations today.

The fearless hummingbird paused, flicked its green wings, then resumed drinking, almost as if it were reinforcing the message.
Pennywise's free hand curled, like an idle cat stretching its claws, but otherwise he stayed still. "So, you see them often?"

"That type, yes. It's the only one of its kind I've ever seen. We get them every spring here in Maine. They migrate, spend their winters in Mexico - almost three-thousand miles away."

That factoid earned Stan a startled glance.

"This little thing?"

"Yeah. They go that far." Nodding, Stan hazarded a question of his own, feeling a bit like Ben must have, showing them all the Derry museum display that also served as his bedroom for the first time. "Pretty cool, right?"

With his response, the suddenly-stonefaced entity didn't confirm or deny anything, to the boy's mild disappointment. It merely smirked and glanced down at the pint-sized bird perched in his palm, watching as it twitched backwards, glancing about, before taking off again.

"And... what's the other kind?"

"Selasphorus rufus. The Rufous hummingbird. They're more of a brown color, with a coppery-orange bib."

"Bib?"

"Throat."

"Bib." Snorting, Pennywise shook his head at pronouncing the adorably-shorthanded word, as anyone not versed in avian vernacular might. "Pfeh. Funky."

I guess. You usually find these outings tolerable.

How pleased with the others be to hear I finally found a somewhat-willing birding partner in you? Now, that thought was almost encouraging. Infinitely more encouraging than the thoughts of his upcoming Bar Mitzvah.

"So... dare I ask, have you finally found something to like about birding?"

It proved the wrong time to inquire. Appetite satiated, but its curiosity not, the hummingbird returned, zeroing in on its red nose. Watching him flinch and fake buckling up under the touch, Stan couldn't tell if the entity spluttered out of amusement or annoyance.

Or both.

"Only when you can make it so entertaining, Stanny."

Stan frowned, finally thinking to turn the page in the guide he was no longer one-hundred percent focused on. "But I didn't... do anything."

Besides spew a bunch of information you may or may not have soaked up.

"So? You're here, aren't you?"

Raising an eyebrow, Stan glanced back around himself, at the undergrowth, where he spied a convenient acorn.
So. That's how it's gonna be?

Fine.

Pennywise flinched again as the improvised bullet glanced off his head. Squeaking, the hummingbird dove away, escaping through the backdrop of leaves.

"Ow. Heey."

Unafraid, Stan returned the glare for what it was.

Pretend.

He knew because the smiles didn't drop from either of their faces.

Heh. There's one for you and me, Richie.
"Eggboy."

As a bookworm, Ben Hanscom was used to being caught unawares, for better or worse. So focused on the pages currently in his hands, there was little to no chance he would have even noticed Pennywise, had the clown not seen fit to greet him first.

No.

Especially looking like the beast was now. Not even balanced on his toes atop the far side of the boy's worktable, framed against the curtained window, poised like a cat, would Ben have looked up and seen him.

"Stri- " He stopped short, the unusual greeting stalling midway out of his mouth, then sat up straighter. "Ahem. Hi, Pennywise."

At that, his visitor vaulted off the table. Arms crossing, the entity smirked knowingly and leaned over Ben's shoulder, blue eyes narrowing mischievously.

"Ohhh, come on. You can use tHat one, too. The others all do."

*It's the first one Richie thought of. And you took a shine to it like Georgie has you.*

*You could only pretend to be annoyed with it for so long.*

Just managing to not flinch at the almost-chilly breath tickling his ear, Ben smiled at the reminder, both immediate and not.

"Thanks, but- it's just- nicknames, they're not my..."

His smile faded as he sought the right word.

"...Pref-preferenCe?" Pennywise's expression lit up with a glimmer of childish eagerness. "Yes? That's the woRd for it, right?"

At Hanscom's affirming nod, It's smirk morphed into a self-satisfied grin. The thing-* being* liked to hover, especially in the vicinity of one's shoulder. And because of that, he was learning. He seemed to be picking up more and more big words, actively integrating them into his vocabulary.
"Between you and Stan, how could he not?"

"Right."

"Still, don't be shy, if you eVer- chaNg e your mind."

"Fair enough."

Appeased, It sidestepped away, out of sight. Honestly, for such an ungainly-looking creature, he could balance as delicately as a bird.

That much was fitting, Ben supposed, for any dancer.

Piece said, he turned back to reading.

Silence reigned for a time.

When it was inevitably broken, someone like Stan or Eddie would say the spell hadn't gone on for nearly long enough. At the same time, the many black-and-white vintage photos, pasted so thickly around Ben's walls almost like a second layer of wallpaper, could only hold the clown's attention for so long.

That is, they kept It's focus for not long at all.

*Tink. Tink t inp.*

Ben paused to look up, mid-read, putting his fingertip to the book, marking his place for later.

*Tink.*

Turning around in his seat, he thought he saw Pennywise glancing briefly at the corner of missing children posters. Then his gaze veered instead to the glass jar, stuffed as it was, full of silver and copper coins, sitting atop the cluttered dresser.

It, apparently, proved more interesting to him than the miniature human skeleton model (currently posed as it was, arm outstretched in a finger-pointing, hips-canted strutting pose, as if it's platform were a disco floor, *a la Saturday Night Fever*; because Richie couldn't not leave it alone, and a softly-smiling Ben hadn't thought to change it).

No, Pennywise found a selection of pennies and quarters more fascinating, apparently.

With one fingertip he tapped and prodded the change jar, spinning it around in place.

*Tink t inp.*

Why?

Was the sound it made intriguing him? Or the metal inside?

Completely contrary as to whatever the being was doing, he asked an altogether different question:

"...Why don't you liKe nicknames?"

*Stan warned me about this. You and your questions.*

*The only way to get you to... go away is to answer them.*
But—don't go, if you don't want.

And these kinds of laid-back thoughts were how Ben had quickly become known as the most tolerating member of the Losers Club.

"It's not that I don't. It's... I don't know."

Red lines flexing, Pennywise's face twisted with a bit of bewilderment. He straightened up, one hand resting atop the dresser.

"You don't? ...You have to know why you don't like something, Ben. Or else... you would like it."

Yeah? By default? No in-between?

That's fitting, coming from you.

For the longest time, there was no gray in your... life.

It was either one way, or another.

Now you're... closer to the middle.

Most times. You still go weird once and a while.

Or you still are, always, when we don't see.

Like when we found out you don't just sometimes hang out in them - you live in the sewers.

...Of all the places you could be, why there?

"Bowersss..."

A low, drawn-out hiss, like a slowly-overheating boiler, brought Hanscom back to the present. He blinked, belatedly realizing just how many seconds he had taken to dwell on an answer.

"What?"

What did Henry have to do with their conversation?

Working through the problem out loud, It frowned and blinked at him, before glancing aside, fingers twiddling their way together with a sudden restlessness. Like an uncomfortable realization was just now dawning on him. "You don't like nicknames, because... most of the ones you're given..."

"They're not very nice," Ben finished, nodding thoughtfully. "Yeah, I think that's it."


"Eggboy's not... very nice, either," Pennywise concluded, eyes directed apart, to better match his awkward-sounding tone. "...Now that I think of it."

Most nicknames don't sound so good, once they're considered, over-analyzed. And most are given impulsively. The history book I was reading that day, it was about the Easter egg hunt at the Ironworks.

...No, I didn't expect your hand to reach through the picture and offer me an egg.

"Living history," you called it.
And we both had a laugh over it.

That the librarian didn't harp at me for.

Could've been worse.

"Depending on who you ask, nicknames can be good or bad," Ben reasoned, shrugging easily. The memory, though jarringly startling at the time, wasn't an unwelcome one in his library of a mind. "And Eggboy's okay. I didn't think you meant anything bad before."

"You... you diDn't?"

"No." Ben watched, frowning, as the being's pale visage remained meek and contrite, like he was practically expecting to be yelled at. "Why? You think I resent you for it or something?"

"I... doN't."

It's okay to speak rashly, sometimes. And compared to Richie's monikers, Eggboy's as close to a favorite as I have, too.

Hanscom nodded, shrugging again. "Then we're cool."

"C... cooL?"

"Yeah. Even, because fair's fair," Ben elaborated, daring for a bit of seldom-seen cheekiness. "I could go on all day."

"Wellll... Fun as that souNdS, Ben, I'm not here for gaMes."

(Says the suited-up creature before us.)

"No?"

"Nope..." Pennywise hesitated again, growing even more uncharacteristically somber. "Beverly said one of us might waNt to... check on you."

Why? Because, oh...

Yeah.

"Because of that," Ben remarked, sounding distant to his own ears. Glancing back at his desk, he almost thought to close his book. Instead, he reached for a pencil, neatly marking his place on the page before sliding it aside.

"Because oF what?"

He doesn't know. Or he's acting like he doesn't.

Either way...

"C'mere, I'll... show you."

The ungainly model globe took up a good eighth of his workspace. Grasping its stand, Hanscom carefully tipped the object back. Beneath, he found the two index cards - trimmed to fit - he expected to, with the priceless prize paperclipped between.
The only place Mom wouldn't expect to look for this.

Or anyone else, for that matter.

So... Beverly was listening when I told her.

His thoughts went aside at the touch of a fingertip, prodding impatiently at his arm.

"What, Ben? What's wrong?"

Relax.

He's not asking you to be a pest. Just trying to be... friendly.

Like Georgie keeps saying.

"Today's date, it... means something to me," Ben replied, at great length. Delicately, he unclipped the cards, revealing a folded four-by-six-inch photo stowed within. He stopped short of opening it, as the bittersweet memories surged forth.

"And that's... why you're here, instead of out with the others?"

"I didn't want to trouble them," Ben mumbled, more dejected by the second. One despondent thought tended to overlap the next. "I've... done enough of that."

Because being the new kid wasn't stigma enough. Once you found your crowd, provided there was one to be found, your friends may well find themselves being targeted anew. Bowers may go after them. Because of you, for better or worse. Were they asked, face to face, Ben got the feeling every one of them would claim different only out of politeness.

He wasn't a pessimist, per se. But he had doubts, as it was only human to do so. Doubts they understood what it was to be his friend.

Conversely, Hanscom somehow knew what it was to be the creature, standing hunched over at his side (by the shape of his impressive shadow), what it was to be in It's boots.

Whether It realized that or not, there was only one way to find out.

Go forward.

Before he could unfold the photograph, Pennywise's voice rumbled in his ear again, closer than before.

As close to deadly serious as he could sound:

"If you troubled them so, they wouldn't have asked me to visit you, Eggboy."

They asked? Or you volunteered?

Was it one, or both?

Raising an eyebrow, Ben finally glanced up at the peculiar blue eyes, zeroed in on him like a hawk's.

Well, he couldn't find out which possibility was true unless he asked.

"Did they?" Ben challenged, as mildly as he could. "Or was it all you?"
Because you don't know what it is to respect another's boundaries.

How you're always standing so close, poking and prodding.

Stoically, Pennywise stared right back. "This isn't about me, Ben. I just- if there's anything to be helped-"

"You can help by giving me some privacy- some space, then," Ben lectured, mellow and gently, despite how it took an interruption to curtail his visitor's counterargument. "I appreciate the thought, but thoughts are all I need."

The humanoid alien's blue irises darted in opposite directions again, before slowly recentering.

He tilted his head, seeming and looking like a confused chameleon, still learning to look the same way with both pinhead-sized eyeballs. His hands drew up to clasp before his chest.

"Are you... you sure?"

"I am. Tell the others that for me, please."

And if I need something more, I'll ask.

You have your share of secrets.

Let us keep ours'.

He half expected it to pout, beginning to insistently whine about how unfair a statement that was. That he had stopped in for nothing.

But like the vocabulary lessons, Pennywise's expression crumpled only as he pondered the content over, concentrating very visibly. Then, with a twitch, he stepped back, conceding the point with a bobbing nod.

Like a bird.

"Hmph. Fair's fair."

Ben smiled gently, reclipping the index cards atop the photo again.

"You can still hang out, if you want."

It only seemed like a just reward, for not protesting or pushing the issue.

But the next inevitable comment out of the clown's mouth was as predictable as a sunset.

Which it was, outside, this late in the day.

"But- there's nothing to do."

Not while I'm reading, no, but...

Ben stowed the picture underneath the globe. Then he reached for the opposite corner of the desk, where his Walkman and its rolled-up set of headphones sat.

He smirked at seeing the almost-apprehensive, head-tilted look Pennywise watched him with, shortly followed by another very overt backwards step.
"Don't be like that. You ever even hear New Kids On The Block before?"
What Isn’t Broken

Chapter Summary

Rob, it might just be you.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Damsel In Denial”.

"Dude. How are you not roasting alive in that jacket?"

Normally, Robert Gray would greet such an up-front question with a smug grin and a borderline-witty comeback. Perhaps something that alluded to how they were both sweating, while his 'skin' remained cool to the touch.

Today, though, the shapeshifter had other ideas. It was anything but in the mood to joke around. Yes. July in Maine wasn't the best time of year to layer yourself in leather and denim. But to him, it was the same as putting on an invisible shell.

Showy outside.

Nothing inside.

Save for his own incorporeal hodge-podge of questions, comments, and countless new concerns.

Otherwise known as one's own consciousness.

Speaking of roasting...

Trying to seem nonchalant, Rob removed his sunglasses, hooking them over the collar of his shirt. After dealing with Bowers, Georgie had mentioned how rude it was to talk with shades on.

"Because-"

The second half of the duo cut him off.

"Because he's not, Richie. Haven't you learned anything?"

Rude!

Already starting to fume, Rob let his mouth snap shut. The heat may not be making him sweat, but it certainly bolstered his already-fiery temper. Rather than screech to that effect, he settled instead for mutely shooting Interceptor Eddie a sullen sideways glare.

Unknowingly, Richie Tozier mirrored his sour-faced expression to a tee.

"I might've- kinda, sorta. But I tried to put it out of my mind as fast as it sunk in."
"No." Eddie shook his head, then proceeded to tic off points on his fingers as he explained his counterargument: "They could pull your brains out through your nose, pressure wash the inside of your skull, bleach-rinse-repeat several times, and you still wouldn't get it out of your head."

"...Just what are you saying?"

"That you can learn, dumbass, and remember. Your brain is a sponge- a filthy, filthy sponge. And it wouldn't kill you to just let it absorb something for once."

Rob scoffed and held a hand to his brow, temples pressed down between his thumb and index finger, an improvised compress. Maybe this hadn't been the greatest weather to confront Tozier and Kasprak in. As casually as he could manage, the entity-in-disguise stepped past Eddie to sit down on the bench beside the wooded trail.

No. Early stage migraines weren't a thing for his human form to endure usually, either.

As such, he couldn't totally repress a small whine.

"Guys..."

To that, footsteps answered him, shoes crunching on gravel as they drew close.

Then passed by.

"Hey, if we're boring you, Stripes, you know where the door is."

"Door?" New head pains momentarily forgotten, Gray couldn't help taking a disbelieving glance around their surroundings. Bassey Park boasted a lot of features. But doors were not among them. And they certainly weren't holding this conversation in a restroom. "Do you see any- doors around here?"

Question, idiot.

You posed it as a question.

Now he's going to- yep, there he goes!

Smirking, Richie shrugged, making a show of pushing aside a handful of shoulder-height bush branches. "Oh, plenty. Let's see..." He tapped his chin in thought, then started pointing. "There's... one over there. Front of the gas station. Down the block, at the arcade. And... oh! Let's not forget, the town hall- "

"Richie."

The leafy branches rustled audibly as they were released. "What?"

Rolling his eyes, as no talk with Tozier would ever be complete without said gesture, Eddie stalked back over to stand beside the occupied bench. "You know that just confuses him more."

Richie's mocking grin was anything save subtle. "Yeah, I know."

"And you're doing it anyway?"

He shrugged. "What else is he good for?"

Silent up until that moment, slowly sifting through a proverbial deck of stock-card-written responses,
It decided on the one that took the least airflow to voice.

He sighed and let his hand drop from his face, doing his best to pretend he looked offended.

"...Ouch."

*What have I been good for?*

Eddie spoke up again before the entity could compile a mental list. The kid went for his fanny pack, punctuating his next comment with the opening of the zipper. Anyone within ten feet could already hear the plastic bottles rattling inside.

"Pft. Ignore him, Dingbat. That's my best advice."

"That you constantly ignore. Ergo, worst advice ever!"

Rob glared. There it was, the lynchpin. Pull that out, and their next exchange wouldn't get any traction.

Richie's never-ending ridicule was bad enough.

It half expected Eddie to try forcefeeding him a painkiller, plus an anti-depressive.

Nope. Time to draw the line in the sand. A little show of his formidable anger usually got these two to clam up.

"For the last *time,*" he growled, and stood up, dwarfing them both by a clear twelve inches. "*This is* not Dingbat. Or Stripes. Or Pennywise. It's Robert." Slowly, for effect, he looked at each of their faces, with one eye apiece, teeth bared. "*Got* that?"

And normally (again, as close as the cosmic entity could ever be ascribed to being called normal), this version of It was a well-read, sometimes-clumsy, level-headed imitation of a man. Between the heat and the mild human dizziness that came with having an empty stomach, that control wasn't proving so easy to hold onto. He had a right to be a little cranky.

A little.

At least.

Thankfully, faced with that display, the two boys appeared to agree there. The timid, suddenly-nervous look they exchanged indicated as much.

"Y-yeah, roger," Richie mumbled, fidgeting with his frames.

Eddie swallowed. "Ditto."

Temporarily satiated, Rob sighed and blinked, eyes recentering as he did so.

"Oh-kay, now... that that's out of the *way,* there's something else."

"Isn't there always?"

And just like that, the tension was back.

"Tozierrrr..."
"Hey," Eddie leaned in, hesitating only briefly before patting his shoulder, soothingly (or so he hoped). "What'd I just say? Ignore him."

*Keep cool. You already had your tantrum.*

*Don't stay riled up. Come down.*

Rob snorted quietly, feeling a mite annoyed with having to take his own best advice. He wasn't sure he could, what with the very nature of the problem most on his mind.

He closed his eyes, paused for a deep, cooling breath, then reopened them.

"Right. Well. Everything else aside, what was all that fuss about the other day?"

Eddie shared a look with the other teen - a single, skeptic, darting glance.

"Fuss...?"

"Between you two and Bevs."

"..."

"..."

Insert cricket-chirp-chirp-chirp-sound effects here.

At that, Rob found his eyeroll-worthy moment. He folded his arms, gaze turning skyward, if only to make him not appear so severe. The still-blooming headache seemed to ease as he did. "Come on. You had to know I'd ask at some point."

"Yeah, I guess. Even though you can hear *everything* in this town."

*And that's a lot of white noise to comb through, Eds.*

*Can't you help a guy out, make it perfectly clear?*

*It can't hurt for me to be sure.*

Scoffing, Richie was not so quick to jump on board that train of thought.

"So? We already said we're sorry." In another unintentional-slash-intentional parroting, he threaded his arms and shifted back on his right leg, looking and sounding defensive. "Wasn't that enough?"

Eddie chuckled uneasily. "Yeah. If we were in sixth grade, maybe."

"Eds-"

"What do you want me to say?" Kaspbrak shrugged, almost helplessly. But at least he looked contrite enough for the both of them. "Rich, we fucked up."

Richie shook his head. "No more than usual."

"No. No, that time, I think we went too far."

"Sure. And the last thing I wanted to do today was some serious soul-searching with the pair of you nimrods."
As if the insult wasn't blatant enough, Richie did something worse.

He started to walk away.

"That said-"

Squinting, Rob frowned at the back of the teen's head.

"Get back here."

Richie's yelp almost veered into a scream as he looked down and realized what had grabbed onto him, stalling his retreat.

Eyes bulging, Eddie gaped, then covered his mouth. He was not a fan of the black, smooth-skinned tentacle that unfurled, lashing out to snag Tozier by the elbow.

"Hey! Hey, ew! Not in public! No! Keep that-thing to yourself!" Flailing, Richie managed to twist aside, tossing the boneless limb away about as effectively as an uncoiled garden hose. "Ew! Hands off the goods!"

Rob smirked, waving almost daintily with the tentacle's very tip.

_Hands?_

"You know what I mean!"

"Goods, no shit," Eddie half-giggled, caught betwixt outright horror and unsettled mirth. "Like the goods we were spouting off that afternoon."

Richie forced one last disgusted shudder, reluctantly trotting back over.

"Christ on a bike, Eds, don't tell me he's already got to you."

_After that display?_

_I think I just did._

Rob declined to comment. With a blasé look, the tentacle arm retracted into his sleeve, oily skin lightening and shifting back to better fit a normal human hand.

Shivering at the sight, Eddie covered his leftover show of nerves with a forced sigh.

"So what if he has? Wouldn't you rather get it over with, then run away?"

"I'd rather not entertain the thought."

"Duh! Same difference."

"Tough luck, Trashmouth," Rob spoke up, after another lengthy pause, hiking an eyebrow. "Because I'm not going anywhere until you do."

Then, with a perfectly-deliberate slip of voice, he added:

"And neither will you."

Richie promptly threw his head back to groan at the sky. Apparently, he needed to plead to the heavens, to summon a modicum of explosive anger before responding.
"Oh, of all the *f*ucks ever given, in the long, sad history of *fucks* - if you've learned anything from us, it's how to be as stubborn as this guy is paranoid."

Eddie wasn't half as dramatic.

"He was already halfway there, Rich. I just helped."

"Yeah?" Richie frowned, eyebrows lifted high, eyes falling half shut. His shoulders drooped noticeably, arms hanging at his sides. "And I bet you don't regret a second of it, either."

"Right now? ...Nope."

Despite the summer sun, Richie couldn't force being more pale than he was already. To make up for that, he pretended to shy away in terror. "God, it really is a monster."

"Richard."

From that, came the groveling, as though crawling around in the grass on his hands and knees, beseeching some holy figure he obviously didn't believe in, suddenly made Tozier look more feeble.

"No! Lord and saints preserve me! There's two of 'em! Abandon all hope, ye who tresspass here! The end is nigh!"

Nonsense.

Overblown, unnecessarily-grandiose nonsense.

The Richie Tozier specialty.

It could sense other parkgoers watching - distantly, but watching all the same. Wondering just "what in the blue blazes is that kid spouting off about?"

He almost didn't care to alter their memories later. Richie was making the scene for all to see. Why not let them?

Instead, the entity turned back to Eddie, arms crossing loosely.

"...And you say I err on the theatric side?"

"Heh. Y'know, occasionally, I do kinda have a hard time seeing the difference between you jokers."

Kaspbrak could be right snide sometimes.

*So much for him being on your team.*

*Snide. That goes for you, too, Stan-voice.*

Rob pulled a grimace. The headache was starting to rev up again.

"*About Bevs-*"

"Oh, you're back to that?" Richie rolled over with a sigh to match, sitting up. "Come off it, dude. You wanna keep bringing a sore subject up like some- whingey teenage girl, you're just gonna start the cycle all over."

"You said you were sorry. You didn't say what for."
Another bout of awkward silence ensued. In the wake of the very-much-exaggerated groveling act, though, it was fairly welcome.

Richie scoffed and brushed his shirt off, climbing to his feet.

"That's what's gnawing away at you? Man, lighten up. Bev wasn't in any real trouble. And she still isn't."

Curling his nonexistent claws, Rob bristled. "Oh? Because from what I saw and heard, you two twits were out for someone's blood."

Or was that me mishearing things?

Maybe.

...Seems to be happening more and more, doesn't it?

"It- really, dude? No. If you read something more into it, that's on you."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, to better match their taller friend's mildly-puzzled expression. "How do you figure that, Richie?"

"Yeah, I'mean, we were running our mouths a little too fast there at the end, but- "

"A litTle too fast?!" His shoulders hunched, and through his human lookalike, Pennywise started into his own rant: "Saying nothIng ever goes wrong for her? That her cigarettes will kilL you later in life? None of that neEded to be said. Nothing about her will possibly get you kilLed. Your own G-God-given stupiDity would get you there fasTer."

It wasn't quite the highly-combusted explosion from before.

But heated, with it's own kind of intensity.

The quiet that followed was weighted, tense. Like a rapidly-inflated balloon, that just hung there in the air between them, invisible.

...Until a pin was stuck in it.

"You can't fix stupid, Rob," Richie declared, looking anything but ashamed of his words.

"Kudos for trying, though," Eddie finished, with a little, rarely-seen grin.

...Nope.

Not changing that. Like it or not, these two aren't the problem.

It might... just be you.

Processing the final leg of that internal monologue, Rob sighed one last time and straightened up.

"I... suppose..."

Belatedly, conceding his defeat to no one save himself, he thought to unfold his sunglasses. His assumed-optic nerves seemed to hurt less when his eyes were covered.

But the disguised entity paused before putting the shades back on his face, glancing up.
"And Bevs doesn't have it that easy. She's no princess."

Eddie shook his head, finally thinking to zip the forgotten fanny pack back up. "Pft. Gimme a break. To you, man, she is."

"Yep. Get that one through your oversized head, too," Richie advised, but without malice, before the moment could become too sentimental for him to stomach. He even spared his eldritch counterpart a friendly punch in the shoulder to boot.

"Anyone can see she's got you hooked. And Haystack. And the Stutter. Between the three of you, y'really think she'll ever be in any trouble she can't get out of?"

Rob frowned.

Pondering that question, he came up pathetically empty on valid counterarguments.

They weren't wrong. Beverly could handle herself. That was one of the things he admired most about her. True, she was a little bad at actually accepting help in return, but just because she was reluctant to do so didn't mean he had to complicate matters.

Not when the instigators were just Richie and Eddie... being Richie and Eddie.

Defending Marsh's honor at every last turn, no. She didn't want that. Most times, she didn't need it, either.

A helping hand here and there, sure.

But It wasn't a hero, anyway, remember?

He should stop trying to play the part.

Were she here, Beverly would say so.

With a little nod of sure, Rob finally placed the shades back over his eyes.

"No, I... guesSss not?"

"See that, Rich? Sponges. He soaked that one up."

"God. Like pulling teeth, though. In reverse."
Reclining atop her much-loved beach towel (yes, much-loved, as Richie had once described the thing as), Beverly Marsh kept her hands folded behind her head, and continued to gaze upward. Things were quiet, save for the occasional wail of a distant train whistle. The air up here was clear, tepid, and favorable. Not too dry, not too humid.

Just right.

Her visitor's unexpected appearance didn't disturb that. He showed up with no more than a soft *click*, and there was a minute impact of weight settling on the roof, behind and beside her skull.

Like someone's plane had just touched down.

He was lying on his back, in repose, she assumed, same as her. For she knew the entity had a tendency to mimic poses as much as he channelled feelings and expressions at any given opportunity.

Briefly, Beverly allowed herself a smile, eyes closing in almost-contentment.

"Figures you'd find me here."

Followed by a quiet scuffling of fabric, an unusually-hushed voice found a place in her ear.

"Where eLse would you be?"

Beverly let her eyes open at that, the smile easing away.

*Where else?*

She would probably- no, *definitely* be denned up in her bedroom, hoping Daddy had dozed off for good that time. That was the safest place she could be, usually.

It was too much, to chance creeping down the stairs. There was nowhere to go tonight. Nowhere important enough that warranted such sneaking around, anyway.

Pretending to stargaze from atop the apartment building, as she had been, was a much-preferred
alternative to both of those risky options.

Even *with* the interruption.

*May as well turn it around on him.*

*See how he reacts."

"Where would *you* rather be?"

Beverly turned her head, glancing sidelong over her bent elbow.

While he reclined on the roof beside her, Pennywise faced the opposite way, keeping one long leg propped up, bent at the knee. He didn't fold his hands behind his head. Those, he kept folded across his middle, eyes taking in the murky blue-black sky above.

With all its astral specks of light.

At her question, he didn't glance over. Or speak. Or blink. Or emote anything.

Typical.

She may as well have asked a statue.

But it wasn't entirely discouraging. She knew. For him, the lack of reaction was a reaction in and of itself.

Beverly frowned, thought to refold her ankles. One was feeling cooler than the other.

How apropos.

They felt like how that afternoon had gone.

Started off warm and companionable enough.

Before freezing over fast, until things were inverted.

Richie and Eddie, bicker session in full swing, before her asking them to stop had them trying to nag her.

Stupid. Just because the tension was getting a bit thick as of late.

Not only because of Bowers, but other woes.

Beverly sighed softly, trying in vain to shake the gloomy comparisons.

"Me, either."

That earned the girl a bemused blink and glance combination.

"...WhaT?"

"Where you are, Pen. I rather wouldn't be here, either."

"I... didn't saY that- "

"You don't have to," Beverly cut him off. "You've kept your distance from us for a few days."
Where once we couldn't go a few hours without tripping over you in some form...

Accused as he was, Pennywise's face turned over, about forty-five degrees. He scowled at her, eyes centering briefly, before returning his focus to the night sky.

The girl followed his eyeline.

"You'd rather... be up there, wouldn't you?"

Where everything used to make sense.

For as much as you don't make to us, it has to for you.

Somehow, someway.

Pennywise scoffed, scarlet lips pulling back in a slight grimace. "It doesn't wor- " Thinking twice of his most-used dismissal, the extraterrestrial chuffed again, half in a chittery-sounding growl.

From her towel, Beverly raised an eyebrow, trying to make heads or tails of the alien sound.

What did it indicate?

He sounded... frustrated.

Indecisive.

Inconsolable.

It wasn't her style to ask, to console when the other party was feeling standoffish, bordering on misanthropic. Having been there, she knew all too well what it meant to feel alone, and wanting to remain alone. And when it felt like changing that could only make things worse.

But in It's case...

Mind made up, Beverly turned over, leaning on one elbow.

"Is- everything okay- with you, I mean?"

A more loaded question, there never was.

The visitor merely glanced her way again, then, after a tense, mute beat, sat up to match. He drew his legs in, elbows poised on his knees.

Almost like he was trying to close himself off already.

"Oh, oKay as can be."

Worst liar ever.

"What you said today, about us not taking things out on each other... Is that getting to you?"

"It can't not geT to me," he sighed, eyes down, absently picking at one of his cuffs. "Along with everythIng else."

"You mean, Derry?" Beverly prompted, not unsympathetically. When he didn't reply, except for indulging in another longsighted stare, she sat up and turned around, scooting closer. "...That's a lot of 'everything else' to have in your head, all day long."
The clown sniffed, dismissively.

Or so he had probably hoped.

"It shouLdn't, get to me. I've always been thiS way. So has DerRy."

"Before you met the likes of us," Beverly nodded, mindful not to venture too far ahead. "I know what that's like."

"...YoU do?"

"Yeah. Like... before high school? How everything up until that point- it just made sense. I was who I was, and I thought I knew who all the other kids were. And the world didn't seem to have a problem with any of it. But all of a sudden, you pass on to the next grade and it's like, I don't know. Like the ground goes out from under you. Everything you used to think made sense? It's like... those same kids, and everyone else, just changed their mind about you and having your place, and because they did, it no longer does."

By the time she finished speaking, he was looking her way again.

"Like you, changing your mind about... humans. What brought that on?"

Weird as it was to refer to her own species in the third person, considering who she was talking to, it was rather unavoidable.

It took another few minutes, but eventually Pennywise spoke again. Slowly, his gaze drifted aside.

"Lotsss of thingS. No... one thing, exactly. Except- why noT?"

"Yeah...?"

"Why not... see if things could be diFferent, for me, just once?"

Beverly smiled and shrugged. For as narrow-minded as It had been at first, the entity had come a long way in terms of mental growth, as kids tended to go. Eternal as he was, for being the ultimate conservative, that didn't mean he had never had cause to adapt, to rewrite his tactics time and again.

For 1989, that seemed to mean adding a page titled "human perspective".

"Why only once? Why not, from this point onward?"

Far be it from her to tell anyone how to live their life, but there was no harm in suggesting it.

Pennywise's only response was to make that odd chuff-scoff sound again, shaking his head as if he were disgruntled by the idea.

When she knew he wasn't.

Not by a long shot. How badly did he want to be wrong about his own words?

"...I'll make up my miNd when that time comes."

*In thirty years or so.*

"Fair enough."
She inched even closer, hesitated, then leaned against his arm. When that wasn't protested, she threaded a hand through his elbow, gently patting his sleeve.

He glanced back down at her, didn't return the strangely-delivered hug.

But he didn't shake her off, either.

After a moment's peace, he sighed and seemed to relax. Just a bit.

Finally.

He started plucking at the cuff's frill again.

"You're still thinking... of leaving, once you're done with school?"

"Still, yeah."

"How?"

"Through a lot of hard work. There isn't any other way."

"Ohh? To anywhere in particular?"

The redhead shrugged with her free arm, clear blue eyes rotating up. "Just... anywhere else, really. Something better. Whatever form it comes in."

"That's pretty... vague, Bevs."

"Pfft. No more than your answers can be."

_TouChé._

Smirking, he raised a striped eyebrow.

"You survived your first year, though, of school."

She frowned, unsure. Survived was the word for it.

"Yeah?"

Where's he going with that?

From the cheeky, sideways head tilt, the encouraging grin, she figured it out.

"First is worst? Isn't that what they say?"

"Hm. I suppose."

A gloved finger found its way under her chin, pivoting her face up, lifting her eyes to meet his, fully.

"Hmph, nothing. You survive that, you can handle whatever else they throw at you." With the same glove he dealt her a soft, brushing nose-flick. "And you don't need me to tell you that."
Beverly barely managed not to sniff, to acknowledge the new stinging in her eyelids.

To not let her voice, halting as it suddenly was, waver too noticeably.

"Maybe... no, but... it's- it's nice to hear."

She didn't think to stop the shiver that suddenly passed through her frame.

Spotting it, Pennywise reached for the discarded beach towel. He paused to brush its facedown side clean.

Beverly tried not to fuss as it was arranged over her shoulders.

To savor the moment for what it was.

"And you never get enough nice things."

She closed her eyes, forced them back open.

The burning was suddenly too much.

"No one does, Pen."

He only smiled, making the motion seem strangely neutral in doing so.

And then gently pulled her back to shelter, at his side.

"Ain't that a joke?"
Chapter Summary

Why things can ultimately never work out between these two.

...Or can they?

Chapter Notes

Pre “Reality Bites” / “Personal Space”.

Recommended OST: "Bird With A Broken Wing" by Owl City

Sometimes, It had to call to a stop whatever inane mortal activity his physical form was participating in and remind-slash-ask himself, "Why am I doing this again?"

Only to be interrupted as - in one such case - an in-pursuit Loser found him, standing there, stalled out. They would slap his arm or leg with a fearless, triumphant cry of "tag, gotcha!" He would snap back to reality, growling playfully, and the game of chase was effectively reversed.

Why?

Oh, yeah. Because loneliness was a thing.

A shapeless, but all-powerful concept, that. It was one, prior to his awakening in 1989, the creature hadn't allowed himself an opportunity to consider. Insofar as it applied to him, being alone was just part of what made him what he was. For the longest time, since before there were numbers to count the passing of billions of years, before billion was even a word-

You get the idea.

So, in some ways, yes, he was the slowest study ever. It had taken him that long to realize there was more to existence than his never-ending cycle of devour, sleep, repeat. But then again, for all the time he had spent simply being, he was without any guidance to show him different (at least, none whose company he welcomed beyond "hi, how are ya? chomp!").

...Or that was how the human known as Richard Tozier would have surmised such a thought, if he was in the know about all there was to understand about It.

But he wasn't. None of the children, known collectively among themselves as the Losers Club, knew It. Unknowingly, they uttered his name hundreds of times a day, and, as yet, he hadn't bothered to lift a finger to educate them otherwise.

They couldn't know It. But that wasn't their fault, per se. Their minds wouldn't and couldn't let them. And no amount of wishing and willing from It could have even changed that, no more than It could change the basic tenants that had governed him for so long.
Against every argument to the contrary, he had befriended them. Then loneliness ceased to be a problem. It was availed as by the eight children who, one after another, came to see It's most favored corporeal avatar, Pennywise the Dancing Clown, as a friend, their club's de facto mascot.

Sporadic and prone to glitches as that form was, it served It well. In the past, no other had proved better suited (for the record, these puns write themselves, audience) to the task that was luring children within striking distance. Sometimes with pretty words, sometimes with promises of carnival games that yielded fantastic prizes. For most, it seemed to work.

Humanity hadn't been around for a proverbial blink's-worth of time on this planet. And those of them that painted up their faces, dressed in colorful, overexaggerated articles of clothing, indulged in ever more zany and flambouyant antics, all in the name of entertaining others-

No. It hadn't found anything that could compare, much less outdo, the clown form. So it stuck. And he donned it as often as possible whenever in the presence of the Losers, so they were as familiar with it as he could be with they.

For familiarity was a big part of being human. Finding something they could recognize of themselves in another lifeform, that often made the difference in deciding what species they counted as worthy of respect and protection, and what others they would sooner obliterate into extinction.

In short, the more anthropomorphic It appeared, the better.

(Kudos to Ben Hanscom for patiently defining the meaning of the word.)

But their arrangement wasn't perfect.

No, the cosmic entity wasn't lonely anymore.

That had been replaced by an altogether different emotion.

Depression, of a kind.

Branching out had a cost, one It hadn't wholly appreciated when making the decision he had, as a small child might steal a cookie from a jar, before remembering nope, they hadn't asked for it first. They hadn't stopped to consider the consequences. They just wanted a treat.

There it was, oh-so-enticing.

And upon turning around, there was Mom or Dad, ready to bill them for their misbehavior.

It had no parents to answer to when he made an impulsive choice.

Only time.

Right now, if time could ever be said to have a personality, they would not be amused by this clown.

He had upset the scale, the carefully balanced machine that was long bouts of sleep in a quasi-nonexistent state on the one hand, and satiating a never-satisfied hunger on the other. Adding a third arm to the mix, a need for company, for contact with something besides the hollow void all around - doing what he had had both opened his eyes and tied his hands.

Most days, though, he found enough distractions to take his mind off it. Depression could be momentarily repressed, thankfully. Flitting about Derry, Maine with no more than a thought, the eight kids - each with their own unique set of attributes and home lives - kept him quite busy.
Busy was good.

Busy kept his mind off the hunger.

Busy meant it didn't have time to dwell on time.

Occasionally, however, he slipped, looked over his shoulder, and the dull, drab shroud known as depression, a gloomy feeling even more colorless than his favorite form's silver suit, would overtake him.

As it turned out, six-year-old Georgie Denbrough knew what worked best to pick up one's mood when it fell flat.

Besides giving a hug.

"Tickle fight!"

"Omph!"

Honestly, Georgie had a natural knack for springing jump scares that had absolutely nothing to do with a certain six-and-a-half-foot clown beast he had come to count as his second best-best friend.

(Bill was still first in his book.)

But no.

The jump scares.

Pennywise had nothing to do with endorsing them, besides what Georgie happened to inadvertently see and learn from him when the shapeshifter demonstrated said feat in his presence.

Which was... most of the time.

Mike had just about fainted, opening the family photo album he had thought to share with the club, only to see a gloved hand jut out and gently grab his nose.

Today, though, It wasn't feeling so devilish. Our once-space-dwelling creature had taken to lazing about upon one of the short couches at 29 Neibolt Street. And by laze about, we mean he had somehow managed to curl up between the two fraying armrests, looking as uncomfortable as you please in the process, face half-buried in his sleeves.

All in the name of relaxation?

No.

Just because. He wasn't about to cave to the typical depressed human behavior that was curl up into a ball and sob, especially not when there was no one to hear his misery. Please. He didn't cry as they did. It may have availed mental stress, but it didn't fix anything in the long term.

Like a cat, It simply picked a perch and put himself there. Done. Whether or not anyone understood reasoning behind the choice in said perch?

That was irrelevant.

And he had been perfectly content to lie there, indefinitely (maybe), until Georgie raced in, dropping
his backpack midway through the door, and pounced.

"Ge-orgie, what are you- heh-hee-hee-hey!" Pennywise couldn't help a few traitorous giggles. Something was tickling him, fluttering along his ribs, before progressing to the sensitive skin behind one ear. Impulsively, he tried to twist away, then, realizing what it was, he grimaced and swatted at the wiggling fingers. "Stop tHat!"

"Aww. Why not?" Leaning forward, Georgie pulled his hands back for only a moment, grinning. "You look like you could use a laugh."

*You just got here. How do you possibly know that?*

Pennywise frowned, but didn't think to ask as much.

Maybe he had looked a trifle upset. But this thing known as a... "tickle fight" that the kid had tried to spring on him in response - he wasn't so certain he wanted to be the victim of said fight.

"Tch. I'll be the- judge of that, thank you veRy muc- Ey! No, I saiD! OfF!"

Undeterred, Georgie's grin transformed into a determined frown. What little space there was left on the couch, between Pennywise's bent elbows and knees, he climbed onto. From there, he reached up for the backrest.

And just like that, the old piece of furniture gave a terrifying, backwards *lurch*.

"N-no, realLy! CarefuL! Y-you're g-gonna tip us oh-ov- whoa-oomp!"

All that was missing was a lumberjack shouting "*Tiümber!*"

Somehow, they ended up sprawled in a pile on the floor behind the backflipped couch.

That is, the costumed entity had made a crash mat of himself, arms fastened around his 'attacker', as securely as a seatbelt. Eyes closed, Georgie lay giggling atop his midsection, apparently-delighted at the chaos he had suddenly wrought upon the room. The cloud of dust that heaved itself into the air with the impact settled gradually.

Blinking rapidly, eyes drifting askew in his confusion, Pennywise almost did a double-take. Through the screen of gilings, he couldn't be so certain of his attacker's identity all of a sudden.

*Was* this Georgie Denbrough?

Pouncing onto someone with such force that you tipped the furniture they were lying on over - that was more like a stunt one would expect Richie to pull.

Downright violent.

*Who was* this boy suddenly-aspiring to be Tozier?

"W-what are you- Eh! N-no! Heh-hey, I th-thought- "

The kid wasn't deterred. He started tickling again.

"*Now* you can't get away."

"Oh-ho? D-don't- heh hee- don't b-be so sure!"
"Oof! Penny! You cheater!"

A quick whisk of teleportation later, and it was Georgie alone on the floor, struggling to get to his feet.

That is, he was. Before two hands snatched him from behind, threading themselves under the boy's arms, and lifted.

"Two can play this game."

"Mph, no! Put me down!" Struggling, held in a backwards hug, Georgie barely managed to buck and twist around. But what leverage he did manage to gain, he made the most of. He slithered one hand underneath the collar, going for the sensitive collarbone underneath. "You- ohh, I'll get you back for that!"

Pennywise wilted like a flower, almost sinking to his knees as the laughter grew more intense, harder to hold back. He had clearly underestimated how crafty Georgie could be, when he set his mind to it. And this was an altogether pleasant change to fighting with an unruly prey to being delightfully tormented by one.

Within a minute, his knees gave.

"S-stop! You- no!"

Thump.

Down on the ground, down on the ground!

Te-technically, hehheh, it's a-a f-floor, Richie-vo-voice. Heh!

Ridiculous.

Even his internal monologues couldn't hope to keep themselves together.

And Georgie 'pinned' him there, half-crouched upon his back while his victim flailed and twisted uselessly.

Because maybe, just maybe... he was starting to feel better for it?

"Say it! Say uncle!"

"Uh-uncle? Wh-what does- heh heh hee! WhaTdoesThA-have- Q-quit!"

"It's what you say when you give up," Georgie explained, sounding triumphant already in having brought down his over-twice-as-tall friend. All the while, his hands kept going. Ribs, neck, under the arms, behind the ears, repeat. "Have you? Have you given up yet?"

"T-that, heh, that de-depends," Pennywise managed between writhing cackles. "Wh-ha-ha-what do you w-want?"

Something grabbed his ear, almost threateningly. "You to lighten up, for starters, silly."

But at least the tickles eased up.

"I- heh-hee, I-I thoughHt I was?"
"I mean, not just today."

"Wh... what?"

"I saw you, through the window," Georgie revealed, his expression suddenly downcast and somber. He sat down on his knees, letting go of his friend's ear - now that he had the entity's full attention. "What's wrong?"

Pennywise almost looked away, almost gave into the urge to explain.

_Oh, nothing much._

_Just thinking about—_

Then came the nose-flick.

_No. Don't lie."

"Heey," Pennywise scrunched up his face, affronted. "I wasn't goiNg to."

"Honestly? Now you're lying about how you weren't gonna lie."

"Pfft. S-says yOu, oh-so-honestly. Heh." Carefully, the entity sat up on his elbows, residual shakes still trembling along his limbs. "It's nothiNg you need to worry about, GeorgIe. I was only-thinking."

"You looked pretty sad, though."

...Maybe.

_Until recently, I didn't have anyone who could tell me what I looked like when thinking about things._

"Only on the outsiDe," Pennywise surmised, finally, instead of telling the whole truth then and there, forcing a supposedly-clever smile. "Have... you ever done tHat - felt one thing, while... showing something else?"

Georgie's frown only deepened, out of concern, if not bewilderment. "No. I... haven't had to. Why would you?"

_This kid..._

_Of all the kids you had to pick first, it had to be a smart one?_

..._Smarts didn't have anything to do with it, at the time._

Scoffing, Pennywise slowly rose up on his hands, closer to the six-year-old's eye level. Challengersly, almost, he leaned in for a close stare.

Time to defuse this conversation before it veered the wrong way.

"Because you can use it to youR advantage, that's why," Pennywise reasoned, pseudo-seriously, while his true intentions remained safely hidden. "Just like..."

To his peril, attention riveted by mesmeric eyes, Georgie didn't see the hand gradually reaching around behind his head.
And he fell against the floor with a gentle *thump*.

"Eep! Penny, no!"

"Now you say it! Say uncLe!"

"E-hee-hee-hee! No! N-no fair! You- "

"Life isn't fair, GeorgIE. Ha! After tickLing me that much, now it's your turn!"

"Y-you- heh- you don't t-take- hee- turnsina f-fight! Ha heh!"

"Yes, you dooo!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Uh-uncle!"

"Ha! Gotcha!"

No, maybe It hadn't felt like sharing too much that day.

He hadn't wanted to spoil the friendly exchange for what it was.

But like the rest of the bills, that lack of revelation would come due in its own time.

Meanwhile, the tickle fights that ensued tended to heal all wounds between he and Georgie.
"...And don't you ever go there without me again. ...Ever."

"But, Bill-"

"But nothing, Georgie! You- had some- W-what if something happened?"

"Nothing would've!"

"You can't k-know that. Forget the... the clown in the drain. What if another car came along? Or you slipped and hit your head, worse than before?"

"I... I had my radio. I could've called you."

"The first time. The se-second time you didn't."

"...No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I... didn't think I'd need it."

"Did you, really? ...That- thing hurt you, Georgie."

"He's not a thing!"

"Well, it certainly is-isn't human."

"How do you know he's not? He looks like one. Kinda. ...Doesn't he?"

"Georgie... did I ever tell you, h-how did it go... if it looks like a duck, s-swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck?"

"...What do ducks have to do with clowns?"

"It isn't a clown, G-Georgie. That's what I'm getting at. Did you not see those eyes? They changed
colors. And how do you think you were pulled down against the curb? Those aren't scratches, they're b-bite marks!"

"Muh... maybe, but- "

"But nothing. The evidence speaks for itself. How that happened, h-how... the b-boat came back. I see now why you h-had such a hard time, trying to tell me, but y-you shouldn't've lied about... how you got hurt."

"Why? What were you gonna do about it, if I told the truth, about any of it? If I told Mom or Dad? I couldn't. One way or another, we would've been in big trouble."

"...Are you so sure we aren't, still?"

"No, but... Penny wouldn't hurt us, Billy. He said he was sorry. If he knows what it is to be sorry, doesn't that mean he's really good?"

"He... he also di-didn't seem to know the meaning of the word 'accident' b-before you put it that way. That doesn't necessarily mean he's good."

"But he could be, right? Whatever he is, he could be good?"

"After all that... I don't know."

"No?"

"No."

"...He said he'd take care of it."

"What?"

"The car. After it almost hit me. Penny crawled out, made sure I was okay, then he said he'd... 'take care of it'."

"How... how did he manage to crawl out?"

"I didn't see. He just did."

"Kind of like, how the bo-boat came back? Neither of us saw that, either."

"Nyh uh."

"...What do you think he meant by 'take care' of the d-driver?"

"I... uh... I don't know."

"And that's just it, Georgie. Again, there's t-too much we don't know. About what... Pennywise is, what he wants... if he still wants anything. Maybe he hurt you by accident, maybe not. But until we figure out which it is, I don't want you going down Witcham Street, alone, period."

"...Okay."

"Who knows? You- w-we m-might not ever see him again."

"You think he'll be okay, though? I mean, his circus blew away in the storm. He might not... have
anyone to talk to anymore."

"Honestly? I doubt whatever circus he was with is actually real, except in his head."

"Still, that... sounds pretty lonely."

"Hm. Maybe."

"Yeah. ...We'll go visit him after the storm's over, right?"

"He might not even be there."

"But if he is..."

"If he is... I su-suppose... it couldn't hurt to try and find out more. One way or another."

"Thanks, Billy."

"For what?"

"For listening. And for not being too mad at me. You're usually... not."

"Well, today's been pretty unusual, hasn't it?"

"I guess."

"I w-wasn't mad, I was concerned. Like Dad was, that time you knicked yourself on the sawblade in the shop."

"Yeah, that was scary."

"You were four. It probably seemed scarier than it really was."

"The first time I remember you putting a Band Aid on for me."

"Speaking of which, let's go redress that elbow. It... God, the roll's almost gone. H-how are we gonna keep this from Mom and Dad?"

"This? Penny?"

"No, Georgie. Your arm. We're n-nearly out of gauze wrap."

"Ohh..."
“Yeesh. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today.”

“Sh-shut up, Richie.”

“No, it was the right side. After you went to sleep on the wrong one.”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“No? You... woke up at the end? With someone you don't know next to you?”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“No, you woke up on the floor. Naked.”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“With no idea how that happened. That's how wrong it was.”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“Tch. Your Honor, I rest my case.”

“Shut up, Richie.”

“Circus?”

“Yeah. Do you know about any, nearby?”

“Not... not this time of year, Georgie. Why?”

“Just wondering...”

“If you're interested, I can try looking some up, for our trip next year. Or- don't you want to go to Acadia?”

“No, Acadia's fine, Dad. Mom probably... wouldn't like the circus, anyway.”

“Hm, you might be right, champ. Too loud for her, and too hectic. Like my shop is.”

“What's 'hectic’?”

“Crazy. Out of order. She keeps the house so spic and span, yes, but the garage is my turf.”

“Turf...”

“Nope. Not going there.”

“Why n-not, Eds?”

“Because I'm not. You'll never hear the end of it from me.”

“Well, kudos for quitting while you're ahead.”

“Shut it, Richie.”
"I'll pay you back, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh, not at all. I'm just... wondering what could've happened, that you need so many boxes for. You don't look any... less healthy than the last time I saw you."

"Y-you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"So... does that mean we can still come over?"

"Yeah, I j-just... can you wait downstairs, while I help Georgie?"

"Fuck, c'mon. Now you're just killing us with suspense, Bill. What's going down up there?"

"...I'll tell you afterward."

"Well, now we're definitely coming with you."

Sorry.

You were sorry enough, you brought the boat back?

Is that it?

It should be.

Why? Why care about that scrap of paper?

Just because Georgie cared about it doesn't mean you had to.

...She.

He said, "You call boats 'she'."

"Jesus Chr-"

"Shush! ...Eds, r-really, it can't be the first time you've seen something like that."

"I know, right? I mean, how many firsts take place in the bathroom? But, anyone listening in from outside, seeing the door's shut, they'd think we were-"

"Beep-beep, Richie."

"Aw. Way to kill the mood, Stan."

"Keep it down, though. Please. Our parents don't know about it."

"Why? These kinds of punctures, this many of them- Georgie, you should've been stitched up at a hospital. Or received a skin graft."

"...We can't tell anyone."

"How come?"

"They wouldn't b-believe us, the same way you wouldn't."
"Well, you know we're better to you than that. C'mon, boys, spill it. Spill."

"If you're sure..."

"Ve haff vays of making you talk."

Talk.

...They're still talking about you?

With... others?

...Hmm. . .

"...Shut up. Just... shut up right now."

"Now who needs to be quiet, Richie?"

"Them. Both of them."

"You did ask."

"I didn't. I said they could talk."

"No, you t-told us to 'spill'."

"Well, Mr. Grammar Nazi, next time, do the world a favor - DON'T!"

"Shhh!"

"...It's just because we said he's a c-clown, isn't it?"

"What? Really? ...Since when are you... scared of clowns, Rich?"

"Since always, Stan. What more you gotta know?"

"But, Billy- you said he's not a clown. Before."

"I did."

"Well, which is he, then? Or... what? If he's not a- Eddie, what are you-"

"You sure he didn't hit his head that hard, Bill? Without bruising, somehow? Concussions sometimes don't."

"Or did your own noggin deflect off the toilet bowl at some point? Sounds like the two of you had a pretty sick weekend."

"..."

"And not in the good way."

"There is no good way to be sick, Richie. Or hurt. So quit making fun of us."

"Hey, Shortstop, I'm sorry, but it's kinda hard not to when the story is, you went out for a little sail in
the rain, and some- some clown living under the road saved you from being run over by a car. And then you couldn't tell your brother, until you went back to the same damn drain, he followed you there, and saw it for himself?"

"..."

"Yeah, you can see how that sounds, can't ya? Pretty frickin' loony."

"Never mind how it sounds. I- If it's... what happened..."

"Uh! Georgie's arm didn't have any run-in with a-a wood-chipper or a weed-whacker, Stan. I know an animal bite when I see one."

"...Should we be worried, Eds?"

"For the two of them? I would be, and I am. And I'm not chickenshit enough to deny it."

"Does that m-mean you'll come with us, Rich?"

"With you? Where?"

"To the... d-drain. Maybe, w-with more of us there- "

"The fu- Why on Earth would you go back? Ever? If it hurt Georgie like that, on accident- "

"He's not an it, Eddie."

"Fine. If he can hurt anybody like that, then, why should any of us bother going anywhere near him? I'd wouldn't, that's for sure! Sounds like the kind of thin- guy I'd want to avoid at all costs."

"Can't we warn somebody? The police, or..."

"Or who, Stanny? You don't think the lot of us would be sent up to Juniper Hills if we did. Better to pretend this never happened. Yeah? We didn't hear it, and Bill, you and Georgie never went out, never saw anything."

"R-Richie..."

"Denial is a powerful thing, ain't it? You've got bandages for days now, thanks to Eddie here. That's all you need to keep secret."

"...W-we'll pay you back, Eds."

"It's on the house, Bill. Don't worry about it. But- how are you supposed to keep Georgie's arm free of infection? That's your real problem. I can't loan you too many ointments without Mom getting suspicious."

"Don't y-you think... after a few days, if it's not infected by now, it would've been, though?"

"I would. It'd have to be. His arm was cut open inside a- a storm drain. A few days ago. And yet there's... there's... no sign of inflammation or discoloring or anything."

"...How?"

"Hmph, doesn't matter. Penny didn't mean it."
"Oh, sure, he didn't mean it, mean it, so therefore it's cool. And you think that's enough to sprinkle a little magic dust across your arm and make it all better? Plea- ow!"

"Georgie!"

"I told you to stop making fun of us. That includes Penny."

"...Kid, come on, gimmie a break. He's a... not-clown. Don't be so touchy, I'm sure he's used to it."

"So what? He's not even here right now. You shouldn't make fun of someone behind their back."

"Pft. You got it, O Reverend Denbrough."

"You shouldn't hit your friends, either, Georgie."

"...You're right, Stan. Sorry, Richie."

"You were kinda asking for it, though."

"Heh. It's okay. Doesn't matter what I say. I always kinda am."

"So long as you know it."

"Even if I didn't, you guys would constantly remind me. If a punch in the arm or the head is what it takes, bring it!"

"Hmph. What else are we good for, right?"

"Right."

"Well, if that's all settled, some snacks would be nice. Before homework is in session, that is?"

"Yeah, can't think this hard on an empty stomach."

"Ditto."

"You see what they were serving in the cafeteria today, Bill? Smelled and looked like old socks. You're lucky Mom packs your lunches sometimes."

"Ew!"

"Ew, indeed, Georgie..."

"...What... what do you think Pennywise would have tonight? If he were real."

"He is real, Stan. And he's probably having- "

"Hiya, BetTy..."
Suffer In Silence

Chapter Summary

. . . . .

Starvation takes many forms-

And yeah, that's about as far deep as Richie's biased perspective will let us get.

To him, watching a movie like this wasn't so much about asking yourself deep, meaningful questions, whatever the subtext may pose (leave it to folks like Stan Uris or Ben Hanscom to appreciate that). Far from it, actually.

Rather, this viewing was simply about enjoying some flawless pacing, textbook suspense-building, damn good acting, and - what no horror movie would be complete without - a gratuitous amount of blood and guts.

On the whole, Alien didn't have much of the latter. But what it did more than made up for it, a classic example of "less is more" filmmaking. Even after watching the infamous chestburster scene dozens of times, that point in the film never failed to disappoint Tozier.

Nor did it ever disappoint in getting a reaction out of your fellow audience members.

After it was over, the only grin of genuine enjoyment being worn in the semi-dark living room was his. Everyone else's faces were the expected assortment of bald-faced disgust, shallow-breathed gasps, and wide-eyed astonishment.

Surprisingly, though, the only sounds of muffled, gagging revulsion sounded off a moment after the chestburster had fled the Nostromo's mess hall table.

Like a cat about to bring up a hairball.

A very... big cat, that is.

Georgie, face buried temple-deep into Bill's arm up until that point, was the first to react to the noise. Glancing down at the now-empty space below the fully-occupied couch, the seven-year-old was quick to throw his blanket aside, then vault forward onto the floor. Crouching down, he lifted the skirt.

The next instant, he aimed a very-heated glare at the remote-wielding Trashmouth.

"Richie! You made him sick."

Despite the accusation, and the retort just sitting there at the front of his mind ("Hey, take it up with Director Ridley Scott, not me!")), Tozier wasn't sure whether to laugh or to scoff.

So he hit the STOP button on the remote, and tried for both.

After all, the 'he' being referred to was not your everyday horror movie newbie.
"Tfpht. You've got to be kidding."

There were so many ways Georgie's claim didn't add up.

*Kid, you don't know what he's putting himself through on account of us. This is as close to being anorexic as he'll ever know.*

*There's nothing in his gut to get sick with. Even if he does, it'd have to be all phlegm.*

*And besides, considering what he calls food, that you certainly don't know about - how could this scene be enough to gross him out?*

Turned out, Georgie was very much not kidding.

"No, *really.* He's- Penny, no, it's okay! Come back!"

By now, the shock of the film had passed. Bill frowned at his brother's words, wordlessly climbing down to join him. Stan followed, with halting, reluctant steps, while Eddie - unusually quiet for such a peak in their collective hysteria - perched himself on the couch cushions above.

With a very-much-exaggerated eyeroll, Richie set the remote aside, and bounded forward from his chair. On his hands and knees, he crawled up beside Georige's crouching form.

"Keep it *down,* Shortstop," Tozier hissed, then he turned his head sideways, to better look under the couch. "You want your folks tossin' us- uh. Huh. Where... where'd he go?"

Where indeed.

The carpeted space underneath the couch was slightly unkempt, with a few visible dust bunnies, clumps of dirt, and other nameless bits of clutter. No odd sight, or smells, or anything amiss.

But there was no sign of anything having *been* there besides what they saw now. No alien clown entity, much less a supposed, freshly-made vomit stain.

Though Richie shuddered to think what such a thing might look like.

"There's no mess under here, Georgie," Stan pointed out, as plainly bewildered as the rest of them.

The youngest moviegoer frowned, but only with concern now. "No, he- he didn't get that far."

"Dare I ask...?"

Georgie's eyes pivoted upward, only making him look all the more worried for his missing guardian. "No. He put his hand over his mouth, Eddie. Whatever might've happened, he... he kept it to himself."

"Huh. That explains the... cleanliness of our crime scene," Richie remarked, resting easy on his elbows now. He paused, listening for the ominous creaking upstairs, that might herald Sharon or Zack Denbrough, descending to check on their sleepover party.

When nothing but blessed, oblivious silence continued to reign, he dared to breathe out-slash-sigh, and voice a tentative command: "Oh-kay, Stripes. You got us, you faker. Come on back, now. We've still got an hour of movie left."

From that, they expectantly glanced around the room, one set of eyes for each direction. Experience had taught them the entity had a tendency to spring up from practically *anywhere.* And he could do
so as soundlessly as he was obnoxious.

Although, It's behavior had seemed more somber overall as of late. Blues associated with his impending hibernation usually meant he now spent many an occasion moping, rather than maximizing what time he had left with his motley gang of friends. Beverly had told him as much three times already, but the lesson had yet to sink in fully.

To everyone's quiet dismay.

But what else did they expect outta him? Undoubtedly, this was the creature's first real go-around with depression as a concept, coping with the idea of leaving something behind, after taking so much. Mentally dealing with it was as much of a work in progress as anything else about him.

Even tonight, Richie remembered starting the movie, pressing PLAY, to nothing unusual. He had turned back and seen Pennywise, reclining in his usual below-couch, movie-watching vantage point. He rested with his luminescent eyes closed, head lying sideways on folded arms, fingers slack against the carpet..

Maybe it had been a nap, maybe it was just the depression showing through.

For a time, Georgie ignored the movie, as sparse on dialogue as its first ten minutes of running time was. He sat beside their dozing mascot, silent and thoughtful as you like, mutely stroking the creature's mussed mane of hair.

Then, as the *Nostromo* crash-landed upon the planetoid, intent on investigating the cause of its mysterious signal, Pennywise's eyes snapped open. The white eyeballs held for a few seconds, before the dark blue irises languidly pivoted around, back into view. And finally they angled up, to begin watching the movie along with the rest of them.

Or try, anyway.

Georgie smiled, albeit a bit tearfully, at seeing this awakening, and spared him a scratch above the ear.

Pennywise pretended to flinch under the touch and spared the kid an annoyed-slash-welcoming grin. He sat up far enough to pull Denbrough in for a brief, one-armed hug. Sniffling softly, Georgie only reached forward with both hands to hold the back of his friend's head, giggling as brow pressed against painted brow.

All of it happened without a word passed between them.

Watching this ensue, trying not to retch at how ridiculously-sentimental a moment it was, daring to unfold alongside the likes of science fiction greatness, Richie still found it weirdly difficult to turn his own eyes back to the television screen. He distracted himself in turning the volume up, just one more notch.

Damn not-clown.

Damn him for getting under everyone's skin like he had, especially Georgie's.

No, Tozier still didn't care that it was coming to an end.

...He didn't.

But that was beside the point.
Compared to here and now, to think *Alien* had somehow driven the missing entity to the point of puking (inherently impossible as that sounded), their situation had done a complete one-eighty. The mood was no longer a shaky, uneasy sense of tension.

Now it was just plain old confusion.

(...*Kind of like the latter months of 1988 were...*)

"He's not coming back," Georgie finally concluded, after about a minute, sitting back on his knees. "We grossed him out."

Richie scoffed, completely counterpointedly, face dropping to the carpet with a deadpan *thump*.

*Please.*

*More like he got upset because no one was paying him any more sympathy. Like a regular baby. He faked a gag reflex to get our attention.*

*Why am I the only one reading this for what it is?*

"Somehow, someway," Eddie remarked, still lying sideways atop the couch's edge. Contrary to the other boys' puzzled reactions, he looked oddly considerate, as a physician might as they studied a patient's preliminary work-up chart. "I didn't... think it was possible to make Pen sick."

"He's said he- can't, or at least, his body can't," Stan pointed out, exchanging a ponderous look with Bill. Together, they dropped the bedskirt. "If you ignore the whole splitting episode from May, that is."

"That was him, sick? Being stuck as a human?"

"No, that was... a change of state, Georgie. He was stuck in that form the same way one of us would be stuck in a cast if we broke an arm or leg."

"But... he got better, once we gave him some time," Georgie nodded, as stringing the facts together, one by one, clicked for him. "Maybe... maybe he'll be back before the movie's over, then?"

When the others utterly failed to offer a response, Richie shrugged, sitting up. Once again, the duty had fallen to him. "Doubt it. I'm not so sure he'd want to now, kid. Would you, if you nearly blew chunks all over your best friend's carpet?"

*Not that he was actually going to.*

"But- but he didn't."

"I said 'almost', didn't I?"

*Yep. Just like I almost gave him some kinda punch to the head last month.*

*He deserved that one, though, leaving me to try and outrun Bowers.*

"He hasn't been f-feeling so well lately anyway, Georgie," Bill reasoned, not unsympathetically, completely oblivious to whatever misgivings and ill-feelings Tozier still harbored. "It... it m-might be good for him to sit this one out."

Whatever hopeful spark there was in Georgie's expression fizzled out. They all knew there was nothing to be gained in saying more, speculating for good or bad. His brown eyes dropped, the better
to match his new frown, but when he reached out for an impulsive, comforting hug, his older brother was quick to deliver it.

Returning to their seats, Richie stopped short of grabbing the remote.

Only because a very soft, very indiscernible hissing, that seemed to suddenly emanate from inside his head, started whispering feather-light against his eardrums, making itself known.

It was a sound only he could hear, seemingly, as he reluctantly pressed PLAY and the movie snapped back on. The rest of the group took their seats on the couch, sitting together a bit more tightly than before. He almost thought he had gotten away with ignoring the phenomenon as static, inconsequential fuzz whose origin was of no importance.

*Wait.*

*Noise?*

*Like the signal... like what the Nostromo's computer honed in on?*

Ohh, no. The comparison was too uncanny to ignore.

Scooting back against the cushions, Richie couldn't help a minute, uneasy flinch as the hisses morphed into a few choice, stomach-turning words.

Which were most definitely not being said in the voice of Tom Skerritt.

"One- moRe meal befoRe bedtiime..." eh, RicHie?

The skies above Derry gave way.

And so did the power at the Derry High School.

Lulled to sleep by the steady patter of rain, besides the droll reciting being done by his science teacher, Richie's eyes popped open at the sound of his classmates' collective chatter. He did so just in time to see the close-striking flash of lightning, how it cast everything in the room in a momentarily-blinding white light, fade away.

He jumped back to full attention as thunder shook the walls. He heard nervous laughter, notebooks flapping, squeaking chairs, desks being drummed on by idle hands suddenly going afidget.

The next thing he noticed was how utterly *dark* the room had turned.

*As dark as the sewers...*

Taken aback, just for a second, Richie breathed in, sharply, even as the teacher called for calm, everyone, stay calm. It's okay. Just a little outage. Remain in your seats. No, this doesn't mean we're letting out early.

Oh? Are we so sure about that, Teach?

It wouldn't be the first time someone had cut out before study hall, using such a distraction as this to their advantage.

...First time.
Richie blinked, squinting behind his lenses. Belatedly, he looked down at the desk he had been leaning on. He had rested there so long already, the wooden surface was comfortably toasty.

Wait.

Desk?

Class.

What was he doing in class?

Wasn't this... summertime?

Richie felt his face scrunching up, as if doing so of its own accord, in keeping with how puzzled he was suddenly feeling. Last time he had cause to look at a calendar, it had surely said JULY across its upper edge.

Didn't it? The thing was one of those cheap, stock-image calendars, too. The kind who didn't think there was anything more original than the picture of an American flag to shoehorn in as its decorative image.

Or had that one been a bit different? Had there been the likeness of a bald eagle to go with that, using the flag as a backdrop?

There must have been.

*Why am I worrying about this?*

*The power's out. Now we're-*

*Oh, seriously? Tornado drill? Today?*

*We do those all the time, for nothing.*

*Okay, class. Leave your bags. Single file, out into the hallways. No pushing. No rushing.*

*No cussing! We don't need to hear your opinions on the matter, Mr. Attitude!*

So went Tozier's thoughts as he, automatically, did as he was bid. For there was nothing else he could do, without getting verbally lashed. Most of his classmates followed suit, rising from their desks to march out. He didn't mind the idea of running a drill if it meant he got out of listening to his science teacher's monotonous lecturing.

Someone, phone Ben Stein. We found his long-lost brother hiding out in Derry.

*Beside the point, again, Richie.*

*Just follow along. The way it's raining out there, you wouldn't want to skip out now.*

*Probably slip and drown on the trek home or some shit. Like the clumsy clod you are.*

*Wouldn't that be some fuckin' irony, after surviving the underground tsunami? To drown in an inch-deep puddle?*

*...Teach, why you gotta interrupt me when I'm ranting on the inside?*
Now, everyone. Assume the position-

Wait.

Where are we...

The basement?

Since when do the teachers tell us to head down there during a power outage?

Weirder still, the voices around him seemed to protest less and less. Richie felt one or two shoulders clocking accidentally against his own, as the other ninth-graders trekked by. Eyes forward, no one even glanced back at him as they went. And despite everything contrary to what he was thinking, his feet just kept following along to their steps.

Like he was both not there and somehow beholden to do the same as they were.

Okay. This is just fucking spooky now.

These were supposed to be his classmates. Not a pack of emotionless, braindead zombies. Or robots.

Yes. Like in Blade Runner. The robots- replicants- how they looked human, but despite how closely they did, even they didn't seem it all the tim-

Time.

Mind the steps, Richie.

He almost stumbled his way down them, half-pushed along by the crowd.

This staircase, had it always been so far down?

Sometimes, kids would sneak down here for a smoke between classes. When the janitors weren't around, when the hall monitors were gone on a restroom break, there were more than a few closets. For a smoke, or a makeout, or a quick grope session.

Or all three... if they were really desperate.

Better that than a bathroom stall anyday.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Richie looked up. He adjusted his glasses, despite knowing it would make no difference. A few of the teachers had had flashlights in hand, but now, people around him, ahead of him - they just seemed to be trekking away into the dark.

Dark.

Yeah, dumbass. The power's out. Of course you can't see where they're going.

Or you, for that matter.

How do they, though?

People don't walk down the stairs for a tornado drill, just to melt off into the shadows like that.

Do they?

He glanced back.
The stairs behind him - they were already gone.

Richie squinted again, closed his eyes, shook his head. Tentatively, he turned, took a few steps forward, and cautiously opened his eyes again.

More darkness.

He thought he heard shoes, still shuffling forward across tiles. Little, scuffing whispers.

Almost echoing against unseen walls.

Where were they even going?

Finally, the impulse to speak, to call the world out on its insane Wonderland-esqe break with reality, caught up to him.

"Hey! G... guys? Anyone? H-hey! Anyone gonna- tell me what's going on? ...Anyone? Hey! C'mon, stop! Snap out of it! People, d-don't you see we're- "

Lifting an arm, the freshman stopped short at what he saw. He remembered putting on a shirt today, a Hawaiian one, with short sleeves.

Not something with a long, olive-green sleeve, with the band of stripes along the shoulder.

Not his jacket.

Hold - the fuck - on.

His jacket?

Richie balked, glancing from one arm, to the other and back. With quivering fingers, he grasped the open edges, pulling at the loose collar.

Since when did he wear a jacket to school?

Or a-

Jeans? Jeans that pale?

He had put shorts on that morning. He remembered.

And-

What's that on his-

Hat?!

Fumbling, he grabbed it off his head, almost knocking his glasses askew.

Where did this come from?

Gold leaves on the bill.

The yellow, rainbow-bordered patch on the brow, with its star and the two planets.

Richie frowned, bringing it closer to his face.
There was just barely enough light to see by. Enough that his already-racing heart beat even faster as he read it for himself.

*USCSS Nostromo.*

*180286.*

Just like... Brett's.

The engineer.

The one who-

Richie flinched, ducking as the downpour of water hit him, like an impossibly-huge bucket had just been dumped from above. Or a massive, public showerhead had switched on *inside* the building, like the kind you saw at the indoor water parks.

Warm, slightly-stinky drops splashed down on him, running over his shoulders, soaking through his clothes. Impulsively, he crammed the navy blue hat back onto his head, to somehow keep it out of his eyes.

Little drops began to adorn his lenses.

Water.

*Like the sewers.*

*The god - damn, shit-and-piss-stained sewers.*

*The tunnels you took a slip-and-slide ride from hell through.*

*Fuck.*

*No.*

*This isn't the school basement.*

*Not- not anymore.*

*It's... it's- Christ, it's the landing leg room. All four toes of it, hanging above your head-*

*With the folded up machinery, the grated-metal walls-*

*The segmented floors-*

*The clinking chains-*

*The water- the condensation-*

*Where Brett- where he-*

"Jonesy," Richie wheezed at the name, hands over his ears. His knees felt a touch weaker, all of a sudden, as did his bowels. Hell, he could piss himself here and no one would be the wiser - just like in the sewers. "The fuckin'- cat- where it- "

*Meow.*
Shit.

Shit, no.

No, this wasn't real.

He had no real reason to be saying-

*Here, kitty kitty kitty.*

But he was.

His feet- they kept inching forward, one halting, ginger step at a time.

There was no one here to tell them to stop. Not even himself.

And despite the tightness of his throat, he kept saying the infernal lines:

"Here, Jonesy... Jonnseyy..."

The damn thing was meowing back at him, hidden somewhere in the shadows ahead.

No, not somewhere-

There!

He darted forward.

Blasted furball just slipped past his fingers.

*Get back here, you little-*

Then his foot brushed something on the floor, making it crinkle like a plastic bag. The sound stopped him. Somehow, he was able to hear it past his thudding heart, and the water drumming on the bill of his hat.

Glancing down, Richie saw the coiled-up pile of skin. Shed and left there, like a snake's.

Stupidly, just like Brett, he knelt, hesitated only a second, then grabbed it. Holding it up, the pale, almost-translucent material let the light pass right through the coils.

No, he hadn't seen anything like it before.

Not even underneath Derry, where all kinds of unmentionable refuse lay, marinating in filthy, stagnant mud for as long as the town had been around. And, unless some crazy soul went forth on a suicidal cleanup mission, there the garbage would continue to lay for all of time-

*Time.*

*Hissss!*

Sharply, he glanced up.

Jonesy.

The orange tabby was there, not far away, staring at him from around a corner.
Glaring at him.

Or- past him?

Hair puffed out on end, eyes narrow.

Growling, low, like it had just laid eyes on a dog.

Starting to take a step back.

Just like in the-

He froze.

Something gusted against the nape of his neck. It ruffled the collar of his florally-patterned shirt.

Hot. Too hot, to direct to be anything except a trick of the 'wind'-. 

Richie blanched, felt his heart practically skip to a stop.

He dropped the skin, and wheeled around. Drops flew from the edge of his hat.

There it was, leering at him from the cascade of rain.

He barely had time to open his mouth before the eyeless face vaulted forth, no more than a wickedly-snarling maw at the end of an absurdly-sculpted, oblong dome. The steel-like teeth facing him parted, a slick mixture of water and drool running along its slavering, cable-round lips in equal measure, before the inner fangs shot out-

"Fuhh-ack!"

Wrapped up, held prisoner by his sweat-soaked blanket, Richie twisted one last time, crying out as he found himself unexpectedly let free from the grips of sleep. He gasped as he fell from his bed, hitting the hardwood floor with a curse.

Panting rapidly, he thrashed and wrestled his hands free, gripping his temples with his palms. Most of his skin felt cold and slick, whereas his forehead and palms were as hot as the imaginary breath on his neck had seemed.

No, no.

Ohh...

Oh.

Thank God.

The pain in his head now- just- just a... headache. Boring, dull, everyday headache.

Not the life-ending wound that was his skull being pierced, his frontal lobe pulverized by the toothy, piston-like inner mouth of a xenomorph.

As unstoppable as a crashing, surging wall of water about to swallow him whole-

But still-
The two visions merged. The residual throbbing abruptly folded in on itself, turning twice as intense as before. Seething, he couldn't help kicking a socked foot in frustration. He cringed as his heel glanced off the leg at the foot of his bed.

Richie whimpered again at the new pain, and kept on cussing.

Who care if he woke either or both of his parents?

They would just bark at him to keep it down. This late at night, or early in the morning, who knew how safe it was or wasn't to speak up?

"Fuck, f-fuck, fuck!"

A nightmare.

A right and proper nightmare of *Alien*.

How?

How had he ended up in Harry Dean Stanton's shoes?

He hadn't had such a vivid, lucidly-frightening encounter in-

"Beep-beep, Richie..."

Something settled on the top of his head.

A... hand?

A thumb, stroking his brow?

Wincing, he breathed in, held it, and cautiously opened his eyes, fuzzy and useless as his vision remained without his glasses. The frightful aftershocks racing along his arms and body stopped, mostly.

For once, Pennywise's dour expression matched his tone. There was no joy in how he said it. Instead, unsmiling, unblinking, the silver-suited creature stayed where he was, stooped over the teen's fallen form.

Too close.

Always way too damn close.

But again, as always, Pennywise didn't acknowledge it. Instead, ever so slowly, he reached down, brushing the damp, dark bangs out of Tozier's watery eyes.

Comfortingly.

Almost.

His glowing eyes fell halfway shut, making the frizzy-maned beast appear at once thoroughly-tired and vaguely contented.

Almost like he was... relieved to see Richie had been successfully pulled from his nightmare.

Of silence, of isolation.
Of having only dangers at his back.

With no one watching out for it.

No one stopping him from acting on stupid, life-threatening choices.

Much as either of them may not have expected It to intervene, given their well-established history of barely getting along at all...

In that moment, neither of them were complaining about the result.

Inside or out.
Flight Of Fancy

Chapter Summary

Stan knows when it's better to stay mum on the matter.

For reasons.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to "Backslider". Post all the birding prompts.

Generally speaking, Stanley Uris wasn't in the habit of handling dirty objects.

But in this instance, he hadn't stopped to overthink the dangers of picking up a recently-expired avian. Whatever mites its frayed feathers may have contained, he simply didn't care to dwell on. And there was very little blood visible, much less to to worry about. From a distance, one would think the mourning dove had simply fallen asleep in his hands.

No.

Not *Zenaida macroura*.

They were skittish birds, at best. Some of the individuals that flocked around Bassey Park had taken to being handfed, but the majority stayed well out of the public's reach. Ordinarily, they were seen as part of the background, perching on power lines, playground equipment, rooftops.

Sitting on the bench, Stan frowned, stroking the dusky brown plumage with his thumbtip. From a distance, he had seen this dove try to take off, only to fall mid-flight. The rest of the flock had scattered, abandoning the birdbath in short order, and didn't return.

Among Henry Bowers' less-conspicuous weapons was a BB gun.

To a bird of this size, those things were as deadly as a pistol.

Stan scoffed quietly, eyes hooding.

Stupid.

What a pointless waste of life.

Birdbaths weren't meant to be a shooting range.

At least, Stan hoped most of the townsfolk kinda felt that way, on the inside, even if they never verbally admitted it. Yes, doves and pigeons tended to make a mess of wherever they roosted. Seed shells and excrement took much sweeping and scrubbing to remove, if the rain didn't do the work for you.
But at a concrete-pedestal bath, a place that had been set aside specifically for the birds, this was inexcusable conduct in his eyes.

Besides disappointment, Stan felt the crackle-like stirrings of anger, sparks of friction kicking up inside his mind. It was all the better mood to match the afternoon sun, transitioning from yellow to molten orange as it was at this late hour.

In Henry's case, any ire directed his way - publically or privately - was very much deserved.

It was quite far from being the first time Stan had felt that way about the policeman's son. Whatever whispers said about young Bowers' home life, whatever emotions like sympathy they conjured up, when he pulled violent nonsense like this, they never proved to be very long-lived.

"That f-
"

"Now, nowww. Language, StanNy boy."

With his hands full (as always seemed to happen when the club mascot made a spontaneous appearance), Stan breathed out, sharply, and let his eyes blink open in a glare.

His nerves weren't what they used to be.

He didn't even flinch at the feeling of a hand, patting the top of his head.

Twisting around, he aimed a raised eyebrow at his new visitor, perched there on the bench's backrest not unlike an obscenely-huge pigeon.

"It's nothing you haven't heard before, Putz."

The nickname did the trick.

Pennywise snatched his arm back, expression screwing up as if he had just touched something vile. The way he wrung his hands together certainly matched his look of ewww.

"Do you reaLly have to call me that?"

*So long as it keeps getting under your not-skin?*

*Yeah, yeah, I do.*

Not caring enough to verbalize the thought (as several months' time had taught him It could hear a person's thoughts just as clearly), Stan scoffed, mouth canting up in half of a sarcastic smile, and turned away. Despite that 'little' annoyance, he forced thoughts of Bowers to the back of his head, slamming the proverbial door on them.

His hands stayed in his lap, holding the dove's body. Cradling it, almost.

And for a while, neither of them said anything.

Pennywise, apparently, respected whatever moment of silence Uris needed, to recover from the ordeal of being startled.

Then, inevitably, the entity started up with his oh-so-instigating questions.

Because he never could completely shake his pesterific-little-child mentality.
No matter how falsely-mature he sometimes acted.

"That one's... deAd?"

Stan didn't know if the sound he made counted as another scoff.

But he couldn't find it in himself to call it a laugh either.

"Hmm? Oh. It- Isn'T it?"

No, it's just sleeping!

Stan glared back over his shoulder.

Tink. "YeeSh. Sahr-ee."

Faced with that, Pennywise flinched and, with exaggerated delicateness, sidestepped away, poised on the farthest available end of the backrest.

The fourteen-year-old sighed through his nose at the sight, eyes rolling shut. The sarcasm didn't need to be voiced. He felt it strongly enough, it was beginning to bleed through.

"Did you want something?" Stan asked, eyes reopening in half the glare they held before. "Or are you just here to pester somebody?"

"You're not someboDy," Pennywise retorted, cautiously. When that joke wasn't automatically rebuffed, he paused. Then a shadow of the usual-variety-infruiating smile appeared, and he sidestepped back to his original perch. "Sooo... no."

"Neither of the above?" Stan shifted forward, to sit on the bench's edge.

Only to put a little more distance between them.

No reason.

Just being... considerate.

"Did you need something, then?"

"...You juSt asked that a moment ago, StanLey."

Stan frowned, but the dove in his hands took no offense. Its eyes were closed, anyway, for good. "No, I said, do you want something? There's a difference."

To both his dismay and his approval, Pennywise took a moment to consider his words.

"TheN... I need to ask."

"Ask what?"

Out with it... man.

"If... we'Re cool?"

"Cool?" Stan sat up, blinking, and he glanced back. The otherwise-ordinary word felt very unordinary all of a sudden, given who was voicing it. "About what?"
Pennywise said nothing. He affected only a wincing frown, hiding his face behind his gloves, looking up shyly through the tops of his eyes.

*What do you think?*

*Yes, that, but... I thought he'd want to know about the dove first.*

*Odd. Maybe he's learning to... prioritize?*

"Oh. You mean- what happened?" Stan let his mind, reluctantly, drift back to the springtime thaw. That was a night he had thought was better off forgotten. But stubbornly, it had stuck in his mental library, a book that didn't want to check out and remain lost for all time.

His fault, really. He hadn't told anyone about it.

After facing Mom's wrath over the ruined polo, Stan had written the encounter off as 'bothersome' to say the least.

That had been a very cold May night.

Now, here they were, at the tail end of July.

He elaborated: "Back in May?"

Then, as the puzzle pieces clicked, his mood turned from curious to mildly alarmed.

...won't tell the others...

"You didn't... tell anyone, did you?"

Gloves still raised, Pennywise’s gaze drifted in two different directions. But from the way he turned his head aside, neither one could be described as 'toward Stan'.

"...No."

"Pft." Again, Stan was unsure of whether to chuckle or lose his temper. "Amazing. You're just as lousy a liar as Georgie."

"Hmph."

"No, I mean it."

"BeTter a lousy liar than a honeSt coward."

"Coward?" Stan repeated, twisting around, dumbfounded. Never had he known someone so prone to out-of-nowhere proclamations, besides Richie. "Those don't- What does that have to do with-"

"I told Bevs about that man, StanLey," Pennywise explained, flatly. The suit's ruffles were bristling, as if stirred by some imaginary breeze, but his irises stayed blue. "But I didn'T say you were thEre."

"Why? Why would you even bring it up?"

"She asked."

*How could she ask about that it if she didn’t know?*

*I didn't say anything. To anyone.*
"About...?"

Pennywise scowled down at him, teeth barely visible. It was as close to an insulted expression as the clown could manage.

No. He didn't need to say what it was about.

All too suddenly, Stan understood.

May. *It happened in May, Urus.*

Today's date?

"Oh."

Nervously, Stan sought a distraction, and belatedly found one. He scratched at his hair. Then he looked back.

"That was... that was the last time you...?"

Shoulders hunching, Pennywise didn't speak. He only grimaced, with a brief side-to-side toss of the head that might have been an ill-translated nod.

His equivalent of a dismissive one, most likely.

Stan supposed he could do no worse. Ambushed though he was by the conversation's subject, it would hopefully be done and over before he had had time to fully process the awkward, confusing pain of it.

"Yeah, we're... we're cool."

Cool.

*Another Georgie specialty, I presume.*

"I wanted to- to thanK you," Pennywise went on, haltingly, as he often grew when it took some seconds for him to summon the correct words - ones that weren't so juvenile. He folded his arms, palms holding his elbows. "For not tellIng. I just... needed to say that. Before I- foRgot."

Stan sighed again, more softly than before.

Forgot may as well have had a whole new definition assigned to it.

Slowly, he turned the other way, gently setting the mourning dove down on the tattered old bird watcher's guide sitting beside him. He smoothed the tail feathers. The wings remained neatly folded along its sides.

You wouldn't know there was a hole in the side of its chest if he didn't keep the body so picturesque.

"Yeah. That makes us even, I guess. You saved my hide. And you got... got a meal out of the deal."

Once again, he tried to ignore how even uttering such a sentence made his own stomach twist in discontent.

Eddie, after climbing down from an eighty-foot-tall oak tree, closely followed by Richie, had unknowingly summarized their cosmic misarrangement in three words:
"So messed up."

"But you stilL didn't tell anyone."

Glancing back, Stan raised an eyebrow.

The entity's voice had taken on a new slant, as had his expression.

One might have thought he almost sounded... impressed? Quietly surprised?

Why?

Did he expect me to renege?

"No."

"Why noT?" Pennywise frowned, brows furrowed. "I thought you... wouLd've wanted to."

I... did, but...

"There was no need," Stan finished lamely. He sat back, finally figuring out for himself the motivation behind the unspoken pact he had made with no one after returning home.

Simple. There was nothing to be gained in telling the rest of the club about their protector's sort-of relapse.

Only lost.

On top of all their usual concerns and hostilities to endure, it was one less Stan could afford not to share.

He had been disappointed enough, initially, to have to swallow the harsh fact that there was no changing It completely.

Going back on his word, blurring it all out the others would go over as smoothly as: "Hey, gang, guess what? You know that killer alien clown who sometimes- no, always hangs out with us? Y'know, who snacks on the occasional kid from our school, or some drifter passing through the county? Yeah? Know what he did? Yeah, I couldn't believe it, either! He did it again. And you still want him around?"

Following a quick shower, changing his clothes that night, Stan had thought twice. And he had only been able to sleep because he shelved the inner debate for later. He was good at that, considering when it mattered most to speak, and when things were better left alone.

So what if he had neglected to dwell on it for almost two months?

He was already upset enough.

So was It, probably.

To impart that same information on Bill, or Beverly, or anyone else...

That would have been such overkill.

No pun intended.
"Hey."

Again, something tapped the top of his head.

Pecking like a certain annoying overseas corvid, who had turned up, tapping incessantly at his bedroom window, the evening after Uris had spent his birthday sick, stuck at home.

"...You know I can hear you, right?"

"Yeah, sure." Halfheartedly, Stan reached up, as if to bat the hand away. Truthfully, he was grateful for the pesky interruption. He couldn't help a sad, if not sardonic smirk. "Nothing gets by that nose."

His arm was just long enough to stretch out and manage an unpracticed nose-flick, across the tip.

It evoked a satisfying twitch all the same.

"You don't hear with your nose, silly," Pennywise retorted, smile coming to light once more. But instead of the usual goofy leer, this one was softer, more on the sympathetic end of the scale. He glanced over, craning his neck to look over Stan's head. Without invitation, he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, half-leaning over him. "Now, what happened to the dove?"

Despite his now being used as an impromptu balancing aid, Stan's next scoff bordered on affectionate.

_The questions._

_I almost... wish they wouldn't end._

He managed to cover the waver in his smile as he glanced up.

"Bowers. Didn't you already know that?"

Upside-down eyes stared back at him.

"I did. Georgie says it's polite to ask, anyway."

_Because politeness matters to you, right, Stan?_
Pecking Order

Chapter Summary

Vic. This is a club, not a gang.
Gotta start learning the difference.

Chapter Notes

Post "Stepping Out".

Old habits weren't something you dropped overnight.

Bearing this in mind, when Victor Criss received a punch to the face, for thinking he could somehow get away with nicking one of Richie Tozier's candy bars, he knew that was deserved.

Yes. It had been a stupid, compulsive move on the sophomore's part. Just as much as it was unplanned, it hadn't been hunger alone that drove him to thievery, only years of conditioning. Running with Henry for as long as he had often meant grappling over the same food, whenever they managed to squirrel it out of a convenience store or gas station.

Not everyone had such understanding-slash-well-provisioned parents after all.

That said, the Trashmouth had been positively civil about his retaliation, all things considered. He stood there, shook the pain out of his hand, and growled: "And that was just the start, Blondie. Now you can explain yourself to Ruffles, there."

Just as suddenly as he was mentioned, the creature- that is, Pennywise - appeared, looming over them both. Looking appropriately thuggish, the hunchbacked entity snorted, sounding very unimpressed at having been 'summoned' to this situation, and pointed toward the door.

"Out, RiChie."

"Pft. I was headed that way anyway, Ding-Dong," Tozier muttered, pocketing his retrieved snack inside the flap of his shirt. He strode past Criss and the club's scowling mascot without a backwards look. "Fuckin' punk..."

"And giVe it back."

Sitting up from where he had fallen, sideways against the dirty floor, Victor didn't think long on that parting command. He didn't particularly care to ponder about how it didn't make sense to him.

Instead, he felt at his mouth, and was relieved to see his hand came away clean, not smudged with blood. Given how ungodly-dusty this archaic house was, the last thing he wanted as an infection somehow borne from it.
That hit had smarted, but at least he wasn't bleeding.

After what happened at the creek, he had a thing about not-bleeding these days.

Even then, though, it didn't stop him from still occasionally making a bad decision.

Like trying to steal from one of his supposed-new friends?

...What had he been thinking, trying such a stunt, here?

"You oKay?"

"Ahh!"

Startled, Victor dropped as if the now-up-close voice had thrown its own punch. He lay flat on his back against the floor, hands already half-raised in surrender.

It was the only direction he could go, to get away from the painted face that had suddenly dived in, right up against his own, holding less than a few inches away.

It didn't matter what its mouth was saying, how concerned it sounded.

You don't just do that.

Je- sus.

_Doesn't this thing know the meaning of personal boundaries?

"Not likely" was the most likely answer there.

The once-bully stared up, eyes wide.

Blue very-human-looking eyes stared back down at him.

Or, they seemed to.

..._Georgie never did explain that. What's with the lazy eye? Eyes?

Victor frowned, glancing away.

He didn't care to think on that, either.

Now wasn't the time to ask, not even face to face.

"Crissss, hello?"

Pennywise blinked, then - upon receiving no reaction - he reached down.

"I saiD, are you oKay?"

"Don't touch me, creep," Victor sniped, batting the gloved hand away. "What are you... getting at, asking me if I'm okay, when- you- you- "

The eldritch entity cut him off with an airy-sounding snort. "WhaT? WheN Richie deserved that?"

Considering the sophomore's puzzled grimace, he only twitched and straightened up. "You didn'T see him take the caNdy bar from EdS first."
Oh.

So things among the Losers aren't all that much different than they were with Bowers?

At least... between those two?

Banishing the comparison, Victor rolled his eyes, scooted back along the floor, and crawled backwards into a standing position.

It was as safe distance as he could manage to get to, without leaving the room.

At least one cerulean eye watched his every move.

"Hmph." Regarding his now-dusty attire, Criss shrugged and batted at his camo-patterned jacket, wiping his sleeves clean. Dust puffed from the fabric as he did. "So, does that make us- even? I don't need the lecture, Tozier does?"

Frowning, Pennywise slowly shook his head and rolled his shoulders back. "Ohhh, now, I didn't say *that*.

"Fff- buzz off, anyway, man. I don't need- hey!"

Spluttering, Victor stopped short, having been snagged by the collar of his jacket. He took one half step through the door, almost making it out into the hallway, before being pulled back into the room.

Stealing from Richie had been his first mistake of the afternoon.

Trying to sneak by the creature when he thought the pasty-colored thing wasn't looking?

Because who could ever tell which way he was looking?

Bad idea number two.

Wrenched around, Victor found himself spun about, then backed up against the wall beside the doorway.

Pennywise braced a frilled arm on the doorframe, barring his exit, and leaned in close. Close enough the boy could feel the being’s imitation-breath wafting against his face.

Oddly clean-smelling breath, that is, for someone living in such squallor as 29 Neibolt Street.

"You need to get somethiNg straight."

The blonde-haired boy scowled, hunkered down against the wall. He forced a laugh, to cover his suddenly-racing nerves. "Heh. S-sure. And when you say 'you', you mean 'we', right?"

Being a smart ass.

Mistake number three.

Pennywise narrowed one eye, raising the opposite eyebrow. In the near-dark of the mostly-lightless room, his blue irises brightened a few noticable shades, but otherwise he gave no further answer, no further movement.

...Yes?
Victor shook his head, marveling at the otherworldly-ludicrousness of this encounter before plunging ahead with his next thought. Or two or three.

"Look, it's good that you and your club have- let me in, somewhat. I know, I shouldn't take advantage. But you can't expect me to change overnight. And I'm sor- ah! I'm sorry about Ben."

The cool-smelling breath suddenly turned hot and foul.

As did the beast's expression.

In less than a blink's time, the striped face morphed, jaw stretching back and to the sides. With a wet, crackling series of pops, row upon row of forward-pointing fangs sprouted from between his lips, counterpointing a throaty, guttural-sounding snarl.

Trapped, Criss yelped and quailed instantly. He slid right to the floor, cowering against the wall, feeling his jacket catch on jagged splinters. All too suddenly, he was taken back to those nightmares, the same drug-addled terrors he had endured in the hospital. There, where he had played and replayed such a scenario of this in his mind's eye, waking up time and again to the pain of his body and his new reality.

In those dreams, the monster wasn't a clown.

But that was beside the point.

The teeth that had torn him apart, no matter what form wielded them, may as well have been their own kind of monster.

Absurd as that sounded, it somehow made sense to apologize upon seeing them again.

Instead of 'talk to the hand', it's... this?

"P-please, I'm sorry, s-sorry about what I did to Ben," Victor pleaded, hastily. At first, he spoke fast, panicky, then, when he didn't find himself ripped to shreds, he elaborated, haltingly: "I know, I-I didn't say so sooner. It-it was wrong. I- should've. A long time ago. At school, in the Barrens. O-or the library. I-I had plenty of chances, and I d-didn't."

The teeth stayed there, frozen in a mute snarl. A thread of spittle dripped free, thinned out, and separated in the tense quiet that followed. The soft pat it made against the floor did nothing to avail the tension.

The alien eyes didn't change colors, didn't narrow, didn't widen.

They just stared, expectantly.

Victor ducked his head.

"Please. I'm- I'm sorry. That's all I can be."

Just don't- not again. Don't. Please.

Who he was pleading with, he didn't know.

But, the oddest thing was, it seemed to work.

There was a harsh rasp, of the fangs snapping together, but only on empty air.
Then, with the same gurgling hiss, they withdrew.

And for a while, there was quiet.

Punctuated by only the teen's nervous, gasping gulps of air.

Peeking up from under his bangs, Victor swallowed thickly, finally daring to speak again.

"Are we... uh, are we cool now?"

"...You apologized," Pennywise shrugged with his free arm, apparently pacified by the display. He stayed where he was, but glanced away, slowly, eyes veering even further apart, as if something only he could hear had caught his ear. "Which is more than your buddy PatRick did."

Criss froze anew, pieces clicking into place.

*Patrick.*

*He went missing.*

*A week before I... I messed up.*

*That... was you?*

"I'm- sorRy, too," Pennywise sighed, interrupting before that thought train could leave its station. After a moment's pause, the clown turned back, frowned, and pointed. "For that."

Victor glanced down at his bad shoulder, despite knowing there was nothing different to physically see there.

"It... was stupid of me," his once-attacker went on, undaunted by the teen's stunned silence. Slowly, the gangly creature sank down into a crouch, arms balanced across his knees. He reached up, brushing residual spit from his chin. "How it happened, I didn't knoW better at the tiMe. Doesn't mean it was the right way to handLe it."

"Oh..." Victor blinked. He may not have known all the details as to how this creature existed and operated, but that much made sense in and of itself. "Did... Georgie tell you that?"

Pennywise squinted, glancing up, tilting his head to one side.

Like, "*How did you know?*

Scoffing, Criss shook his head, brushed his swaying bangs out of his eyes. It was obvious enough even without an affirmative. "Pft. It's okay. He told me, how you two... met. That I wasn't the first one you overreacted to."

*Or the last.*

*Somehow, that makes me feel better.*

*From the sound of it, Patrick didn't go missing.*

*He got put down, like the sick puppy he always was.*

*Like... so many others?*
That was you, too?

The clown only tilted his head the other way, jaw working once. It was a sharp, halting motion, like he couldn't decide what to say, before sighing deeply, as if he was reluctantly letting stale air let out of a trapped void. He pulled once at his collar, ting, and folded his arms, huddling into himself.

"...It was still wRong."

Sitting there, with peace momentarily reached, Victor pondered the formermost word for a while.

Wrong, and everything it stood for.

Like it was wrong of him to listen to Henry that day, to scour the roads for someone to hold up at his command. Like it was wrong to rough Ben Hanscom up, to push him down the hill.

Wrong to refuse the new kid's apology.

And now it was wrong to continue to act like a cowardly fool, even after the same boy's circle of friends had tried to make an allowance for him, the now-outcast bully.

And for every wrong he had committed, it sounded like the entity sitting opposite Victor at that moment, It, had committed just as many.

If not more, that he wasn't fessing up to.

...Did he really need to?

No, they just needed to focus on their set of wrongs.

No more, no less.

Victor smirked, timidly.

Cautiously, he sat up and dared to crawl a bit closer.

"Then... we got each other wrong. Fair's fair?"

Pennywise glanced up, from under his striped brows, then away.

Again.

"Sure, Vic. Fair's... faiR."

Now, that didn't convince me.

"Make a fist."

"...WhaT?"

Criss demonstrated, hand raised. "Like this."

Frowning, the clown glanced down at one of his gloves, fingers splayed, palm up.

Nice, Georgie?

Let's see how docile this wolf can be.
"C'mon, it's not hard."

While his expression remained dubious, Pennywise slowly obliged, holding out said hand, midair.

Smiling, Victor lightly rapped the cotton-covered knuckles against his own, then opened his hand with a flourish.

"Now we're even."

An apologetic handshake would be too formal.

Whereas a fist bump was a nice middle ground.

It was worth chancing, seeing the newly-perplexed expression cross Pennywise's face. Experimentally, the creature slowly mimed the teen's opening-fingers motion, closed his fist, then did so again, before peeking upward from under his brows.

_The Losers aren't the only ones who can teach you new tricks._
Chapter Summary

Out of sight isn't always out of mind, Eds.

Chapter Notes

Post "Confessions For Dummies". Pre "Taste Test".

Detention.

Seriously?

Eddie Kaspbrak sighed quietly to himself, uncaring of how his bangs fluttered with the force of the expelled air. He kept his dejected-seeming pose, perched on the forward edge of his chair, folded elbows resting on the table. He declined the urge to stare balefully at the clock, no matter how dull reading from the science textbook before him was quickly becoming.

Wasn't this just grand? Bowers and company (that is, Belch and Criss, sans a recently-deceased Patrick Hockstetter) had thought it funny to swipe his pillbox in the lunchroom, in full view of everyone. And all because Eddie felt like acting on some rightful indignation, he (very stupidly) thought taking a swing at Henry was the way to get them back.

Not only for that, but as fair recompense for a certain unreported vehicular incident out on the eastern edge of town.

No, it hadn't ended well.

Smirking, the guy had dealt him one solid deck to the temple and Eddie was out like a light.

The only silver lining was that, sometime later, when Kaspbrak groggily came to in the nurse's office, his mother hadn't been contacted. For once, the staff of Derry High had shirked their non-contractual obligation to report any and all problems regarding young Edward to Sonia, pronto.

Three-quarters of the way through the school year, perhaps they were just as sick of adhering to that mandate as Eddie was of taking pills for imaginary conditions.

Bless them.

Who knew if Sonia had the wherewithal to sue anyone, no matter how livid she was? Her temper was like a burning sparkler. Once it fizzled out and the sparks ceased spitting about, no damage was really done to one's fingers.

Eddie knew there was no hiding the ash-colored bruise adorning his left cheekbone, though. It twinged and ached with every flex of his facial muscles. He wasn't about to go try borrowing makeup from some sympathetic girl to blend or conceal it away. He had made enough idiotic choices
for one day.

That had him feeling down, for more than one reason. Besides stomaching the unfair fact that someone, somehow, had pegged little, skinny, inconspicuous him as the instigator of his own self-fulfilling lunchroom fiasco, enduring this hour-long session after the day's last bell was almost intolerable.

...Almost.

Fifteen more minutes.

C'mon, it isn't worth bitching about.

Not that I have anyone to bitch to.

"Oh. BesideS you, you mean?"

Frowning, Eddie's shoulders hunched, fingers curling into half-fists. But he made use of the impulsive, full-body twitch the best way he knew how.

By redirecting the energy elsewhere.

One of his sneakers swung slowly back, then sharply forward.

Where it connected with something soft and billowy.

Tink!

"Ow! Hey! What was tHat about?"

Oh, lots of things.

Take your pick.

"Nooo." Something tugged at the edge of his pant leg. "No, you teLL me. WhaT'd I do?"

It's not what you did.

It's what you're gonna do.

"Hmph. Well... theRe goes my neXt idea."

"Pipe down, Dingbat," Eddie whispered at long last, under his breath. Scowling all the deeper, his dark eyes stayed glued to the book. He promptly lost his reading place on the page, and pretended to try and search for it again.

Soon enough, an annoyed-looking red-and-white face peered out from under the table's edge.

Fine time you pick to visit, as ever.

That is to say, you really do have a lousy sense of timing.

Pennywise scowled back, as if the unspoken thought were plain as day. Just as wordlessly, he held out one long arm, hand turned upward and splayed in display.

Sitting in the center of his palm was the missing pillbox.
"So, you don't want these back?"

Brows low, Eddie stared down at him, moving only to prop his fist against his cheek. The unbruised one.

Depends.

Who'd you have to kill to get them?

No doubt continuing to read the teen's thoughts word for word, the clown-shaped beast glowered, eyes moldering with repressed annoyance. His fingers slowly closed around the blue pillbox.

"Pft. Funny, Eds. What do you take me for?"

...Yes, I know. It's been a while.

Again.

"And it's gonna have to..." Eddie wanted very badly to retort in full, but trailed off, cutting himself off with another eyerolling sigh.

Truthfully, there were only a few other students attending detention today. But none of them were speaking, and save for the radio in the corner, playing almost too softly to be said it was in working order, there was nothing to mask his voice.

As much as he wanted-slash-not-wanted to talk, he couldn't.

"Wait?" Pennywise finished. "...Excuse yourself, then."

Eddie shrugged, trying to make the gesture seem as helpless as possible.

Can't.

"Why not?"

Detention rules. I- you- are you really getting this?

"Every word, Eds. Clear as a bell."

Then, like I... 'said', there are rules here. No one leaves the room for all of it's hour. They check backpacks at the door. And if I leave with a box I somehow didn't have when I walked in-

"Rules," the creature hissed, twisting around and chancing a look over the table's edge, eyes askew to better take in both sides of the room. "You shouldn't even be here."

Leaning aside, Eddie's frown eased.

You're telling me.

But later, dude. We can talk about what an outrage it is later.

"As in, ten minutes later?" Pennywise quipped, miming checking his watchless wrist.

The freshman nodded, turning the page of his textbook with exaggerated slowness.
The pillbox gave a little rattle as it was shaken, duetting with chiming bells for just an instant.

"Oh-kay. Bathrooms by the fRont door. They'Ll be there."

Wait! What? Right where all the most concentrated chances of contacting contagious diseases are?!

"The public bathroom?" Eddie squeaked, aloud and at an oh-so-incriminating volume.

His fellow detention-goers shot him a varied assortment of confused looks.

And the attending teacher's head shot up.

"Mr. Kaspbrak!"

Eddie almost didn't hear it, too busy looking in wide-eyed horror at the now-empty space under his table.

Now, Eddie wouldn't have expected Richie, Bill, or any of the others to wait around outside the school to meet up with him, once his sentence had been served. No doubt they had heard what happened in the lunch room. It would have been a nice surprise, had any of them seen fit. But at the same time, he knew they had their assignments and afterschool lives to attend to.

Riding home solo, vulnerable as you like, would have once given him great cause for concern.

As he strode down the hallway, currently, that was the furthest thing from his mind.

He had a rendezvous to make first.

Never mind how reluctantly he pushed the door to said restroom open, then promptly washed his hands at one of the sinks.

Ugh. So unsanitary.

But to a great extent, there was just no avoiding that.

Bathrooms were a necessary evil.

Lately, the day-shift janitors did seem to be doing a better job of maintaining the school's restrooms. They did not lack the means, or the motivation to, for once, what with summer vacation right around the corner. But the odds were stacked against them from the get-go. All it took was one careless student to ruin their cleanup work and render a stall (or more, if they were feeling inspired) completely unusable.

Eddie lucked out, again. Today, the sink looked pretty immaculate, as did the floor of the room. Virtually no stains. And the paper towel dispenser was fully loaded, for once.

Sitting atop the black plastic housing, the little blue box stood out, innocent as you please.

"You bastard," Eddie commented out of nowhere, flatly, to the seemingly-open air of an otherwise-empty room. He paused, mid-reach with dripping fingers, and took a prolonged second to glare resentfully at his waiting prize. That done, he ripped a sheet off and began to blot his hands dry.

"You know I'm not that tall."

I can't exactly run to a classroom and borrow a chair. Those doors are locked.
And you knew that.

All too suddenly, the entity's plan became clear.

The bathroom was to be the proverbial hard place, and It was the rock.

With Eddie now situated nicely between them.

Said teen huffed and tossed the used paper into the wastebasket around the same time the next sink down the row gurgled ominously.

Then a watery, distorted, pipe-filtered voice bubbled up from its drain.

"How else was I supposed to keep you here?"

Eddie hesitated only a moment at the sheer oddness before the compulsive need to banter back won out.

"By- asking, maybe. Why?"

"So... I could talk to you?"

"Oh, you want to talk, that's all?" the germaphobe sniped, swiveling his fanny pack onto his hip, trying in vain to look distracted.

This, this was dumb. After almost another week of practically nonexistent contact between himself and the club mascot, It just wanted to talk?

That was too simple a reason to take at face value. And this was not the best place to hold a lengthy conversation.

At best, they had maybe a few precious minutes before some late-departing wanderer ventured in. Or less.

The sink's faucet gave a whinging squeak, as one of the handles was pulled by an invisible hand, then reset.

Then its partner rotated and squeaked thrice, before being set back.

But no water flowed out.

Despite his best efforts to remain irritated, Eddie paid it a glance.

"What's that about? Are you dabbling in Morse code now?"

"Heh heee. Nah, just messing with you."

Eddie frowned, hands swiveling his fanny pack the opposite direction, pretending to smooth the bunched-up shirttail underneath its belt. "Nice of you to admit it, for once. You wanna give me the box back so I can go on about my day?"

"Noo, not yeT."

With a shrill squeal from the pack's half-open zipper, Eddie sharply pulled it shut and turned around to face said sink.
Time to vent, the only way he knew how.

Vehemently.

"I'm not doing this. I'm not talking to a damn *sink*, if whatever you've got to say is in any way freaking- freaking *meaningful*. And, knowing you, it probably isn't anyway. And even if it were, it's probably the lead-in to some- I don't know, Charles-Manson-esqe *hunting trip* you've already got planned. And I will be in nowaymorecomplicit- "

"*Edward.*"

Fuming, the teen stopped short, glaring daggers at his own reflection in the mirror.

Why?

There were no other eyes available to glare at.

"*Re-lax. I mEant what I said. I only waNt to talk.*"

"But you can't do it face to face," Eddie accused, with the obligatory finger-point.

Again, to his own reflection.

The stand-in image he wished he didn't have to gesture at.

But it was better than pointing at a blank drain.

...Wouldn't that look weird to an unexpected someone walking in?

It apparently didn't consider so.

The creature was too busy almost-folding against Kaspbrak's harsh tone.

"*I tried, eArlier.*"

"Yeah, I don't care how ignorant you do or don't claim you were in going about it, either. You had to *know* I was in detention. You knew what happened in the lunchroom. There's nothing you don't know. You could've timed it a hundred-times better, and didn't."

"*...You done?*"

"Yeah. I will be, when you give me the damn box back."

"*It's empty, anyway, Eds. You're not goNna be taking any pills righT now.*"

"What?" Eddie blinked, disbelieving.

No, he was sure. He had heard the thing rattling before.

Calling the entity's bluff, he raced back over to the dispenser, giving its housing a solid thump with his fist.

The pillbox jigged toward the edge, but didn't fall.

Frowning, Kaspbrak punched it again, as one might a faulty vending machine.

But before the plastic box could bounce over and fall, a familiar gloved hand reached over his head
to pluck it up.

"NoPe, you don't get 'em bacK that easy."

"Err, give it here, you-"

He didn't stop to let himself feel intimidated. With both hands, Eddie grabbed the clown's frilled cuff, pulling the arm down to his level. Frantically, he pried the box loose from the slackened fingers, expression dropping as he lifted each lid in sequence.

Only to find the same thing, in one compartment after the next.

"It... it is empty?"

Behind his head, Pennywise scoffed.

"Told yoU."

Glowering, Eddie let go of the cuff and glanced upward, seeing just what he expected to in the mirror.

He wasn't alone anymore. His thin, scrawny self was completely dwarfed by the silver-suited monstrosity standing at his back.

And where before It had looked irked in the detention room, now that same pallid face was smirking down at him.

"Oh, quit with your pouting. You don't need them liKe your mother thinks you do."

"That's not- " Shying away from the touch that was a gloved hand, trying to ruffle his hair, Eddie cut himself off with a groan. "Ugh. Doesn't matter if I take them or not, Dingles. They're gone. She's gonna flip tables over this."

Never mind the bruise on my face.

No, those medications are expensive.

How dare I lose them?

"Flip... tableS?" Eyes astray, Pennywise tried the figure of speech out with a bemused frown, then shook his head. It was the same tic Richie would typically have after falsely thinking something over. "I don't think so, that'd take real effort."

Of which Sonia does not possess.

Effort.

It'd be like watching a fat bass flop around, beached on the bank of a river.

Not sure where the mental comparison had been dredged up from, Eddie rolled his eyes and snorted. He thought to be almost-offended, but the sound might have been misconstrued for a smothered laugh.

Instead, he closed the pillbox up, shoving it into his pocket.

"I guess, it can't be worse than when she flayed me out after the car accident," he remarked, trying to
sound and feel dismissive, in equal measure. That had not been a fun afternoon, even if a late-arriving Bill and Richie had helped cart his sorry ass back into town. "And when she sees this, she'll be more pissed at the school for not calling than anything else."

Craning his neck around for a look, Pennywise raised an eyebrow at the mention of the bruise.

"But- I could just- "

Where once he would have appreciated the gesture, Eddie grabbed the long-fingered hand reaching toward his face and shoved it away. "Leave it alone, man. You've... done enough."

Here and now.

And just about everywhere else.

At that awkward reminder, Pennywise fell quiet again, expression growing blank, if not a mite thoughtful. Suddenly, the floor between his boots appeared altogether too interesting to not stare at.

Half turning toward the door, Eddie almost considered walking out on that note.

He stopped, though. It would've left the entity hopelessly nonplussed, doomed to twisting in the wind, when - once again - he had only been trying to help.

As annoyed as the thirteen-year-old tried to feel, even he had his limits as to how long he could remain mad at somebody. No emotion in existence had that much staying power.

Even if it had taken another week for the clown to show his face, at least he had. Better late than never.

"I mean, thanks. You did what... what you could," Eddie admitted, after some deliberation. "And I... should've been more grateful, I guess. It's just- if I were in your shoes- I-I wouldn't have- "

Demented as Hockstetter was, he was still another human being. If being human means knowing when to behave humanely, to not seek cold-blooded revenge-

"You don't have to say it, Eds," Pennywise interrupted mid-thought, slowly wringing his gloves. "I... messed up, not you. I won't again."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, dude," Kaspbrak sighed, wincing as his bruised cheek twinged again - a reminder of his own impulsive revenge-seeking mistake, that would fade far more quickly than the knowledge of Patrick's presumed-demise.

Officially, Hockstetter was missing, like all the others. His body hadn't been recovered, no death certificate signed and stamped. But it couldn't not have had something to do with It.

The thing was a weirdly-benevolent carnivore, after all.

Who was to say he hadn't made mincemeat out of one of Eddie's attackers?

"You can't help what you are, any more than I can... help what I am. There's always a chance things'll repeat, so long as Bowers is out there. Just- don't take it so far."

You don't gotta eat every last person who's a threat to me, or the others.

"No? Not without... asKing first?"
"Pft. Don't bother yourself there. You ask me or any of the others, we'd all have the same answer."
As the ensuing quiet grew unbearably tense, yet again, Eddie went for a less-blunt follow-up: "It's okay to forgive without getting something back in return."

*It took a punch in the head for me to be reminded of that.*

"Even if they... don't?"

"The bullies?" Eddie shook his head and shrugged. "It wouldn't enter into their minds, Pen. That's what makes them the way they are. You want to be better than that, you don't stoop to their level."

Pennywise's gaze twitched over in the direction of the mirror, seeming to regard its pale image with a freshly-intensified interest, behind his eyes, that hadn't been there before.

Or he didn't seem to take in his reflection so much as look *through* it.

Distantly. Longingly.

At something only the entity could see.

And probably could never hope to describe.

Watching this ensue, Eddie strode back over to the creature's side.

And went for the last card in his metaphorical hand.

"If he knew, Georgie would tell you the same thing."

Both of Pennywise's blue eyes sharply glanced down at him.

"He won't know."

Eddie smirked.

"Not if we have anything to say about it, no. He won't."

*There's a promise we can keep.*

*Makes us even.*

Compromise reached, Pennywise smiled back.

"Yep. Even SteVen."

As the customary hair-ruffle ensued, undeterred this time, before pulling him into a one-armed hug, Eddie could only scoff in contentment and lean into the touch.

And when he grinned, his cheek didn't hurt anymore.

So messed up, this arrangement.

But that didn't mean it had to be destined to remain messed up.
Odd Man Out

Chapter Summary

Loyalty gets put on trial.

How do you plead, Rob?

Chapter Notes

Post “Conspiracy Of One” / “A Human Affliction”.

Despite school having let out for three blessed months of summer vacation, only a few days ago, the grounds of Derry High were by no means sacred and therefore off limits. The metal bleachers overlooking her football field were fair game to any youth in town. So long as no outward vandalism took place and the litter was kept to a minimum, the gates to said field were left open, a kind of public trust left in the proverbial hands of Derry's teen populace.

Ordinarily, Beverly Marsh would never have been caught dead there.

But with her current chaperone, it was decided between them things were safe enough, socially, to venture up to enjoy the highest seats. Today's semi-permeable cloud cover made such a raised vantage point tolerable to occupy. A light breeze wafted over and around the risers, stirring their hair as Robert Gray glanced down over the tops of his drooping sunglasses.

Reading the three lines scrawled across the back of the postcard in his hand took him less than five seconds.

In truth, he gleaned more from than the simple inscription than a basic appreciation of Japanese poetry, looking pointedly at the image of the Derry Standpipe on the other side. The entity kept quiet for all of two minutes while he pondered, idly tapping a finger against his knee while he did.

Curious that Beverly would bring him here, to the school, of all places to ask about its origin.

Which she inevitably did.

"What do you think?"

Blue-green eyes shifting sideways, Rob raised an eyebrow at her.

Was that a bit of uncharacteristic eagerness he heard?

It read in her eyes. Even if her body language was as relaxed as his own, leaning back in the seat, the have-to-know tension was still there, in the curve of her cheeks.

"It's... elegant," he admitted at length, shrugging with one shoulder, trying to at least appear outwardly neutral. "January embers, winter fire. Whoever wrote it knows how... to play their words
off of each other."

_Could be anybody._

_Good enough for y-

"Yes, but... Who do you think wrote it?"

The raised eyebrow fell. He just managed not to frown, save for a muscle-spasm twitch of one mouth corner.

Of course that offhanded answer wasn’t enough for her.

But in divulging just who the author of this vignette was - by the smell, the residual trace energies still clinging to the paper all these weeks later - It found himself momentarily ensnared between two fiercely-warring emotions.

Piqued alarm and burgeoning confusion.

_No._

_Don’t tell her it- it was Ben. Don’t._

_He told you what a ’secret admirer’ is. The point of not-knowing._

_You helped him before, with the second letter._

_But, I can’t not tell her._

_Yes, you can, idiot. Just like the last time... last time..._

The edges of Derry fell away into blank nothingness as It felt his concentration rapidly wane and lapse. His perspective abruptly narrowed down into a virtually-painfully-narrow tunnel of cramped realization.

He just managed not to grimace.

_Shit._

...As Richie-voice would say.

When was the last time he had disobeyed Beverly?

...Never?

Really?

Not once?

No.

No, he had to have.

Sometime.

Some... somewhere.
Did he forget?
Yes, that... that could be.
Maybe he only forgot?
Something so small and inconsequential, it hadn't been worth remembering?
Nnno.
There had to be...

_click_.

"...b? ... Hey, Rob, snap out of it."

_click-click-click._

The disguised entity blinked his dried eyes, stupidly, belatedly thinking to swallow a mouthful of pooled, almost-overflowing spit. Wincing, he resurfaced to the rapid snapping of Beverly's fingers, right beside his ear.

"Hey. You okay?"

_Ugh. There's that overly-concerned frown again._

_Like it's the first time you've seen me- zone out?_

"Fine, t-thanks," he grumbled, leaning away, banishing the sarcastic thought back to where it belonged. With the back of his hand he wiped away what saliva had managed to leak out. "Ahem. You were saying?"

Her smile - once it returned - hurt to look at it, as it was the picture of patient, expectant.

"The postcard, do you think you can tell me who wrote it?"

"Why do you- want to know?"

He managed to keep his hand from shaking, in handing the poem back. Suddenly, it felt like holding a thousand outward-pointing needles between one's fingertips.

_Be careful. She so used to you complying with her every word._

_If you were to suddenly stop-

"Just curious. I mean, if there's... anyone who can tell me who it was - besides whoever wrote it - it'd be you. ...Right?"

"Can you... be more- specific than... 'just because'"? Rob managed something like a question, trying hopelessly to not garner too much more suspicion - more than he hadn't already. "Signing it the way they- did, I mean, this person obviously doesn't want you to know who they are."

"So... what? You're practicing discretion... on their behalf? You don't even..." Trailing off, Beverly's smile morphed into a thoughtful frown. Slowly, she removed her amber-lensed sunglasses, primly folding them as she did. "Is it someone... we know?"
Stoic as he knew how to be, Rob stared at her over the tops of his shades.

*Don't smile. Don't frown.*

*Don't blink. Don't move.*

*Don't even breathe.*

*Don't anything.*

Contrary to the disappointment he thought the act would provoke, Beverly only gave a stifled snort of laughter at his motionless expression. Slumping down in her seat, she leaned sideways, resting her temple against his shoulder.

When that failed to instill a reaction, she looked up, grinning, and tried for an affectionate insult.

"You jerk, you don't want to tell me?"

....

"You really don't want to tell me."

............

"You really, really don't want to tell me."

....................

And from that point forward, their roles were effectively reversed.

(For at least half a minute.)

She finally sat up and put on her best impersonation of, well, *him*.

"Come onnn. Please?"

Frowning, It let his voice crack and start skipping in time with his change in mood.

"NoPe. You don't neEd to know, Bevs."

"I don't?"

"Mm-mmm."

"How do you know? You don't even- *know* what courting is. What it means to us."

At that, Rob found it safe to arch an eyebrow in retort, almost scowling. His irises simmered, but didn't change hue. "Is tHat what 'secret adMirers' do? ...Then no, I don'T know, not... in pErson. But if I leaRned anything from that posTcard, it's whoeVer wrote it doesn't waNt or nEed to be found. And noThing else."

*You know something about that, don't you, Beverly?*

*Not wanting to be noticed?*

*So many filthy, shallow boys at school do.*
So many stupid, jealous girls give you dirty looks over it.

When you wish both sides would just give it a rest?

The person who wrote Winter Fire isn't far off in that regard.

Leave them be.

Of course, It would never dare saying these things to the redhead's face. For a variety of reasons.

But when it came to projecting those kinds of thoughts, to force them to cross one's consciousness, on that he could accomplish a bit. He was nothing if not influential. And the entity could be as staunch about willing it to happen as Georgie could be about refusing to eat his vegetables.

Moments later, staring him down, Beverly relented.

"Yeah, I... I guess you're right."

Thank... goodness. With the bout of seriousness passed, he smirked and dared a nose-flick, tone settling back into practice. "Ey, chin up, sister. That doesn't mean you don't still have someone out there who isn't pining after your every move."

"Sister..." The smile was back, not as glowing as before, but there. "Huh. Never thought I'd be-happy to hear you call me that."

While the adjective had slipped out as slang, upon rethinking its usage, It thought back, just for a bare milisecond, to a time when there was another he counted as an almost-sibling.

This mortal - somehow, she was that important, to be given the dubious honor of that comparison?

...Yeah?

Before he could dwell too long, Rob scoffed through his teeth, feigning and meaning dismissiveness in equal measure.

"It's not literal, Bevs."

He stopped at feeling an arm settle around, behind his neck, lying across, hand moving to pat his far shoulder. Once again, she eased down to lie beside him, head settling atop his chest.

Not the first time they had been that close, no.

She made it seem like she was very content to just stay there all of a sudden.

Her other hand still held the Standpipe postcard.

"No, it isn't," Beverly went on, inadvertently (and thankfully) derailing the next long-buried comparison about to jump forth from the entity's older-than-time memories. "Thanks, anyway."

Rob kept his hands where they were. He didn't need to move, or say much else. Her accepting half-hug was reward enough.

Instead, he let his cheek rest against the crown of her head, eyes dropping shut with a smile.

No.
It's Ben who should be thanking you, for not forcing anything.

I'd tell him, but...

Nah. He's better off not knowing, too.

And he'd understand not needing to know.

Just like you have.

Attraction, to It, was by and large an irrelevant concept, one he had always considered himself a league apart from. There was no point in romanticizing or courting others when you were the only thing like yourself in existence.

But Beverly was like January fire, all right. He was starting to see part of what made her so appealing - to others of her kind, that is. In a way that was fundamentally different than basic friendship, she had that innate charm.

For once you got past the icy exterior, the embers encased within were pretty darn beautiful - like fiery diamonds.
What Goes Around

Chapter Summary

It needs a little schooling, Georgie.

Chapter Notes

From earlier in the timeline, between "Soft Praise" and "Midnight Blues".

Affection.

Blegh.

Like everything else in the corporeal stage of our world that came with reviving after hibernation, adopting that concept into one's repertoire took some getting used to. Affection took so many forms, as many as the human brain could fathom, within the parameters of their physical limitations. Surprisingly, there were a lot of expressions and gestures they used to convey the same feeling amongst their closest family and... friends.

It was still coming to grips with the idea of being counted as the latter.

Meaningfully, that is.

Whereas Georgie Denbrough had cleared that hurdle with ease.

And the kid seemed to favor the behavior known as 'giving a hug' most of all.

It wasn't sure if there was something to... enjoy in receiving one, in the beginning. The first time it happened, the entity didn't exactly see it coming, not where they found themselves that day.

Ordinarily, anyone brave or foolish enough to set foot in the well house would only have cause to run back out, screaming to high heaven (preferably, to It's ears). That usually happened after they suffered some eyeball-bulging, mind-searing torment. If they were so lucky, they would be let go to dwell on that horror, to marinate, if you will.

Instead of taking the opportunity to startle Georgie on arrival, that was when the entity learned a new lesson:

You don't stoop down to your prey's shorter-than-half-your-height level if you wanted to avoid getting glomped.

At the time, Pennywise didn't know there was anything to actively be avoiding. All he did was lean down to look his visitor in the face, before finding himself 'pinned' in said position. The lithe arms that latched themselves around his chest and over one shoulder were as unexpected as a sunny day in November.
Which, outside 29 Neibolt Street, it was proving to be an unseasonably warm day indeed.

So, being It, he did what any reasonable, albeit wild, creature would when faced with a new, wholly-foreign experience:

He froze.

Waited.

...Remained frozen.

Waited some more.

Then, haltingly, he craned his neck around and asked:

"Are you... are you done yet?"

"Nyah uh." Georgie giggled against his shoulder, arms still wrapped in place.

Pennywise blinked, eyes drifting apart.

Asking anything else would be too redundant.

Joints locked, he simply stood there, one foot before the other. Bent at a forward-canted angle, any normal human body would have protested if held that way for such an agonizing length of time. He kept his arms drawn to his sides, lest he somehow disrupt whatever it was Georgie was doing.

Then, as he soon realized his greeting wasn't being returned, the six-year-old boy unwound his arms and stepped back, beaming.

"You goof. You don't know what a hug is?"

"I do..."

Sort of.

Which makes me wonder why you're bothering inflicting one on me.

If Billy finds out, he won't be happy.

He's still not happy about me being around.

"You need practice, then." Georgie shook his head, his concerns far more present tense than his host's. "You're supposed to hug back."

With both hands, he grabbed one of the being's long arms, repositioning it across one of his shoulders.

Wordlessly, Pennywise frowned and blinked again, letting it happen.

"Like this."

Situated, Georgie wove his arms around again.

"Now, you do the other one."

Gingerly, mindful not to move too fast, It wrapped the opposite arm around his diminutive teacher's
"Now, squeeze."

_Really?_

Pennywise couldn't help but echo his own mind's doubts out loud.

"Okay?"

"Umph!"

Pressed a little too firmly, Georgie choked on his laughter.

"No! Ugh- eh hee, not-not s-so tight."

Flinching, Pennywise drew back, hastily straightening up, arms snapping back into place, hands intersected.

Where once he would have delighted at the idea of causing another hurt, in this context, it was of no reward. It would only be yet another reason for Bill Denbrough to see It as dangerous.

Which he was, but...

"SorRy."

The boy's grip failed, hands slipping free against the silver ruffles.

Stumbling forward a step, Georgie looked anything but offended. He only looked up and smiled in sympathy.

"Aw, that's okay. You must've been alone for a _long_ time if you forgot what that was."

Scoffing softly, Pennywise glanced away.

_Far from it._

_I can't forget what I never learned to do._

Ploughing ever forward, Georgie didn't give him time to dwell on it further.

He raised his hands in invitation. "Try again?"

Carefully, the process was repeated, but with less pressure applied than before.

"That's better. Good job."

And this was said with a perfunctory, very-literal pat on the back.

For the moment, Pennywise didn't let himself feel much satisfaction in 'accomplishing' the feat. He only voiced his equivalent of a human's sigh, insides reverberating with a waver, discordant hum.

"Hmm..."

"Penny, what's that?"

"WhaT?"
Georgie's head remained pressed, sideways, against his torso. Working one arm free, he poked gently at the being's pleated chest. "That... sound. Was that you?"

"Yes...?"

"But- it doesn't make sense," Georgie mused, wedging his ear even closer. "I hear that, but I don't..."

Bemused, Pennywise let his eyes shift left, then right. Weird. *He* didn't feel anything amiss about his corporeal form.

Nor had he ever been called on to describe its aspects to anyone.

Also weird.

So he couldn't help asking:

"You don't... whaT, GeorGle?"

"It's like, I can hear you through this. Your voice. But I don't hear your- lungs. Or your heartbeat. Or anything... normal."

'Normal'?

Not by your definitions, no.

"And you woN't," Pennywise retorted, simply, as the puzzle's image became clear. Despite this being his most-favored corporeal exterior, what it masked was beyond mortal description. The shorthanded, secondhanded excuse would have to fly. "Normal'S... too boring for me."

Most times.

But anything more, you won't want to hear.

Or... maybe you would.

But I can't explain it as simply as you've explained a hug.

Fair's fair, isn't it?

"Oh..." Georgie went quiet, before turning his head against the silver satin, glancing back over his still-raised arm, peeking up through his bangs. "Not this, this isn't... boring you, is it?"

Chin still hooked over his newfound friend's shoulder, Pennywise let the far side of his mouth curve in a tiny, almost-guilty-looking smirk.

"Hrmm. I can learn to liKe it."

I think.
Bury The Hatchet

Chapter Summary

Don’t be afraid to tell It like it is, Mike.

Chapter Notes

Follow-up to “Reflash”. Some creative license taken.

Time is like a flat circle, rotating around and around.

Because of this an inevitable saying started to be pandered about by humanity as a whole.

"History likes to repeat itself."

"...Why? Is that because even it has run out of ideas?"

Mike remembered Georgie asking as much of Ben on a weekend camping trip. He professed it innocently enough, to the rest of the club’s amusement. Maybe it was simply because they, being older, were more in the know about the ramifications of the boy’s words, that they found it inherently funnier.

For many, many different reasons.

It hadn’t been there at the time. Why, no one had dwelled on.

That is, not until Richie had unceremoniously unrolled his sleeping bag only to have Pennywise spring out and pounce on him. Besides the uproarious laughter that ensued, Georgie had inadvertently learned a lot of new cuss words that day.

Since then, Mike had had cause to wonder, occasionally, what said older-than-time entity would have to say about the accuracy of Ben’s words. Granted, everything It did know of earth’s past was buffered by countless almost-three-decade-long gaps. His grasp was like a bookshelf that housed an incomplete series of encyclopedic volumes.

How could you tell if history was repeating itself when your sleep cycle kept you from beholding it all in... person?

You probably couldn’t.

And as yet, any time It had spent at the library with Ben had seemed to be inadvertently furthering his overall knowledge of the world, and events that happened within it at large. Thankfully, the creature hadn't taken to constantly-citing every new factoid he was now in possession of, like some overpreening know-it-all.

But now that school was out, Ben had less cause to spend time at the library, forcing It had to seek
amusements elsewhere. Lately, the club had taken to enjoying the outdoors. Being shut up inside for two-thirds of the year meant you were more given to appreciating summertime when it finally did roll around, from late April onward.

Even when the storms came along, people occasionally ventured outside to play in the rain.

Because rain was good.

For many reasons.

But it could also be bad.

Especially when the whole state of Maine seemed to be facing a six-week-long lack of it.

Because rain kept the fire danger down.

The fire at the Black Spot.

The fire on Harris Avenue.

Ex-serviceman Leroy Hanlon had had his life touched by flames one too many times. In that regard, he and Mike could wholeheartedly agree that the worst thing to happen to either of them was to lose the farm. Few things would be more devastating than for it to be lit up.

By lightning, by a stray cigarette.

By the son of some grudge-bearing bigot wearing a badge.

Thankfully, the third possibility wouldn't come to pass.

At least... not today.

"D... drop him."

Pincering in from both sides, the lack of light had worked to their advantage.

So Mike kept his flashlight pointed at the ground.

At his command, Henry Bowers unceremoniously landed in the circle of yellow light. A fine cloud of dust puffed up as he fell, sprawled on his front. He was wearing dark clothes, all the better to hide at nighttime when there were no stars or moon out.

The air pressure was up. The forboding cloud cover overhead meant a storm had finally seen fit to grace Derry with its presence, promising an offload of rain.

But before it could begin, Mike had caught this trespasser lurking about on the westernmost edge of the farm.

Caught, because a certain little bird had tipped him off as to the oncoming threat.

Rolling out of bed, Mike had dressed quickly, then grabbed up his flashlight and air rifle. He ventured out the front door as a late-flying magpie took off from his bedroom windowsill.

Twenty minutes later, the pair had caught their prey.
Henry groaned in frustration, trying to raise himself up from the ground.

Frowning, Mike heard the telltale chittery growl, closing in fast, and took a step back as It pounced again.

Loping on four thin, segmented legs, instead of eight, the eyeless, scaled-yet-shaggy-furred beast, not unlike what had killed the second wolf, was back. The initial takedown had happened just inside the property fence, where Bowers found his feet knocked out from underneath him before he had had a chance to reach for his lighter.

The red jerry can sat a few feet away, neglected, where its owner could no longer spill the contents out to set ablaze.

Bounding forward, It snarled at the very sight of Henry, and did so again when the teen, now pinned beneath his weight, tried to struggle free. The creature stayed there, paws poised on the interloper's shoulders, exactly where Bowers couldn't see him.

For effect, he leaned down to drive another very-canine-sounding growl into Henry's ear.

Which the teen promptly flinched away from, protectively gripping the back of his head with both hands.

"Fuck, H-Hanlon. Enough already. Call your stupid mutt off."

Muscles tense, Mike breathed in deep and scowled. The flashlight was in his left hand, while his right still gripped the rifle-bearing strap slung over his shoulder.

He had brought it along on reflex. He had no intention of actually using the weapon, unless he had to. Needed to.

The good old 'want versus need' factor.

He would rather have not had to be out this late at night, confronting this insanity face to face. There would be a lot of work tomorrow, getting most of the animals ready for a trek to the Derry Summer Fair. Every precious minute of sleep he could be enjoying, lost, compared to this...

But catering to the need to intervene - it certainly beat the alternative outcome - having to call the fire department, all because Mike had wanted to disregard It's warning in favor of a little beauty rest.

No, he was responsible. This property was how his family made their living. He needed to do something about protecting it, heading off the random and ever-present danger that was Henry Bowers.

Somehow, someway.

He'd console himself with knowing the best part was - at least now, in the dead of night - he wasn't going to have to do so alone.

Hackles up, It snarled again, a higher-pitched, undulating sound. Spittle flew from row after row of the sawband-like fangs.

_The gall. Call him off?_

Despite the creature's ferocity, held in check by who knew _what_ higher power, Mike managed to keep his own voice toned down, under control.
Because someone had to be the calm one here.

"Why? He hasn't done anything to you."

*Other than knock you down and scare the piss out of you.*

*Yeah, I wish I didn't have to smell that.*

At reading that thought, It made a little yipping scoff, like a hyena's giggle, almost.

Wasn't Mike pleased? Proud, even? The impossible-looking demon had managed to avoid cutting the guy's skin. Barely.

...*next time, don't end it in blood...*

Mike's scowl transitioned into a pensive frown.

Bowers failed to see the awful humor in the moment, too.

"Done anything? You mean, besides- *fuck off*, you m-mangy- ahhh!"

He quailed mid-yell, face pressed into the dirt, feeling the wet fangs graze his ear as It leaned in for another growl. Threads of spit dripped down into his disheveled brown hair.

The beast's display didn't make Mike feel any more empowered. It wasn't his style to gloat and posture victoriously. Right now, it only served to reinforce the idea that here he was, using force to meet force.

Whereas before he simply prefered to play the part of immovable object.

And Henry, at fifteen-years-old, was by no means an unstoppable force.

Not yet. Not like his old man.

Butch Bowers, prior to 1989, had never been associated with the fire on Harris Avenue.

Not until Pennywise, intentionally or not, had blurted the information out, trying to be somehow-sympathetic to Mike's pyrophobia, when the uncomfortable subject had cropped up during one such club meeting in the kitchen at 29 Neibolt.

What had happened to Mike's parents was something the other kids had often wondered about. It was a painful story he finally grew comfortable enough to share, and once told, It had unhelpfully read between the lines.

"*The policeman wanted to play fireman. Just not the right way 'round.*"

To which the rest of the Losers had grown somber and alarmed at hearing.

Naming the perpetrator had happened soon after.

"*And he's... told Henry about it more than once.*"

Mike remembered being angry at the time, dually open-eyed and terrified at feeling the blinding, righteous rage that came with knowing just *who* had taken his parents away. That the cause was no damn electrical short like his grandfather had been told. Oh, he was beyond furious in no time, wanting to bike straight into town to find the next-nearest police officer and tell, to report, what he
had learned.

But therein lay the clincher.

What was his... proof?

The word of a shapeshifting, morally-reforming cosmic demon whose very existence could not be comprehended by adults?

Tears still streaming down his face, Mike had relented. Such a mad act would have only landed him in a padded room at Juniper Hills.

Pennywise had apologized soon after, following a thorough tongue-lashing by Georgie and Beverly, who sternly lectured him on the necessity of not exposing anyone's personal history without their prior consent. It didn't matter if you were trying to demonstrate how sorry you were for them. You don't go about it that way, dummy.

That had been before the two wolves started picking off sheep.

Cautiously, It had tried to somehow redress his wrong in taking care of the first.

The second, he took down with some kind of relish, almost.

Rather than let the entity's mistake stand between them, Mike had resolved to put it all behind him. He simply would not bring up the subject of Bowers ever again in It's presence.

Tonight's unfolding drama made that kinda unavoidable, though.

Damn Fate.

"What do you want, Henry?"

"Pfft. What do you think, ni- shit, call the dog off and I'll talk!"

Looking up, Mike felt his blood run a few degrees colder. Ridiculously, he thought to quickly unsling the rifle, one-handed, crook it under his arm.

"No, d-don't!"

It froze, jaws parted.

But they refrained from closing where they stopped - about to clamp down on the back of Henry's skull.

Without any eyes to indicate where the creature looked, the hesitation could have been pure coincidence, or a conscious move to not harm their trespasser.

Breathing a bit shallower, Mike swallowed a lump of new nerves.

"L... l-leave him be."

Again, Henry had the aduacity to chance a laugh, to try and see some sick humor in this situation. If he could turn around and see the danger lurking behind him, he may not have.

But right now, they had to keep this illusion up.
"Christ, man, you afraid of your own dog?"

_He's not really... mine._

"He... he doesn't always listen very well," Mike managed, fingers mantling uneasily against the flashlight's grip. "R-Right now, you should be glad he is."

To that the alien carnivore gave a scoff in exhale, lips curling down in a grimace, before retracting his teeth.

Then the narrow, canine-like paw jammed tightly between Henry's shoulder blades lifted, and drove in deeper.

"F-fuck, ow! Seriously, then- c-call him off!"

Adjusting his grip, Mike held the flashlight beneath the rifle's barrel. Together, they were both starting to feel too heavy to handle, especially by sweat-soaked fingers.

"What do you want? Answer me on that, then I'll decide what to tell him."

Nature herself seemed to concur. A low grumble of thunder rumbled over their heads, reverberating between the ground and the clouds. The bulk of the storm was upon them, if not nearly so.

Empty hands flexing, Henry mirrored the sound with another sardonic groan. "Pft. You can see the evidence for yourself here, Hanlon. What more do I gotta say?"

_What more?_

_After what you almost did? What your father did?_

"Nothing, I... guess..." Mike replied, at some great length. He knew these things without being told, honestly. A peculiar numbness beset his mind, and his words. Suddenly, his hands weren't trembling so much anymore. "Besides how... sorry you are."

On the peripheral of his hearing, the beast's breath seemed to still.

After a tense pause, Henry's dirtied face wrenched around. His green eyes narrowed.

He didn't know Mike knew about Butch. The younger Bowers could have no way of knowing.

"Suh-sorry? That's all you want to hear? Goddamn, I knew you were soft-hearted, farmboy. But you could at least have the balls to threaten someone and mean it."

Says the one remaining pinned to the ground.

Mike moved without thinking. The rifle practically positioned itself under his arm, cradled in his hands almost delicately.

And somehow the end of the barrel wound up pressed against Henry's temple.

"...This isn't meaning it?"

To his credit, the would-be arsonist didn't flinch, or flail in anger, or burst into hysterical tears. His eyes narrowed to slits, upper lip drawn back in a mute growl.

He only stared, watched, and waited.
The sky rumbled again.

Lower than before.

As the sound tapered off, Mike heard another voice, slinking in as it did between his thoughts, unheard by anyone else. Unwelcome as it felt, to be intruded on in that fashion, the voice checked whatever ragged impulse it was that had forced his hands to move.

The eyeless, long-jawed face didn't emote anything. But It sounded more confused, more wrought with indecision with every passing, unspoken word.

...Mikey.

...Mike...

MichaEl...

What... what are you doiNg?

You- no. You're not thinking of-

...No. You wouLdn't. This isn't you. This...

This is- everything you told me not to do. But- you-

How will it solve anYthing?

There- thEre has to be a way to-

"Get off my land," Hanlon growled, in his best impression of his grandfather. Undoubtedly, Leroy would be saying the same. "And should you stay away, I'll assume this never happened."

"...What? You don't want to hear how sorry I am now?" Henry scoffed. "I haven't actually done anything, here and now. What do I have to be sorry about?"

"Nothing, tonight," Mike retorted. The rifle's aim didn't waver, didn't shift, but his finger inched minutely closer to the trigger. "Though I can think of... plenty of other times you have yet to apologize for. And right now, interrupting my good night's sleep is just the latest one you can add to the list."

Mike, do... do you meAn-

"Get going."

Henry said nothing, but hissed like an agitated raccoon as the rifle prodded his brow, turning his gaze aside. Grumbling, the bully made to sit up, to rise to his hands and knees.

The first telltale drops of rain began to patter around them as Mike stepped away.

"And don't come back."

It may or may not have wanted to drag the confrontation out. Daintily, the beast hesitantly moved off, stepping sideways into the dark where the flashlight did not illuminate him so brilliantly.

The sky cracked open. Timely rain began to fall in sheets, carried along by a late-arriving wind. With its arrival the fire danger was effectively cut down, eliminated on the spot.
Two birds, one stone.

Moving back, Mike clenched his jaw and watched as Henry slunk away, glowering, into the trees. Obviously the guy had some sort of route marked, that he could follow in a retreat as well as he had in an approach.

For good measure, or small compensation, It spurred the former trespasser on with one last slobbery-sounding snarl.

Frowning, Mike turned, holstering his rifle, and began trekking back toward the house. Already he could feel the water soaking through his sleeves. With that, he was looking forward to a change back into his pyjamas.

And not having to roust a deep-sleeping Leroy, even better.

"M... MiKey...?"

The rain fell harder.

But not hard enough the farmboy couldn't hear the rattle of exoskeletal legs, skittering after him.

"Mike, ar-areN't you- "

"Aren't I what?" Eyes burning, Mike stopped and snapped at long last, glaring sharply over his shoulder. "What do you want me to say, Pen?"

To his annoyance, It followed, but remained in beast form. The intensifying rain had thoroughly wetted-down the silver fur already, reducing it to unsightly clumps, sticking to the scaled flanks. Jigging to a stop, the long, spike-ridged tail lashed out as he lurched backwards.

He was obviously caught off guard by the boy's suddenly-hostile energy. Hooked on the tip of his tapered jaw was the discarded gas can.

Mike stepped close, and didn't let up.

"What do you think that would accomplish?"

Alerting me to the trouble, that was fine.

But almost taking it to task? Biting the back of Henry's head off?

What were you thinking?

Gingerly, the can was set down. "I... I thought it'd... heLp? ...You- we-we kept him from s-setTing the field on fire, d-didn't we?" It stammered, half in a clicky, overly-halting tone. "But- if you wErEn'T g-going to kill him, and he- w-wOn't apologize, w... what- "

"Neither option would have solved all our problems, here and now. I just wanted him dealt with until the rain showed up, which it has, thankfully enough. Whatever plan he had to... to torch our property, it's ruined until the next dry spell."

"But- if he comEs back- "

"You deal with him, if you think you know how," Mike ordered, sternly enough for effect. "And leave me out of it."
Bad enough you had to agitate things, telling me about my parents and his.

Saying you're sorry is one thing.

Meaning it is another.

Stung, put on notice, the creature drew back another half a step, jaw held low to the ground. It did not whine or cringe or somehow tuck his tail between his legs. Rain continued to drip from the saturated fur, but it made no move to shake the bothersome moisture off.

Despite how inherently-vicious that face appeared, the form's frozen, uncertain posture almost turned Mike's mood around. The sorry-looking wet dog vibe, if you will.

Almost.

Glancing aside, he reached down, picked up the jerry can.

Without eyes, it kept watching.

"There'll be a time and place for settling differences, Pen. It's... just not tonight."

*I don't care what strings you would pull to cover it up.*

*From his perspective, Bowers may not have known this rifle was nonlethal, just like he didn't know you weren't an actual dog. But he wasn't about to mouth off enough to find out, on either front.*

And I'm not meting out vengeance when it does more harm than good, especially not if it ever benefits anyone to start with.

"But... but wheN?" It's lipless, puppeted voice trailed off into the nonvocal realm. *When will that... be, Mike?*

Hanlon frowned, glancing off into the dark. Distantly, he thought he heard the rumble of a car engine, fading away. Maybe it was Belch's Firebird, maybe Henry had commandeered the family truck.

Whichever one it was, the danger had passed.

He was realistic, he couldn't predict the future.

"I can't tell you. It'll happen... when it happens," Mike finally replied, as the anger mercifully bled away, leaving a drained shell of himself behind. He didn't like dealing tough lessons, but this one needed to be. "You just have to be... patient enough to wait and see. And be smart enough to know *how* to deal with it, when the time comes."

*Like forgiveness.*

*You can't ask for it.*

*You earn it.*

*Let's see how different you and Henry really are.*

Again, it didn't balk in shame, or snap in denial, or flinch in pain, or react whatsoever. It read into those sentiments without as little as a twitch of a lip. Standing as still as death was inevitable, impossible to know what the entity was thinking about, the creature was silent.
He remained there, stoic in the field, outlined against the rain, as a heavyhearted Mike turned away and plodded back into the house.

For everything the farmboy had wanted to say, that much needed to be said.

Even if it hurt.

The truth usually did.
Chapter Summary

Vic needs a little encouragement, gang.

Chapter Notes

Post "Pecking Order".

I have a little experience with self-depreciation. About 30 years worth or so.

At midday, things were really starting to cook. Not surprising, really, as some rare, late spring-early summer afternoons in Maine could be. So most of the group of teens opted to stay in the shade, with their bikes, rather than venture out into the unforgiving sunlight for too long.

Even if the water's edge was just right over there, relatively speaking, it didn't appeal. Not yet. No amount of sunscreen was worth hazarding exposure to the ultraviolet rays when they were at their peak. Not unless they wanted to return to school the next day, with most of their person toasted a light, sensitive pink.

Yes, Eddie Kaspbrak had done a convincing job of relaying that hazardous information.

The alternative activity was agreeable enough, too. Using their assortment of bath and beach towels, they had arranged a decent workspace to set their books and papers. It was a setup that wouldn't suffer for having too much sand between strewn across it, either.

Never without comment, Richie Tozier had taken one look at the impending schoolwork session and promptly yanked his towel aside. "Forget that."

With his history book balanced across folded knees, Victor Criss glanced up at those two words, through the sides of his eyes. He had forgone adding any towel to the 'quilt', sitting more than a few body-lengths away from the circle's edge. He looked over more out of reflex than conscious thought, but before he had time to glance back down, Tozier noticed him.

"Ha! Don't think I didn't see that, Blondie. You're right there with 'em."

Oh, how dare I?

"Leave him alone, Richie," Stan piped up, after a tense beat. Not even a merciful gust of breeze blew in from the lake to dispel it. "He has every right to study with us if he wants, too."

"Study, pft," Richie scoffed, like that was its own kind of curse word (to him, anyway). He paused only to wipe futilely at the sweat, practically flowing in waves down the sides of his face. As things stood, the oppressive heat was effectively subduing him.

Alas, it never did take him that much energy to keep the complaint train running.
"I didn't take you for a hit-the-books type, Criss."

Victor frowned, without glancing up. It was easier to respond without looking. "I'm not."

"So, why you even bothering? And- shit, why do you still have your jacket on?"

*Better question - why are the rest of you half-naked?*

Breathing out, trying in vain to cool off, Victor turned the page, despite not having really finished the last column. He needed a distraction more than to understand what rehashed rhetoric he was reading.

The younger teens were partially disrobed, to cope with the weather conditions.

Maybe that was the reason why he was keeping his eyes averted.

No, it definitely was.

Despite only being a few years their senior, that was enough of a difference to make the sophomore feel... well, different. The rest of the boys lounged around, bare from the waist up, some with shirts draped across their necks like impromptu sweat towels. Victor acknowledged the narrow age gap, and his relative unfamiliarity to them, in his own way, suffering silently, even as his layers of clothes grew warmer.

Foolishly, it made him feel a bit more repentant in the process.

*What right do I have to be comfortable, having done what I have?*

But, apparently, having taken one poignant look at his erstwhile-attacker, Ben Hanscom didn't exactly embrace the same self-punishing idea.

"Vic, you... can sit a little closer, if you want. Coat off."

Richie snorted loudly at the obviously-pacifying gesture, but held his tongue.

Rather than look their way, Victor glanced far aside, in the opposite direction, off toward the trees. Once again, he felt torn between two conflicting impulses - paralyzing reluctance and timid acceptance. He had long ago lost track of how many times it had happened in the last two weeks, whenever he found himself in the club's company.

Even if he had successfully broken off ties with Henry (who was good only as another painful source of mixed emotions), making inroads with the club was proving nowhere near as easy.

He was still languishing in that halfway point in between.

And they seemed as divided on the idea of him being around as his own brain felt with itself.

Even Hanscom's words were a double-edged sword.

*He's okay with you enough to call you "Vic", but...*

"I'm fine, Ben. Thanks."

"He has a full bottle of water, as it is. And he's sitting still, not running around out in the sun. Less chance of suffering a heatstroke, that way," Eddie huffed, clearly having taken Richie's side on the social conflict.
To that, the rest of the club exchanged a weighted look.

Or the new bout of silence they engaged in suggested they did.

Beverly, having kept her short-sleeved blouse on (three buttons open from the top), would and could sympathize, and quickly gave into the impulse.

True to form, she didn't reiterate Ben's words.

Rather, she acted on them. Rolling over her knees, she stood and crossed the short distance to sit down beside the reforming bully, to not make the divide seem so obvious.

"So, what've they got you studying?"

Looking nervously at her, Victor felt a different kind of heat, one he couldn't ignore as easily as the mainstream kind, creep up the back of his neck. Quickly, he moved his clothed arm away before their elbows could brush. "N-nothing interesting."

"World history, I'm guessing," Stan remarked, untouched by the tension as he seemed to be. Talking about schoolwork always seemed to be a neutral enough card for him. The rest of soon-to-be-tenth-graders were still 'confined' to the subject of North America's collective past. "That's one subject you learn from the inside out, the higher grade you are."

"Seems that way," Beverly seconded, casually glancing down at the more-advanced edition in Criss' hands. "D'you... like history?"

Victor kept his dark eyes pointed firmly away from hers.

History.

Not always.

Like the kind they had.

The good and the bad.

That he couldn't just pretend didn't happen.

The heat under his skin, as opposed to the kind outside, was easier to set aside than that.

"Sometimes..."

"Does that mean you can tell us all about what we're studying, now?" Mike ventured, sitting beside Ben as he was. Despite being homeschooled, that didn't mean he was without peer on the matter. On a few occasions, he had more answers ready for the rest of them than they themselves could fathom. "You've been down this road before."

Reluctantly, Criss admitted to that.

"I... wasn't the best at it, when I was your grade." Evasively, the older teen bit his lip and shrugged. "Couldn't tell ya much."

Beverly went silent for a moment, as still as the windless day was proving to be. Her expression mirrored the placid surface of the quarry lake.

And anyone who knew anything about her would take that to mean, "Oh, stand by, one. Insightful
comment inbound."

Scowling, Victor bared his teeth and cut her off before it could happen.

"Really, I can't. So don't ask again."

Self-deprecating dismissiveness.

Another defense mechanism he found himself had been using a lot of lately.

If one or two of these twerps didn't want him around, who was he trying to fool, thinking he was totally welcome?

Recent actions of contrition notwithstanding.

His denials were all for naught anyway.

After a tense beat, he felt something settle on his shoulder, soft and reassuring.

A hand.

"You can't, or... you're afraid to?" Beverly asked, as gentle as the gesture being employed.

Victor flinched as if he had been stung by a stealthy hornet.

God.

If I had known I was setting myself up for this-

No. I knew.

Went with it anyway.

What a dumba-

"Victor, it's okay to be shy."

At that, Criss couldn't help a sarcastic huff, closing his eyes so as to not glare at Bill. His fingers tightened against his history book, where once he would have found something to punch to relieve his frustration.

"Is that what I'm doing, Denbrough?"

I thought I was just being me.

Stupid, impulsive, closed-off me.

At least, with Henry, I knew where I stood.

He was always quick to remind me.

Why not hope for the same reception here?

With the rest of you, I don't- I can't-

Undissuaded, Beverly patted his shoulder, interrupting his self-fulfilling mental argument. "We get it. This isn't what you're used to. And... it's gonna take some time for all of us to get comfortable. But
that doesn't have to mean one slip up, and you're no longer welcome. People mess up, it's okay."

It took another minute of processing power, but, eventually, Victor found the nerve to glance back across the way.

Directly at the pair who seemed to resent his presence the most.

Following his eyeline, predictable as sunburn without sunscreen, Beverly rolled her eyes and smirked. "Oh, those two? Never mind them. They're always out to bust someone's chops, if it isn't each other's first."

"Someone has to," Richie proclaimed, chest out. "I don't see any of you stepping up to do it for us. Keeps our egos in check."

"I don't have an ego," Eddie protested, with a slug in the Trashmouth's arm to match.

Richie took the hit in stride, grinning obscenely. "Come on. Everyone does, Eds. Just a question'a which kind."

"Don't bother telling me mine, then. Whatever you'd claim, I'm sure it's incorrect."

"Yeah? What if I claimed the opposite, and it turned out I was right?"

"...What does- agh. Knock it off. It's too hot to play word games with you today."

Primly, Richie removed his glasses, set them aside. His grin turned suspiciously sly.

"I know, right? There are far better things to do, such as..."

With no further ceremony required, he stood and sprinted for the rocky overhang's edge.

Anything to escape the awkward moment, seemingly.

"Cannonbaaall!"

With a descending swoop, the jubilant cry followed him out of sight.

And was punctuated by a distant splash.

While the majority of the group looked on, with various expressions of disbelief and nonsurprise, they stayed motionless in their shady refuge.

Eddie alone spluttered and raced to the edge.

"You- Richie, you forgot the sunscreen!"

A single bolt of laughter echoed up the quarry wall to meet him.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Bring it with!"

"You- stupid- ugh!"

Victor scoffed quietly, hiking one dark eyebrow up at the absurd sight of Kaspbrak actually taking the demand seriously. The germaphobe trotted back, grabbing said ointment from his backpack, and taking a completely-fearless second run back to the ledge.

"Last one to the other shore has to apply it!"
Richie laughed again:
"Hah! With their feet."

"What?!"
"Creativity, Eds! You gotta have the creativity!"
"Fine, catch!"
"Don't need to! It's plastic, it'll float. Now, c'mon!"

With a long-suffering eyeroll, Eddie glanced back. "Well? You guys game?"

"Now? We've barely gotten started here," Stan objected, pencil in hand, blank notebook balanced on one knee.

Ben nodded his agreement. "And you said we're supposed to stay in the shade, at least one hour after noon."

"Well, Rich just threw that plan out the window. I refuse to think I'm that special to him. The dare goes for all of us."

"Hmph. Only if Victor comes along," Beverly challenged.

Said sophomore's eyes darted around again, like an indecisive, zigzagging dragonfly.

Taking her meaning, Mike grinned. "Yeah, that sounds fair."

While the rest didn't voice as much, they made their concurrence known.

Gradually, one by one, the papers and books were set aside.

Conversely, Victor's attention flicked briefly to his bicycle. An easy out, just waiting for him, less than five feet away.

"Guys, I- "

Not that he didn't inwardly-appreciate the group voting to suddenly include him, but one big doubt kept gnawing away at his mind. As it had been ever since that first venture away from home, post hospital release.

He had only barely gotten the hang of riding a bike one-handed, as needed.

*Bad shoulder, remember? Not ideal for swimming.*

*Much less taking a thirty-foot drop off a cliff.*

*Not that I don't deserve the hurt for it.*

Reading his ponderous expression, Beverly's fair, freckled face fell. Evidently, she hadn't considered that factor. Or had, and was just now appreciating the sad, limiting conclusion.

Then, with a quick glance at something past said bad shoulder, she smiled again.

"Might do you some good to stretch it out."
"Yeah, hobbling around all the time like you do is only making things weaker," Eddie seconded.

"And if you donnn'T..."

Stifling a gasp, Victor felt his spine lock up, on automatic. He dropped his book to the ground with a light thump.

The new voice in his ear wasn't its usual pitchy hiss.

But mildly-threatening all the same.

"You can stay heRe and do the others' work for them."

Beverly's hand was still on his left shoulder.

Without turning his head, Victor felt another, larger one alight on his maimed right. Long fingers settled there like tendrils of fast-growing ivy creeping across a stone wall.

The day's warmth didn't make the old injury ache so badly as when it rained. The pain was always there, sometimes mild, sometimes profound.

In the second that followed the ultimatum, it was suddenly as if it vanished completely.

Disbelieving, he clutched after it, as far around as he could reach. He tried squeezing the muscle, stretching his arm out, kneading the once-ruined joint between his fingertips.

No more hurt.

The display drew an amused snicker from the scene's newest arrival.

With playful roughness, the hand let go to prod the back of Victor's head, shoving it over. His blonde locks, combed to one side, swished the other way with the ruffling gesture.

"Oh, quit with the theatricS and go already."

The remaining boys, having made their way to the edge, took in the sight with a mix of tentative optimism and tolerating smiles.

"This workload, all by yourself? I'd listen."

"Hm. He's no r-right to say that, about being theatric."

"True."

"Since when has that ever stopped him?"

Beverly was quiet, but her smile turned to a grin.

Regarding the scene for what it was, Victor rolled his eyes and finally looked back, unable to help a crooked half-smile from bending his lips.

"Always gotta throw in your two cents, don't you?"

Exactly where he expected the mascot to be, Pennywise smirked down at him.

Complete with a high, palms-open shrug that was the definition of Why not?
"What the fuck..." Richie sighed, feeling his shoulders droop in apparent disappointment. Turning away, he let the old fridge's door fall shut with a dull clank. He waited a second, half expecting an answer to that lackluster gesture.

When none came, he trundled back out of the kitchen.

*Where you at, Stripes?*

Damn. He was so sure the first place he would have thought to look, while saving it for last, would have been the right place. But as yet, the freshman-going-on-sophomore had spent, roughly, forty minutes combing through 29 Neibolt Street, room by dusty room.

...Alone.

And so far, so not-good.

Feet stilling, he bit his lip.

*Not the* basement.

*Come onnn.*

*Don't make me check the fugly-ass basement.*

*That well - ugh, still gives me the creeps just thinking about it, let alone looking at it. And the others, they feel the same. They just don't admit it.*

*Ben told us what it used to be, around the same time the trapping camp disappeared, the "trail of bloody clothes" being the only leftover clue - but that was in the long-dead past.*

...Wasn't it?

*And Georgie only went near it the one day he thought no one was looking.*

...*But you were.*

*Bill just about shit himself, seeing you carry Georgie around by the collar of his jacket like that - in your mouth - like a dog scruff-grabbing a puppy.*
Rest of us had a good laugh, though.

"Aren't you looking out now, doofus? You gotta know I'm here," Richie mumbled to himself, trekking up the rickety stairs for (what had to be) the fourth time. Starting with the crawlspace-sized attic, again, and if this roundabout didn't yield results, he was effectively done with trying to be the nice guy.

Nice guy.

...Right.

This was as close as he could get to being counted as one, regarding his relationship with a certain cosmic-grade contrivance.

In the spirit of that idea, Tozier had made the impulsive choice (again, despite there once being a time he had thought he would never do so more than twice in his life) to visit Neibolt alone.

Why?

He had some things to say.

Reluctantly, very, very reluctantly.

For better or worse.

But really now.

Did It really have to keep playing hard to get about this?

"I know. You can hear what I'm thinking, just as much as anything else in this town, Twitchy," Richie grumbled, trekking along a vacant hallway on the second floor. The already-open series of doors gaped at him, dark and hollow and completely empty. Stupid as it felt to monologue, it wasn't really talking to himself as it was talking into a set of unseen ears. "But if you've changed anything about—anything, don't you want to hear me... say the words? Face to face?"

And not sarcastically, for once?

(It had seemed like a good bait idea at the time.)

He seemed to finally make some progress upon descending back to the ground floor.

In the otherwise-quiet, over-two-centuries-old house, there were very few sounds that stood out as unnatural. Most of the squeaks were because of rats, scurrying to and fro. The creaking of the rotting floor and the mouldering walls came and went, in how intensely the boards flexed, bent under the pressure of either shoes or wind.

Glancing up, Richie stopped. One foot still rested on the steps behind him, as he watched a flat, semi-rectangular board, with four distinct wheels, unceremoniously roll into view.

Like some shy animal, it slid to a stop not four feet away from him, and stayed there. The nose of the skateboard faced him, but with that first look, he couldn't begin to tell what the art underneath might have been.

...You didn't.

Far from being amazed, or girlishly overjoyed at the apparent offering, Tozier's anger flared up. His
arms tensed.

What was this supposed to signify?

"Here. Now leave me alone."

Talk about an easy out.

"Nope! You don't get off that easily." With newfound determination, the bespectacled boy strode past the black-decked skateboard, across the foyer. "Get the fuck out here, you sneak. We're not going out on that note."

And just to punctuate his words, he slammed a fist down on the ancient, upright piano's splintering keys.

What hairstrand-thin strings were left inside the age-old instrument gave a warbling, discordant whang.

Like something out of The Addams Family.

Perfectly timed as that moment was, the only jumpscares to ensue took the shape of another bald-tailed rat, shrieking as it half-jumped, half-fell from its perch and scampered away.

Watching it flee, Richie scowled.

What were the odds a rat just so happened to be hanging out inside the piano?

No. Don't think you can fool me with that one, man.

That was no damn rat.

He started to take a step after it-

"Hiya, RiChiie."

Tozier flinched like his eardrum had suffered a beesting.

"Shit!" Practically leaping out of his shoes, he stumbled sideways as he did his best attempt at wheeling around. His loaded backpack nearly offset him enough to tumble off his feet. The nervous laughter that bubbled up from his chest couldn't be helped. He couldn't help that anymore than his hand reflexively reaching up to clench over his heart, either. "Heh-he-heh... huh. Ch-Christ, Cackles, y-you got me."

"More like... you goT yourself," Pennywise quipped back, looking every bit as devilishly smug as he sounded. In the house's poor, yellow excuse-for-lighting, he half-leaned through the doorway, lifting a finger to poignantly tap the teen's nose. "You'Re an eaSy read."

Richie flinched again, taking a half step in reverse.

No, he still didn't like the nose boops. For him, it was the same as having someone callously tap the frames of his glasses.

And It knew that.

Which was why the clown still chanced making the occasional flick.
Beside the point, though.

"Well, if I'm so easy a read, then you... know why I'm here."

To our mutual astonishment, I'm sure.

Still, Pennywise felt a sudden need to play coy.

He shook his head, despite the wholly-affirmative answer, but the smile never dropped from his face. His eye never wavered.

"I do. Why don't you... tell me, any way?"

Fine. That how you're gonna be?

"Because... it's been a long time coming, like the skateboard?" Richie retorted, before inflecting his best classic Western cowpoke voice, "Ahh reckon not. You're gonna have to do some hagglin' first, partner."

At that, the creature's smile abruptly fell flat, gone, like a heartbeat as monitored by an EKG's readout might flatline as the plug was pulled.

His blue eyes blinked, very deliberately, to accompany an exaggeratedly-slow tilting of his head.

"...W-what?"

Gotcha.

Richie smirked, back in his element - for the moment. "Yeah, that's right. You gotta pay for me to say the words." Deftly, he changed to his best approximation of a New Jersey gangster, rubbing the pad of his thumb across his fingers for emphasis. "And last time I, uh, checked, youse was pretty low on cash."

No. On the whole, he hadn't used his Voices much around It in the past year.

For a reason. There was a time he couldn't have gone more than a few hours without donning some kinda quirky accent or persona.

Somehow, someway, he had thought saving them up for a special performance somewhere down the line would be prudent. And now, here it was. The moment he didn't even know he had been waiting for.

As such, Pennywise took a moment to puzzle over the oddly-proclaimed words. Around them, the old house went a decibel or two quieter, as if it too were contemplating this turn in conversation. Cottoning on to their meaning, or his best guess at it, the humanoid beast finally straightened up, hands falling to his sides.

"I... I thought you- wanted a skateboard?"

Not even close.

"Nah. Not what I'm gettin' at, Dollface," Richie rambled on (though, in reality, that red-and-white visage was looking a touch thinner than 'normal' in the cheeks). "You owe me a bit'a somethin' before I'll admit to anythin'."

"Bit- to-admit? WhaT?" Flustered, Pennywise snorted and tossed his head like a horse might shake
out its mane. If that display wasn't obvious enough, he went on to say as much, "I don't- know what you're gettiNg at, RicHie."

"To talk, you useless wanker," Tozier's gruff, British dockworker came back to the fore. "No runnin' away this tim', no one else 'ere to interrupt us. Jus' you and me."

"You'Re... saying you want to?"

"More like I need to, because it's drivin' me nuts- not knowin'," the visitor admitted, with a tense shrug. "Yea, nuts. Moreso than you usually do."

And you know the want versus need argument. Stan said so.

So don't try telling me different.

To his credit, It didn't.

The bizarre display actually seemed to get him pondering.

He scowled and glanced away, shoulders hunching defensively, pulling his chin back against his layered collar. It made him look very much like an affronted bird of prey in the process. But he didn't vanish, growl, or whinge and whine childishly at how unfair an arrangement this was bound to be.

"Sooo... what do you neEd to know?"

Richie paused for a gentle sigh, steeling himself, before breathing in deep. Eddie sometimes did it when he was trying to keep the manic impulse to ramble at bay, to impart carefully the same words that he didn't want to splutter and stumble across.

For this, Tozier would need every last drop of calm and composure he had within him.

Especially considering how ridiculously simple his first inevitable question would sound.

"...How you are?"

Naturally, the alien didn't take him seriously at first.

He promptly doubled over and burst out laughing.

"No."

Wiping the fair-sized flecks of spit off his chin, also known as collateral damage, Richie stepped forward.

Before he could think to stop himself, he reached up to grab the creature firmly by his ear.

It froze.

The foreboding chiming quieted instantly.

"No! Don't start with the laughing shit, Dingles. I'm serious."

Imitating Eddie at his most hysterical.

That almost worked.

Pennywise stared over at him, through the side of his left eye, expression blank, for a beat.
Then his billowy shoulders started quivering, the corners of his mouth curling up, as the giggling threatened to resume.

"Oh-ho, I c-can juSt-t tel- "

Frowning, Richie simply held tighter and twisted his wrist, sharply - along with the being's ear.

"Oww-ch, ow-ow-h-hey? RichiE?! No! N-not niCe!"

Pennywise cringed and buckled along with the motion, but didn't try to pull away. The torture wasn't for real. Georgie had said, were you ever in a position to reach one, an ear grab usually served to keep It's focus.

The resulting cry of 'pain' one had to endure hearing was worth the risk, too. It wasn't for real. Anything to keep the clown from devolving into another hysterical, unrecoverable fit of mirth.

For whenever the entity didn't seem to be working on his not-crying act lately, he indulged more and more in moments of overblown laughter. While they had been intermittent before, reserved for when a particularly good prank or joke was told, it was almost daily now.

And that was - somehow - proving twice as hard for everyone to hear.

Especially Georgie, who, after the first few times it had happened, learned to not laugh along.

It wasn't the kind of laugh that indicated a good time being had.

"Pull yourself together, Stripes," Richie ordered, stonefaced even with the pleading puppy dog look now being aimed at him. "For once?"

"Then we'll see how nice I ought to be."

"You've got everyone worried sick."

"Niceness alone might not be the best way to get through to you right now."

"If there's nothing more we can... do, I can at least talk serious."

"With you."

"Just this once, right?"

Reading his strands of thought line for line, Pennywise seemed to reach the same conclusion. The faked agony on his face eased away, and for the first time that day, the entity looked almost considerate, bordering on apologetic. His irises shimmered, shifting to a brighter, greener shade.

"Hiya, Rob."

"S-sorry, Rich."

"Don't be sorry, you dork, just... talk to me," Richie grumbled, almost tiredly, and let go. Keeping up the creature's mercurial shifts in mood was actual work, indeed. No wonder he hadn't actively tried at that until now. "For real, how are you... holding up?"

Not that he was worried about It.

He was more worried over how much his friends were worried.
Both Denbrough boys were starting to appear a bit haggard around the eyes. Bill looked almost waspish nowadays, half-slumped over his desk while sketching, pensively, for hours and hours. Georgie didn't even dare disturb him, contenting himself with sitting nearby, on the floor, holding onto Tim the hamster so long the rodent fell asleep in his palms.

Beverly's red hair was still short and wavy, but fraying, practically splitting at the ends. Richie had never seen her brush it so much. Or smoke more than a few cigarettes a day. She was almost up to a whole pack.

Mike and Ben appeared to be holding up the best, or at least, on the surface. Outwardly, they would never admit to the mental stress, even when asked. But it was showing in the ever-more-creased spines of Ben's paperback books, and Mike's gnarled hands, which he always seemed to pick at when he was mulling over troubling thoughts.

Eyes hooded, Stan took to the woods. While there wasn't much fun to be had in birdwatching alone, before It, that was what he had known how to do. It was almost as though the Jewish boy were reluctantly reacclimating himself with the idea of flying solo.

And Eddie - the one who had walked Neibolt Street virtually every day to and from school, and would continue to for the next few years until graduation - he missed more and more phone calls. Logic said he was spending many a recent summer night curled up on a couch in the foyer, monitoring the situation as best any of them could.

It didn't need monitoring.

It was It.

Or so Richie had thought, until the unconsciously-conscious thought kept coming back to pester him, over and over.

Like a bad... penny that kept turning up in your pocket.

No, he didn't want to admit anything.

But if he didn't at least try to, his head was bound to implode with the uncomfortable knowledge he and his friends might not ever be the same again, post It.

"For... for real?" Repeating the words, almost sounding like he was in a new daze, Pennywise shook his head again, gentler than before. "Hmph. I should be asKing you that."

"Don't get sap-amental on me now, Dingbat," Richie snapped, utterly content to invent an entirely new word to convey his feelings on the matter. "I'm not... here to pity you in person."

*Feeling something for someone doesn't fix anything itself.*

"No...?"

"No, and it's as obvious as the *nose* on your face. ...Ew. So don't try- and steer me that way."

Richie stopped only to wipe his offended finger against his shirt.

Since when was the entity's nose that cold and wet?

"Psht, perish the thouGHt," Pennywise scoffed, mindful enough to aim the spluttery words away from Tozier. Only now did the drool seem to be welling up a tad faster, spilling over his bottom lip.
"I'm as fine as ever, Richie, or as can be. What about you?"

Clenching and unclenching his hands, Richie shrugged, trying to play it off as the weight of his semi-loaded backpack hanging low on his back. He had brought its contents along on a whim, thinking of Eddie's selfless vigilance and feeling oddly... inspired, despite the sheer dumb factor.

Thinking of that timidly-made choice, and the question being posed now, he tried for a deflection.

"Oh, you know, the usual—bullshit. Besides the kind that follows you around. If no one else is gonna call the world out on it, it falls to us critics."

*Seems to be why I was put on this earth.*

*Why stop now?*

"Trasshmouther, " Pennywise remarked, almost with a bit of nostalgic whimsy. "Never without comment."

"Tch. You get that tagline from a Derry Visitor Guide?"

Richie regretted making the joke the moment it was out.

Mostly because he had to plant a hand over the clown's still-wet mouth to keep him from cracking up anew.

"No! No laughing!"

Glaring at him, Pennywise's striped eyebrows angled down in a mute, V-shaped frown.

For the moment, his lips were sealed. So he didn't chance speaking, verbally.

*No? Why'd you put it that way, then?*

Richie frowned, almost drawing back. His stomach turned, uneasily. He swallowed a new inexplicable lump in his throat.

*Because—idiot, because you aren't—aren't the only one who says stupid things off the cuff.*

*That's not a reason.*

Is, too! ...Infinity!

Aww... you beat me to it.

Yeah, my point exactly, dude. You see? You're slackin', more and more. Mind and... body. You won't entertain the idea of listening to anyone else, not even for a few seconds. Georgie's tried. Bev's tried. So here I am, Doctor Tozier, Ph. D., at your service.

...I don't need a doctor, Richie.

Eds seems to think you do.

Oh?

Yeah. ...Come on. Don't tell me you haven't noticed how many times he's camped out in this place's living room the past few weeks?
He wouldn't be doing that, alone, if he wasn't sorta worried about you. And the rest of us would probably be doing the same, hell, if we didn't have parents who suddenly rediscovered our very existence. "Oh, yeah! Kids! Honey? I just remembered. Didn't you and I have some of those? Where've they been all this time?"

Staring him down, Pennywise's eyes slowly turned yellow and baleful.

Consciously, or another plainly-visible slip of control, like the involuntary skips of his voice?

"You'Re... not hapPy about that?"

Grimacing, Richie shuddered. Drops of spit were starting to ooze into view.

That did it. His sense of touch couldn't bear any more.

Nor could his misfiring emotions, apparently.

"Ugh!" Repulsed, Richie snatched his now-thoroughly-dampened hand away. Opening his fingers, a clear film of drool spread between the digits as he did just like the slime from *Alien*. Present, though, he had to keep his mind on the present tension. Never mind how he was beginning to stammer worse than Bill ever had. "No, man, w-we're- yeah, we are, but- but we're so used to- to d-doing our own thing- "

*Looking out for ourselves-

*How are we supposed to-

(...damn him for getting under everyone's skin...)

"...TougH luck, then," Pennywise rumbled. He sounded unusually dismissive and deadpan, despite what must have been a very tempting urge to laugh at Richie's disgust. The creature didn't make any move to wipe his still-salivating mouth clean, either. "It's juSt- one of tHe signs. DeRry ignores whaT she needs to igNore, for- as lOng as I'm aWake. WheN I'm not- "

"Stop," Richie almost choked on the word, at once grateful and beyond livid for it. No, he didn't know what it was, placing an invisible hand around his throat. But it certainly felt tight all of a sudden, gripping his larynx with an emotion he didn't even register as having been there, before, in the back of his head.

Offense.

"All of this? And you call it tough luck? Like it's to blame for everything we didn't have control over? I'd say, *fuck* you for daring to put it that way."

"ThaT sso?"

Bristling, Richie hissed right back. The burgeoning stinging in his dark eyes made itself known around the same time. The overmagnified lenses had to be showing how they were starting to glisten.

"Yeah, numbnuts. How *dare* you say that, after- aft-ter- y-you- "

Impassive, seemingly oblivious to the new turmoil roiling in the boy's mind, Pennywise raised an eyebrow. He stayed were he was, half stooped over, arms practically hanging slack. At least the drooling, thankfully, appeared to have trickled to a stop.
...WhaT?

AftEr keePing you saFe for almOsT a yeaR?

So? SoMeTImes, it waSN't neeDed.

EveRYone sTeaRted to rEmiNd me, afteR a poinT.

YoU diD it onCe befoRe, gettinG by, bEfoRe you eVer eveN kneW oF mE.

YoU'lL forGeT, yoU'lL surviVe.

YoU'lL be saFe.

WhaT moRe maTters to yoU?

StaRinG, unABle to bElieve hoW thoSe unvoiCeD wOrdS weRe aCtuAllY gEtting to him, foR thE reAsOns thEy weRе, Richiе f elt a drop of wATer leech free oF hiS rigHt eye. He blinKed hard, swAllOwing aGAIн, and clenChed hiS fIsTs, aS if it wOuLd kеп others f rollinG. ThE tеаr sliD awаy, bу he dId'n't rEmeMber f еllinG it drиp off hiS jaw.

It's rаised eуebrow еаsеd.

And luCk? I thOught you wеrе nоtHinG if nоt lucky, richаrd.

Gооd luck, bаd luCk. DuМb luck. WOrse luCk.

...RigHt?

I wOndeR... whicH oNе of tHоse dIеd I fаll unDeR?

"Allof thе aH-abоvе, аsshole. Thеrе. Yоu ha-happy? Ge-getting mе all wo-worked uр оvеr thIs- thIs shiт," Richiе gAsped, hуffinG iнvoluntarily aS thе sobs threаУtened to piQuе and оverwhelm him. His nосе wаs stаrting tо rUn. FitGuLу, hе wipеd it wіth thе bаck оf hiS hаnd аnd wriSt, nеvеr mіndіng hoW іt m ust hаvе mаkеd him lооk аbоut three-yeаrs-оld. "YoU're- you'rе eh-everythіng wе dіd а-n dіdn't w-wаnt іn а f-friend."

A goSh оf а guIty smіrk cReаsеd thе еntiTy' S реd lіps.

"Аnd 'wе' іncluDes 'yоu', dоеn't іt, richіе?"

Or-dо you mEаn wе as іn-

Thе sеntеnСе dіеd mіdWаy.

Мostly bеCAuSe Richiе wаs tоо buSy sурprіsіng hіmself. Маvе hе wаs аskіng fоr mоrе trоубlе, mаvе hе wаntеd sоmеthіng thаt fеlt lіkе a bіt оf clоsurе, оf rеs оlvе. Еvе rythіng wаs sо up іn thе аіr nоw, sо subjесt tо сhаngе, gоіng іntо thе fUturе, hе wаntеd jus t оnе fасt tо bе clеаr.

МаЛvе hе hаd understаtеd juСт hоw bаdly hе nееdеd а hug.

Hе wаntеd аnd nееdеd fоr sоmеоnе tо sау, thіngs wіll bе okау.

Nоw, tоzіе, stоp tоurturіng yоurself оvеr whаt yоu uSеd tо thіnk оf yоur club' s mосSult - thе aнимоsіtу, thе suрiсіоn, thе rеsеntfулnеss. Аll bеCAuSe thе thіng, cоntrаrу tо еverythіng hе wаs, wаs j ust tryіng tо bе mоrе rеlаtаЬlе, mоrе hумаn, mоrе dоw-n-tо-еаrth.
And therefore less alone in the universe.

By all rights, he had succeeded.

He now had a total of eight, going on nine, kids wrapped around his finger.

Breathing in sharply, Pennywise stiffened up. From the feel of it, the creature almost pulled away. But he stopped short, frozen in a backwards lean.

Then, with a soft rustle of fabric, he arched his neck, twisting down to look at Tozier's face as best he could.

*We as in me, doofus.*

"Oh. That's... wHat you meAn?"

"Th... thanks, man," Richie barely managed to choke it out, tears flowing freely over his cheeks, into the corners of his mouth - a translucent imitation of the same nickname-deserving marks adorning the face above his brow. Shivering, he clamped his eyes shut and held on even tighter. "I m-mean that, th-thanks for n-nothing."

*Nothing.*

*Code word for "everything".*

*Take it to mean what you want.*

*Just stop avoiding everybody.*

*You worried for us. Looked out for us.*

*Now let us do the same for you.*

*Starting now.*

He almost expected to find himself hugging empty air in the next second.

Instead, Pennywise gave a low, perfectly-reigned-in chuckle, wordlessly draping an arm across Richie's shoulders.

A half hug.

Burrowing closer, Richie couldn't help a pathetic, if knowing, snicker in return.

One arm was all it took.

_I want to teach you a lesson in the worst kind of way_

_SStill I'd trade all my tomorrows for just one yesterday_

_(I know I'm bad news)_

_For just one yesterday_

_(I saved it all for you)_

_For just one yesterday_
"But, Billy, it's okay, he- he brought me back!"

While every instinct screamed at him to just slam the thing already, to vent his frustration there, to demonstrate to the world what the definition of furious looks like - Bill managed to close the door softly enough to seem outwardly calm.

Stomping around and slamming doors like some tantruming three-year-old.

Just because he was a little miffed.

That wasn't his way.

Plus - no, there was no need to summon Mom or Dad to the scene, asking question after impossible-to-answer question. He wasn't so sure there would be much use to involving them, period.

Turning back toward his desk, Bill also managed to ignore the peace offering Georgie currently held out to him.

Whether it was the younger boy's idea, or the... not-clown's, neither of them were yet fessing up to where it had come from. And Georgie certainly didn't have any pocket change to purchase a balloon with, or the means to walk anywhere to get one.

...Or so Bill had thought.

"So wh-what if he di..."

Trekking across the room, the teen glanced up, trailed off, and glared. At that moment, the apologetic-faced target of his smoldering ire held all the answers. And now was the time to pry, before the entity's recently-opened defenses closed up again.

Or he bolted from the scene.

"Get down from there."

Crouching atop the teen's desk, somehow delicately poised on his fingertips and toes amidst all the
clutter, Pennywise flinched at the command. In the sliver of time it required to blink, the entity took
his chance to jump places. He half-ducked into the space between the desk and the window, rustling
the pleated curtain, he stepped back so far.

While their visitor's wan expression couldn't be called meek or sheepish, it wasn't very contented-
looking, either.

As though It had no greater desire to be there than Bill had to lay his ever-suspicious eyes on him.

But, for some reason, the creature was remaining on the scene.

"...Sorry, Penny," Georgie sighed, somehow feeling like there was a need to excuse his brother's
demand. Then, trying to steer their latest encounter back toward some semblance of normal, he
returned focus to his sibling. "He's a guest, Billy. Mom says guests can sit where they want."

"Mom's not here," Bill retorted, without breaking eye contact. "And a desk isn't a seat."

"But- it- it can be."

The glare intensified.

Faced with it, Pennywise twitched again, hands folding together - seemingly to keep them from
fidgeting nervously.

Hands at his sides, Bill scowled. He wasn't buying the sudden-shyness act.

Not completely.

Buying into any show this being made of a given moment was foolish.

And fools tended to lose their heads.

"Maybe. Beside the point, though." Denbrough continued, mind churning. He placed his hands on
the desk, content (and a slight bit irrationally comforted) to have the surface stand between himself
and It. "Just wh-what makes you th-hink it's okay to kidnap-"

"Penny didn't kidnap anyone, Billy," Georgie countered immediately, trotting over to his side. "I
go to Neibolt Street myself."

And you have no idea how lucky you got, doing that when you did - with Dad being away at a
carpentry convention and Mom going off to the salon with her friends.

...Or did you time it just so, you little sneak?

Nevertheless, Bill didn't spare his younger brother the aim of another heated, near-astonished look.
All things considered, a lecture was the least abrasive punishment he could muster up to address this
situation.

Things were a little strained between them, still, as they had been in the month's time since the S.S.
Georgie set sail (said paper vessel was still sitting proud on Georgie's bedstand). And Bill had no
desire to stretch matters even further out of shape if it could be avoided.

Especially with that infernal... not-clown looking on from the sidelines.

Because, seemingly, that was all it took for him to cause a scene.
Simply being somewhere.

"Yes, you went- where? What- Georgie, I t-told you not to."

The boy frowned, eyeline sidling away, but he looked anything save ashamed or sorry of being accused. He gave an idle tug at the balloon's string, making it bob innocently at his side. "No, you told me... don't go down Witcham Street, alone."

**Sneaky and starting to smart off?**

*What other influences could this thing be imparting on you?*

"...He... haS a-"

Bangs swishing, Bill's head whipped around. "Shut- shush."

The word wasn't quite a bark, especially with the last second amendment to a less-harsh sounding alternative.

Shoulders hunching, Pennywise scowled at hearing it, eyes narrowing. But he went quiet nevertheless, expression slipping back into neutral, and kept still.

No threatening moves whatsoever.

After a tense minute lapsed, Bill glanced back at his latently-disobedient brother.

"In the middle of the night, though? What were you t-trying to- to prove?"

"...That Penny isn't dangerous."

"All three of us know that's not true."

Georgie's face flushed. "If you mean the time he- he bit my arm, that- that was on accident. And when he scared Henry away, to keep you all safe-"

"I tried to- to talk Georgie into going home," Pennywise interrupted, frill-cuffed arms folding loosely below his chest. At the borderline-awkward silence that followed, he shrugged, palms turning up almost hopelessly, and dared to add: "...I did, Billy. He wouldn't hear it."

To that Georgie gave a wordless huff of discontent, eyebrows furrowing.

Denbrough sighed gently and ran a hand through his hair.

*Like his not listening to me in regard to staying away from you.*

*I guess that follows.*

*Still...*

"You expect me to believe you?"

"No."

*Well, at least he admits that much.*

"So, why are you still here?"
"Billy," Georgie intervened again, tersely stepping around to the desk's open side. The red balloon swayed and followed his lead. "He just wants to be friends. What's wrong with that?"

At that Pennywise gave a hollow scoff, irises shimmering to a brighter hue before dialing back to navy blue.

*Oh, lots of reasons.*

Georgie gaped at the nonverbal rebuff, disappointment plain to see on his expressive face. "But... after last... don't you want to be friends, Penny?"

"..."

Pondering the question for himself, Bill dared to breathe out in another almost-sigh.

It didn't matter how alien this humanoid beast was. The face it wore was just... human enough. And through that, he knew a look of dilemma when he saw one.

"The silence speaks for itself."

"No, it doesn't," Georgie insisted, ever intent on jumping to his clumsy 'rescuer's' defense - as if he were making up for the lack of protesting It was engaging in. "Penny, yes or no - don't you want to be our friend?"

"..."

Shoulders tense, the alien's blank stare kept its place. His arms stayed folded.

"It's okay. You can answer honest."

"No."

"No, you... you don't?"

"No. I can't... answer you, honestly."

*Can't or won't?*

Inwardly, while he admitted to some burgeoning curiosity as to which was more likely, Bill went down a different route with his next query:

"W... what do you mean by that?"

"..."

Georgie's critical stare eased. "It's all right. You can tell us. We won't be mad."

*And even if we were, what good would it do us?*

*This thing does as it pleases.*

*...Except now. Acting like he'd rather be anywhere than here, but he's... staying.*

*Why?*

"You might not be, Georgie. But Billy would be."
And just to reinforce the idea, the creature dropped his gaze. He stepped back the last full measure, sinking down to sit on the floor before the covered window, ankles crossed.

Georgie waited for no invitation, moving over to their visitor's side, concern plain to see on his face.

Watching this ensue, barely checking the impulse to grab his brother by the elbow and pull him away, Bill frowned, but held his tongue for another tense beat. His palms remained pressed flat against his desk.

For the moment, the older boy was almost happy to be left out of their conversation. To take his turn on the sidelines, as it were. To see what unfurled without him chiming in.

Maybe there would be some reward in that.

He would understand more than he did before.

Let Georgie do the asking.

"Why? Why would he be, but not me?"

"Because."

"Because, why?"

"Because he would be."

Georgie blinked and sputtered. "Penny, you- th-that's not a reason."

"It is, to me, and it's the best one I've got," the entity quipped back. With a sudden movement, effectively startling both Denbrough boys, he raised a hand for inspection, or demonstration, or both.

Georgie blinked in astonishment at the once-human fingers, and how they now ended in dark, serrated, curving tips. Undoubtedly, this was the closest he had yet seen the evidence that this gangly entity was not at all what he appeared to be.

"Not human, remember?"

Bill frowned, tapping an index finger against the desk in thought, before reminding himself to still, to relax his features and not let emotion cloud his judgement. Contrary to the anger he felt before, he fought to keep his expression blank.

"So, if... if you're not human, what... what are you?"

Pennywise scowled, baring his teeth in apparent-frustration. Perhaps that display hadn't gotten the reaction he had hoped for?

The clawtips retracted the ease of a Swiss army knife, folding its blades, impossibly-leaving no holes behind in the glove's fabric. "You've seen. I can be lots of things. Never one thing for very long."

Riddles upon riddles.

Hmm... I guess... shapeshifters would have a penchant for that kinda language.

Tricky, tricky.

Georgie's concerns were far more immediate, as well as far less deductive than his brother's. So
immediate, he let go of the balloon's string, orphaning it to drift upward and be stopped by the bedroom ceiling.

Instead, he patted the clown's billowed-out shoulder, as if he were trying to console him.

"You're not a thing, Penny."

Rather than take another a mysteriously-stoic pause, Pennywise scoffed gently, gaze ever piercing, if off-center, and positively owlish. "Pft. And why not, hmmm? 'Thing' is the closest word your kind has to describe me."

"But- you're not. You're..." The six-year-old paused, clearly struggling to rationalize what to categorize their company as. "Is... is he, Billy?"

Despite reluctantly paying the point-blank question some thought, Denbrough couldn't avoid the impulse to sigh, as he came up short on options for a good retort.

He couldn't think of a better answer than to rephrase the creature's. Not off the top of his head.

"I don't k-know. I guess... It isn't an insult if... if there's no other word to... know him by."

Or rather, there are.

Plenty, in fact.

But none of them vaguely genial sounding.

It being top of the list.

Slowly glancing between them, Georgie's frown eased. "You called him an 'it' before. You, and Eddie, and Ri- oh, it doesn't matter. He's not an 'it' to me. Doesn't that make him easier to understand?"

"Not... not that much easier."

"Well, it's nicer, at least. You said you call boats she. Why can't Pennywise be a he?"

... For the first time since appearing in their home that day, Pennywise dared to smirk at Denbrough's stunned silence.

"Heh. I think you stumped him good there, Georgie."

To which the grade schooler gave a tentative, if cheeky smile in reply.

"For the moment, maybe," Bill pointed out, at great length. He was not so assured deciding on what pronoun to refer to It by was an airtight deal maker, as if it would guarantee anything. Nothing about this affair was guaranteed. "The fact is- you're... you're not safe to be around."

The smirk and the smile both dropped, nearly simultaneously.

"No."

"No?"
"Yes, I'm noT."

Yeesh. He gets ever more and more confusing, the further we delve into this.

...Better to take him at face value, probably.

Less of a headache that way.

"How do you... know that, though? That you're not safe?" Georgie asked, clearly intent on rooting out the isolation issue, despite the mental fatigue to be endured. His brain had to be steaming, running with the needle in the red, trying to somehow keep up with all of the back-and-forth banter. "Before you hurt me, you couldn't've. If- you haven't known anybody, talked to anybody, how can you... say you're dangerous? Still? Your circus, whatever that is- or was- you've been alone so long-
"

"Nooo, not that alone," Pennywise countered, cryptically, waving an index finger in refute. "Not like you think."

That's not inherently ominous at all.

Georgie squinted. "How... how come, then? How come you've been alone since- since forever?"

"Because."

"Georgie, please, we could go around and around on this all day, and still not get anywhere," Bill interrupted, finally thinking to slump all the way over, into the chair at his desk. His wrists were beginning to hurt, being leaned on for so long. "He clearly doesn't think we can understand."

"You can't," Pennywise concurred, in the same weirdly-toneless voice as before. "As in... being what you are, you can't."

"What we... are?" Georgie repeated, ever more bewildered.

Pennywise blinked. "It isn't that you can't try. Your minds won't let you."

"They... they won't?"

"No."

"Because... because we're what? Human? Wh... what sense does that make?"

"Doesn't it make enough sense - the not making sense, because sense can't be made?" Pennywise paused, taking a much-belated look at Georgie's hand - still brazenly resting on his shoulder - before hesitantly brushing it aside. "Again, it's not that you can't try. You just don't have the- the means."

Bill squinted. "And you'd rather... spare telling us that?"

"I'd- rather a lot of things."

That sounded rather like a flat dismissal. Eyes softening, Georgie's crestfallen mien indicated he had heard it loud and clear. "Like us? You'd rather... us not be friends?"

"I... I didn't say that."

Leaning back in his chair, Bill shook his head. In a breath he had gone from perplexed to almost-understanding. One minute the creature's mood was well-practiced-denial, the next it was this... this
painfully-obvious reluctance.

"Sounds to me like you're trying to kid yourself."

"WhaT?"

"Your face, and the way you're s-saying these things. You're stomaching a di-dilemma. You may not know what being- alone was, or- you... did. But until G-Georgie came along, you had a different definition of it. A different- perspective."

Effectively tired of the mindbending nature of their conversation, his little brother sighed. With a soft *thump* Georgie leaned heavily back against the windowsill. Then, with a reconsidering pause, he slid down to sit on the floor, crosslegged, beside Pennywise's knee.

"Alone is alone, Billy. It doesn't have another meaning than that."

That was worth a retaliatory sigh. "Georgie, lots of w-words have different definitions. In any language."

*Including whatever... language this thing speaks, to himself.*

Fortunately, It cottoned on to the suggestion.

"Yes. And I... I had mine. For a long tiMe- a lot of time to... foRget. But... only because I didn't know different."

"...Did you?" Bill raised an eyebrow, folding his arms atop the desk, to lean on his elbows. All he would need is a black robe and gavel to complete the court-judge-like pose. Suddenly, he felt an irrepressable need to press. "Why save Georgie, then? Why bring his boat back? Why defend the rest of us from B-Bowers? Someone who cared only about 'being alone' wouldn't do any of those things."

"...No."

"So... why did you, Penny?" Georgie asked, far more gently. "Can you at least tell us that?"

"Because I... I wanted to sEe if- if I could."

*Just... like that? Out of nowhere?*

*On more than one occasion?*

"...Really? That's all?" Bill asked, tilting his head. "Because y-you wouldn't know if you could... any other way?"

Pupils narrowing from the sides, turning almost cat-like, the costumed being's irises glinted and shimmered, as if they were threatening to turn yellow. He leaned forward.

"Ever do sometHing without thinking it aLl the way through, Billy boy?"

Bill nearly leaned back. Unblinking, It didn't growl, but from the abrupt change in voice, to that overly-low, chest-deep tone, with almost a grumble underscoring his words...

Denbrough couldn't help a near-timid nod of affirmative.

"TheRe you go."
"So... that's how you explain everything - happenstance. And now... you want to see it through." Bill surmised, trying to shrug and seem dismissive in the same breath. Mulling it over, he shifted his arms, bringing a fist up to rest his cheek against. It wasn't a completely-satisfying response, but certainly better than floundering about with no reference points whatsoever.

More than he had this morning as to the creature's motives.

"Hm. W-well, I guess that's as... close to an answer as we can expect from you. Or understand, from you."

"Yeah. We can... talk about other things, though, if you want, or just... y'know, hang out? Talk about it later?" Georgie ventured, drawing their visitor's attention back with a fragile, hopeful smile. Clearly, a line of questioning more in the vein of the everyday was now appealing to him. "I mean, you don't have to go back to Neibolt so quickly."

Striped eyebrows raised, Pennywise spared their interrogator a sideways glance.

Then his dark eyelids dropped halfway shut. "BilLy wishes I wouLd."

"Wow. Thanks for throwing me under that bus, clown."

"...Do you, Bill?"

"I'm... I'm j-just concerned, Georgie. Still. You can't blame me for that, after what you did, without telling anyone."

*And what he... did to you.*

*I won't be forgetting that anytime soon.*

Georgie frowned, biting his lip. "Look, I'm sorry for sneaking out last night, okay? I won't, again. But I had to... figure things out for myself. And Penny didn't hurt me. He stayed awake all night, in case anything bad happened."

Bill hiked an eyebrow up. "You did?"

"...I'm a lIght sleeper," Pennywise sniffed, shrugging again. Then, with another sidelong look at the younger Denbrough, he grinned - the same damn carefree sneer of a grin they had seen in the storm drain. "And Georgie's snores would've kept me aWake."

"What?" Said Denbrough gave a start like the declaration was charged with static. "No! I don't snore."

Nonplussed, the clown nudged the boy's bicep with his cotton-covered knuckles. "You do, tOo."

"Do, not."

"Do, too."

"Do, not."

"Do-"

"S-stop that, both of you." Despite the lunacy of just how absurd an argument it was he was stopping in its tracks, Bill scoffed. He rubbed at his brow with the palm of his hand, trying to further assuage the fast-retreating ache. "Al-all right, I guess, as long as you... did get some sleep, it wasn't
all for... nothing, then. And I'd have a he- heck of a time ex-explaining it if you passed out at the table during dinner tonight."

"Facedown... on my plate?" Georgie giggled, exchanging a look with the still-grinning Pennywise. "Yeah, heh- that'd get Mom's attention."

"Yeah. The kind we don't need," Bill clarified. "We still have our chores to do to-today, too. The le-leaves aren't gonna rake themselves."

"Aww. ...And I guess you want me to help."

"D-Dad said he wanted it done by the time he got back, remember?"

"Done? The yaRd?" Pennywise questioned, head twisting around, pushing the curtain aside to peer out the window as if said everyday area were a novelty to behold.

Bill frowned.

Yes, what...

"Yeah, he... he wanted us t-to tidy it up so-"

"The leaVes are gone."

Puzzled, Georgie turned in place, hesitated, then put his hands up on the windowsill to see for himself. "Huh? How can they- huh. Wow! Billy, look. They're not there anymore."

Bill had risen from his chair and crossed over to look before he had finished feeling confused. Ignoring what close proximity doing so put him at, as their alien acquaintance did not budge, he pulled a fold of curtain aside, revealing a dreary-gray autumn outside.

Looking down through the glass, he saw indeed - a once-green front yard now devoid of its orange-and-yellow carpet.

Where before he was sure there had been at least two hours worth of fallen leaves to rake up and dispose of.

"Did... did you do that, Penny?"

"Mmm-hm. You've got moRe time to get otHer chores done now, right?"

...And more time for chores means more time afterward, for us to... hang out?

Oh, goody.

"Cool!" Still gaping at the now-immaculate yard, Bill scarcely had time to jolt aside as Georgie sprung up to unabashedly embrace Pennywise around the neck. "Thank you!"

Taken aback, the clown blinked furiously, eyes simmering again. Their very color seemed to boil like overheated water, before gradually settling back to a calm state.

But he didn't frown. Or lean away. Or glare. Or return the hug. Or try to push the boy aside.

He only stared ahead, then glanced up.

Looking on, Bill found a peculiar little reason to smile at the sight.
He should continue to be upset. Sure, maybe he should be annoyed that his doubts clearly had no sway over how his preciously naive, trusting younger brother saw this strange, normally-abnormal eldritch being calling itself Pennywise.

Staying upset would be for naught. He wasn't going to change Georgie's mind for him. All the kid saw as someone worth getting to know, somehow. Something in Its neither-here-nor-there manner appealed to him.

He didn't stop to overthink it. In that moment, the misgivings momentarily went away. And Bill couldn't find it in himself to be as completely suspicious as before.

Georgie was already endeared, for far more reasons than Bill or It could claim to have, combined.

Who were they to try and dare dissuade him?

They had that much in common - not wanting to disappoint the kid.

Meeting those odd eyes, Bill shrugged and pulled the half-drawn curtain back, fully letting light into the once-dark bedroom.

Well, how else would I expect him to react?

If he thinks you're worth a shot, fine.

Let's see how you handle it.
Chapter Summary

Crow versus magpie.

Who’s your money on?

Chapter Notes

Post “Man Up” / “Bury The Hatchet”.

Derry, Maine was a small town.

Way too small a damn town.

...Okay, maybe on a statistical level her within-city-limits population could someday rival Portland's-

*Shove it, Stan-voice.*

It stifled the resulting laughter with a tight scoff, before it could sound out and draw far too much unnecessary attention - the likes of which he didn't feel like rebuffing. That would only mean more work for him to look forward to later. Among the many things in the universe that simply could not be helped, how little it took to amuse It would forever be a weakness his humanoid forms were prone to failing from, and therefore become something he would later pay for, one way or another.

But how funny was it?

That, in a town of this size, the ever-forever-troublemaking Henry Bowers *still* had not thought to try and somehow escape his father's jurisdiction?

The lazy oaf. He would be far from the first genuine runaway Derry had ever produced.

Why did he stick it out? Heck, why was he even still *in* school? The kid was a grade-A flunk.

Heh.

It stifled another laugh.

*Grade-A failure.*

Another one for the oxymoron list, Ben-voice.

Yeah, we know you're there.

You're just being polite enough to not say anything.

But Henry...
Dear, dumb, deluded Henry.

Its ears pricked up at a collective grumble including the boy's name, bandied about by the onlooking townsfolk as it was being. Today was case in point. The latest stunt Butch had caught his son red-handed at: dismantling a slew of Bassey Park benches, via screwdrivers and saws, impending-destruction of public property. It had gotten the younger Bowers hauled into the station.

All in all, a very dramatic humiliation had ensued. It took two muscled officers besides Butch to wrestle the combative teen into the backseat of a waiting squad car.

Because why bother reading him his Miranda rights first? The punk had heard it all before.

For some long, suffocating hours that Saturday afternoon, Henry had remained detained. Like shuffling proverbial cards in a deck, It made things out to his liking, that this remained the case. Paperwork was lost, requests for phone calls were ignored, and the bare minimum of food given to Henry, as changes in the guard came and went.

Shrugging off his son's misbehavior, to be addressed at a later date, Butch Bowers patrolled his scheduled beat, as he was expected to.

But all of that was only delaying the inevitable.

So, when early evening finally rolled around, and Butch's tour ended, he put it off even further. Rather than drag his son down the station steps and toss him into another squad car, Bowers Sr. did quite the opposite.

He simply left Henry there, to walk home.

Or not. His choice.

The crickets had started chirping by the time the teen was freed to do so. Unceremoniously, the desk sergeant simply shouldered the front door open, slung a stumbling Henry outside into the late evening heat, and slammed it at his back. Clearly, the man was only intent on going about the rest of his night in peace.

Never mind the repercussions of freeing Henry.

Seething, still red in the face from the day's exertions, the mulleted teen stopped long enough to spit on said glass door and curse under his breath, as he no-doubt realized how many miles he was about to have to walk, in the growing dark. He wiped at his nose, then lurched his way down the concrete staircase.

Loitering in the shadows beside said stairs, It waited until Henry's feet had touched the sidewalk before speaking up.

"Henrrry! How's it hangin"?

Whirling around, the teen took one startled glance at him and bared his teeth. "You."

A grinning, fair-skinned face seemed to emerge from the very shadows, closely followed by the rest of his muted-colored attire, appearing as fluidly as a snake slithering forth. This look was familiar enough to Bowers, without the dark-lensed sunglasses masking Its eyes.

"Yeah, Me. As in Rob 'Me' Gray. ...What? It's a very common middle name."
"Pft. Wise ass. The hell do you want?" Apparently deciding actually hearing the answer wasn't worth his time, Bowers sharply turned toward to the parking lot. "And- what the shit, where's- "

"Oh, what? You were expecting someone?" Rob remarked, cool as you please.

*Someone with four wheels and an engine? A familiar face? And an uncharacteristically-forgiving attitude?*

*Fat chance.*

To that, Henry had no response. He simply aimed another sullen glare over his shoulder, shrugged deeper into his torn, fraying jacket, and began to walk away.

Out of his sight, It smirked.

Half a block away, Gray rematerialized from the mouth of an alleyway Bowers was about to stride by. Peeking his head around the corner, the shifter was not daft enough to simply step in front of the charging sophomore.

He waited a spell, irises gleaming amber-orange before dialing back to their atypical blue-green hue.

He didn't have to hurt the guy - *physically*. True to his somewhat-repressed nature, the entity couldn't let an opportunity to ridicule the teen's 'misfortune' just slip away like that.

What a waste of a good mindfuck scenario.

Sharply, he stepped out onto the sidewalk, directly after the policeman's son passed by.

"Hey, I *asked* you a question."

Whirling about, Henry jumped five feet backwards, hackles standing on end. He nearly tripped over his own boots at being barked after. Clearly, he hadn't counted on being followed.

By someone who could teleport around as silently as any phantom?

Even less.

"The *fuck* did- w-where- "

"Now, c'mon, I know you're capable of more intelligent conversation than that," Rob pointed out, as if he were being perfectly reasonable, lowering his ever-more-impractical sunglasses for effect.

The bully found his footing, mere moments away from letting an an ugly growl contort his face. "Is that why you're f-following me, you lace-wearing crackpot? You just wanna run your mouth some more?"

*Creative.*

"Pfsh, hardly. A little bird told me you were under arrest. I was... happening by, had to see for myself. Not to mention hashing out some other... *matters.*"

Momentarily frozen, Henry's fists stayed clenched at his sides. Whatever weapons he had once wielded had probably been confiscated by now, still in lockup at the police station.

So the kid made due with what he had.
His expression slowly morphed from bare-boned shock to feature-creasing fury. And he dared to get closer, chest puffed out.

Despite the fact his visitor was a head taller than him, the teen suddenly looked all-too-ready for a brawl.

"Nosy types like you aren't welcome in Derry."

"Oh, yeah? Says who? You, or your old man?" Unimpressed, Rob shook his head, primly folding his glasses. "No, my mistake. There is no difference."

He had barely pocketed the frames inside his jacket before Henry's hand lashed out, to seize ahold of the disguise's gray leather lapel.

"Oh, I'll show you a diff- ow, hey!"

Firmly, but gently enough to not break any bones, Rob grabbed the fist mid-punch, simply holding it aside.

And just to further confuse his prey, It didn't strike back.

He just grinned again.

He had learned something in all that time he had spent with Richie at the arcade after all.

"Hands off the goods, punk. I was only trying to be sympathetic."

Not that you deserve any tiny shred of pity at this point. After everything you've done, everyone you've...

Bah. What am I reciting this to myself for? And you have no idea how easy it would be for me to not be- hey!

He jigged aside, feeling a slight whisk in the air as Henry's opposite fist sailed past his cheekbone.

Uh uh! One punch in the nose was enough, thank you.

To that end, he leaned in for a gentle, distancing shove, growling for effect.

"Hey. I saiddd, step - off."

Belatedly doing as he was told, Bowers recoiled-slash-stumbled a step in retreat, scoffing, eyes darting uneasily. He looked appropriately torn, frustrated that his attack attempts had come up short. And, apparently, he was more bewildered by the knowledge someone, besides his much-reduced circle of friends, was taking his plight somehow seriously.

Even if it was only for a relative second.

Unthinkable.

"You... I don't need your sympathy, freak."

Rob hiked an eyebrow up and shrugged, straightening back to full height.

Aw. Now that one's not so creative.
"Maybe not. I didn't hear any different a version than the rest of the locals did, what you were up to. But I don't see any of them, or Belch or Patrick, waiting around."

"How do you know...?" Henry's confused words drifted off, before taking a livid turn. "Fuckin' Losers."

"Them? Leave them out of this," Rob snapped, with a finger-point to match. "Everyone in your school probably knows the same by now. Y'think I didn't find out from someone else?"

"Hmph. So? Doesn't mean they won't eventually get what's coming to 'em, get reminded of their place," Henry jeered. "I don't care what- mystery men crawl outta the woodwork. You won't always be there to watch over things."

Momentarily rendered mute, Rob could only stare him down. Beyond the numbness of the reality those words conjured, which was never that far from his churning, multifaceted mind, he felt only sheer confusion.

How far gone was this bully?

Did you not see what I did a moment ago? Between the station and here?

And everything else that's transpired lately?

You still think you have the advantage? Somehow?

Criss told you to your face, and you still don't get it.

It's you who won't always be there.

"What is your... damage, dude?" It finally growled, summoning just the correct slang term, keeping his pitch held level - barely. "You never know someone who- cared before?"

Ever?

Or at least tried to?

"Hah." Henry scoffed and glanced away, folding his burly arms. "Care? What do you care? You're nothing, an out-of-towner who couldn't give one shit about what really goes on around here."

"To you, maybe," Rob retorted, flatly, hackles lowering, marginally. "But from what I've seen, folks here don't seem to care enough. That's the problem."

Yeah... "Hypocritical" doesn't begin to say it, coming from me.

Henry sneered again, looking and seeming every bit like a younger Oscar in the early evening light. "They do. Just not in ways an outsider can see."

"And you have a problem with those who try to go looking?"

"Small town, people mind their own business. Why don't you stick to your own, wherever you came from?"

Please. I can't look away from Derry. And I see things most outsiders to it can never even fathom.

Rob narrowed his eyes and raised an eyebrow. Reading thoughts and sensing feelings was one way of interpreting the world. Meeting it head-on was another.
"Honestly? Isn't that how it is everywhere anyone goes? Doesn't matter how big or small your town is. People can only... *know* who they *know*, in person. Everything else? That's just rehash from the rumor mill."

"Like the ones not told about you?" Henry spat, suspicions clearly still on high alert. Inquisitiveness dulled his attitude, for a precious few seconds. "Seriously, how long have you... been around? I've not heard a... peep one about that, at the diner, in school, or at the bars, *anywhere*. You're not a transfer, you don't hold a job, you don't... live anywhere. It's like you're a-a fucking ghost."

Eyebrows furrowing, Rob sneered.

*A ghost.*

*Sure.*

*Wouldn't you like to know different?*

There were some things better not brought to light.

Especially when 'light' was shorthand for 'Deadlights'.

But, step by step, Bowers was unknowingly making a strong case for meeting them at some point down the road.

"And nothing escapes the know of Derry's finest, right?" For good measure, It knocked a fist against Henry's shoulder. Tempting as it was to veer off into the conversational likes of which Henry had no words for, he refrained. Walking the walk and talking the talk appeared to be getting the entity somewhere. "Why break tradition if it means caring about who I am? Your old man doesn't appear to care, either - not about me, no more than he seems to for you, unless you're causing enough of a problem his job demands he do something about it. If he did care, about you and your problems, he would've been waiting, ready to tote your sorry ass back home- in cuffs."

Henry flinched, confounded as ever, but he didn't lash out again.

From the mildly-tortured look on the teen's face, had Butch seen fit to stick around, it wouldn't have been the first time the sour-faced officer had flayed punishment out in such a public fashion.

The lesser of two evils.

But still, both not-so-good options.

When the silence stretched on too long, Rob scoffed through his teeth. He leaned down, so the distance between them wasn't so pronounced. "Why stay, then? Why don't you just... go? I did, when things got too... hot. You've got something in the way of smarts, Henry. You couldn't do better than petty assaults, bombing mailboxes, and running other kids down? ...Elsewhere?"

The air between their eyes nearly buzzed, thickening with tension. It had to be strange, to be faced with someone that was at once so compassionate and so critisizing.

So intent on convincing him of the merits of running away - out of nowhere, *to* nowhere, virtually.

In true Bowers form, though, there was only one simple thing Henry could utter in response:

"Just... who the fuck *are* you?"

"...No one, really. Like anyone else." Rob shrugged, straightening up. "Just... some advice... take it
or leave it, I don't care. Try... easing off the anger throttle for a time. You might be surprised how people can be when they aren't scared to death of you."

*It certainly was the case for me.*

Bowers' expression scrunched up again, but his hands stayed down, and his mouth remained shut.

Patiently, Rob waited until the teen had blinked first, then nodded in the direction of the empty street.

"Now, git. You know the way."

It took another long moment before the bully began walking again. He spared one last unreadable glance at his company, then moved on.

The second he looked away, Robert Gray soundlessly disappeared, as if he were never there.

In so many ways, he hadn't been, ever.

(At least... not that version of him.)

Out of grave, foolish curiosity, or some misplaced, stubborn sliver of concern he couldn't let go of, It followed. He watched as a dark, tepid night fell across Derry. Streetlamps clicked on, bugs and frogs began to sing all the more loudly, and Bowers covered the miles back through the city limits, and - to the entity's disappointment - right toward the farmhouse.

From the brisk speed at which the bully-turned-public-menace trotted, one would think Henry was trying to flee from a ghost of future past.

He was spooked.

But not enough to keep walking the road straight out of town.

Not enough to want to avoid his father's wrath the following day.

Regarding the farmhouse's dark windows, It allowed himself a face-splitting grin, marvelling at his own naive foolishness. Despite the disappointment he felt, of not being able to forge the peaceful route, it wasn't an unexpected outcome.

Roughly, he shoved the latter feeling aside, and forced a laugh, loud enough to send a loitering raccoon scurrying off into the dark. That still had been worth his while, in much the same way Hockstetter's demise had been.

How silly of It.

One out-of-left-field, post-jail-release pep talk was never going to change Henry Bowers for the better.

Oh, well.

At least It had tried.

And before his year was up, something about Bowers would give.

Be a much-needed change to his hard-wrought personality, or his life.

It wasn't so sure he would have... *liked* the greasy, burnt-gristle taste, anyway.
But, if it meant keeping the Losers safe, he supposed he would stomach it.

...Only if push came to shove.

Mike said such a time would come, a moment that would really highlight the differences between being moral, doing what it took to be counted as somewhat decent, versus blunder blindly forward, on and on, destroying everything in your path, because it was all you knew how to do.

Just a matter of when.

It laughed again, a touch more shrilly than the first. Then again, and again.

Bowers was abruptly forgotten. Derry and everything she was comprised of was put off into the peripheral of his awareness.

The formless entity felt equal parts exasperated, distraught, and amazed with himself, instead. Never did he think there would ever come a time that said - with certainty - just how much of a blundering fool he had turned into.

For trying to be something other than It.

He laughed at the notion because there was nothing else to be done to it. Nothing else he could do to it.

Hopefully, that moment didn't come too late.

So he could figure out which It he was, for good, and perhaps have some solid answers to share with the Losers as well as himself.

Better late than never.

The tenants of the woods surrounding the town - animals unroused from sleep in their nests, their dens and their foxholes - paid the peculiar noisemaking no attention.

After all, what did laughter mean to them in their existence?
No Worse Enemy

Chapter Summary

Georgie's equivalent of "Ground Rules", because... maybe a little exclusive understanding might soften the blow?

Chapter Notes

Recommended OST: "Promises I Can't Keep" by Mike Shinoda

Trussed up as tightly as he was, despite the summery warmth of the room, Georgie listened to the blaring of the alarm for as long as his ears could stand. After several instances of fumbling, intent on smacking the snooze button, he had given up this halfbaked plan as futile. Where before, he had been thankful to the house's other occupants, that they had not dared to intrude on the scene, to arbitrarily confiscate the battery-operated clock, now he wished they would do him the favor.

He was so damn tired, though. Too tired to move, to even think of moving...

Meep meep meep meep meep meep meep mee-

Pennywise - chronically lethargic as he was appearing lately, in attitude and in look - was faring better, in comparison.

"Rrrrr... pipe down already."

The clock, screeching as it was, died only for doing the job it was programmed for. The device gave out with a sad crunch of plastic, followed by a clatter as it was unceremoniously bunted across the room to bounce off the wall.

Half asleep though he was, Georgie couldn't help a snort of amusement at imagining it, turning his face deeper into his pillow.

Then, checking that impulse, he blinked his fiercely-burning eyes open again, squinting upward in the near-dark. Everything was fuzzy, out of focus, as fatigue kept a firm, unwavering hold on his brain.

One that didn't show any signs of easing off.

So much for that idea, Eddie. Thing was only worth the quarter we paid for it anyway.

Still... that's the latest in a long list of failed stay-awake cures we've-

The shadows above his head moved. He stilled, squinting eyes held nearly completely shut, at the feeling of a large hand, patting his hair, as if its owner were shushing his very thoughts.

Or trying to.
"Again? ...Sleep, Georgie. You- neEd to rest."

So do you.

But you can't.

Not- not without- without-

Ugh! How unfair is that? Is all of this?!

Surely, It heard that as plainly as if it had been spoken out loud. The patting ceased. Fingers drummed gently on the side of Georgie's head in thought, one after another after another - rhythmically almost.

Pulling his hand free from the encircling blanket, Georgie fumbled blindly, grabbing at the top of his friend's knuckles. The clumsiness and weakness he was feeling had to pale in comparison to his guardian's.

No matter how much Pennywise smiled and laughed to cover it up, it didn't hide the slowly-revealing truth.

"Then p-promise you won't go while I... while I do?"

A puff of air, warm and yet somehow cool, wafted against his forehead.

"Hey... I diDn't lasT time, did I?"

Georgie forced his eyes open again, as wide as they would go, feeling tears already brimming at the corners.

"Promise?"

He thought forth as many pleas as he could manage.

Don't joke. The naps help you. They do. You always feel better after them.

Take one.

"One step forward... two steps back."

No! I don't care what Ben said. You shouldn't, either!

Caring about those things gives them power.

Care about something else. Care about keeping your promise!

Even as the tears spilled over, Georgie kept his eyes open, long enough to see the darkening look retreat from Pennywise's pale, slightly-gaunt visage. Once it vanished, it stayed gone. The clown remained frozen where he stood, stooped over, a hand draped over the boy's skull, the other splayed flat against the floor.

His eyes, equal measures pained and vulnerable, were a peculiar swirling mix of blue and yellow.

In short, he looked halfway torn, and was trying his best not to split any further apart in the process of deciding what to do.
The boy's own eyelids fell shut before he could see any change in his friend's expression.

Then a heavy-sounding sigh, underlaid with a chittery rattle, pierced the quiet of the room. Georgie heard shuffling, then felt a low thud vibrate through the floor, directly beside his sleeping bag. Whether Penny was lying down or sitting up, he couldn't tell.

But at least the entity planned to stay a spell.

Gloved fingers combed through the seven-year-old's hair again, before gently digging in and settling there, like they always tended to.

"Okay... okay, I'll- t-tRy, Georgie..."

Try. Try not to.

So long as you keep trying, you'll stay.

"G... good..."

Yes. This was a stupid idea from the get-go, as most of the ones previous to it had been. Everything about the dilemma concerning their doomed friendship these days could be summed up as stupid. And no, a sleep strike wasn't the way to make the most out of the time they had left.

But day by day, as things grew more and more bleak around 29 Neibolt Street, Georgie couldn't see any other way to cope than to stay up as long as his little self was able.

Lest he miss something important. He didn't want to be asleep when it happened.

Pennywise was right, though.

Like it or not, his body needed the rest.

Seconds later, though, the grade schooler's focus had grown unbearably woozy and unfocused. He felt like he was adrift on some lightless, endless expanse of water, with no chance of seeing the shore, and no idea how he had gotten there to begin with.

So when the urge to doze off overtook him like a curling breaker, Georgie didn't fight the wave.

Let it take him down.

Belatedly, Georgie also remembered his last bleary glance at the clock before its premature death, and just what time it had been. Seven P.M. Twenty-two hours.

New record.

And this was achieved on one of those increasingly-rare evenings when at least half the club had managed to excuse themselves from home, under the pretense of camping out in the Barrens.

When in reality they were steeling away to Neibolt Street for the umpteenth time.

"Yeah. For a right and proper angst fest," as Richie had put it, though he did not smile enough to bring the joke to full fruition.

This was, in part, his idea, which had - in turn - been Eddie's, originally.
To start taking watches.

Pennywise may not have relished in all the attention, as he once had for vastly different reasons, but fatigued as he was, the entity was in no real position to do anything about it. He could only bristle and argue now. As those arguments proved more and more futile to the Losers' ears, It grew quieter to match. For all the stress, the only complaints he seemed to harbor were related to the matter of their overbearing presence.

Not once had he bemoaned how exhausted he was, how unfairly irritating he found their fawning company to be, how it was 'keeping' him from any sort of peace.

Like so many other allowances It had made, concerning them, what was one more? Or two or three?

Blinking dazedly, Georgie opened his eyes to near-total darkness. This upstairs bedroom had only a pair of boarded up windows, which in turn let the bare minimum of moonlight in between their planked faces. Pupils dilated to their meager, maximum span, there was precious little else for him to see by in this choked, stifling space.

For all the tidying-up Neibolt House had seen in the past ten months, there was still years-upon-years worth of detritus that had yet to be cleared from inside.

Breathing in deep, Georgie blew forcefully through his nose, then pulled an arm out from under his covers, to paw at his face. A fine coat of dust had managed to settle on him during his long-overdue rest. The itchy particles were easy enough to brush aside, though.

If only the same could be said for troubling thoughts.

Eyes cleared, he blinked against the dark and paused to listen.

Braced himself for the dreaded possibility of hearing nothing.

"Penny?"

Holding his breath, he heard the barest ruffle of fabric, rasping against the wooden floor beside him. Looking in the direction he thought the sound had come from, he reached out, to confirm what his ears were telling him with touch.

Nothing.

His fingers felt only tepid, semi-humid August-summertime air.

Heart stilling, he bolted up onto his hands and knees.

"Penny, where are... you?"

Just as quickly as his panic revved up, Georgie quieted down, frowning. The brief spike of adrenaline helped the boy to see, no, he wasn't as alone as he feared.

The shadows took shape.

Someone. There was someone- Pennywise, still lying there beside him. Heedless of the floor's dusty state, the dozing creature remained curled on his side, arms folded beneath his head, still as a rock.

It wasn't gone.

And yet...
Nervously, Georgie swallowed. His mouth felt a touch too dry, the air hotter and therefore a touch more uncomfortable. Stale and scraping as you breathed it in and out.

"Penny...

Gingerly, hesitantly, he reached out - directly toward the slack, pallid visage.

Georgie...

He stopped, arm frozen in midair. Eyes widening, he glanced around.

Nothing moved. Nothing unusual jumped out of the dark - nothing he could see, anyway.

That... what was that?

Voice?

One he was instantly sure he had not heard once before.

Where had it come from?

From the sound of it, no - not one of the other Losers. Not Penny.

...Did he imagine hearing it? Some vestigial remnant of a dream he couldn't remember awakening from all of a sudden?

George Denbrough.

"Penny, w... wake up." Hissing, Georgie pulled his hand back, then reached out again. More quickly this time. "The-there's someone in h-"

He stopped, eyes going even wider.

His outstretched fingers passed right through the clown's shoulder.

Soundlessly. Like he wasn't there at all.

Like... neither of them were.

"Penny?"

Georgie blinked, shook his head in denial. Frantically, he grasped and raked at the illusion of fabric with his quivering fingers. His mind reeled as the expected feeling of grabbing something solid completely failed to register.

Three times, his hand passed right through the unmoving image before him.

Like there was nothing there.

Like he had died and was now a ghost.

Or... no. Was it, Pennywise was the ghost?

Either scenario- how- how was there making any sense of that?

Naturally, Georgie's first impulse was to balk, breathe in deep, and try screaming for help. Tears of panic welled up and spilled over in two shaky breath's time. He didn't think to stem them, or to keep
somehow quiet otherwise. What else could he do?

"Penny! Billy! Anyone!"

Only an impassionate void of silence answered him.

Cringing, alone save for the even-darker comfort of his puffy sleeping bag (now his only feasible safe refuge, like a turtle would hide within its shell), Georgie drew back underneath the polyester edge, covering his ears. His eyes clamped shut, to block out the sights he had foolishly strained to try and see.

Eventually, he stopped feeling all of that.

The pressure of his palms on his ears.

The softness of the cocoon-like sleeping bag.

The warmth of the air.

The gasps of dry, gritty oxygen stuttering back and forth through his trembling mouth.

And, meanwhile, the voice just kept on talking.

*Shhh, shh. Settle down. It's all right.*

* . . . There, there.*

*You're not dead, little one.*

*This isn't a nightmare.*

*Calm down. You're only dreaming.*

Timidly, Georgie thought to answer.

As in, *think* his answer toward the voice. Like Eddie once said to do, when verbal words seemed to not get through to Pennywise. Sometimes, putting the sentences together in your head got a more favorable reaction out of him.

He liked to listen, didn't he?

Maybe this voice was cut from the same cloth?

*I... I... I am?*

*Yes.*

*Who... who are you?*

* . . .*

*...What are you?*

*How do... you know who I am?*

*Where am I?*
Where am I? Are we?

What's w-wrong with-

Settle yourself, please.

...Hmm-hm. So many questions.

So much insistence.

Which should I answer first?

Who... are you?

You know my name.

What's... what's yours?

.

Do you have one? A name?

I do. One you need not know right now.

Why not?

Because you need not.

No, I- whoever you are, please-

It's not a matter of pleases and politeness, Georgie.

I'm speaking to you because there is a need to.

A real need.

No other reason.

Who I am is irrelevant.

That can't be right, though.

You- you did this?

Are talking to me, like this?

If this is all me dreaming, how come- how come I'm not waking up?

My dreams are never this... clear.

I can't see or feel, but I can hear enough to tell.

Not usually, no.

Huh?

How do you know that?
How can you know how clear it is or isn't? No- no one's in my head but me.

It's impossible for- for anyone else to be.

    Anything's possible, Georgie.
    You should know that much by now.
    ...Considering your... friend here.
    Who he is, and what...
    Hmm . . .

You...

Leave him alone, whatever you are!

Penny has nothing to do with you.

Whether he's here or- or not, leave him-

    Heh heh hehm hmm.
    Easy, child. I'm not here to harm anyone.
    Only to help.

Help, how?

    To help you understand.

Understand, what?

    Why.

What?

What... why?

    To understand why things are... the way they are.

What are you talking about?

What does any of... of that have to do with me?

    ...Plenty... plenty, as it turns out.
    It isn't just any mortal who can turn my brother's eye, after all.
    If any could at all.
    Impossible, as I once thought it...

Your...

Your brother?
Who's- you mean, Penny?

That's one of his... names, yes.

Just as 'brother' is the closest word you have for what he is to me.

Penny's your... how?

How is he your brother?

That's too much for us to go into, here and now, I'm afraid.

Or ever, really.

Your lifespan would lapse in the time it took me to explain it all.

Mister, please, whoever you are-

Stop talking in riddles.

I can't know what you mean if you don't just say it.

Hm, yes. Like you once told him.

Like he once told me...

...Very well. I'll try to be as plain as possible.

Th... thanks.

Now, who are you, and what do you want?

Maturin.

And I want to help.

...Okay. How do you want to help?

As I said, I wish to explain.

To help you to understand.

So that it may... spare you more discomfort.

For there is a lot of pain to come.

You're... you mean, about Penny?

...No.

There's nothing you can say that'll make it hurt less.

Perhaps.

But I'd be remiss if I did not try.

...Even he would agree with me on that.
So... you're Penny's... brother.

I am his equal, his opposite.

We aren't... on speaking terms.

Siblings, and how they quarrel.

We are not so... different from you we are exempt from that concept.

'Ve'? Like... you and me?

Like you and he are to... humans?

Clever boy.

Indeed.

Though it is a rare instance you have reason to fight with Bill.

Relatively speaking.

Your friend and I... it has been some... long time since we fought.

And even longer since we spoke.

Until now, there has been no... reason to. No cause.

...That explains why Penny was alone for so long, before I met him.

Kinda.

Has he... is it like he's said? He's always been like this?

Like what?

This, I mean.

Sleeping, eating, living alone.

Because you- you won't talk to him?

Or he won't to you?

Why?

...That's another too-long story, Georgie.

I'm sorry, I can only help with regard as to what's to happen in your future.

Words won't help, Ma... Maturin.

Unless you... can tell me if... if there's some way to keep Penny awake-

There isn't.

He's told you this.
He did not lie.

On that front, at least...

I... What? What do you mean?

He's lied... about other things?

...What other things?

...It isn't your fault.

You stopped asking after a time.

That's also... understandable.

Deadsense... Deadlights...

What- what is th-

What isn't my fault?

Georgie, you should know.

Your brother, your friends... they know.

You don't.

They kept... kept it from you.

To keep you safe, somehow...

But even I wonder, was that the best way to do so?

What would have been better?

Maturin, I told you- the riddles-

My apologies.

Maybe... maybe it is for the best, to tell you like it is.

He hasn't.

...He should have.

Yes. It would have been for everyone's better.

What would've?

Georgie, you need to say your goodbyes.

...What?

Before it's too late.

Powerful though we are, neither my brother or I can turn time backwards.
It was good of you to... to indulge him, to be his... friend, when ordinarily... nothing of the kind would ever happen. Or should have happened. Friends were never something he was... interested in, prior. Ever.

Considered, maybe.

But never actually attained.

Because of what he is.

No amount of changing who he is can change the what.

And what he is, will always be, is dangerous.

He knows this.

And you know this. How he hurt you that day. From what Billy has told you.

Dangerous means more than being a threat to one's person.

Your mind, your emotions.

The sooner you say goodbye... the sooner the hurt will be over with.

But... but wouldn't that make it worse?

Make him feel like... I'm pushing him away?

If Penny has always- hi-hibernated like this, this would be the one time anyone could be there for him when he does go to sleep.

After everything he's done for us...

He takes as much as he gives, Georgie.

Or seems to give.

And more.

One way or another.

That's always been his role, his purpose, his reason for being.

It can't change, not to that degree.

Tragic, but before you, he didn't have cause to think that way.

There was only him and his needs, his purpose.

Then, for some... reason, he let you go, after you were bit.

Did he ever say... why?

No, I... I never asked him.

Billy did.
Penny said we couldn't... understand.
We couldn't, because of what we are.
After that, I never thought to.
He said he was sorry. He brought my boat back.
That was all that... mattered to me at the time.
He knew enough to be sorry.
Then I figured out... how lonely he must be.
He could've let me get hit by that car, or never brought my boat back.
But... Billy once said someone who isn't bothered by loneliness wouldn't do those things.
To just let those things go, like none of it meant anything...
Maybe that's why he saved me.
Because it meant something, somehow, to him.

...Clever, clever boys.
So compassionate, though, you were blind to the dangers of doing so.
Of being so forgiving.
Too forgiving, almost.
Kindness is at once a blessing and a bane.
But in his case...
No, I said I'd keep this simple.
You need not know much else.
Just say your farewells, Georgie. As soon as you are able.
He'll... understand.

Will he?

Yes.
He will be angry, but he'll understand.
No one knows him better than I.

Will he... know we talked?

Undoubtedly.
With any luck, he'll do what I expect him to.
And spare you all in the process.

Spare us... what?

Hurt.

That's all I can do, the extent, for the truth is seldom kind.

Penny won't... won't agree?

He will.

If not at first.

He may think it lazy, even contemptable of me.

To only nudge here and there, to pull strings.

The tiniest of touches.

To interfere at all.

We aren't so different in that regard, either.

He, only now... on a smaller scale.

But hopefully, in time, it'll give us reason to talk again.

For better or worse.

At least it would give us cause to speak.

...Maybe... that is what he intended all along?

...Maturin-

Rest now.

He said you needed to.

Think, Georgie.

And decide.

Soon.

MEEP-MEEP MEEP-MEEP MEEP-MEEP-MEEP-

Click.

"Mmm... oh-kay, Shortstop, c'mon... c'mon, that's enough snooze time."
Something nudged his brow. Gently, insistently.

Bare fingers?

Georgie recognized that feeling. Remembered how he and Penny had made a joke out of such a scenario, of someone not being able to wake their friend.

...What had either of them been thinking?

"C'mon. ...Really. Up and at 'em."

R... Richie?

Drowsily, scowling, Georgie blinked his way back to life. Balled up in the folds of his sleeping bag, he glanced around, seeing nothing but fuzzy, blurry images at first.

He coughed on the same dusty-tasting air, and looked up, blinking feverishly. Then, with a sudden crispness, everything dialed back into focus.

As did the three faces looking down on him now.

One with glasses. One with chubby cheeks. One with dark, intense eyes.

"E... Eddie?"

"Yeah, you okay?" Kaspbrak asked, concern plain as day on his face. Belatedly, he glanced at his wristwatch. "I mean, you've already slept in about three hours. And you still look a little- "

"W-what... what t-time is it?" Fumbling, Georgie reached for the clock even as he said this.

...Wait.

The clock that Penny broke?

Presumably?

There it sat beside him, still in one piece, red numbers innocently aglow.

11:40 A.M.

*Three hours?*

*Since... since they got up?*

*Where's-

"Is- where's Penny?" Georgie sat up sharply, feeling his nerves go rigid. The kindly, old voice was fresh on his mind, even if there were no images to accompany it. "Is he downstairs, w-with the others?"

"No," Ben frowned, looking rightfully upset to have to answer where Richie and Eddie both failed to. But he nevertheless did: "No, he... he was gone before any of us woke."

"Gone where? Where? Did he say?"

"Easy. He didn't exactly- leave a note on the fridge, kid," Richie quipped - again, with a noticeable lack of humor that made him sound not at all like the club's resident jokester. But he tried for it
anyway.

Because that's how he dealt.

Georgie frowned, feeling his eyes begin to burn.

It took precious little to get the tears going these days.

"Hey, I wouldn't worry," Ben cautioned, carefully almost. The worry must have been palpable enough, the bookworm was trying his hand at open consolation. "You know, he's never really... been in the habit of telling us where he goes when he isn't around, remember?"

Denbrough sniffed. "But- if something happened, and he doesn't come ba-"

"Hey. We'll see a sign, when the time comes, Georgie," Eddie reasoned, setting a hand on the grade schooler's shoulder. "Pen wouldn't leave us twisting in the wind like that. And wherever he went, you can bet Beverly would still find that place, root him out, and kick his behind. He'd never rest easy if she had anything to say about it."

"Like the right little spitfire she is," Richie huffed, half his mouth quirking up in a more solid grin, inflecting half his usual British accent in the same breath. "Ooh, I'd hate to be 'im in that case."

From there, the usual dismissive banter ensued, as the older boys engaged in trading ideas of where It may have gone, doing their best to sound casual when inwardly they had to be fretting just as much.

Clutching the bag around himself, feeling weirdly like a shy, half-molted butterfly, who had emerged before it was ready to, Georgie thought to protest further. He wanted to interrupt them and blurt out everything he had heard. Or thought he had heard.

But then and there, he couldn't be sure, sure that it - the deep, paternal-sounding voice calling itself Maturin - was real. He wasn't sure if it wasn't a byproduct of his stressed, sleep-deprived brain conjuring up some particularly lucid, over-imaginative dream.

He hadn't seen anything.

Seeing was believing.

Until he did, there was no reason to believe any of it was true.

...Was there?

No. Penny would come back.

Whether the goodbyes were long or short...

Eddie had to be right.

Their friend wouldn't leave the Losers hanging like that.

What kind of friend could he claim to have been to them if he did?

I had so much certainty
Til that moment I lost control
And I've tried but it never was up to me
I've got no worse enemy
Than the fear of what's still unknown
And the time's come to realize there will be
Promises I can't keep
Chapter Summary

The real beginning of the end...

Chapter Notes

And as of now, AO3's Iterations has caught up with FF.Net's.

All in all, it hadn't been a... bad day, exactly.

Until cold, unfeeling reality crept up behind everybody to soundlessly clock them across the backs of their heads.

Like, Yeah, boys, look at that, Time and I - we're still here!

And we ain't going anywhere, except forward.

Because, in hindsight, they had all deserved such a collective decking in some measure. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. But no one could claim this hadn't all been done in the name of prolonging the inevitable.

Time's up, the gesture seemed to say.

In more ways than one.

Eddie Kasprak would later diagnose the onset of it all as singularly idiopathic.

Using his fingertips, Richie plucked at his short-sleeved shirt, fluttering the unbuttoned fabric to attempt drying the sweat accumulating underneath. This done, he sighed and pulled the bill of his hat down flush over the tops of his frames. Even if they were already safe in the shade, he seemed keen to hide from the sun as much as his current attire would let him.

Stretched out upon a nearby beachtowel, fully-clothed in a pristine polo shirt and belted shorts, Stan could almost imagine their roles as having been reversed, for a second. His hands were folded behind his head, sneakered ankles crossed, and he watched a breeze stir the leaves over their heads into a whispering rasp.

Then he glanced over at Tozier and remembered to quip accordingly, in a vaguely Richie-esqe tone: "Why didn't we go to the Barrens for this again?"

Glancing back at their still-diligently-sketching club leader, Richie's scoff was said with a smile - and a halfway-enthusiastic French accent, the newest he had yet procured for his repertoire. "Hmph. Becawse le mosquitoes, monsieur, they 'ave no respect forh ze artist when he'z at work. Orh- hies subjectz."
It did the trick, to break up the tension threatening to settle in on them again like a rapidly-hardening sheet of ice - a feeling totally at odds with the temperatures the group was currently tolerating.

Stan stifled an impulsive need to chuckle, covering it effectively in the time it took him to sit up and shrug.

"Maybe, yeah, but it would have been... more private than this."

Richie shrugged in kind, waving a dismissive hand. "Eh. Ze point, she sthil stahnds."

Things here are miserable enough. Why add bug bites to the mix?

Sitting almost-apart from the two of them, with blue eyes determinedly-glued to the contents of his sketchbook, Bill paused in his attempts to erase some lightly-made in-progress lines. He glanced over at said drawing subject again, then wordlessly looked to the page before him. Flipping the pencil around, he started anew.

Cross-legged beside Denbrough, heedless of stirring up whatever grass-related pollen their surroundings presently threatened him with, Eddie had unceremoniously volunteered to pin the semi-finished sketches in a binder. He went about this in an unusually quiet, focused manner. As yet, there were six drawings - one for each of the club. He handled each as if it were a precious, irreplaceable museum artifact, methodically lining up the edges, shuffling blank sheets in between the finished lead portraits to keep them from rubbing off on one another's backs.

Plan B, in other words.

Watching him work, no doubt appreciating the extreme show of care, Stan couldn't help remarking: "And you know we already figured out Polaroids won't do."

Just like that, the good humor whisked away like fragile snowflakes on a errant gust of wintertime air.

With another scoff, Richie looked over, immediately readied to challenge that claim, before a flicker of movement further out of the corner of his eye stalled his intended retort. "Why? ...Yeah, you know, I was there, Rob. I saw. ...So, what, you didn't like the flash the camera made, because we didn't give you a count of three-two-one? Don't go looking at me all-quietly-stingey like that. After removing yourself from the printed picture, we're the ones who should be angry with you."

Reverse psychology. As though it made any difference to riling the entity up, versus coddling him. It was worth a try.

With whatever meek reserves of energy he possessed, a currently-human-faced It glared over from where he reclined against the base of an oak tree. He had donned the glamour only upon request, so Bill Denbrough could have a live, still image to sketch from. The mouldering look he now aimed at Tozier wasn't half as intimidating without being aimed downward, via the above-average height, but at present, Robert Gray was in no more position to argue about it than the flagging entity puppeting said form.

Then his gaze sagged and veered aside, eyelids slipping shut in a most dejected fashion. His chin dropped against his collarbone.

"...Sure. S... sorry, Rich..."

Sorry if a dirty look is the least of which I can manage right now.
As the import of his biting words failed to sink in for whom they were intended, Richie thought twice, and backpedalled as best he was able. Effectively, that had been as useless at trying to roust a sick man out of bed. Hesitantly, he rolled to his feet and moved closer, apparently unsure of the need to somehow undo the verbal damage.

"...Hey, I... I was kidding, man?"

"Leave him alone, Richie. He's only half coherent as it is."

Predictably, Tozier did nothing of the kind - to Eddie's secret pleasure. He pushed his baseball hat higher up on his forehead, nervously scratching at his bangs. Then he chanced another step closer, laying the back of his hand against Rob's slack cheek.

Like checking for a fever was the only logical thing he could fathom to do.

"Someone, g... get 'im another drink, maybe?"

Rob cracked one eye open at the touch, summoning a glare with half the strength than it had before, blearily staring sideways from across the temple of his sunglasses.

*Back off already,* it seemed to say.

"Why?" Stan frowned, a hooded, forlorn look overtaking his own expression. He drew his legs up, elbows resting on his knees. "We tried that. The caffeine fix doesn't do him any good, either."

"If only it did..." Eddie paid the three emptied soda cans around them a cursory glance. His own sat untouched, as did Bill's. The sugary taste simply didn't appeal, never mind the flagrant disregard for compromising one's blood pressure. "We're out of change, anyway."

Richie mustered another fragile scoff of a laugh, trying in vain to dispel some tension. He pulled his hand back.

Ever increasingly more mum on the subject, Rob kept staring Tozier's way, but the furrow in his eyebrows eased.

"Well, that's all I've got- I mean, as far as legal ideas go."

It was impossible to say if Richie was being serious with that statement.

Eddie took it as for-serious in his place, and flipped the binder shut with a *snap.* Stan winced at the mere sight of the pages within ruffling, corners aflutter and in danger of being folded over themselves. Hearing the ruckus, Bill paused again, one blue eye peeping out from under his bangs.

"Fine, you can stop there, Mr. Font of Bright Ideas. Drugs are *out,* I don't care what good you think could possibly result from it. And it's not like we need to go around making any more trouble for ourselves before the next school year than we have already. Not even on his account."

"Hmm - B... Bevs i... is right..."

Contrary to his near-inborn need to banter back, Richie momentarily closed his mouth at the softspoken mumble. A flicker of open worry surfaced again in his expression as he glanced back at Rob. "Dude, that wasn't Bev. That was Eds. ...Doze off if you need to. It's okay. It's not... you're not- feeling any different from before, right?"

The response was anything but loud and affirmative, as the eye glancing their way closed. Temple
pressed to the bark, Rob slumped against the trunk as one would a favorite pillow, newly oblivious to the plainly-troubled looks the action was paid.

Watching him all four boys chose to overlook the factor of not imitating a human's need to breathe suddenly made the disguised entity appear very dead to their mortal eyes.

Bill finally hazarded speaking up.

"...How long was that for, Stan?"

Uris's frown didn't ease upon regarding his wristwatch with fraught eyes. "About... nearly fifty minutes. Ten less than the... day before. Though the decrease might be on account of the mor-changing forms. If that takes energy, which I'm guessing it does, it'd figure in. If his- metabolism is anything like... what he presently looks like..."

Eddie picked up the flagging observation where it petered off: "And if you do the math, he's been crashing more and more often the last three days. The breaks between naps are about the same, but that doesn't mean- mean... shit. I can't know what it means. There's no studies to compare this shit to, obviously."

"All the- napping, that hasn't been helping him?"

"Temporarily, it seems to. But when you consider the exput of energy versus... versus input..."

What input referred to was better left unsaid. Stan and Eddie exchanged a look of finalized disappointment. And all too suddenly they sounded like a most unconvincing laboratory pair that had ever been assembled.

Time to pack up the chart, fellas. Your presentation doesn't bear out any good news.


"Sh-yeah. Science my ass," Eddie bristled, rubbing his once-broken forearm with a distracted sort of gaze. Thinking twice of his harshness, he amended, "Yeah, well, this is one study I wish I wasn't... fronting by myself."

Mutely, Bill took this in and glanced up at the leafy boughs, mantling gently above their heads. Their movements were deceivingly peaceful to the eye, like the world around them was calm, save for their private bubble of misery.

But no one of them was in it alone.

You aren't, Eds. We're right there with you.

It's the best we could do. Georgie's stuck at home only because I asked him to stay there, and thank God he listened. He doesn't need to see It like this- no more than he has to.

And Bev, Ben, and Mike are the furthest away. The distance to and from here to their homes speaks for itself. Not that they wouldn't have come along, but...

Parents - they're just interfering more and more as of late.

But if photos are out, what better way to preserve a memory than to sketch it?

"It's okay. I th-think I've got the likeness down. I'll work on the next two from home." Managing to keep his voice from wavering too badly, to maintain some semblance of calm, Bill swung the cover
of his sketchbook closed, stowing his drawing supplies in his backpack. "Give him a b-b-bit. If he
doesn't wake up in-"

"Gan."

In one spastic movement, Robert Gray woke again. His form seized with an acrid rigidness,
sunglasses sliding off to unceremoniously drop into his lap. His expression twisted and froze
forebodingly, half in pain, half in abject confusion, and in the next second he had bolted to his feet
with inhuman speed.

Too quickly, he pitched forward.

Scrambling, Richie was next to him in the next instant, shortly followed by Eddie. Their hands on his
shoulders kept him from tumbling the whole way down, even as Rob collapsed to his knees.

"D-dude, hey. Easy. You're okay."

Blinking fiercely, Rob's voice hitched in a breathless cough. Clear spittle began to flow from his lips.
"Ge... He- B... agh- Bo-Bow-wersss..."

"Look at us, you're okay."


Rob's eyes rolled like a panicked horse's - one way, then the other, and back, then two ways at once,
like a nightmarish case of nystagmus. He twitched and flinched as if a live wire of electricity were
now coursing back and forth between his ears, hijacking every other motor function. "The- the kn-
knifFe, h-he f-fo-found-d-"

"Stripes, you idiot, c-calm dow- look at me, get a grip." Undaunted, Richie reached over to grab Rob
by both sides of his jaw, pulling him down to eye level. As if demonstrating his very orders would
make all the difference. "Focus. Focus on me. What's wrong? What are you saying, about Bowers
and a knife?"

"Knif-fe." The humanoid disguise stared through him, slumped over like a puppet dangling haplessly
at the ends of its strings, hands clenching and wringing fretfully. Nearly hyperventilating, his voice
cracked, grating and skipping like the broken pieces of a shattered ceramic plate spraying across a
sidewalk. "He-he f-fOund it. He thoug-ght he losT- l-loSt it. His- he wa-wa-wasN't haPpy a-aboUt it-"

Shaking his head in disbelief, Richie slapped the lookalike's shoulder.

"No, he-he caN-"

As it failed to snap the muttering tangent off track, Richie frowned.

And he tried a very poignant backhanded smack to the face.

Thwap!

Rob winced at the hit, but quieted and froze on the spot, sparing his attacker a plainly-confused
glance. His breath stilled and his eyes stopped rolling, wide open and lost-looking though they were.
The spark of agony dimmed.

"Dude, put the brakes on, time out, what's wrong? Jesus, you're talking nonsense- I mean, more than
you usually do. A lot more."
The effect was temporary. To their dismay, It only coughed - a harsh, wet crack of a sound emitting from somewhere. A trickle of black, oily-looking substance trickled out from the side of his grimacing mouth, running down his jaw to drip like a poorly-sealed faucet.

And, wheezing anew, he began devolve to more nonsensical stammers.

"N-no- fo-fouNd, th-hought- he- thougHt h-he forg-goT- "

"Jesus H." One of Eddie's hands flew to his fanny pack, opening it on automatic. He pulled out a wad of tissues, flicking his wrist to unfurl them, and without a flicker of hesitation the germaphobe began to wipe the viscous substance away, " Fucking idi- I d-don't think he's listening to you after doing that, Richie."

"The shit he isn't." The bespectacled teen shot Kaspbrak a most dubious glare over his raised arm. "If Bev can get him to listen to her every word, why can't we?"

"This isn't that. This is- different," Stan pointed out, hands fistling and flexing uneasily at his sides - a quieter imitation of their gibbering mascot's uncoordinated half-gestures. He circled anxiously around to Bill's side.

"L... l-let me try, Richie."

For a second, Tozier looked as if he made to protest. But one hesitating glance at Bill Denbrough seemingly persuaded him otherwise, and Tozier let go and stepped back.

"Pennywise, stop. Look at me, and listen."

As directed, the alien looked. His shuddery breathing quieted. The stammers stopped, as sharply as if another backhanded slap had halted them. Eye contact made and held, fierce blue against glazed-over cerulean, Bill let his eyes drop shut.

And he thought forth two very deliberate sets of syllables:

What's - wrong?

Thankfully, his intuition turned out to be the right call. Richie hadn't been fibbing when he said he had confirmed their friend's ability to communicate this way - the not-telepathic connection It could forge with any person's mind, anywhere in Derry, at any given time.

It stilled.

Bill breathed out and felt an instant measure of relief.

Good. That eliminated the effect of both stutters in one go.

Shaky and brittle-seeming as It's unspoken words were, they were slightly more comprehensible, now that he wasn't shaking so profusely. In mind or body. Or having to speak through a mouthful of hemorrhaging bile.

B-Bowers. Henry. He- he fouNd the knife, i-in the woods.

What knife?

The nuh-Nife. That h-he hurt Ben wiTh.

He did? The one from- from months ago? Just now?
YeS. He- he went looking for it. He remembered.

So... so what? What's the probl-

Butch- Butch tHought it was gone- gone f-for goOd. Wasn't haPpy- wasn'tthappyabout i-it.

No? What happened? Why's it a problem now?

...Henry remeMbers. Gan, he remembers! I- stupid- I-I forgot to- no!

Focus, I- Gray. Get ahold of yourself.

...Suh-sorry.

So Henry's a problem now. He found his knife. I get that. It's just... "Gahn"? What-what's that supposed to be?

It's not- Not- not impoRtant. No.

It isn't? ...I'll take your word for it, then.

Y... you wiLL?

Just this once. Why the spaz attack? What's wrong with you?

...

Fine. Dumb question. Forget I asked. The here and now isn't what matters. If Henry found his Dad's knife, what does that mea-

It meanS go.

...Go?

Go. Go home, BiLy. Go hoMe, t-tell the othHers. P-please. CalL them, w-warn- tell thEm. Tell-

"Bill... Bill... Hey! Earrrth to Bill. Come in. ...Dude, seriously-

The third voice wasn't the only interruption. Intrusive hands found his arms, grabbing and tugging earnestly, wrenching him away with one strong pull.

Grip lost, Denbrough wheeled on his attacker, shoulders hunched, scowling. Way to interrupt the flow, Tozier. He had only just started to make sense of the clues before being very literally pulled off the case.

"What, R-Richie?!!"

"Hey!" Defensive, the Trashmouth backed up, hands raised as if he had been rounded on by a panther. "F-fuck, man, relax. E-easy. You looked like you were seizuring there, too, for a second. Biting your lip and shaking like that."

"Last thing we needed were two of you falling into some kinda- psychotic shock episode," Eddie agreed, in a thin, whistly gasp. His white-knuckled hands were still resting on Rob's shoulder and sleeve.

"W-what are you t-t-talking ab-bout..." Deciding that concern could also wait for later, Bill looked
back to their now-completely-stoic-faced companion. For a second, déjà vu overcame him. Denbrough had seen this blank expression before, one rainy afternoon at the end of April. His very words had brought it on.

Now they had seemingly done it again. There was no solution to the change other than wait, he knew.

Human nature demanded he try solving the apparent 'problem' with some kneejerk fix nevertheless. He had caused it, hadn't he?

Swallowing, Bill tried waving his hand before the impassive face, snapping his fingers beside its ear. "Rob... Hey. Rob?" Bill only stopped short as Kaspbrak, shedding his nerves for a moment, bravely reached up and placed two fingertips against the human lookalike's throat. "Eds, is he-"

Eddie frowned. "No, no... pulse. That's- that's normal... for him."

"Then w-why..."

Gray's eyes stayed as they were: staring, half-lidded and vacant.

Vacantly haunting.

_Go home, Billy. Tell the others._

_Go home, and stay there._

Looking around at them, Bill blinked hard, shook his head to try in vain to clear it of its logjammed thoughts, and glanced around at the other boys. "Y... you all heard that, right?"

_What he said in my- to all of us?_ 

_You had to've._

"Yeah? So what if we did?" Rather than be in any way soothed by this, Richie's temper flared anew. He grabbed the collar of the entity's jacket to give him a firm shake. And rather than teeter side to side, Rob merely stood there, as immovable as a telephone pole, still staring impassively off at nothing. A fresh trickle of black spit leaked from the corner of his slightly-parted mouth, one Eddie didn't try to wipe off.

"Damn you, Stripes, snap out of it...C'mon, we know you're tired, but you're not- not- q-quit cracking up on us. Or freezing up. Whatever you're doing now, it ain't funny. ...C'mon, wake up."

And as the seconds stretched into awkward minutes, Bill realized how futile his friend's struggle was.

He knew. There was nothing more they could do, here and now, other than heed It's word. The entity's bout of ataxia was a symptom of more than just physical significance.

Besides sounding unbelievably frantic, bordering on berserk, the palpable alarm that radiated through every note of It's voice said they would be smart to not question his instructions any further. They had to trust that It was only trying to help, even in this drastically deplenished state.

Maybe for the last-

"Guys, we n-need to go."
Stan's mouth dropped to better compliment his double-take. "What, and just... I leave him here? Like this?"

"Shit. We can't exactly lug him across the park," Richie surmised, though the wince in his expression said he thought no better of the current scenario than the Jewish boy did.

"No." Nonplussed, Bill zipped up, then shrugged his backpack on. "We need to g-get home. All of us. It- It'll be fine. But w-we need to do as he s-s-says."

He's offline until further notice.

Rattling sounded off. Eddie took a deep, hissing draft on his inhaler, forcing a whoop of an exhale on the release to somehow loosen his tightened chest. He stepped back, reluctantly, and, inadvertently, he put to words the exact same feelings Bill felt in the next breath.

"Until, what? Further notice? I... What if... what if this is-"

Bill frowned, opting not to point out the coincidentality. "This isn't that, Eddie. He'd t-tell us if it were."

He would. I believe that.

Eddie blinked, biting the insides of his cheeks. Nervously, he packed his inhaler away. "He would, he... wouldn't he, Rich?"

"Shit, dude, no... I mean, yeah. It's the one thing he hasn't pulled our leg about - the whole 'going to sleep' deal. This is- something else. I'll be dipped if I know what it is, but we ought to do like he says."

Eddie stole another anxious glance at Stan, as if looking for extra affirmation.

"You think so, too, Stan?"

Gazing at the lookalike's once-animated visage, Uris spoke without glancing back, transfixed by the long-dreaded sight before him, the torturous worry and slowly-emerging agony plain to see in his expression.

"I don't... see why not. But... if this is... how that process starts-"

"Hey," Richie clapped Stan on the shoulder, but not roughly, just forcefully enough to get the thinner boy's attention back. "What'd I just say? It- it probably isn't. Don't worry about that right now. Until we know different, we work with what we know for sure. Let's go."

And just as assuredly, as the four of them took one last collective look toward their catatonic fifth party, only to see a very empty-looking void of air where he had once stood.

Blink. Gone, as if he'd never been there.

They didn't balk any longer.

That was all the cue they needed to hurry on.

Backpack still hanging off his shoulder, Bill didn't start to feel truly worried until he reached his destination. He balked instead upon returning home, glancing up at the second story landing in disbelief.
...Georgie's home, too, then?

Say what, Mom?

His fingers were still on the doorknob. "Wh-what do mean, he l-left?"

Sharon Denbrough, laundry basket in both her hands, frowned at him. She stood one step down
from the top of the stairs as she regarded her eldest's mildly-alarmed expression. "I mean, he asked to
visit the Barrens. And I said he could. That's where you were, wasn't it?"

No. I said- we were going to Bassey Park, not the Barrens.

Did he mix hearing the two up? Shit. Christ, please say he didn't.

Bill's fingers clenched around the doorknob. Something flared cold, deep inside his gut. He
swallowed. "Ha-how l-long ago, Mom?"

A flicker of concern crossed the woman's expression. Belatedly, she paid a look at the grandfather
clock overlooking their home's foyer.

Never mind she couldn't actually see its face from where she was.

"Maybe twenty minutes?"

Ignoring the new freezing sweat flushing across his palms, Bill whirled around and darted out the
door, utterly forgetting to close it behind him. He jumped off the porch, grabbed Silver up on the go.
He had run halfway down the driveway by the time his bemused mother made it to the threshold and
called after him.

"You mean- you didn't see him, coming back from there? ...William."

Swinging a leg over the frame, Bill wordlessly put his feet on the pedals. Silver's tires hit the street
and he flew.

Small stones rolled down the slope of the wooded path, jarred loose by their procession of well-worn
shoes.

"Ohhhh, great. We're in for it now, aren't we?"

"Shut up, Richie."

"I mean, what are the fucking odds - Georgie just got a wild hair to trek out here by his lonesome all
of a sudden? Coincidence? No. Nope. Stripes had to have something to do with it."

"You don't know that, Richie. Quit jumping to conclusions."

"Well, it's as close to one as we've got right now! And it definitely isn't funny anymore. Never was
to begin with, for the record, and you bet your sweet asses I'll be giving him a piece of my mind the
next time we se- "

"Shh! Get down!"

Hissing, Bill dove forward, flattening himself against the rough, dark ground, beyond grateful Richie
and Eddie followed suit without another heated word. Slightly ahead of them on the path as he was,
Denbrough had seen the glint of sunlight on metal before either Tozier or Kaspbrak. It was some
hundred yards onward, barely visable through a lush screen of scrabble bush branches.

But definitely there.

And Henry Bowers had to have an ear out as much as an eye.

He was in the Barrens for tracking some wild game, wasn't he?

Didn't matter how many legs it walked on.

*Georgie.*

*No. Please, say you're not out here by yourself.*

*Not with the likes of him, armed and dangerous, prowling around. Henry knows this is where we hang out most frequently.*

*And Belch, who knows where he's away to? That was his car on the ridge off Kansas Street... driver's door left open.*

*Pedal faster, Stan, like you never have before. Please, get there in time. Someone at the station house ought to listen to you. If our parents are listening again, the police have to be, too.*

Leaves rustled, a swath of undergrowth momentarily pushed aside by the interloper. Palms flat on the earth, Bill spied a human hand, holding the bough of branches at an angle, out of Henry's line of sight.

"See anything yet, Belch?"

Bill held his breath, desperately wishing he could do the same for his racing heart, rattling his eardrums like an overspeeding train. Distantly, Huggins hollered back: "A whole lot of nothing, man. Maybe they're not here."

"Odds are, one or two of 'em is," Henry growled, and the branches snapped back with a raspy rattle. "Keep following the bank. Fuckers like to skip stones on the river when it's this full."

Terror settled somewhere behind Bill's lungs, steadily pressing the breath out of them. Momentarily, he found he couldn't inhale, only stare in blank horror. Belatedly, he could feel Eddie's and Richie's shoulders, level with his knees. He didn't need to look back to see the same fear he felt surfacing on their faces.

*Georgie.*

*No, no, Henry wouldn't—*

*He would and he could, man. The guy's temper has been thinning out since school finished up. Patrick's missing, Victor got out while he could, and now some reminder of a beating he took finds its way back into Henry's hands. What else would he do but go out on the prowl, find someone to threaten with it?*

*Who better person than one of us, who have been under his feet in some fashion every step of the last year? Doesn't matter if Georgie has wronged him or not. He's one of us.*

*Why else would you be here on this last-minute rescue mission?*

Belch grunted a wordless affirmative and with the noise faded, his very presence disappeared into the
Perhaps a minute later, the scuffing clatter of Henry's boots moved on.

Richie crawled forward on his elbows, a Hawaiian-shirted parody of an army soldier, pushing his glasses up his nose with shaky fingers. "Well, fearless leader, what do we do?" he whispered.

"Something." Eddie wheezed, moving up to Bill's other side. There was a scuff of dirt on his chin, he had hit the ground so fast. "Quick, without either of them finding out we're here."

Bill breathed deep and swallowed again, hard, trying to calm and think rational, to formulate a plan which didn't somehow involve a little help from above. And not the conventional kind said figure of speech would lead you to believe the Losers had.

"Guerilla style isn't gonna get us there fast enough," Eddie reasoned out loud, when the expectant quiet became too much to bear. "We- we don't even know where Georgie is in all this mess."

"The radio," Richie suggested, twisting around as if he could see where their three bikes. Those had been tossed haphazardly into the brush at the head of the path (not before adding Georgie's yellow-framed Huffy - ever-identifiable by its broken kickstand - to the pile, lest it go missing somewhere in the interim). "Eds, you could still go back for it."

Bill blinked, clenching his jaw. No, he wasn't certain if his brother even had his half of the set of walkie talkies. But it was worth a try. And there was nothing to be lost in splitting up long enough to chance it.

Henry and Belch were somewhere ahead, following the bend of the Kenduskeag. So long as the younger three boys didn't draw attention to themselves, they could follow stealthily enough.

And if Pen- if It is in any condition to- do anything-

Bill blinked again and shook his head. He couldn't count on a prayer coming true. Not after what he saw in the park, not with Georgie's safety at stake. He needed something that didn't hinge on hope.

"I-it's a-a start. Eddie, d-double back. W-we'll go on."

Nodding, Eddie scooted back on palms and knees. "Don't get too far ahead, then, in case I lose sight of you."

Richie mustered a queasy-looking grin, the unsure look of a man about to drop into battle nearly totally unprepared, but trying to seem ready for it anyway. "Hey, not a prob - if you hear someone screaming bloody murder, it'll lead ya right to us."

"Beep-beep, Richie."

George Denbrough hadn't misheard his brother. Let us just get that out of the way to begin with. He had no more gotten the Barrens mixed up with Bassey Park than one could mistake an orange for a lemon. Both may be of the same fruity variety, but they also were two totally different colors and tastes.

Oranges were sharp and sweet. Lemons were sharp and tart.

...Okay, maybe not completely different.

But the core fact of the matter remained unchanged: Bill had asked him to stay home, to not go with
him and the others to the park. And Georgie hadn't asked why at the time. He could figure a bit of ever-painful truth out for himself. Putting it into words just made it hurt worse, and the urge to weep was easier to keep at bay when your mouth stayed closed.

So he had come to believe.

In no time at all, though, the seven-year-old boy had grown weary of his all-too-homely surroundings. He did what chores he was bid without complaint, helping Mom fold clothes, putting them away in his dresser, making his bed, tidying his desk, returning most of his scattered belongings to his closet.

Mom had assumed it was because he had these tasks to accomplish he decided to simply not go along with Bill. And wide-eyed, unassuming little Georgie didn't do or say anything to disillusion her. He was actually a mite surprised with himself for taking to the errands with as much calm, controlled composure as he did. It wasn't unlike how Dad would go about methodically hammering together a piece of furniture in the garage.

Like he was wearing a movable mask, Georgie smiled when Sharon stooped to kiss his cheek, pat his head, and then he asked if he could still go along to the park after all. Chores done, she gave him the okay, only stipulating he was to be back home for dinner by five o'clock.

Instead of turning left at the end of the street, toward downtown Derry, he had gone right. There wasn't much foot traffic on the path, but he opted to pull his bicycle along the sidewalk rather than ride. It was a bright and cheery-looking August day all around, not too oppressively hot, and the humidity tempered just right - not too much, nor too little.

The day of his last sleepover at 29 Neibolt Street had been much the same.

The same day before the night he dreamt a most peculiar dream.

A dream in which he ultimately did not see any of his surroundings. He did not touch or smell anything. Where he had only heard, and listened, and responded, and understood.

To an extent. It was really impossible to say he comprehended, in full, everything the bodyless, faceless voice had told him. Or if it had been a voice from outside his own mind, speaking to him, at all. He couldn't correlate it to anything, save perhaps his own dreams (which had never felt so undeniably lucid and concrete prior to that night, not after he had starved himself from sleep for so long).

He couldn't tell if it was real, without something or someone to relate to. Something he could peg as familiar. Someone who had been through the same ordeal.

Billy wouldn't believe him. Georgie knew this from firsthand experience. His elder brother needed discernible, undeniable proof of something before he counted it as real. Their eldritch company was case in point.

And, as yet, Pennywise certainly hadn't bothered to enlighten Georgie as to whether any of the dream was true. Things may have panned out differently if the entity had.

Here it was, Thursday afternoon, and that had been a Sunday morning Georgie woke up to, alone.

The voice - Maturin - hadn't come to him since, either, in his sleep or otherwise.

But Georgie hadn't been, in effect, alone with his own thoughts since then.
Perhaps that was the key?

If Pennywise, who was said to also have heard every word of the plainly unspoken conversation, was staying away, because he had heard everything, maybe a way around the new roadblock was to recreate the conditions which had caused it in the first place?

And hope for a different outcome?

To see if Pennywise did have something to say about it after all?

Destination reached, Georgie leaned his bike against an elm tree, turned to look at the vacant, waiting path, and felt a surge of assurance. Plus the Barrens were nice and peaceful this time of year, just like he preferred. Tourists seldom fought their way down through the brush to fish or swim in the river, even if the clouds of mosquitoes weren’t so thick. And you couldn’t find a more accommodating slice of nature anywhere in Derry’s town limits if you wanted some outdoor solitude.

Peh. Right.

You’re giving this little, craggy, reed-choked rut in the Earth too much credit, Shortstop. It wouldn’t make the cover of no National Geographic.

Because, even if he was nowhere nearby, the spiritual successor of Richie Tozier was never without comment.

Much like the corporeal original.

Finding a place on the bank to his liking, beyond the grabby limbs of the nearest overhanging hemlocks, Georgie deposited his backpack between the roots of one such giant, for safekeeping. Besides to lug a few books and his walkie talkie, he only needed to take it as far as the edge of the river.

The Kenduskeag bubbled quietly on by in the background, splashing and chuckling only as its neverending current ran up against and flowed through a sizable dam of driftwood. Over time, the broken-off branches had piled up against a series of water-smoothed stones, in a not-quite imitation of a beaver dam. Looking at it one last time, decided, the boy unzipped the main compartment of his pack.

Today, the dam was his safeguard against losing the S.S. Georgie.

Idly, her captain had wondered about other things, trying in vain to think of lighter matters. Staring at the paper vessel, resting on his bedstand last night like she was, he pondered. He did so instead of contemplating the empty space beneath his bed.

She hadn’t been back in the water since that past October.

He wanted to see if she still floated.

Low to the earth, the three of them pressed onward.

"Georgie... Georgie, c-come in. ...Come in."

Somewhere behind him, Bill heard Richie trying to formulate the next leg of the plan. "Okay. What now, Eds? If the kid doesn’t have his half of the set, we’re kinda shit outta luck there."

With a most-aggravated sigh, Eddie crawled forward. "Bill, I'm the smallest of us. I'll go ahead and
try to distract them. That should give you two enough time to find George."

"Distract, how?" Whispering, Richie cast instant doubt over the tactic. Without much care for stealth, he half-rose to his feet. "Besides being stupidly brave, say they do come after you. Then you gotta haul ass like never before. You sure you won't twist an ankle or have an allergy attack or something?"

"No, I can't be sure, Rich, but it's the three of us to two of them. We know the Barrens better. If you think you've got a better shot at outrunning them- "

"Ah, but I don't just think, señor, I know." Pointer finger raised, Richie cut Eddie off. "I know I'm faster than either of them any day, over whatever ground you want. So long as all Henry has is his pigsticker, I think I'm good for a decoy run."

"G-Georgie." With his thumb on the receiver, Bill waited for maybe two terse seconds of silence before giving the tactic up for naught. At the moment, the alternative being posed by his companions felt like an option with more potential for success.

Not that he wouldn't keep trying.

Richie was wearing the most green-colored attire between them. He had the best chances of blending in and remaining unseen.

"Even if they don't try anything, we gotta get Georgie outta here, or lose them if we can't before they find him." Sparing his best friend a belated glance, Eddie rolled his eyes with visible worry. "Fine. Before you find someone."

"So, I'll whistle - once for Georgie, two if I run across Belch or Henry. ...Three for all three." Richie nudged Bill's shoulder with his knuckles. "Then you try that damn radio of his again."

Follow the water. The b-bank is the only clear path throughout most of the undergrowth.

Common sense, or just It momentarily taking on the definition of it, spurred Bill to climb back to his feet. They wouldn't make any faster progress continuing to crawl along. Emotions set aside, he sighed forcefully enough to flutter his bangs. "Be q-quick about it, then." His eyes communicated the rest: And be careful.

Smirking, Richie met his gaze, then Eddie's skeptically raised eyebrow with a two-fingered salute. "Sir, yessir." Plan set, he sharply dashed ahead, pushed aside an obstructing curtain of branches with both hands, and vaulted down the craggy incline.

Perpendicular to the river, Bill and Eddie made to follow.

Bon voyage.

He didn't say so out loud.

Why wish her any luck? There wasn't much danger to begin with. This branch of the Kenduskeag didn't flow very fast, despite its relative shallowness. For a second, Georgie thought to tie the paper boat off with a piece of string - a mooring line, if you will - to make sure she didn't get away. Then if she got too far out of reach or took on water, he could reel her back in, like a kite.

He decided against it.
If she floated, good enough.

If she didn't, well...

Wouldn't that be just in keeping with how his life was going lately?

He could practice saying a goodbye, of sorts.

The pebbled gravel cracked underfoot as the boy knelt at the water's edge. Heedless of the mud on his denimed knees, Georgie took one last look at the wax vessel in his hands. He ran a finger around the underside of her hull's rim, making sure the pocket of air underneath would hold its form. Despite its age, he didn't feel any cracks in the thick wax. Nothing would compromise her buoyancy.

Perfect. Like she hadn't aged a day since Bill made her.

"You'll be okay," Georgie murmured softly, as much to himself as to the papercraft. Not as though she needed the encouragement to do what she was made to, but because he needed to hear the words. He wanted something to dispel the quiet that was anything but void of emotion. "It's nothing you haven't done before."

He could already see it happening. She would drift some twenty feet downstream, bobbing along the surface, bow forward, stern aft, unless she hit a little whirlpool here or there. Then she would fetch up against the driftwood dam, and he'd climb across it to retrieve her.

No fuss, no muss.

The fuss the boy somehow hoped to avoid began just as he set her atop the current.

Don't.

Blinking, Georgie gasped and closed his fingers on the boat's triangular mast, before she could slip away. With a little startled splash, he jumped back to sit on his heels.

Don't let her go, Georgie. You need to go.

"Wha..." Despite being already used to a number of odd sights over the last year, the seven-year-old still couldn't help a puzzled stare at the sudden cloud of white, billowing into existence, like milky smoke forming beneath the water's surface. The rippling distortion was such he couldn't tell what it was beyond a sizable flare of color.

Color that shouldn't be there.

He clutched the boat to his chest and took an uneasy half step in retreat. Caught between surprise and almost-irritation, he couldn't find the impulse to do much else.

"...Penny?"

The voice he thought he had heard spoke again - soft and weak, but still talking - right into his head. Being heard by no one save himself.

Ra... radio, Georgie... Ans-swer... yoUr radio.

The command ended with a timely, distant crackle of static, muffled as it was by the backpack in the roots of the tree.
"G-Georgie, come in."

Richie hadn't been boasting, for once. He vanished into the trees like a regular fox, and some tense minutes went by before Bill or Eddie heard any sign of him.

Straining to see or hear anything unusual, Kaspbrak was understandably jumpy.

So when the walkie in Bill's hand gave a very late cough of static, Eddie jumped about two feet to the left out of impulsive fight-or-flight. Stumbling over a fallen branch, into the trunk of a poplar, he bit back shouting out a curse with a pull on his inhaler.

"B... Billy?"

"Georgie," Bill grasped the radio in both hands, hastily turning the volume down, lest there be any unwelcome listeners. "Thank God. Wh-where are you?"

"Down- down in the Barrens, the sou... southwest end. Wh... d..."

"Say again, Georgie. Y-you sound pretty staticky on my end."

From behind, regarding his taller friend with a very muted look of tension, Eddie patted his shoulder, then pointed onward.

Keep going - the gesture said.

They couldn't afford to stop and catch up.

Gradually, as they moved (presumably) closer, Georgie's voice came through more clearly:

"...are you doing here? I thought you went to the park."

Bill swallowed deep, licking his drying lips. He couldn't lose his cool about why they found themselves here, for the reasons they did. "W-we did, but p-p-plans changed. It's not s-safe here right now, Georgie. B-Bowers is around."

"He is?"

"With Huggins. And th-they have a knife. ...Again, where are you?"

"I... I'm by the water, where the logjam piled up against the rocks? Remember?"

Barely, he did. Turning back, Bill found his shrug was counterpointed nicely by Eddie's puzzled headshake. But it didn't get either of them closer to solving the crisis at hand. "H-how far away from the bikes?"

"I ...n't know, Billy. Y'know how much... maze the trees are if you don't stick by the river."

Waving Eddie to follow, Bill pushed through the underbrush to their right. He stopped to glance up and down the bank before stepping out into the reedy mud. "Get away from the w-w-water, Georgie. H-hide where you can. We'll find you."

"But Bill-"

Trembling, he brought the receiver closer to his mouth. "But nothing. Do as I say, wait, and please, be careful. Richie's somewhere out there, ahead of us. Look for him, but stay hidden where you are."
"..."

"Georgie, do you read me?"

"..."

"Georgie!"

Hunkered down, water seeping into his clothes, the younger Denbrough brother scarcely thought to respond. Eyes riveted, he turned the volume dial of his radio all the way down. Listening rapty as he had been to Bill's instructions, he had scarcely heard the snap of branches - crunching underfoot - from a thicket just upstream.

He didn't think about what it could be, good or bad. Spotting a patch of thick-growing sawgrass, standing some three feet high, he bolted for the potential hideway, slipping and crashing to a stop in the soft mud. Wheeling around, the boy hunkered down into the vegetation and froze like a cornered fawn, peering out from between the swishing blades.

Seconds later, the hulking form of Belch Huggins lurched into the clearing.

Following him was a telltale shout of the real danger, still approaching:

"Well, you fat fuck, is there something up there or not?"

Stifling a whimper, Georgie held his breath and flattened himself closer to the boggy earth, utterly uncaring of the mud now adorning his front. These clothes were old, anyway. He didn't dare look elsewhere, despite feeling how keeping his eyes on Belch might inadvertently give his position away.

Squinting against the sun, Huggins threw a dim, dirty look over his shoulder before his eyes scanned the open bank. "Nothing yet, He- wait."

Following the bully's eyeline, Georgie clapped a hand over his own mouth, smothering another whimper. He spotted what had caught Belch's eyes.

Not the foggy cloud under the water. That had vanished by the time he had looked back.

He had forgotten the boat.

With her yellow hull, she stood out like a bald flare, lying there against the mud and stones.

Belch strode forward and grabbed her up, turning the paper vessel over in his meaty hands. One way, then the next, she was rotated. Mud from his fingers smeared her sides.

Henry Bowers stepped out of the trees as his accomplice hollered back, holding the boat up to wave. "One of 'em's around, Henry - Denbrough's brother."

"The little whiner, huh?" Bowers sneered. His eyes lit up with vile anticipation. His sleeveless top had left his arms vulnerable to the claws of the woods. Several bloody scratches adorned his biceps and forearms, making him look all the more savage.

Georgie paid them no mind. His eyes were fixed on the glinting silver blade held in Henry's right hand. Looking at it, so shiny and sharp, made his eyes water in fearful dread.

Glancing about, Henry prowled the short bank, one way, then the next. He paid the river itself no
mind, focused on the mud as he was. "Well, he's gotta be somewhere close. ...Those footprints are fresh. ...And they lead right... over... that wa-"

Fw-fwee!

"Yo, Butch Junior!"

Two whistles sounded out. Around the same time Richie Tozier's voice crowed, a rock - fired by some unseen cannon of an arm - flew forth from the treeline. Belch wheeled to spot it, slack hands dropping the boat they held. He jigged aside with more speed than someone his size should have been capable of. His foot hit the water's edge.

Behind his hand, Georgie gasped as he watched the rock glance off the top of Henry's skull, drawing a wordless howl of pain and anger as it did.

"And there's more where that came from, asshole. Leave him outta this!"

Bill had warned him, said that Tozier would be scouting, potentially making a decoy of himself. Cautioned though he was, to stay hidden and out of danger, Georgie couldn't bear the idea of someone being hurt, just for trying to help him.

He couldn't help it. He sat up on his hands.

"Richie, d-don't!"

Belch's gaze swiveled toward him.

L-look away!

Georgie thought he heard something else - a growl, low and earth-deep, smothering the very sound of his own thudding heart. Somewhere in his peripheral vision, he saw the surface of the once-placid river swell, like a ballooning depth charge about to let loose.

The next few seconds to follow were a veritable blur.

Birds, flushed out of their hideaways, took flight. Amidst their startled, keening cries, Bill Denbrough thought he heard a scream. He didn't stop to dwell on the cause. Abandoning all illusions of sneaking forward, he charged through the undergrowth, feeling sharp, thin branches claw and snag his skin and clothes.

"Georgie!"

His scream was lost in the uproar. Breaking out onto the scene, feeling Eddie careen to a stumbling stop beside him, he saw only the latter half of the attack.

Later, they would realize how lucky there were to not have seen the whole thing.

"What the fuck?!!"

The shrill yell was almost lost in the ensuing roar. Like an eruption out of Yellowstone, the white geyser of water reached its peak - roaring some thirty feet into the air - before gravity reclaimed it in a broad shower. A spindly black shadow materialized from inside the curtain of droplets. Through its center, Bill thought he glimpsed a red, struggling something before the flare of crimson disappeared. It fell as if it were thrust back under the river's churning surface.
As the torrent crashed down upon the bank, he spotted another body on the ground, flailing and trying its best to get clear.

"What the fuck?!"

Recoiling from the edge of the chaos, a soaking-wet Henry Bowers scrambled backwards on his hands. His feet slipped uselessly against loose stones, heels digging furrows in the mud, as if he couldn't bring himself to actually get up and flee.

As soaked through as Henry was, Bill saw the flecks of blood mixing with the waterdrops upon the older boy's face.

Gaping, Henry paid Bill and Eddie no attention, too horribly transfixed by the impossible sight before him to fathom looking at anything else. The curtain of water had dropped, revealing in full the towering monster, waiting behind it.

Counterpointing his worry, Denbrough felt a rock of disappointment plummet from his chest to his gut. His fists clenched at his sides.

Shit.

*It's the same thing that attacked Victor. The same thing that kept him from rejoining Henry.*

*Big as a school bus. Those eight claw-tipped legs, like witchy stilts. Black as ebony at midnight, so dark the exoskeleton shines. Scissoring mouthparts full of goblin shark teeth, leading to a meat-grinder-like throat.*

*And the white ey-*

"Shit, no! Please! No!"

Whatever bravado Henry had started with evaporated on the spot. He quailed, his pleading drowned out by a shrill, rattling scream the creature emitted, lunging forth on its spindly appendages to pin his shaking body in place. Thick, ropeline strands of drool oozed from the toothy maw, slathering across the bully's arms and torso. The gusting force of the concussive roar blew Henry's brown hair back.

Besides that, frozen as he was in the grips of his own disbelief, Denbrough saw the shredded bits of flesh. Dark, clotted spots of red were already wrought between the spider's drooling mandibles. The breaking water had only washed so many streaks of blood out.

They ran and wept like hellish tears from the pupilless, blood red eyes - four situated along either side of the beast's tapered skull.

*Red, not white.*

That was different.

Snapping back to the present, so fiercely his head ached, Bill dropped his radio and ran forth. He thought he heard Eddie or Richie shout after him, to stay back, to not get closer.

Didn't matter. Where was Georgie?

How was he supposed to stop this?

Would stopping It change anything already done?
"Don't!"

Mouthparts held wide, the spider halted. It's head canted toward the sound of his pitched voice. The discordant screaming abruptly ceased, even as Henry, eyes covered by trembling hands, continued to whimper and stammer in his gibbering panic.

Bill grabbed onto the nearmost leg, wickedly-smooth chitin under his hands, feeling immediately dwarfed in the monster's shadow. He didn't know what to say, much less do. He almost didn't expect the creature to listen. All he could think to do was say "no", to hold onto the spider's limb like some overgrown toddler grabbing their parent to try and plead for mercy.

All eight scarlet eyes bore down into his two blue ones.

"Don't, d-don't, please."

Don't. Just don't.

The mouthparts flexed out, slowly folding together like the tines of an inverted umbrella. Bill felt his hair flutter under the push-pull of the spider's quieting, labored breaths. The fetid, ripe stink was almost overpowering. His eyes watered involuntarily at the feel of it clogging his sinsuses.

Let... him go.

Let... let us.

Poised over him, the spider's face emoted nothing, save a tense pause. Then the head pivoted sideways on its stunted neck. Bits of bloody flesh snailed out from between its closed jaws. Four of the red rubies seemed to quirk and stare down at Bowers, cowering at Bill's feet.

Whatever- whatever you're thinking, don't. Just don't. Please.

Don't repeat yourself. Don't be like him.

The giant arachnid's eyes stayed averted.

Shamefully, almost.

Lit... little late for-for thaT, Billy boy.

Bill blinked - the first in what felt like several minutes. Despite what his eyes and ears had already told him, he wanted to believe the ragged flesh was just figmentary. It had to be something It had conjured up to look more intimidating, moreso than the beastial form already was.

But Belch was nowhere to be seen.

The red shimmer in the gysers?

"What...?"

No. No, don't say you kil-

The spider's breaths pitched up, until it was hissing like a rattlesnake, interrupting him midthought. The collective tip of its fanged jaws bunted into his chest, almost loosening his grip, knocking him over. The rotten stench wafted into his face, sharp and metallic, almost making him gag.

With a sudden firmess, It's voice pressed into his eardrums from both sides, like a vice.
I don't have to say anything.

The words sounded anything but simple. Part malevolence, part sorrow, part mad glee, part languishing hurt-

"Th... the h-hell are you doing, Denbrough?"

It stopped hissing, eyes shifting focus again. Despite the horrid numbness in his chest, Bill followed the alien's eyeline.

Pupils shrunk to pinpricks, Henry Bowers stared up at them from between his sullied fingers. He looked as startled with himself for speaking as he did actually addressing the unbelievable sight, hovering above him.

"Y-you..." He trailed off, swallowing uneasily. When neither boy nor spider moved, he chanced crawling backwards on his hands. The knife was still in his right hand, switchblade stowed. But he made no move to raise it. "Christ, you- you kn-know this... this thing?"

Bill heard a distant rustling, shoes crunching on stones - presumably Eddie and Richie, finally daring to get closer.

In that second, though, he didn't dare take his eyes off Henry.

Until a small, quivering squeak of a voice spoke up to answer their felled enemy:

"...H-he's not a thing."

Georgie!

Frozen anew, Bill stared. The pressure in his ears relented, as instant tears of relief leached from his eyes. He gasped wordlessly, ducking around the spider's maw to scramble forth, almost tripping in his haste, to wrap his arms around the small body that had cautiously crept toward them - without anyone being the wiser.

Stumbling under the force of the hug, Georgie broke into open weeps, sobbing with relief against his brother's shoulder. He buried his face against his chest, clinging desperately to the fabric of his shirt.

Practically on his knees, Bill held him close, murmuring words of comfort to the both of them even as he heard Henry yelp in fright. Another rattling snarl began to slowly build up behind them.

Then the very sound seemed to pitch and split open, unfolding to reveal gravelly words contained within.

"DadDy knNoWws, HEnR-ry."

"Wh... what?"

"He knOowwws."

Bill heard footsteps again, drawing even closer. Then the shuffling and scrambling of rocks sliding over rocks, and the gruff, borderline-livid voice of Richie:

"And that's all you need to hear, asshole. Get lost."

A flicker of Henry's usual stubborn temper showed itself.
"You- you fuckin' lose- "

"Stuff it, Bowers." Eddie's voice piped up next, its own kind of boiling intense. "Don't make us tell you again. Get outta here, while you still can."

It added another wavery-sounding snarl to reinforce their words.

Arms still wound protectively around Georgie, Bill glanced over his shoulder, chin trembling as he tried to quiet his need to sob. He met Henry’s confused, furious eye, but the bully was practically crabwalking in reverse, unable to believe the situation was what it was.

Staring just as vehemently, their hands preemptively loaded with stones, Richie and Eddie stood to either side of the monster's stooped shoulders.

The final nail in the coffin hammered home as It reared up to full height and took one loping step forward.

"GO!"

Bowers recoiled at the thunderous bark of sound, wheeling away to nearly crash into the trunk of a tree. He stumbled over the roots, pocketing his knife as he went, clumsily pushed aside a barrier of boughs, and vanished into the forest.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Yeah, right.

Bill breathed in and out, several times, to try and clear his head and steady his nerves, even as his heart kept up its relentless pounding, absolutely refusing to settle down. He kept his grip around Georgie, who grew more quiet and calm to match. No doubt he could hear the anxious thumping in his brother's chest for himself.

_God - damn - It._

No wonder Richie was so fond of the expression.

Speaking of Tozier...

"There. Fucking _great_. Happy now, Stripes? You- you done went and pissed him off. _Again._"

Bill heard a growling hiss answer the quip, starting to rev up, before it died down, as It apparently thought twice of any more posturing. There was no more show to put on here. The beast gave a heavy exhale not unlike a sigh. The armor of its exoskeleton rasped and clicked as It made to turn aside.

Twisting his head, Georgie heard it, too, and promptly tried to unentangle himself.

"Penny, w-wait- "

Bill tightened his grip, at loss for what else to do save keep his little brother from further harm. "_N-no, Georgie. D-don't- don't l-look._"

_You don't need to see - no more than you already have._

_Christ, how much did you actually see?_
The seven-year-old didn't sound very distressed, past the obvious concern for his shapeshifting friend. But that was the only clue Bill had to work with. He hadn't seen the first half of the attack.

...Had Richie?

Tozier's next scathing words suggested as much: "Yeah, if that is what- shit, what I think it is, you should do- whatever it is you do. Don't worry about us or anything. We'll try to forget just how... how fucked up it is in the meantime. Oh! And if you could actually take care of Bowers the same way, without any of us around to actually watch, that'd be just GREAT!"

Georgie sniffled and whined softly, burying his face into his brother's shoulder again. Bill squeezed his eyes shut, as if they could block out the fresh whirlwind of conflicting emotions spooling up within his mind.

He heard stamping, splashing footsteps, moving away. One of the clawed tips speared the ground like the spade of a shovel, dangerously close to their feet, scraping through the rough, moist sediment. The creature seemed to pause, then gave a loud huff, shattering the near quiet settling on the clearing.

Then there was a groan, followed by a louder, deeper-sounding splash.

Eddie sidestepped to stand against the Denbroughs, arms raised to somehow shield them from the smaller wave thrown their way. He muzzled any complaint, making only a muffled whimper at the chilled water which doused their hair and clothes.

The next Bill dared to open his eyes and chance a look, the river was settling, swirling - empty.

Like nothing had happened.

Except for the paper boat, sitting serenely upon the surface, perfectly still, while the water flowed and ran gently around her sides.
Hurry Up And Wait

Chapter Summary

It all adds up.

...Just about as much as it always hasn't.

Chapter Notes

Featured song: "Roll With It" by Steve Winwood.

Self-indulgent addition: it actually was a number one, playing the same week I was born.

Chest heaving, Beverly Marsh stood there in the tub. The broken slab of porcelain, heavy in her hands, pulled her forward. Clumsily, she dropped it, barely registering the thudding clank at her feet, almost stumbling as she sidestepped her way over the tub's edge. Sidling past the sink, her eyes never left the limp, bleeding form of her father, sprawled upon the bathroom floor.

A puddle of dark crimson was forming around Alvin Marsh's head, slowly overtaking the black-and-white tiles. The gash above his left eye pumped steadily, in time with his sluggish heartbeat. As she stared at him, half in a foggy daze, still caught in the grips of stunned realization, the puddle only spread, defying any expectation her mind might have, that it might somehow be imaginary. What meager light found its way through the room's only window made it shine almost regally.

In that glint Beverly thought she glimpsed her distorted reflection.

Then another point of shininess caught her eye. With renewed determination, she stepped forward. Her foot slipped only a few inches through the pooling blood, fetching up to stop against Alvin's arm as she bent over him. Bracing a hand on his stomach for balance, she reached for the belt of his pants. Turning his still-groaning form halfway over, she found the noisy, clinking ring of keys, secured to the beltloop at the man's hip.

The same apparatus included the key she sought, to unlock the exterior stairwell's deadbolt. She worked the carabiner clip free and stood up, rifling through the many choices. Smears of crimson coated her fingers. Her breath hitched as she found the steel key with its cracked rubber fob.

Then, still with a dazed-but-steadfast determination, Beverly turned and left the room without looking back. She stooped to grab her knapsack where it had fallen, beside the upturned ironing board in the living room. Walking on, she felt the sullied sole of her right shoe, leaving bloody prints as she strode across the carpet. Trying to ignore how dirty it seemed, compared to her left foot, she opened the door and stepped out into the late evening light.

She had to mind her step going down the metal staircase, making sure her bloodied shoe didn't slip in her haste to flee.
What a time she had picked to try running away.
For good.

Where're you sneakin' off to?

Nowhere, Daddy.

Nowhere you'd think I'd ever be.

...you know I worry about you, Bevvie...

Yeah? Then why worry about what folk in town are saying about me?

Don't I make my own bed? Lie in it? Like you always said?

What's this?

It's nothing. Just a poem.

Nothing more, nothing less. You can't know different.

Just a poem... that you had to hide in your underwear drawer.

I wouldn't have to hide it if- if you didn't worry like you did.

...Why would you have to hide it there?

Why? Why would you ever think to look in there?

Are you still my girl?

No.

...No.

What did you say?

I said, NO!

Her knees were starting to ache, moving at such a clipped, near-robotic rate. Beverly pushed her hair back and strode onward, breathing harshly. Like the blood on her hands, her initial bout of tears had dried, leaving cool, airy tracks on her face. She didn't care to dwell on what had brought them on. Compared to the warmth of her body, the sweat working up across her brow and collar, she didn't think to wipe them away, either.

In a way, it felt great. Every step she took felt like one more stride away from the cage the apartment had begun to resemble.

She had left her bike behind. Bringing it along would only mean having to hide and maintain it. And she had enough baggage in her head and heart to contend with, no matter how heavy her backpack grew, without adding to the burden.

No. She would keep going. Enough was enough.

Even without remembering the incident at the market, Alvin's erratic behavior had remained
unchanged in the months since. And the possessiveness, the seemingly-manic need to keep her close, built in cycles. Most days, he was easy enough to avoid, as errands to and from home didn't take much excuse-making to facilitate. His concerned words didn't take much deflecting to allay.

But as of late, Beverly supposed she had taken to spending too much time at home, as hanging out... elsewhere had become too hurtful to bear. It was unavoidable. Her very presence was giving Alvin ideas.

Ideas. Vile, unspeakable ones, which didn't come around but once in a blue moon.

But when they did...

No.

It didn't matter how rare an occasion it was.

There always came a make or break moment in one's life. Beverly supposed this was her's - if not the one, just the first of many. And she wasn't going into it totally blind. She wasn't daft to the consequences of making this preemptive choice. She simply hadn't expected Alvin discovering the postcard to be the catalyst to which set her plan in motion, the spark being struck and held to the fuse.

But it had.

Looking back, the memory of their confrontation still despicably fresh and raw in her mind, Beverly couldn't help a little wry laughter. Unheard as she was on this lonely neighborhood street, her giggling gave way to another wave of nervous sniffles. Her eyes went moist again as she strode past the church on the corner. Beverly scoffed and wiped at them, trying to banish the imprinted sight of Alvin. She saw him behind her eyelids.

Lying there, head split open, bleeding on the tiles.

Her, stepping into the puddle.

Looking frantically for the key to unlock her cage.

Beverly wiped at her face again, grimacing. The tears rewetted the telltale smears on her knuckles. Bracelets tinging, she wiped them against her blouse and picked up the pace.

Something else.

Think of something else.

What was the song she had heard on the radio? It had been the thing to listen to, around the same time last year, as her dreaded first year of high school began. The stations played it over and over and over. The newest number one with its jaunty horns, clappable barber-shop rhythm, the swinging tempo of the drums?

*Hard times knocking on your door, I'll tell 'em you ain't there no more... Get on through it... Roll with it, baby...*

Yeah, that was the one. It caught her ear from a distance at first, the lively tune so at odds with the nausea-inducing nervousness keeping her practically housebound after the first day back. Her homework lay neglected on the bed, books unopened. Sitting before her keyboard, Beverly had
listened, smiling wider than she remembered smiling in hours.

Memories of the ugly looks by other students faded away. Eventually, her fingers jigged over the keys to match, duetting as best she could to the unfamiliar notes.

Alvin wasn't home. No one was here to judge, to ridicule her for indulging in a moment of childishness. Even alone, it had been fun to try. She could let herself go there.

*People think you're down and out, you show them what it's all about...

*You can make it... Roll with it, baby...*

Turning the volume up, she moved the radio from the kitchen to the hallway, as far as its cord would let reach. Various songs came and went. She played along to every other track, some easily, some with nowhere near the skill. Every time the new one rotated back around, Beverly let herself laugh and her hands danced, relishing in the momentary distraction for what it was.

Granted, it wasn't her usual fare of music to practice. Soulful and extroverted far beyond what she ever typically showed.

Why not just enjoy it anyway?

Then do her homework? It always went by faster when she was feeling jazzed after a good keyboard lesson.

*You'll leave bad times way behind, nothing but good times on your mind...

*You can do it... Roll with it, baby...*

Then Fate crashed the party. The hospital dismissed Alvin early, and Beverly had caught hell for simply moving his radio. Something like the postcard, once a beloved bit of affection and intrigue, her love of music to be twisted around into something revolting, something she had to suffer for having in her possession.

Why?

What had she ever done to deserve such ire from the universe at large?

If not from the town, but from her very family?

And if it was her fault, was it anything she could help?

Getting through school would prove trying enough, year after year, growing progressively harder. The academic workload, she had no doubt she could handle. It was all the metaphorical social bullshit one had to put up with between classes making things muddled.

Why?

Were people always like this, spoiling for a fight, thirsting for conflict, just to make their lives a touch more exciting? A little less mundane?

Men bet on and followed sports, living off the rivalries between teams.

Women tittered and gossiped, whispering behind their hands who was seeing who.

Why?

Was it really so dull, becoming an adult, they had to compensate for the lack of excitement elsewhere? Constantly?

Ire. Tension. Facing a lack thereof.

Is that why some resorted to taking it out on their children?

Beverly was at once glad, and dreaded knowing, she was one fourth her way through leaving Derry High behind, but wherever she went next, she couldn't escape the reality of being a young woman. She had no desire to live the life of a hermit. She wanted out, out of Derry, to go on to something better.

A simple goal with a not-so-simple series of steps. It would take hard work to get there. That much was a given.

Exactly what were the steps she had to take to reach her destination, she wasn't sure of. Yet.

But you could either wade into the water at the quarry from the safety of the eastern beach, after taking the long way around to reach said stretch, or you could take the plunge off the western side, with its forested cliff. Beverly had never balked at the idea of pursuing the latter option. Either way, you would end up swimming.

Why not go with the exciting route?

In those seconds it took to vault away from the rock face, to hang there in midair before gravity reclaimed you, it meant you were in for a precious few seconds of feeling more alive than you usually did.

Risky, yes.

Worth it.

________

**Anyone home?**

There was no foreboding storm on the way - in the sky, anyway. Already a few faint stars could be seen in the pink-orange streaked heavens above. So Beverly stopped at the rusted, atrophying gate of 29 Neibolt Street, taking a few spare breaths to get her wind back and compose herself, outwardly as well as inward. Her blue eyes searched the front of the age-old house, its parched, scrubby-looking front lawn, looking for anything out of sorts.

To an unknowing eye, everything about it would have looked bizarre.

Over the course of 1989, Beverly Marsh had had some practice, in getting to know the place.

And its missing owner-

No, wait.

Not missing.

Spotting him, Beverly couldn't help a smile. This was one behavior he hadn't shown before. Her eyes fell on the twisted, bent-over tree, standing to the left of the front door. Perched on the highest arm of the sickly dead trunk, a certain black-and-white crow sat. She smiled at the sight of him
because, as yet, he hadn't seemed to notice her.

His head was twisted around, tucked deep under his patched wing.

One could almost imagine the trail of Zs floating away above his head.

Feeling a giddy, ridiculously bit playful, the teenager inched over to stand beneath the occupied branch. With his claws anchored deep into the wood, the corvid didn't stir.

"Pst... psst... Hey... Hey, Mister Early Bird, you're not. It's past seven."

Nothing.

Beverly walked one way, then the other, beneath him. Patting the trunk with her palm yielded no reaction. The magpie was a few head-heights out of her reach, too.

Plan B.

"Awk!"

Indignant, the magpie gave a spluttering caw, jiggling aside from the alarm-clock acorn which ricocheted harmlessly off his chest. The avian lookalike wheeled around, neck feathers puffing out, wings held aflame before the unnaturally-yellow eyes spotted his attacker.

Beverly stood waiting, hands hooked on her backpack straps. Despite the tremor of nervousness she felt, the events of the day set aside, the risk had to be taken here. She smiled and nodded toward the locked door (which she knew was only locked, as of recently, because Belch's Firebird was said to have made a few slow drivebys in the last few weeks).

She missed having it open already.

"Sorry, but... You mind? I need to... talk to you."

And maybe... arrange some other favors.

...Maybe.

If... if it's not too much?

To her pleasant surprise, It didn't protest or ask questions. The shapeshifter didn't so much as sniff in discontent, or flick his beak in disdain, or settle down to go back to sleep in front of her. Feathers settling, the magpie stilled to a statuesque freeze, staring her down. His eyes slowly darkened back to impassionate black orbs.

Then she heard the aged doorknob give a metallic click. Of its own accord, the door slowly swung inward, creaking as it was pulled by an unseen doorman.

Sighing with relief, Beverly nodded her thanks. She climbed the steps, and ducked under the boards, hitching her skirt up to avoid leaving it free to snag on the frame. She had to bend lower than normal to accommodate her loaded backpack. With familiar ease, she veered left, into the first vestibule, depositing her pack on a couch.

There. Safe.

For now.
Pulling a few sheets back from the papered-up windows, she looked out into the yard. The sun was practically set. The shadows outside were growing, strengthening and merging with one another across the ground. The advancing dark wouldn't be stopped.

The tree stood empty.

The magpie was gone.

"He's stilL alive."

_Hmph. There's a fine way to say hello._

The husky voice behind her ear provoked no startled jump. Frowning anew, Beverly only smoothed the paper back against the mouldering windowframe. She ran her hands across her bare arms, thinking of the coat stashed in her backpack.

Just like that, the comfort of familiar surroundings was yanked from her sight.

Because It was just one of those types with an inborn knack for spoiling moods.

"Is he? Could'a fooled me. ...He went down like a sack of bricks."

Biting her lip, Beverly paused. She didn't know whether elation or dismay were what she should be feeling. But for the umpteenth time, both emotions vied for her full attention. So, to ignore them, she tried making a joke of it, albeit unsure of how it would be received.

The reaction fell decidedly flat.

"...WhaT?"

Beverly glanced over her shoulder. "You meant Daddy, right?"

"Alv..." The blue-eyed entity trailed off, as did his oft-wandering eyeline. He paused in kind, slumping over, his expression twisting up into a mix of disgust, mild horror, and confusion. Apparently-finding whatever his greater network of senses was looking for, across town, he shook his head. "No."

Beverly frowned. The chill spreading across the skin of her arms seemed to halt.

Two simple letters.

How was it they had the power to cast such uncomprehending doubt over a conversation?

"Then, who're you talking about? ...Who's still alive?"

_What did you do?_

Thinking the third query couldn't be helped.

Pennywise glared, his eyes turning suddenly so sharp and intense the girl recoiled half a step as their gazes locked. After days of watching him progressively tire out, it was effectively surprising to see a flicker of the old intensity resurface. Even at rest, the creature's face had always seemed to carry it.

He seemed oddly more... alive tonight than the new lackluster norm suggested.

"You don't kNow?"
Holding her elbows, Beverly bit her lip again and thought back, trying to dismiss the rumble under his words. No, she didn't remember the phone in the hallway ringing recently, much less her having occasion to answer it. Being grounded (again, on oh-so-dubious reasons) made not hearing it ring virtually impossible.

Had any of the other Losers called?

"I-I wouldn't ask if I did, Pen."

"You didn't, though," her friend droned, words turning blunt and edgy in the same breath, like a double-edged knife, twirling between idle, unseen hands. The tension was there, roiling just under the surface, water on the verge of being brought to a boil. "You thought it, just now. You didn't dare ask."

Beverly bristled, growing a touch defensive all over again. Evidently, she wasn't the only one who had had a bad day. But wasn't she the guest of the two of them?

Moody as he abruptly seemed, It had opened the door. And he wasn't being such a good host all of a sudden. Not to mention a certain lack of intervention she had silently hoped for, around the same time Alvin was pinning her to the living room floor.

What right did It have to be affronted by what she was or wasn't putting to words?

"Yeah? Would you rather I had, out loud?"

"No."

Why this was so, she didn't ask. Or dwell on. It was a conversational pothole which would only lead to more damage if either of them paid it more attention. Guilty though he was, of something she yet had no knowledge of, Beverly knew better than to push.

One prolonged stare later, Pennywise straightened up, resting a hand on the doorframe. He paid the girl's overstuffed backpack on the couch a cursory look, filling in the gaps for himself.

"...You left?"

Beverly glanced away, trying not to show a flush of unnamable emotions. She rubbed her palms along her arms again. "Yeah, I did."

_Enough was enough._

The clown's shoulders sagged. His expression softened. "He found the postcard."

"He did."

"And- he... he tried to..."

"...He did."

_And you- you weren't-

Pennywise's gaze flicked back to meet hers. His resting fingertips curled up to dig against the wood-clawing, almost, before they paused. He looked anything except ashamed or contrite. Nor did he look particularly proud for showing a kind of restraint.

A bit of wincing guilt crept into his visage instead.
"You wouldn't've wanted me there, Bevs."

"Why?"

Slowly, as if unsure of what to do with them, he wrung his hands. "Because... you wouldn't."

And I should know better than to expect any different an answer than that from you.

"Shit," Beverly couldn't help a little sigh. Her eyes burned traitorously hot again. She squeezed her eyelids shut, trying to speak around the new hitch in her throat, hating the mere fact it was even there now. And as she tried to talk around it, her voice broke up - hammered relentlessly as it was by the painfully-blunt realization of he-wasn't-there.

"Shit. Of... of all the times you-you d-didn't... You c-couldn't..."

This - she didn't have the energy to put it into words all of a sudden.

She didn't see him reach over to hug her, timidly at first, before threading an arm around behind her neck. Perhaps for the best, as she felt her shoulders give an involuntary jerk, a jump at being touched without consent. Beverly fought a sniff, even as the tears built up to an excruciating peak and slipped past her eyelids. She couldn't dam them up forever.

Perceptive thing It was, he knew this.

She thought to protest, to growl and push him away. Somehow, the idea of him seeing her openly cry was more unbearable than anything else. Where was the tough girl he had grown so fond of? This wasn't her. He cared not for anything else but her, didn't he? He kept his distance because she was strong, supposed to be strong, Miss Beverly Marsh who didn't need anyone to handle herself.

Even if he couldn't break orbit, wasn't he just playing along to her expectations? She couldn't need anyone else. Life had taught her so, up until this point. To need someone wasn't being her anymore, inside or out. She wasn't worth anyone's trouble. She didn't ask, and they didn't tell. She kept her distance, didn't entertain the idea of getting close. Everyone was better off that way.

Weren't they?

Insofar as that moment went, It disobeyed her, and she was more glad than words could convey.

She buried her face against his chest, muffling her first sob to a meek grunt. Her shoulders twitched again, feeling both arms snake around her back. Beverly felt a wide palm pressing on the back of her head, fingers sliding under her hair, kneading against her scalp. Shaking, Beverly kept her face turned into his collar, gently buffering all the other cries that followed into whimpers and moans.

He made no sound in return. She heard only a tiny, buzzing hum, now quieted to a whisper within his chest. He rested his cheek against her forehead and held still, silent and unknowable except for the warmth he emitted.

It was his best attempt at a nonverbal apology.

Among the many to come, she feared.

Fire was supposed to give off heat.

The blaze Beverly stared at (or another very convincing lookalike), conjured up within the old fireplace a few minutes later, did no such thing. Where once the illusionary magic would have gotten
no visible reaction from her, she was infinitely glad to have it to distract her mind from other matters. Like the little ache blooming in her stomach, because she hadn't thought to grab any food from the kitchennette before fleeing.

She could ignore it for now, given this little show of illumination to occupy her attention.

The air inside the rickety old house was as warm as the night was proving outside. Strange though the red-orange glow against the boarded-up windows was as seen from the street, Beverly had a feeling she was the only one in Derry who would have, could have noticed it now. The old teartracks on her face cooled and dried up, but again, she scarcely paid it any attention.

She paid more mind to the old fraying blanket suddenly being draped across her shoulders, as if it had flown out of the dark to pounce of its own accord. Scoffing, she pretended to fuss at its itchiness, finding how it covered her head to be affectionately annoying.

Elbows propped on his knees, Pennywise took a seat beside her by the time she got it out of her eyes. He only smirked at the mock indignation she aimed his way, reaching over to brush her hair back. She tucked the loose strands behind her ear.
"There... Better?"

"Yeah, th-thanks," Beverly managed a smile, almost feeling completely back to normal for it. "Could've used a cigarette, too, maybe- hey, kidding, I'm kidding."

Pennywise snorted quietly through his nose, a slight tsk of consideration at her playfully-hasty rebuttal. He rubbed his hands together. "Can't say I blame you."

"Good, don't, please. There's been enough blame hurled around lately."

"Oh, has there?"

Oh, yes. Beverly sighed, huddling into herself. "I think so. Between Daddy and I, you and me, you and the others..."

Trailing off felt appropriate. She didn't need to elaborate. They stared into the heatless fire in mutually-silent agreement. The logs inside the hearth were utterly black, smooth husks, by no means proper kindling.

But they burned all the same.

Why not just enjoy the moment of peace for what it was?

"He's... he's still alive, if you- were wondering," Pennywise finally spoke up again. His hands stilled, arms crossing under his chest.

Anything more, he refrained from saying. He was astutue enough to recognize the futility.

"I was," Beverly admitted, a small part of her glad to hear it. Glad she didn't have her father's death to weigh on her head, among other ails. "Thanks, I was... wondering."

"You didn't want to hurt him," the humanoid creature went on, in words which were not quite monotone, but not the bumpy, uneven speech he had never perfected in this form, either. "Not... not at first?"

"No, I... I just... I wanted out." Marsh answered, eyes flicking as she thought back. She couldn't
duck the cause of her newest problem for long. Much as she didn't want to talk about it, with who else could she, if not now? That window of opportunity wouldn't stay open forever. "It was stupid, what set everything off. I shouldn't- I shouldn't've put the card in my dresser, especially where I did. I could've... been smarter about it."

"No." Reluctantly, she looked back at her host, as It's silences were always some degree of thoughtful. His voice bent to match a frown, irises aglow to rival the fire. "No. You shouldn'T have to hide what makes you happy, Bevs. And he should know that."

"I think he- he does."

*Always with the sliver of doubt, you say these things.*

*When are you gonna stop making allowances?*

"No, he doesn't," Pennywise retorted, flatly, despite the half-glare she pointed at him for daring to say so. "You know. He only cares for what makes him happy. He always has."

"Oh, and how do you know? You've never known him."

*Like, known him, known him.*

Smirking again, Pennywise took the challenge in stride. "I saw enough at the market."

"Yes, he did. And, caught up in the moment, you didn't disagree with him, remember?*

*Or was that just going along with the act?*

Beverly felt her cheeks redden. Her grip tightened on the blanket. There stood the rule they had discussed-slash-argued-very-excitedly-over. They did not speak of the moment prior to now, but those events, what had led up to the very-impulsive kiss, those were fair game.

Especially now.

"If you mean, how he treats me, that's just- just how Daddy is."

"...Pft. Doesn't make it okay, Bevs," Pennywise concluded, hiking an unimpressed eyebrow. The smirk melted away. "And you're not stupid." Undissuaded by her excuse-making, he tapped her nose for emphasis. "You know. Like I know you know Billy's told you. Over, and over."

Beverly didn't think to actually feel irritated, to have been eavesdropped on, or being woven around in circles, as though she were some dense halfwit who had to be repeatedly schooled. It wasn't wrong. She wasn't one to fidget, but right now, there wasn't any point hiding her discomfort. "Yeah, well, saying something is always easier than meaning it, you know."

*You don't just give up years of loving someone with a snap of your fingers.*

*Easy as that may be for someth- you.*

*If only everything in the universe was like you, nothing would ever be wrong, would it?*

"Don't be silly." Blinking at her brazenness, Pennywise scoffed again, in quite-appalled disbelief. His irises brightened from blue to an almost-green, recolored as they were by the sheen of fire. "Bevs, the last thing this universe needs is another me."

...Really?
"Could that... that happen?" Beverly asked, when the hungry crackle of the fire grew too loud to keep listening to. The change in subject was most welcome. She had oft wondered on the matter, privately, as had the boys, albeit not so privately. "I mean... if someone like you exists, what else can?"

"Anything and everything," Pennywise grumbled, still refusing to meet her eyes. He seemed at once disturbed and somehow-whimsical at the notion, as though the opportunity were indeed there, he didn't want to admit laying eyes on it. "So long as it's not like me, anyway. This... galaXy can barely stand one me."

She grinned. "Now who's depreciating themselves?"

It wasn't the only one who could parrot what they said.

Frowning at her, Pennywise didn't seem moved by the argument. His eyes simmered again, growing almost-yellow before cooling back to an atypical dark blue. "BesiDe the point, Bevs. You can't see things on the saMe- scale I can. There, a human concept like self- ah- appre-ciation isn't relevaNt, at all."

Grin fading, Beverly tilted her head. Clearly, she wasn't cut from the same solitary cloth as he was - not to that degree. "So, what is? How come there's just... one of you?"

And if you say "because" one more time, I'll slap you.

Snickering, undoubtedly reading the unspoken warning in her clear-blue eyes, Pennywise rearranged his arms, hugging his knees to his chest. "You've seen. What happened at the market, that's what I do."

Among other influences.

Us included.

"You blind people?"

"In more ways tHan one," he retorted. "Seeing me, Richie said it'd be like staring at the sun. And no matter wherE you are on this planet, everything living here knows better, animals, humans - it's something you just don't do." Pause. "Same thiNg goes for why there isn't more than one of me."

Could you imagine a world in which there was?

"I guess, that makes sense," Beverly reasoned, amazed at how two words like "guess" and "sense" - with such opposite meanings - could sound so alike. "What you said that day at the diner, about masks, it's for our own good?"

"Or bad," the entity shrugged. "Depending on mY... mood."

Did he mean to sound so vaguely threatening all of a sudden?

Beverly shook her head. Her friend was like a two-sided coin, and for all her wishing, his uglier side couldn't be denied. "You really are hopeless."

Hopeless to understand.

Nonplussed, Pennywise smirked, almost wickedly. In the firelight, his teeth glinted most maliciously. The shuddering flicker of light made them look sharper than usual. The display was part reminder,
part bitter warning.

Rob Gray had explained it, in as uncertain terms as he could, at the diner.

Epitomy of destruction, remember?

"What else can I be?"

Beverly swallowed. All too suddenly, she felt as though she would be smart to tread a little more carefully. But if she were smarter, maybe, she never would've tempted this in the first place.

"So... all this, knowing us, everything we've done in the last year, that's been, what? Experimental? Again, why did you... bother? Ever?"

*Don't we matter to you?*

*Or is that another mask?*

Eyes drifting apart, Pennywise considered. The borderline-scary grin shrank back into a more thoughtful frown, before they recentered. "Why're you trying to run away?"

*Why? Because... because I'm... I'm tired of things.*

*As they are.*

"There's your answer," he replied, curtly, looking neither pleased nor disappointed by her musing. Spittle leaked from the corners of his mouth. "Today was... refreshing, though."

"You do seem... less tired than last I saw you."

"For now," Pennywise remarked, not without some detectable sadness, and lingering regret. He scratched idly at his jaw with one fingertip, a nervous tic. "Naps- have that effect."

"No," Beverly blinked. She let the blanket slide from her shoulders, to pile in a heap at her back. "I mean, more than a nap has done for you."

Put on the spot, he froze. His eyes drifted askew again, one drawn almost hypnotically to the dance of the fire.

Beverly met them as best she was able. "What happened? What aren't you telling me?"

*I don't want to know, but I... I have to.*

*I have to stop denying- kidding myself.*

"You're smart, Bevs. You'll figure it- Oww. Heyyy."

Ignoring his whines of protest, Beverly went for a classic rebuke. She grabbed him by the chin, roughly pulling his face back around. Her fingers closed tight, and she paused only at the feeling his imitation skin caving, like a hollow paper maché crumpling under the force of her touch.

*No. Knock it off with the flattery. Tell me."

"What - happened?"

He winced. Shoulders hunched, his arms tightened around his torso. His hands remained hidden.
"Nothing- nothing good."

"I know, I meant- details, Pen, about what you said before. Who's still alive?"

"...Bowers."

*The ever-present thorn in all our sides.*

"What happened?" Beverly repeated, as gently as she could think to coax. As much as she didn't want to hear it, logic demanded she try and listen, insanely risky as it may be - like the kiss had been. "Is it what the others haven't called me about, yet?"

He didn't speak, save for sparing her a wounded, plainly-embarrassed glance. Staring, eyes blue and centered, he seemed to freeze with indecision. Like moving was suddenly a very bad idea, and he dreaded what would happen if he did.

Yes, indeed.

"Pen. Answer me. What's going on? Are you... Did... did you..."

She trailed off again, somehow recognizing the subtle change happening behind those odd eyes. A proverbial lightswitch was oh-so-slowly being flipped the other way.

Just as quickly, feeling a tingle of alarm, Beverly let go. Her human need to know didn't seem so important all of a sudden. This felt suddenly dangerous, like she was holding onto a pan poised over a campfire flame.

"You idiot."

She said it in reference to herself as much as it was to him.

*Why did I expect any different?*

For a moment, it did the trick. The switch was stuck at the halfway mark. Almost cowering, Pennywise refolded his arms across his knees, wrist across wrist. Rather than disappear from the scene, he hid half his face behind his gloved hands, closing his eyes.

There was the same pose the creature had taken, telling them all off his impending slumber. She hated seeing it again as much as any reunion with Alvin her future may have held.

It looked so deceptively vulnerable, lost, and scared, all in the same go.

Another act?

"You can't stay, Bev-Beverly, I'm sorry. Just- no, maybe- just for the- night, okay?"

"Sure..." Marsh breathed the word out, in contrast to his near-incoherent stammers. Her eyes began to prickle again, as she tried not to think, to not give credence to his slipping composure. Closing them, she turned around, grabbing the abandoned blanket up. She may have been a trifle hungry, but the need to sleep ought to prove strong enough. The couch her backpack sat on would do fine.

There was no sense in staying here if he was just going to grow even more evasive, more obtuse with every pretend breath he took. If he couldn't fess up to what he had done, then she couldn't forgive him of anything.

And if she couldn't bring herself to ask anymore, there was nothing he need confess to.
But evidently, he didn't want them to part on such a note.

Ting.

"Pen, l-let g..." Beverly's voice died as she felt and heard the small, pitiful whine he emitted, even before the creature's arms ensnared her like a pair of iron cables. Without any sort of speech to lead up to the moment, he caught the girl in another tight, trembling hug, holding her against his shoulder. She couldn't hope to turn and see his face, but by the tight, emotional clench of his jaw, pressing against her ear, anything she would have seen would only tap new tears.

More that weren't already flowing. Something wet ran down the curve of his face, before soaking into her auburn hair.

She couldn't fight a blink of surprise.

Tears? From him?

Since when?

*I'm sorry, Beverly.*

*I... I'm sorry.*

Beverly didn't stop to question where the words came from. She bent her head back and could only start to ask: "What... what're you sorry abou-"

Belatedly, the low whimpering became a keening, alien snarl, filling her head like the deafening scream of a jet engine. Sharp, blinding pressure closed around her exposed throat, hundreds of tiny points digging and sinking into her skin. Stars exploded across her vision as her air was cut off. For a scant second, she felt the tacky warmth of blood washing across her chest.

The switch was thrown.

The fire in the hearth - its upper edge enscribed with the words *Good Friends, Good Cheer* - went out.

Beverly blacked out realizing how she should have been thinking about escaping the new cage posing as a temporary haven.
By the tick of the diner's clock, Beverly Marsh deduced it was somewhere ten minutes past three in the afternoon when her company found it prudent to appear. While not exactly punctual, she supposed there was nothing to actually be upset about.

He had shown himself, as promised, after all.

However reluctantly.

This allowance didn't mean she couldn't rib him a bit for it, though.

"Finally. I was starting to think you stood me up."

(Wait for it, audience.)

"But you're- already standing."

You idiot. At the risk of looking completely silly to the rest of the diner (you had to hold your ground in keeping a table when it was this busy), Beverly straightened from where she had been leaning against the bench booth's backrest.

"You know what I meant." She paused, looking her incognito companion up and down (mostly up). As it reluctantly promised, Robert Gray had shown himself. He was clad in the embroidered, laced-leather jacket-and-jeans ensemble, just as she remembered. And said outfit now seemed complete with the eyewear Beverly had suggested, even if it could be seen as an unwelcome reminder of the confrontation with Alvin at the market.

Unwelcome, but perhaps it was somehow acceptable, too.

"Back to the usual garb, I see."

Rob frowned, brows furrowing over the opaque lenses. "Ge... garb?"

"Clothes," Beverly clarified. She spared him an encouraging smile and pat on the shoulder. There,
nice midway point between a handshake and a hug. "It's okay. They fit you. I wouldn't have expected them to change."

And you remembered the glasses. Nice touch.

Makes you look more a Rob, more than Bob, already.

The entity's frown eased from one borne of confusion to concern. He didn't look mollified by her compliments, spoken and unspoken. "Not... not even after-

Beverly stopped him with a playful sleeve-tug. "Hey, c'mon, we're not here to talk about that." The redhead gestured toward the empty bench seat across the table from her own. "Sit. I already ordered for us."

As you probably already know.

Taking her place, Marsh paused to discard her hoodie, folding it up to stash against the wall. Her necklaces clinked together as she sidled back into position.

Looking on, Gray paused only to ask what he already knew. He tilted his head at the notion all the same. "Ice cream?"

"Why not?" Beverly smiled again, nodding toward the window, trying to seem purely casual - despite there being nothing casual about their recent history. "Warm enough out there today."

Among other... places.

"I... suppose." Removing his sunglasses, Rob didn't look outwardly convinced. He sat down and spared the window no special attention, focusing instead on the folded-up menu stashed at the table's head. "...So long as you let me buy."

Beverly knew better than to deny the offer. She had a scarce few dollars in her pocket, barely enough to afford the sprinkles. "Deal." She waited again, watching him try to busy himself with folding the glasses to stash inside his jacket. He avoided meeting her eyes.

Only when the din of the diner around them continued as normal, a fog of overlapping chatter, hissing stoves, and clinking cutlery, for perhaps a minute longer than it should have, did Beverly pry: "Well... are we gonna talk, or not?"

We have to, at some point.

While 'or not' was a very tempting alternative choice, she wasn't one to take the shier route. Wearing a human face, It apparently harbored no such desire to play the tough guy, then and there. He spared her a very sideways look at this prodding, as Pennywise always tended to when the clown was feeling unnecessarily put on, yet trying not to show it (funnily, enough, Bill had pegged that tic earlier than all of them; something about a rainy afternoon he spent, one on one, familiarizing It with televised entertainment). "You start. I'm- not sure where to begin."

"No?" She took her turn to frown. "...I am. Can't you tell?"

This drew his full mildly-irritated attention back. Rob scoffed, with a helpless-looking shrug to match. "Pretend I can't, Bevs. Human face, human perspective. This might prove- easier for you to understand if we- approach the subject that way."

You and your big words. Ben ought to be proud.
"Gotcha." Nodding slowly, Beverly closed the gap, leaning forward to set her elbows on the table. With the glasses off, she took another, more-measured look at his visage. For the sake of pretending, she temporarily fooled herself into thinking if he appeared in any way ill, it would show there. "You're feeling better, then?"

Just needed some time, when all was said and done.

Rob's scowl proved short-lived. He met her gaze, eyes roving with small back-and-forth twitches, to follow her own. "Back to normal - close as there is to normal for me, thanks," he snipped, tightly, before following it up with a softer response, "And you, you're... okay, too?"

Beverly spared him a brief grin in reward, for showing some geniality. "Insofar as what that means for me, too, yes. Thank you." Waiting for him to offer more, expression dropping as he only indulged in another prolonged stare, she ended their respective inner tirades with a sigh. She leaned back.

The silences between had officially gone awkward.

"All right. Look, I won't beat around the bush any more: we... we were both there, caught up in the... moment. Whatever you were thinking... whatever I was thinking, it- it just... happened, okay? Arguing about it, however long we did, doesn't change that it did."

"Y... yes, but..." Listening to her, It went a noticeable shade paler, closer to the bone-white tones of his most-favored form. His words grew slower and halting as he pondered out loud: "I don't... know... what brought it on, talking like that, feeling like that, I... that was another side effect of being stuck, I guess. Narrowed senses... equals... narrowed thinking... like- trying to fill a funnel without waiting for it to drain first."

Overflow?

Beverly didn't think she would ever associate a kiss with that word. But it felt appropriate, to describe what her friend had endured. "Seeing me there, with my father, it upset you that much?"

"Yes. Not beiNg abLe to- " Rob stopped short, catching the acrid slip of his voice. The paleness faded, overtaken by an almost-bashful flush in his cheeks. His eyes went a bit wider, practically beseeching her for forgiveness, on multiple levels. "Thinking there was nothing I-I could do. I didn't- have to go with Richie to the arcade, after you and I talked, but... a-after you..."

After I brushed you off... Beverly continued, stringing the facts together. She threaded a hand against the back of her head in thought, fingers snaring themselves in the red hairs. Her rings snagged amidst the curls, but she paid it no heed. All too suddenly, her 'lunchdate' looked the definition of how he had probably felt after he saw the bruises on her neck (still visible now, albeit healing and mostly-faded).

"You must've felt pretty useless."

Not just for yourself.

And I didn't make it any easier, acting the way I did.

I thought I was being tough enough, you wouldn't need to worry.

Meekly, Rob blinked at her and his gaze dropped again. He looked borderline reproachful. Perhaps
"I got it wrong," she concluded, folding her hands together atop the table. "I'm sorry, I thought you- you were overreacting again. Over nothing. I should've paid your warning more attention. But I couldn't know Da... my father would come to Neibolt Street. I didn't think he- worried enough to."

On this subject, It was never short on things to say. And he spared no commentary here. "He worries plenty, Bevvie. And I know how badly you wish he wouldn't."

Beverly frowned. *Don't call me that.*

Rob scoffed at her change of expression, raising an eyebrow. "See? It gets you, even now." As quickly as the smugness surfaced, it submerged again, overtaken by a considerate wince. "I'm sorry if it all- upset you, made things even more confused. That wasn't what I wanted. It was only... what I thought I could do, to help."

Beverly scratched the back of her neck, trying to puzzle out how to best accept the fact. Would it have been better if he hadn't helped, if he had stayed out of it completely? Probably. Odds are, Alvin would have dragged her home for another verbal beating before declaring her grounded the rest of the summer. He hated the fact she smoked, yes, but did it really warrant all the public bluster?

Either way, that she had stupidly even dared to, under the pretense of defiantly sneaking away from home to do so, had landed her in hot water.

Limited as he was on abilities at the time, It pulled together the best rescue plan he could on short notice, under the circumstances. And the best possible outcome had left him feeling apologetic, exposed, and hopelessly bemused, all for her sake.

He didn't need to be.

Beverly reached across the table on impulse, patting one of his hands in consolation. "I'm sorry, too. I don't know what came over me, before, or in the end. But- it's a good thing you had that- that light trick up your sleeve, yeah? I guess the kiss was my cue for you to spring it. Just the fix you needed."

*Happy accident.*

It's humanoid disguise stilled. His expression took little reading to see he clearly thought nothing of the kind. Beverly felt a weird quietness settle around her ears, as if an unseen increase in air pressure had caused them to pop. The clamor of the diner faded a few octaves.

Mouth slightly agape, Robert Gray stared at her in abject abhorrence.

Without breaking eye contact, he quickly pulled his hand away.

Challenged by the reaction, Beverly held his gaze, despite feeling a inward flicker of trepidation. "...What?"

"It wasn't a trick, Bevs. It... that- that was me."

"You?" She frowned, ears clearing. How oddly calm and monotone he now sounded, compared to how petrified he looked. "What... what do you mean?"

"What happened." His expression crumpled with distress. Anxiously, he brought a knuckle up to his mouth, briefly favoring the skin with a worried gnaw. "*Just* what I'm saying - that... that light, flying apart like I did, blinding everyone in the market - you've no idea how lucky you got."
Beverly blinked, shrugging, palms upturned, as she sat back in her seat. "If you say so." Rebuffing his anxiety, rather than playing along to it, was easy when she didn't have an inkling what the entity was referring to. "I mean, I closed my eyes, that's all. How is that 'lucky'?"

Rob scoffed again, sounding a little more choked than before. His unblinking eyes seemed to flare brighter with repressed lumens, as if a slider switch had been dialed up. "You didn't see me. That's lucky."

"Why? What would've happened if I had?"

"You saw what happened afterward, didn't you?"

Beverly had.

But like so much else, unbearable to face and impossible to explain, she had tried to put it out of her mind. At the time, there had only been a muffled snap. The feeling of lips against her own disappeared, the pressure vanishing as if it had barely been applied. The air went twice as dense, as though a blanket of humidity had set in upon the scene.

Yellow light, muted though it was by the protection of her eyelids, flared from somewhere and swallowed their surroundings. She didn't dare chance a peek.

Beverly remembered hearing several frightened shouts sounding off, some close by, some from afar. One voice, she recognized as Alvin's. He stumbled and yelled as though he had been struck. Beverly had thought, for one terrified instant, he was going to yank her away, backhand her there before so many of those witnesses.

Just as she had kind of hoped.

Then people would see, for themselves, she really was the victim. Her father was the abusive prick he was rumored to be after all. Word would spread. Things would take a turn for the better. He would think twice before raising a hand to her again.

Instead, she remembered opening her eyes to relative chaos. Bob Gray was gone. She noted so right away, then upon glancing around she noted where several customers had wound up: keeled over their shopping baskets, passed out on the floor. Most had dropped in heaps where they stood, as if a collective, chloroform-induced faint had taken place.

Alvin fell sideways, slumping against a shelf, sliding down to sit leaning against the endcap full of greeting cards. His eyes had dropped into a dull, half-lidded stare. His mouth hung ajar in a breathless sigh.

Without taking too much time to worry for him, or react otherwise, Beverly bolted from the scene. The bewildered crowd of people lingering at the front of the store, shoppers and store personnel alike, were making their way toward the apparent-victims as she brushed by. She rendezvoused with the Losers, waiting as they outside the door, and together they had fled back to Neibolt Street.

Mike theorized there was where It had presumably teleported back to, and to their mingled relief and puzzlement, it turned out to be true.

Oddly enough, Beverly hadn't wondered since what became of the collateral victims.

Neither had any of the guys. They only seemed to relieved to have their club's full ranks back together again.
...Why?

Considering the remorseful stare Rob Gray currently favored the girl with, the answer was looking her right in the eye now.

She forgot, because that's what people in Derry did, no matter what their age.

They forgot.

Because of him.

Because this being, one she somehow counted as her friend and confidant, his very presence had permeated the town, like an undetectable poison of apathy? Years upon years of influence seeping into every living facet. Everyone was polluted, contaminated to some extent, and not because there was something in the water they drank.

Watching her muse, Rob waited until Beverly found the urge, and the will, to glare, near-accusingly, at him before ashamedly dropping his gaze. "And some of them, those people are still... in treatment. Some won't ever recover. The only good to come of it is they all, each for their own reasons, won't-remember. Including your father."

He didn't, apparently.

_I went home the next day. He was lying there on the sofa, with half a concussion, and the only question I got was "D'we have any ice packs in the freezer, Bevvie?...No. I don't remember where I bumped my head so hard."

Nor did he ask if I'd been anywhere I shouldn't have.

"They won't... remember," Beverly repeated, dully. "Just because they... saw you?"

Rob's eyes turned sharp, mitigated only by the barest glimmer of sorrow. She remembered seeing the look not all that long ago, in Neilbolt's foyer, and just to reinforce the memory, he seemed to repeat himself. "That's what I do, Beverly, and have always done. The face you're talking to now is a mask. Pennywise is a mask. All my physical forms are. What I- am is nothing your mind can comprehend and remain in one piece, and there is no explaining that to you, to anyone, in any sufficient degree. That's the... essence of my existence - to destroy, to consume. Eventually, that's what I end up doing. Always."

"...Always?"

He didn't have to nod. A poignant blink from him was affirmation enough.

_Yep._

"And between bouts you... sleep?"

His scowl deepened. "If I didn't, nothing in existence would have a chance to be. It's... It's why I- why you won't- "

_Tap, tap._

Startled, so enraptured by his small speech (he had a talent for them, however much he might protest to the contrary), Beverly jumped at the brazen interruption. Someone had tapped the window, from outside, with all the casual disregard one might a fishtank after reading a sign which specifically said
not to.

Short of bearing his teeth, Rob glared accordingly.

His speechifying came at the cost of not keeping a veil of nigh-invisibility as tightly rigged as it should be.

The perpetrators turned out to be three teenage girls, perhaps her same age, or slightly older. The makeup probably added more years than they could actually lay claim to. Two brunettes and a blonde, Marsh thought she recognized them as tenth graders, whom may or may not have occasion to socialize with one Henry Bowers. They looked like the Gretta Keene types, besides. Their names and reputations temporarily escaped her.

All too suddenly, Beverly realized she didn't precisely... like the way their eyelashes were fluttering. Or how they stood so needlessly close to the window. Or the feathery smiles they sported. Or the very obvious way they chatted sidelong to one another.

It was as if they were trying their damnedest to look enticing, mid-gossip.

Well.

Only a matter of time before something of this nature happened.

Marsh barely refrained from rolling her eyes.

Oh, you girls have no idea who you're putting the moves on right now.

To her inexplicable relief, Rob didn't take the bait. He only scowled at the coy, flirtatious show and waved them away. Expression souring, he used the underhanded finger flick of be-gone, as though he were some old time nobleman banishing begging peasants from his presence.

Visibly disappointed, the trio of girls exchanged a miserable glance among themselves. One of them, the tallest, spared Beverly a simmering look of jealously before moving off down the sidewalk after her friends.

Rob feigned a sigh of relief as they found themselves relatively alone once more. "Bevs, wh-why were they... Why're you looking at me like that?"

Elbows back on the table, Beverly arched an eyebrow. She kept her face as blank as could be. "You're the mind reader."

Among other things.

"I'd... rather have you lie to me right now." He frowned, slowly pointing after the departing girls without looking at away from her. "Nothing their brains were saying is anything I want to hear."

So? Stop listening.

Eyes darting with thought, Rob frowned. He seemed to take the advice to heart (or whatever posed for one). Snapping his fingers, so quickly Marsh nearly couldn't see the blur of his hand, the shapeshifter conjured up an already-lit cigarette.

He did so completely heedless of the NO-SMOKING warning above the diner's exit.

Neutral face lost, Beverly blinked and stared. After all the times she could recall being harped on for her bad habit, here was her critic, going back on his word without so much as a blink of insecurity.
"When did... you start smoking?"

Just now. Deal. The frown seemed to speak for itself, before Rob promptly stuck the filter between his lips. "I need the distraction."

How readily dismissive of him.

Beverly smirked. "So? You're kinda... cute, by our standards."

*Your mask is, that is.*

"Peh. Cute is *not* the word they were thinking of."

Beverly waited as he took a slow, measured drag on the paper, eyes averted. "Yeah? What's the harm in looking, then?"

Rob exhaled with a sniff of disdain, smoke wafting from his nose like an affronted dragon. Further stoking his temper might not be the smartest thing to do, lest he start breathing fire - for real. "Did you not just hear everything I said, about what danger there is in looking at me?" As she failed to answer, the entity twirled the cigarette, baton-style, between his fingers. "One way or another, it always leads to... trouble."

Pondering once again, Beverly tapped a finger against the table. She wasn't one for restless thought, typically. Maybe a smoke would have soothed her twinged nerves, as well. "Well, then that begs the question, and- no, don't cut me off. Bill says he's brought it up to you, before, and you couldn't explain then, either. If you're so dangerous, what good do you think making friends of us does you, or... or anybody?"

*If there's no good endgame possibility, why just set yourself up to fail?*

Again, Rob didn't answer for a while. His idle fingers drummed against the table. "It's not a question of doing one good, Bevs. It's... seeing what can be so good. About humanity's... *idea* of good, that is."

*Versus... what?*

*What expectation did you have? Why're you... pitting yourself against?*

Beverly sighed. Once more, the answer was only half satisfactory. The full scope of his ideals was out of her grasp. "I... guess. *Again*. But if it's all- doomed, in the end, if it's your... fate to destroy whatever you know, why bother?"

"You ever look up the definition of 'fate'?'" Further illustrating his point. Rob sighed through an imitation-cloud of tobacco smoke. The sight was strangely odorless. "Why d'you bother to keep smoking after your Daddy lectures you about not doing it, time and again?" Eyes half-lidded, his voice was almost a careless drawl.

James Dean would approve.

Without getting into specifics, or too much emotion that would somehow spoil her point, Beverly summarized her argument:

"Because I... I can. Because it's my... it's my choice."

*You recall how ticked I got at the thought you'd ever talk me into quitting?*
Marsh would have thought the echo imaginary, some random tangent of her own mind reaffirming the words, had Gray not taken a very pointed glance at her. He stared through the smokescreen her vague answer comprised, masking a not-so-vague multitude of reasons.

Just as she often looked through him.

"...You're your own girl, Beverly. No one can tell you what to do, not Alvin, not me. No one. You demonstrated that pretty clearly the other day. You made a choice to do what you did, no matter how bad the outcome."

Cutting himself off, Rob paused for another very-in-practice drag on the cigarette. He seemed to regard the next exhale of smoke as if searching for something, blue-green irises roving through the whisps before refocusing on her. "You and I, we're not so different in that regard. No one can tell me what to do, even if, in the end, I can't escape what I am. No one can think to tell me anything. One glance at the actual me robs them of that capacity. As it should." He stopped, letting a slow, near-satisfied grin crease his face, appreciating the comparison from yet another, more-human angle. "Like you and being so... attractive."

I guess that follows. The guys do have a tendency to clam up around me.

Guys can't help it. They do that around pretty girls.

"Aw. Well. That's almost... flattering." Beverly teased, before the reality of just what she was joking about (and who with) caught up and sobered her with its slap. "In a... cosmically-messed-up kind of way."

Rob scoffed, flicking imaginary ashes away, not even bothering to aim for the preprovided ashtray. They promptly fizzled out of existence, midair. Watching them disintegrate, he smirked. "Eds would agree with you."

"Really? About the flattering part?"

The smirk dropped. A degree of doubt crept back into his once-smarmy words. "No, the... messed-up... thing. He's said so more than once. Comparing me to you, or vice versa, I'd say that qualifies."

Beverly picked the gesture up where it fell. She leaned across the table, smiling, trying to meet his downcast eyes. "Now who's depreciating themselves?"

"Like you never have," he fired back, expression flat through the tops of his eyes.

Something nudged her foot, his boot against her shoe. The smile disappeared. "Sure, when I deserve it, but-"

"For Ga- God's sake, would it kill you to take a compliment once and a while?" Rob interrupted. Matching her note for note, he leaned in, so close their foreheads almost touched, and she couldn't wonder at his little slip of slang usage. "Not everything has to be a struggle, you know."

She didn't move away. Enduring such biting words demanded she defend herself. "Well, I'm sorry, but it takes some time to shake that mode of think-"  

Time.

Beverly stopped dead. From so close a vantage point, she couldn't miss the fresh ripple of agony
shuddering through her friend's expression at hearing the word. He didn't make any moves to hide it, merely clenched his jaw and looked away, toward the street.

She heard a tiny crackle. The cigarette's glowing tip flared cold, then died to a black husk in his hand. The smoke trailed off into nothing.

A few tense minutes passed before Rob dared speak again.

"Georgie knows."

Watching him, Beverly felt her mind go momentarily blank. All she could think to utter was a soft, "Oh."

They regarded one another in dismal, dreadful silence for a while. There was nothing either could fathom necessary to put to words. When it came to the matter of George Denbrough, on that there was no cause to argue.

Beverly swallowed. "He... he does?"

Grasping for yet another distraction, Rob snuffed the half-spent cigarette out in the tray, neverminding it was already extinguished. "He brought it up."

Slowly, Beverly leaned back, giving him some breathing room - whether he actually needed it or not. "How... how long ago was that?"

"A few days, after all- all of this nonsense happened," the human lookalike continued. Idly, he tugged reddish-brown strands of hair above his ear, winding them around his long fingers - just as she had before. "How he found out, I... I don't care enough to really dwell on. Like you don't about what happened at the market. I don't want... It doesn't matter. He knows, we talked. And I didn't- dis... disillusion him. Billy was right: he had to find out, sometime, and I was... wrong for not telling him sooner."

...Wrong, wrong, wrong...

Beverly felt her eyes sting. Rapidly blinking the sensation away before it could overwhelm her, she tried for another question, the exact same one It didn't want to face. Ignoring it wouldn't stop her from wondering. "How'd he find out?"

Rob paled again. His gaze went even more neutral and distant, as if it were all he could fathom being as he answered. "Richie, and the others. I think... Georgie heard them talking. At the creek, a few weeks ago." His eyes dropped shut. "I was... napping."

...Napping.

Not just pretend?

For real?

Beverly frowned, sympathetically, for the first time since sitting down. "You think he... asked Bill first? If it was true?"

Eyes reopening, Rob shrugged. "He may not've had to. Georgie knows how to listen when he thinks no one's paying him any mind, the little imp. That innocence mask serves him well."

"Among other things he's learned from you - how to hide in plain sight."
"Plain sight... more like, complicat- hello, get lost, goodbye."

Before their visitor had enough time to contemplate a greeting, the disguised entity's head whipped around. The girl stopped just short of their table, hand half raised in greeting. Beverly recognized her from shortly before, one of the same three strangers who had tapped on the window.

Given the touchy nature of what they had just been discussing, Rob didn't look very thrilled to possibly make her acquaintance. Whatever power he used to keep them from being noticed had gone slack again. And a nameless, pretty face was the least of what should be turning his eye right now. He stared back at her with all the affronted outrage of a poised cobra, hood flared.

The buffer slid back into place. Wordlessly, expression gradually blankening as though she had not seen nor heard anything amiss, the teenager turned and kept on walking. Her friends had already taken the corner booth at the far side of the diner.

"Yesss... that's right. Just keeep on walking, you skan- "

Beverly intercepted with her own hiss: "Rob."

He blinked. "What?"

God. Thumbing his nose behind their back, then acting the innocent when you call him out on it.

Typical Richie move. Only meaner.

But I guess he... isn't feeling too chipper any more, knowing Georgie knows.

"That's not very nice," she noted.

Were he there, Georgie would have said the same.

"Hmph." Rob snorted softly, rolling his eyes most carelessly - just as she imagined a cheeky younger sibling might. He spared the offender one last dismissive glance, crossing his flare-cuffed arms with a creak of leather. "Neither were her thoughts of me."

"Now who doesn't know how to take a compliment?"

His upper lip curled in a half-snarl. "Pft. They can keep their kind of compliments, Bevs. The only ones mattering to me are yours' and the guys, for better or worse."

"Only ours'?"

"That's what it is to play favorites, isn't it?"

Fair... enough.

Or as close to fair as their situation could ever be summed up as being.

Again, as she got lost in thought and declined to go on, Rob picked up the conversation anew. Carefully, he steered around any more mentions of Georgie Denbrough. The kid's name didn't need to be bandied about any more, here and now.

"So... you... prefer to call this face Rob, over Bob?"

Grateful for the change in topic to something less trying, as she had no better ones to resort to, Beverly looked him over again. Was starting to think you wouldn't get around to mentioning that.
"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

Beverly nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"...Whyyyy?"

"Why not?"

He squinted. "What's wrong with Bob, though? It's simple, unassuming."

Smiling, Beverly shook her head. She didn't care for the nature of this excuse. "You mean, it's way too misleading, Stripes. You're anything but simple behind that face."

True as the words were, Rob didn't take to them with visible relish. He squinted all the more tightly. "Was that a compliment or an insult?"

Beverly shrugged. "Take your pick."

Knowing you, both are true in some measure.

Like it or not.

Deciding to save the decision for later, Rob unfolded his arms. "Well, there was one other matter..."

"Please tell me it's something easy to answer, for once."

"Should be. It was your idea."

"What is it?"

Opening the flap of his jacket, he removed the sunglasses, unfolding them with a deft wristflick. "You think these really work?"

Beverly smiled again. "They were my idea, you know."

He slid the frames onto his ears, bridge positioned at the tip of his nose. "Yes, but as far as looks go..."

"They fit you. I say keep 'em."

The ice cream, waylaid for an indefinite amount of time for whatever reason (besides the diner being ridiculously busy for a Thursday afternoon), was brought out not long after. Removing his glasses, Rob feigned a moment of repugnance, looking not at the slices of banana included, or the adorning cherry, but at the strawberry drizzled over the vanilla scoops.

The color scheme and what it resembled did not escape his notice, Beverly thought.

Besides... besides the syrup looking kinda like blo-

The next move caught her by surprise. Timely or not, Beverly couldn't stifle a laugh as Rob lowered his face and nosed at the ice cream, as a dog might a treat it hasn't seen before. Then, apparently deciding that wasn't silly-looking enough, he took a very deliberate, yawning bite out of the dessert. Without a spoon.
"Rob. Please. It's for eating, not wearing."

Snickering, Beverly cupped a hand over her brow, fighting another urge to grin. She couldn't bear to watch all of a sudden, to compare the hoplessly-endearing, purely-childish act with the sheer gravity of what they had just discussed. Were anyone present actually able to see her company for what he was, she might have thought to be embarrassed for both of them.

Him for playing the fool.

Her for taking so long to realize he was.

How did you ever fall for this idiot?

"So. You've kissed Billy before?"

Smirking, Beverly let her hand fall to her side. The white smears on his mouth and chin almost blended with his skin, were it not for the red smears.

What a perfectly normal thing to ask.

Coming from someone whose norm was anything besides.

She supposed she had set aside her definition of normal in ever thinking he was worth her time. The rest of the club were just as guilty, dragged in by proximity, with little Georgie Denbrough blazing the trail.

It somehow meant today had come to pass. Here she was, on a not-date with their not-human mascot.

Sliding her sundae aside, Beverly took her turn to roll her eyes, smiling tolerantly. There was no use in getting angry at It for prying into her memory archive, without permission, here and now. He did the same with everyone in his town. And he had put himself through enough painful encounters as of late, she needn't throw fuel on the fire, stoke it all over again.

Small wonder the icy treat didn't immediately melt into a bowl of cream, being placed so close to him.

Rob wouldn't have noticed. He was too preoccupied in eagerly awaiting an answer.

"Did you?"

"Yes, I did," Beverly affirmed, easily opting for the less serious reply. Without ceremony, she pulled her napkin from under her bowl, gesturing with a come-hither quirk of her index finger. He leaned over and she met him halfway, reaching across to wipe his face clean, despite the pretended grimaces of revulsion he paid the gesture. "Years ago, in a school play."

It was a nice kiss, though.

Stillling under her touch, Robert Gray arched an eyebrow at her fussing. For a fleeting, beyond-crazy instant, looking at him with his fake-yet-somehow-real face, she could forget everything else, and Beverly decided the one at the supermarket hadn't been half bad, either.

But nothing good is ever easy
I ain't gonna give up just yet
I've been down so long it looked like up to me
And before I forget I'm gonna be stronger

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