Summary

Midoriya Izuku is born with a quirk, and it is a terrible, burning thing that will not let him rest. It has stolen his ignorance, his innocence, and his safety. It has driven him to restless obsession. But he is still Midoriya Izuku, and he will be a hero, whether his quirk cooperates or not.
AKA: Izuku gets a quirk that's actually awesome except for the part where it keeps messing with his head, but he's not about to let that keep him down. Even if it means resorting to vigilantism.

Notes

Find me on tumblr at melody-dramatic.tumblr.com, where you can ask questions and see extra info about my fics, including sneak peeks (but no spoilers!).

This fic is, ahem, completely without a beta, I'm afraid.

The Book of Deku is also being posted on fanfiction.net.
Izuku is three years old and everything hurts.

Light buzzes and makes his eyes feel like they're throbbing right out of his skull. It's burning hot on his skin, so he closes his eyes and covers himself, but the blankets over his head hurt too. Each individual thread cuts into him and slices his skin into ribbons and rubs him raw, he can swear that's what it feels like, and the fuzzy All Might onesie he once loved more than anything is discarded on the floor because it felt like hot, prickly static and needles and steel wool on every inch of him.

He can feel noise, from the knife-sharp tip-tip-tip of a fly crawling on the wall to the painful scream of a door creaking open to the crashing waves of his mother crying softly in the kitchen. Every vibration shudders and warps into his bones, and he covers his ears but that doesn't block it out.

[His mother cries a lot when she thinks he can't hear. She always smiles for him, though, like All Might. Maybe All Might cries when he's alone too.]

The smell of cigarettes being smoked three apartments over is choking him, burning his nose and eyes and mouth. He gags at the reek of his own sweat and his mother's and his father's—oh, his father. The man smells like brimstone and sulfur and spilled ink and cheap cologne and blazing alcohol and plastic and Izuku hate it. He can smell the stink of sewers and the fuzzy smell of dust motes in his room and the overpowering sizzle of ham cooking in the kitchen [why is his mother cooking dinner when she's still crying he knows she's still crying he can smell-feel-taste the salt and feel-hear the shuddering heaves of her chest as she tries to breathe evenly].

He wants to go to his mother. He wants her to stop crying. He wants her to make him stop crying, because that's what a mom is supposed to do. But he can't move. When he moves, every dust mote in the room shifts and the air rolls fiery hot and storm cold and the fibers of the blankets hook into his flesh while his skin pulls and bunches and folds. So he can't move.
He is too aware of the beating of his own heart. It feels like he is being punched in the chest, again and again and again and again—

He wants it to stop.

When his mother finds him, she starts crying again, but it must be for a different reason this time because the tears smell different, sharper, and he recoils from her as well as he can because the heat of her hands on him hurts and her voice asking him what's wrong hurts and the vibrations of her panicked sobbing hurt and the beep-beep-beep noise when she calls an ambulance hurts and he screams and

i t

h u r t s

Izuku is three years old and he has spent three days in a hospital, writhing helplessly as his back bends to seizures and his body burns through enough morphine to kill a grown man.

But those three days must be over, because it is the fourth day, and he wakes up still in the hospital, but— nothing hurts.

Well. His tummy hurts, because he hasn't eaten anything, and his arms hurt because there were shots trying to make him feel better [they didn't him feel better, they felt like he was being stabbed and filled with the cold fire they called medication], but— but— the noises don't hurt anymore. And his covers are scratchy but they don't feel like they're smothering him in papercuts. He smells bandages and disinfectant and blood… but they don't make him sick.

Cautiously, Izuku opens one eye.

It is morning. The blinds have been shut tightly and the curtains have been pulled shut to keep the light out as much as possible, but Izuku can see the faint glow of dawn seeping in around the edges and it doesn't make his eyeball tremble out of its socket.

He opens his other eye.

It still doesn't hurt.

Izuku sits up. His back twinges slightly and he loses his balance momentarily, groggy, but he manages to sit up on his own.

He doesn't feel great. He feels like he's spent three days in a hospital with a tube down his nose [oh, there's a tube in his nose, that's... gross]. But for the first time in three days, he feels… okay. And considering how not-okay he felt before, this feels really, really cool. Maybe even cooler than All Might [maybe equally cool].

The nurse looks very surprised to see him sitting up and looking not like he's dying. She drops something and it breaks because glass does that when you drop it on a hard floor and Izuku winces at the sound, but— everything's okay. The noise of broken glass doesn't feel like the shards are slicing into the core of him, and he'd say that's pretty good.
"Where's my mom?" he asks.

He hopes this didn't make her cry a lot. [He knows it did.]

Izuku is three years old and he thinks he did pretty okay at answering all the questions the doctors asked him. They say it wasn't a test, so he's not worried about it, and for some reason, it's easier to think about things than it was even before he got sick. It feels easier to talk, too, even though he has a sore throat. He can figure out what words he wants faster than he could before, so it's pretty easy. The doctors ask his mom and dad much, much harder questions, so Izuku thinks that he's just glad he's not his parents. He doesn't know the answers to any of those questions [well... well, actually, maybe—].

Kacchan visits him. Mitsuki brings him and scolds him when he jumps on the hospital bed, but Kacchan doesn't care and Izuku doesn't mind. He's just glad that it's all over. He has never, ever, ever been so grateful for anything, and he's usually pretty grateful for everything. To be fair, though, his is only three years old. Maybe he'll be more grateful for something else later in life.

[After burning for three days, he might live to be a hundred, and he doesn't think he will ever be more grateful for anything than he is for the burning to have stopped.]

"Izuku!" Kacchan shouts, bouncing on his knees on the edge of the bed. Mitsuki's scoldings fall on deaf ears. "Izuku, why'd you go and get sick, huh? That was stupid. You weren't there to play and I had to play with stupid kids."

"Calling people stupid is mean, Kacchan," Izuku says, because everybody isn't stupid [well,], and Kacchan shouldn't be cranky just because he has to play without Izuku for a few days. But it does feel nice, Izuku thinks, to be missed, especially by Kacchan, who doesn't miss anybody.

"Whatever," Kacchan huffs, crossing his skinny arms. "Just get better faster."

Izuku promises to get better faster.

Izuku is three years old and he stands outside the hospital for the first time in seven days. His arms are outstretched, and he takes deep, dizzying breaths as the sunlight tingles pleasantly across his skin.

"Somebody sure feels better!" Hisashi laughs. His hand ruffles Izuku's fluff of curls and, although Izuku doesn't move, something in his gut twists.

[brimstone and sulfur and spilled ink and cheap cologne and blazing alcohol and plastic and smoke and burning burning burning burning burning burning burning]

"Yeah!" Izuku says, smiling even though he wants to march right back into the hospital and be sick again, because every single one of his muted senses snaps back into alertness and suddenly the sun is scorching, the fresh air is crowded, and his father reeks of burning.
He smiles wider when he looks at his father, even as a headache begins to swell in his brain and he sees the orange flickers of fire in the man's eyes.

[He can smile for everybody else and only be sad for himself, just like his mom. Just like All Might.]

He puts his arms down and tries to take smaller breaths through his mouth so that he's pulling in less of the smell [the scent of burning is so strong in his nose]. He wishes he had a jacket to hide his bare arms and neck from the sun, but everything is so hot that another layer of clothing might kill him.

His father takes him to have ice cream. The chill racks his body, but the smell of smoke and burning is muted by mint chocolate chip.

Izuku is four years old and he likes to think that the terrible incident that the doctors never did come up with an explanation for is over now. He knows that it's not, because he can still smell and see and hear and feel so much that it is almost too much, and sometimes he gets headaches that are so bad he throws up, and he still doesn't want his father touching him, but—he doesn't tell anyone. And as long as he doesn't tell anyone, it's not so bad.

[Smile like Mom. Smile like All Might. Tears are for when no one can see.]

Izuku stands on the sidewalk outside their apartment building. Kacchan is a ways off, poking at bugs, but Izuku tilts his head back and he can hear, five stories up, the soft, muffled cries of his mother. Today is one of those days, it seems. There haven't been as many of those lately, but there are still more than he likes. He would like for there to be none, please and thank you. But he thinks his mom feels a little bit better after she cries, so he lets her.

[She does not cry when Hisashi leaves on business trips, but she cries when he comes home.]

"Can we go to your house for dinner?" Izuku asks Kacchan.

Kacchan nudges a beetle and frowns. "Why? Your mom makes better food."

[Not anymore. Izuku's gut rolls every time his mother cooks, and he knows that the food is still as good as it always was, but he can't taste or smell anything the way it was before. Mitsuki's food, whether it is as good as Inko's or not, will make him sick just the same.]

Izuku bites the inside of his cheek. "I think my mom needs a break. She's been working really hard."

And because Kacchan might love Inko even more than his own parents, the blond boy says, "Whatever. Maybe Mom can get take-out."

Izuku smiles.
Izuku is four years old and he knows he has had a quirk for almost a year. Which means that, of all his classmates [if he can call them that? This is preschool, it's hardly a class], he is the first to manifest a quirk. He's pretty sure that none of them would trade places with him to get theirs first, if it meant that they had to go through the same thing that he did.

He tells no one, not even his mother to whom he has lied to over and over again, telling her he feels better even though the smell of smoke and embers chokes him out of his own apartment every day. He can't tell her about the headaches or the vomiting or the fact that his own father makes him feel sick.

He's not exactly sure what his quirk is, but he knows that it's getting stronger. He knows that he doesn't have to pay attention his class to know everything the teacher said. He knows that he can count all six-hundred-thirteen ceiling tiles in the nurse's office with a glance. He knows that he doesn't have to think about math, and he knows more kanji than most adults, and he knows that Kacchan is developing a quirk because it smells like nitroglycerin. He knows that he is too smart for the other students, and maybe even for the whole school. But he doesn't want to leave Kacchan, or bring more attention to himself.

[He doesn't want to do this. He wants everybody to know that he has a quirk and that it is amazing and unique and useful, but his quirk has already revealed one of its crippling drawbacks: paranoia.]

So he will not be telling anyone anything.

Pure nitroglycerin is cotton-candy-sweet, and Izuku doesn't need enhanced senses to smell it. He thinks that everybody notices the sugary smell clinging to Kacchan for a good three months before it actually happens.

Three seconds before Kacchan pops the first weak spark from his palm, Izuku feels the air around his friend move. So Izuku is not surprised by the abrupt manifestation. And he always knew it would be something explosive. And he's not surprised when everybody gathers around Kacchan and starts telling the boy how wonderful he is, how this is the best quirk, how Kacchan will get to be a hero one day with a quirk like that.

Izuku sees something in Kacchan's red eyes that looks like grand realization and orange fire, and all that Izuku can see is his father, and that sugary-sweet smell burns to a hot, sickly crisp.

Izuku is four years old and in a doctor's office. He's glad that he's not in a hospital again, but this, somehow, is worse. This isn't going to hurt for a few days and then be done. This might ruin him forever, and the worst part is that he's going to let it happen. On purpose.

The x-rays show this: there is no extra toe joint in Izuku's foot. Therefore, he should have a quirk.

He fails test after test after test, sometimes because he really can't do what the test asks him to do, and sometimes because he fakes it. The whole time, he feels sick in the pit of his stomach, guilty because he has never lied so much in one sitting, and also because he can feel his mother getting more and more nervous. He knows all her tells better than he knows himself, and he can see her starting to panic as test after test turns up negative.
"This happens sometimes," the doctor assures his mother. Quirk specialists who deal with worried parents day in and day out say the same thing to all of them. This one is no different, except that, Izuku thinks, for a doctor, he is not too bright. The fact that Izuku got through all of those tests without slipping up is a miracle that can only be attributed to this man's incompetence. "Sometimes more complex quirks don't develop until later, especially combination quirks. Your son is probably just a late bloomer. It's perfectly natural."

They'll be coming in for another appointment later, of course. With no extra joint, no self-respecting doctor will give up on his quirk development until he turns six, at least. But he faked it this time and he'll fake it again. He is the smarter than every other kid in his school combined, and he can do this. He can hide this.

His quirk has listed every possible outcome of revealing the truth. He doesn't like most of them.

When they go home, he smells alcohol and fire on his father. This is not unusual, but he's already had a headache for most of the day. [And there is some sort of danger there, not of violence but of something other, something that should not concern a four-year-old but does because he is not just four and his quirk speaks a language of terrifying possibilities.]

Izuku locks himself in the bathroom and vomits.

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Izuku is four years old and when Kacchan smiles at him, and it is not a pretty smile. Kacchan, unlike his mother, is not pretty at all. It's sort of a shame, not to mention a genetic oddity, for someone as pretty as Mitsuki to have a child as utterly unappealing as Kacchan. Most people don't notice that, because Kacchan is all of the things that this society wants from their children: strong, intense, promising. Everything that Izuku is not. Being cute will not save Izuku, just as much as being unattractive will not condemn Kacchan.

"Quirkless, heh?"

No. Not Quirkless. But Izuku won't say that.

His quirk, which he has yet to give a name since he doesn't plan to register it anyway, is getting stronger and more efficient in overtime, chugging away inside his brain without pause, even when he sleeps, and it tells him that he can do so much more if people underestimate him. And what better disguise for his quirk than the label of Quirkless? Nobody thinks that Quirkless people can do anything.

It also tells him that if he ever reveals his quirk, ever reveals the all-encompassing genius developing inside his brain, that he will be used as a tool for the rest of his life, coveted for his mind but never for his smile, and that they will make him do things, and that they will never, ever, allow him to waste his quirk on being a hero. His quirk will keep him safe only if he keeps it secret.

So he will smile like his mom and like All Might and play dumb.

"That's no good," Kacchan says, top lip curling into a cruel smile that is not a smile but a sneer, and it is ugly, ugly, ugly, but not as ugly as the fire in his eyes. "You're useless without a quirk."

"Maybe it's just late, Kacchan," Izuku says, and it's a misleading suggestion [he's mastered.
those more than it's a lie, but it is still essentially a lie. He had gotten his quirk before Kacchan could even produce a spark.

He doesn't like this. This isn't what he thought would happen. His quirk had taken Kacchan's confidence and short temper into account and foreseen this, but he hadn't believed it, because it was Kacchan. Kacchan wants to be a hero too, and heroes don't do this. Heroes don't call other people 'useless.' Heroes don't hit just to hurt or use mean words to make other people feel bad.

"Useless," Kacchan repeats, looking even more pleased with himself than usual.

Kacchan is smart. Kacchan has the best grades in class. Kacchan knows enough kanji that he can make a very cruel connection between Izuku's name and useless, which is—

"Deku. That's what you are. A Quirkless Deku."

I don't think I like you anymore, Kacchan—Bakugou.

Bakugou is not a hero. He might never be, even if he gets his license, because there's a difference between getting licensed to use a quirk to do heroic things and actually being a hero. Izuku wants to tell him this, but he's four years old, and that's not something that normal four-year-olds say. And Izuku needs to be normal. He needs to be painstakingly normal, so simple and plain that people's eyes will drift right over him and forget he was there in the first place.

[the best camouflage is mediocrity]

So when Bakugou takes a swing at him, and his quirk tells him that all he had to do is take a small step to the left if he wants to dodge, Izuku lets the punch hit him. Thankfully, Bakugou is only four, and doesn't have much practice in his swing, but unfortunately, Bakugou now has a quirk that blisters Izuku's skin without even having to make physical contact. The action of the punch itself is completely unnecessary to anything but Bakugou's violent satisfaction.

Izuku can dodge at any time. Izuku lets the punches hit their mark.

And again, and again, and again.

Izuku is five years old and when he closes his eyes, he knows that it is exactly twenty-five degrees Celsius, seventy-seven degrees Fahrenheit, 12:30 PM on a Friday afternoon. July 25th. His birthday was ten days ago. When summer ends and school starts up (real school, not preschool, but they'll just be learning silly, basic things that Izuku already understands), Izuku knows that he will be getting funny looks for not having manifested his quirk yet. He knows that this will be hard, but not, he thinks, any harder than letting his mom cry and worry while his father's frown grows deeper and more displeased.

An hour later, when Midoriya Hisashi leaves for a "business trip" abroad [Hisashi takes many business trips and Izuku is grateful], Izuku knows that the man is not coming back [people who plan on coming back don't completely empty their closets and strip every single one of their personal belongings out of the house]. And, at this moment, staring at the door where his father just was but will probably never be again, Izuku wonders if this is a good time to cry. His mother is crying, after all, and she's not even bothering to hide it this time. She can get away with that, he supposes. It's perfectly expected to cry when your husband leaves you and lies about it and you're
all alone with a child and no job.

But if he cries, then his mom will feel bad, and what has Hisashi ever done to deserve Izuku's tears?

don't cry, be like mom, be like All Might, don't cry

Izuku will not cry. He has better things to do. He pretends that he's a five-year-old who believes that his father is coming back soon and there's nothing to worry about.

He sits in the living room, turns on the TV, and becomes fluent in English before dinner.

He knows that his quirk must be settling in if he doesn't even have to try anymore.

In his room, he used to have so many toys and posters and—things. He had a lot of things. But hero merchandise is always so intense with color that he had to take all the posters down and put all the toys in the storage boxes in his closet and turn over his All Might covers so that the white sides were facing up. Now his room looks oddly muted, with bright zaps of color around the edges that he couldn't cover up, but it doesn't make his head buzz anymore.

He misses the color, sometimes. Maybe, if his quirk is getting better, he'll be able to look at bright colors without getting a headache. But not yet. Now, he still wants to throw up whenever he looks outside on a sunny day.

Even if he gets to have color back one day, he doesn't think that he will ever be able to abide the intense clash of color that was what his room used to be, covered in bright, shining posters and scattered with painted toys. He'll have to bring color back slowly and softly. Nice and easy. No orange or red or pink. But mostly just no orange.

There sure is a lot of stuff in his closet that he can't bear to use again.

Izuku is five years old and he doesn't have friends anymore. Bakugou is the most popular kid in school (real school, now, not preschool, but it's still just... kindergarten, so, it's preschool with basic kanji and useless to Izuku either way), something of a celebrity, even though nobody actually likes him. But nobody likes Izuku, either, because even if Bakugou is pushy and arrogant, Izuku is Quirkless and weird.

His mother gives him a notebook after he refuses to go to quirk therapy, and she tells him that he can write in it. He can write whatever he wants and keep it secret. She won't look. She just thinks [because a therapist told her] that it might help him to write down what he's thinking so it's all... out there. Somewhere. So he can talk about things without actually having to tell anyone, if that makes him feel better.

Well. It makes sense. And he knows that she knows he needs something, because she has noticed his colorless room with the blinds shut tight all day.

What he needs is for his quirk to stop pushing him so hard. He needs Bakugou to be Kacchan again. He needs to be able to look at his old All Might posters without getting a headache. He needs to not be overwhelmed by every single awful noise and smell in their apartment complex.
But he can't have those things. He can hope that his quirk will actually start working soon, but that may not happen, so... he takes the notebook. He stares at it for awhile, at the pale green cover that is surprisingly easy on his eyes, and the tight blue lines inside that are not hard or vivid. He grabs a pencil from his desk.

_When I was three years old, I got a headache._
Izuku is five years old and there is not one stitch of brightly colored anything left in his room.

His mother, bless the woman a thousand times and again, noticed his sudden aversion to vivid colors, and without asking any questions, took matters into her own hands. The bright blue sheets and All Might bedspread are gone and replaced with plain, pastel green. Most of the room is like that, now, because as much as color can make things difficult for Izuku, white gives him a headache just the same. White is reflective, so he can see the shining rebound of every color and speck of light on his white, white walls, so when he asks his mother if they can paint his room, it's not just a matter of aesthetics. And because Inko is Inko, she says, yes, of course, and they paint his room.

It should be something they do together, and Izuku wants it to be because he spends so much time alone now and he knows his mother is lonely, but his reaction to the paint fumes is toxic and he throws up three times and has to sleep in the living room [which doesn't make that big of a difference but at least he's not in the thick of it].

But his room is his haven, now, all subtle, solid colors. Green and blue. No stripes or polka dots. No patterns at all. Everything is smooth and clean and perfectly organized. The blinds are mostly shut but the curtains are drawn so that there is no hard light coming into the room, just a soft, hazy glow that fills the room gently instead of casting sharp-edged shadows. Nothing in here makes him hurt. Nothing makes his head throb. He can lie back on his bed and close his eyes and cover his ears and everything feels almost normal.

But he still wants to fling every cigarette and stick of bubblegum on the planet into space.

[If he could have a preference, if he could create a world for himself, he would make a world of nothing but distant stars in the dark, and gentle music, and softness and stillness and good, clean air. But that world does not exist and he cannot live in the dark, because his mother will not understand and cannot follow him to the places his quirk wants to take him to.]

He's been hiding in his room for as long as he can, refusing to go outside or face the world since
Bakugou burned him, but school starts in three days. In three days, it will be back to Bakugou and burns and bullying and teachers who don't care and _so. much. noise_. He briefly considers faking an illness but knows that it will make his mom worry. His mom... she has enough to worry about, since Hisashi left. But, strangely, so strangely, Izuku knows that Inko cries less now than she did before.

_[It was Hisashi who made her cry all this time, what did he do?]_

His notebook is already almost full. He'll need a new one soon.

He writes every day, a steady flow of words _too advanced for a five-year-old and mixed with fluent English and smatterings of some Cantonese he picked while waiting for his mother to finish talking to a friend they ran into at the store_ that help his quirk finally seem to _calm the hell down_. Putting all the data down on paper, recording the theories and ideas and conclusions and putting them away on his bookshelf, seems to satisfy his quirk. Everything's still all in his head, of course, but writing it down helps.

School starts in three days, he writes. Pauses, nibbles on the eraser, and then writes again. _I think it might kill me._

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Izuku is five years old and school is a _raging nightmare._

Children are loud and smelly and they fidget and constantly push and tug and shove and pinch each other, and they _yell, all the time, for no reason_, and Izuku wants to yell louder than all of them just to make it stop. He wants to close his eyes and put his hands over his ears and _scream_. Because nobody cares who got a new toy or who learned the most kanji even while there was no school or who got a scar from falling off of a tree. It is all so incredibly pointless and useless and by tomorrow none of it will matter and they will all have found other pointless, useless things to yell at each other about, and Izuku's quirk has to drink in every single pointless, useless fact that spews from their little mouths.

Their noise is screaming static in his ears.

Izuku worries that the teachers are going to call his mom and tell her that he doesn't go outside for recess, that he just sits at his desk with his face buried in his folded arms to keep the light out, but his fears are assuaged when he realizes that half of them don't notice him and the ones that do notice don't care. None of the teachers seem to particularly like him, anyway. Oh, they like that he's quiet and still and that they don't have to worry about him doing anything wrong or needing help, but it seems to irk them that he can completely ignore them all day and still get passing grades. That, and, well. Nobody wants to deal with the Quirkless kid.

None of the teachers call him Quirkless yet because he's still registered as _unknown_, but there's nothing unknown about it. Everybody looks at him and thinks, _Quirkless_. Because even though it's not completely unheard of for children to develop their quirks at five or even six, it's been unanimously agreed that plain, weird, unpopular little Izuku, _Deku_, will never get his quirk. And that is exactly what Izuku wants them to think.

_[His quirk grinds and grinds and grinds and tells him that there is danger around every corner, waiting to snatch him up and turn him into whatever they want him to be instead of the hero he_
knows he can be. But becoming a hero isn't even the point, here, the point is that there are people who would take him if they knew what he had the potential to do and his quirk isn't even fully developed yet, they would take him, they would take him from Mom and from the safe, soft, gentle space of his room and from all the progress he has made to keep his quirk from burning him out."

Izuku allows some of his grades to be just slightly above average, but not impressively so by any means. He paints a picture that looks something like this: a young boy who never pays attention but is smart enough to get good grades but isn't smart enough for all the good grades in the world to mean anything worth investing in. He is only slightly above average on paper, and probably only because of multiple-choice questions. In the real world, he will never be anything special. He is mediocre. His good grades simply mean that his teachers never have to worry about him [not that they would anyway]. His good grades simply mean that he will one day have access to a very narrow array of high schools that accept both barely above average and Quirkless. There aren't many of those. After all, why put the effort into a Quirkless kid who will ultimately go nowhere and do nothing?

In gym, it is not a matter of letting himself be below average. He cannot possibly perform well, not surrounded by young, sweaty bodies and rubber balls and filthy foam mats and stained uniforms and loud, loud, loud voices. A headache hits him the second he enters the gym, and the terrible shriek-shriek-shriek of shoes squeaking on the polished floor makes him want to curl up right there and just… be done. Thankfully, they are only five. Gym is short and followed immediately by a recess.

Recess, his only time alone, would be great if it weren't for that bell.

Oh. And Bakugou. But that's rather a given. Because even though teachers are used to Izuku staying inside, sometimes they shoo him out anyway because they certainly don't want him in their classroom more than necessary, and then he is stuck outside in the overwhelming largeness of the world, and there are the rest of his classmates, all ready to look away or join in when Bakugou decides that Izuku needs a lesson in who is best and who is nothing.

Izuku can hear every pop, hiss, squeak, brush, stomp, clap, thud, and boom that echoes across the school grounds. But he pretends that he doesn't hear Bakugou stomping up behind him, and he pretends that he doesn't hear the other kids snickering as if they don't do this to him almost every day, and he pretends that he doesn't smell the liquified cotton candy that is pure nitroglycerin as the air shifts and Bakugou brings sparks to life in his palms.

Izuku goes home with burns on his back from where Bakugou shoved him.

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Izuku is five years old and walking home after what has been a very bad day [burns scrapes bruises headache nausea] when he feels the vibrations of Present Mic's debut from miles away.

Of course, he doesn't know that he's feeling Present Mic, because Present Mic wasn't Present Mic before today, but he feels it.

He runs the rest of the way home because his quirk kicks into gear so fast that he feels whiplashed by it. In the face of the unknown, his quirk becomes hungry. No, not hungry. Hunger is simple. Hunger is I want and I eat. This is not hunger.
When presented with any sort of mystery or puzzle, his quirk becomes *ravenous*.

Thankfully, Present Mic's very loud debut has been a grand success, and because the twenty-year-old rookie never bothered getting stuck in the sidekick rut, this is his first public appearance outside of the Sports Festival. Which means that the reporters are eating him and his ridiculous hairdo and leather jacket right up, and thusly vomiting it all back out onto the news stations.

Izuku watches the TV with rapt attention, only mildly annoyed with the dozens of inaccuracies being reported.

Present Mic has an incredibly loud, incredibly powerful voice quirk that allows for amazing vocal amplification. He dresses mostly in black, but he is still very, very flashy. Izuku can look at him for more than sixty seconds without getting that pinched feeling in his forehead, but the *noise*… Izuku isn't sure about the noise. It's not different from any other noise, really, just louder. The vibrations are heavier. He feels their echoes from the other side of the city. It's not something that *hurts*, exactly, but it makes all the little hairs on his body stand on end. He will always be aware of it whenever Present Mic uses his quirk.

Izuku is happy. A year ago, Present Mic's quirk would have had him writhing on the floor. Now it's simply… mildly uncomfortable, at least from a distance. This is *progress*.

*I'm going to like Present Mic*, he decides, and he sort of wants to crack his head against the wall because, of course, after two years of recoiling from the intensity of pro heroes, he *has* to pick *the loudest one* to love again.

Inko comes home to find him like that, in the living room with a pillow hugged in his arms, staring at the TV as Present Mic lets out an unbelievably loud "YEAH!" to bring another villain to their knees. Izuku's eyes are wide and his tiny hands clutch the pillow tightly, but he has a small, almost reluctant smile on his face— something more genuinely *joyful*-looking than Inko has seen on him since The Incident.

"Izuku?" she asks cautiously, because this boy before her resembles the three-year-old she once had, the one who had never spent seven days in the hospital, the one who had a father who was at least around sometimes instead of completely absent, the one who had Kacchan, and a love of all things bright and *heroes*.

Her boy looks at her with vividly green eyes much brighter than her own, and she thinks she sees tears gleam there. Funny (not funny at all), but she doesn't think she's seen him cry since before Hisashi left.

"I still really like heroes, Mom," her son says. He sounds… like himself. But a little bit lighter than before.

Inko cries, and for the first time in a long time, they are happy tears.

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It is barely three weeks later when Izuku discovers another new hero that his quirk wants to *devour* [*data data more more more more*]. This one is not loud or flashy at all. He was not on the news, or in the papers, or on the internet. But Izuku's quirk sucks up incident reports and student records from hero schools and area-based rumors as quickly as they can be processed, which is *damn fast*, if you want to be technical.
And as if his quirk couldn't figure it out from secondary data alone [it could], Izuku is standing outside and staring at the stars when the hero flings himself from one rooftop to another, grey [capture weapon, prototype still in the design stages, needs more efficient microfiber reinforcement] looping out against the will of gravity and pulling him towards the next target. Izuku takes less than three seconds to realize exactly what he has seen.

Eraserhead. Aizawa Shouta. Twenty years old, graduated from UA, class 1-A. The same class and year as Yamada Hizashi, AKA Present Mic. They had both performed well together in the Sports Festival.

The two had debuted on the same day, although Eraserhead had done so quietly, and only after the sun went down. There had been no announcements, no news coverage, and not a single article on the internet, even though the new hero had taken down three separate villains on opposite ends of the city in a span of four hours.

Izuku's quirk screams, because the fact that it took him this long to figure out something so important that started three weeks ago is unacceptable. He simply isn't taking in enough data while cooped up in his room. The television is biased and only shows what it wants to show, and the view through his usually-covered window is limited. If he hadn't have happened to be standing outside at just the right moment, he never would have gotten that brief glance of Eraserhead.

He's going to have to venture outside if he wants to keep his quirk satisfied [it is never satisfied].

Izuku has just turned six years old when his mother wants to take him to one last "quirk test" before they give up (more than they already have, that is). Izuku is prepared for this and braces himself for an unpleasant morning of poking and prodding and annoyingly repetitive questioning. But this is the last time, and he is glad. This will be the last time he has to trick his way through tests and say that he cannot see or hear or feel the things that only specific quirks would see or hear or feel. This will be the last time he has to pretend to be disappointed. And, hopefully, from this point on, he won't have to lie so often. If his mother finally, fully accepts that he is Quirkless, maybe there will be fewer… questions.

He can imagine that she will be disappointed. Not in him, never in him, but it will be hard for her, like any mother, to have to face this. He knows what she's been hoping. That all of his oddities are the results of some obscure, difficult-to-detect quirk. She wants it for his sake, because she knows
that he still wants to be a hero, and nobody gets to be a hero without a quirk. But this appointment is going to be, essentially, this: "I'm sorry, Midoriya-san, your son doesn't have a quirk, he's just a real weirdo, and you might want to start preparing him to go nowhere in life because the life expectancy for Quirkless people is very short. How short? Well..."

That's not what the doctor says, obviously. But it is what the doctor says, if you remove all the fluff and manners and boil this hell of a conversation down to the bone.

He has the developed enhancement of someone with a quirk, which he should, because he is someone with a quirk. He has no extra joint, he has healthy, fourth-generation quirk-using parents, and with the exception of one inexplicable incident that put him in the hospital for a week, he has always been a healthy child with a superior immune system. But because he has no apparent quirk, and because his doctor just isn't too clever or because Izuku is just that good of an actor, his records are reopened and he is registered as Quirkless.

Having it down on paper is a sort of relief to Izuku. Everybody already thought he was Quirkless anyway, but like this... there aren't any expectations from anybody. No one can say that his quirk might just be late, or hard to notice. No one can tell him to keep trying, or that he's just a late bloomer, or that one day his quirk will activate under just the right circumstances. His mother will stop watching him out of the corner of her eye like she is waiting for him to pull a pencil from across the room or hiccup a flame.

He is officially Quirkless.

And remaining that way is important to Izuku. Quirkless is not simply the label they've stamped on a medical file. It is his way of life. He is not Quirkless and never has been, but he lives the life convincingly and without flaw. He knows the full and unadulterated truths of being Quirkless better than truly Quirkless people do.

The average life expectancy of a Quirkless man in Japan is twenty-five years. Izuku, who is known to be odd, unpopular, and not particularly intelligent, probably isn't going to make it that far even if he's lucky. At least, that's what people will think, now.

That's what his mom thinks.

When they go home, Izuku feels guilty in a way that churns his gut. He almost confesses the second they walk through the door, but fear and his quirk hold his tongue. He can and most likely will feel guilty about this all his life, because Inko has been holding back tears ever since they left the doctor's office.

"Mom?" He hates that he sounds like a child, voice small and cracked and quivering, because that isn't what Inko needs right now. But he is only six and his quirk can't change that no matter how much he wants to let it. "I'm so sorry, Mom."

She has no idea what he is apologizing for. Not really. She thinks she knows but Izuku has made sure that she doesn't. He's not sure what would break her more— this, thinking that her son is Quirkless and therefore cast out and doomed to die young by a quirk-based society, or the truth, that he has a quirk that hurts him endlessly and will make him a target if anybody ever knows about it. His quirk works in facts and statistics and cannot measure the emotional pain that a mother might experience, but Izuku thinks that the truth might be worse. As it is, Inko believes that he has been fully denied a quirk and therefore any semblance of a normal life. The truth, that he has not been denied a quirk but will still never have anything that other people have and his quirk is a nightmare that never stops anyway, is too much of a tease. A bountiful feast that they can smell and see but never eat. He can touch destiny but never have it for himself.
That is so much worse than the lies, he thinks.

So this is the only way for him to tell her. Pretending to be sorry for something else is the only way he can apologize for all the lies he has told and all the hurt he has caused. Because telling the truth would be worse, and he can't even be sorry for the truth, because it's not his fault. And, well, even at six years of age…

He needs someone to blame, and blaming himself is something that he is already very good at.

"I'm so sorry."

Izuku is six years old when his quirk-caused paranoia finally comes full circle and shows him something to be afraid of instead of just spouting terrifying theories.

It is when he has managed to brave the great outdoors beyond the path to and from school. He still doesn't want to do it, but his quirk demands more, and so he goes. This is made slightly more bearable by sunglasses.

*Revolutionary.*

Sunglasses look sort of silly on a six-year-old, but he can't care less. He looks silly often enough whether it's outside or inside, and it's not like anybody is looking. He is outside, and that's an accomplishment, even if he never strays too far. And he's determined to keep it up, firstly because his quirk is giving him a break in exchange for all this new data, Secondly because living inside of his room for the rest of his life just isn't an option, and thirdly because his mom just seems so happy about him going outside.

He hadn't realized how much he worries her. [Well, he did realize, but having such a bold reminder always brings his mother's worry back front and center so that his guilt can have a good pity party.]

She thinks that he goes out to play, and while he doesn't lie, he doesn't correct her misassumption, which is just as bad although not as hard to stomach because that, really, is the smallest of his lies so far. But he does not go out to play. He doesn't play anymore. Six-year-olds are supposed to play, because that's a normal, childish thing to do. Good for development of social skills and real-life problem-solving abilities and… things.

His social skills are what they are and there's really no fixing them at this point, and he solves enough problems that he thinks he has that covered. The idea of playing, of running around and pretending to be All Might like he did when he was three or perching himself over a board game simply to meet one result out of a limited number pre-determined endings, makes him… uncomfortable. And bored out of his overactive mind, which means that his quirk refuses.

He is six years old and he is too old to play games like a child. But he can't say that to his mother because she has enough to worry about [or not because she has no job and they live in an apartment with a considerable renting fee and yet the money does not dry up and she denies him nothing, where is it coming from, what has she done].

There is a park, not all that far from the school [if only it could be farther]. It's not the greatest park, but this is a good neighborhood where even pre-school children can wander and play
unsupervised without worrying about their faces ending up on milk cartons. Too many heroes live in the area for villains or petty criminals to try anything, especially with kids. So the park is well-kept because there are people there all the time, careless and happy to be out, not worrying for a second about villains or losing their children. Because nothing bad can happen when there are heroes around.

Izuku sits alone on the center of a bench. It's uncomfortable. He doesn't like the wooden slats. But—

He closes his eyes and—

[there are two-hundred-five people here, one-hundred-fifteen children, forty-eight women, forty-two men, twenty-seven dogs, five cats, sixteen strollers, seventeen bicycles, five-hundred-eleven ants all called by the scent of a watermelon slice left forgotten on the edge of a sidewalk— twenty degrees Celsius, sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, 9:45 PM on a Saturday afternoon, not a single villain attack in Musutafu on this day, but there's someone— danger— danger— D A N G E R—]

Izuku's eyes snap open and immediately focus in on a teenage boy who's sitting all the way across the park. From this distance, to a normal person, he would look like nothing but a dark blur amidst the green, but Izuku can see him perfectly. He's skinny and tall with washed out, blue-grey hair. His dark clothes are worn and permanently infused with the scents of alcohol and wood polish. His lips are abysmally chapped and his eyes are bloodshot as well as being actually red [not as vivid as Bakugou's but just as aggressive] and his skin is tinged grey and his hands—

de c a y

Izuku's quirk is screaming.

This is it. Izuku doesn't know how, exactly, but he knows that this is one of those people who will hurt him if they find him. His quirk is connecting dots without him having to think about it, taking in sight and scent and sound and telling him that this boy is someone who will hurt him. And it's not a matter of that quirk, of course. Destructive quirks, even one as frightening as this, are common enough and nothing to be afraid of. No, it's the boy himself. There is something there, something his quirk cannot quite touch because there is not enough data here, but somewhere between analysis and intuition, Izuku can see it.

This boy is a villain and there is death on his hands.

[This is why we hide. Because we do not know everything and cannot predict every outcome, and this boy is only one dangerous part of a deadly whole, and that whole will hurt us if it finds out what we are. Because we are dangerous too, although we have not yet learned control. We will be deadly. We will be their challenger, but we must first last long enough to make that challenge. And we are not ready. Not yet.]

Izuku sucks in a deep breath as his quirk and his consciousness make a connection, and for the first time since he was three, it is no longer fear and blind trust that drives him to do what his quirk tells him, but understanding.

[finally]

I have to get stronger, he thinks. The calculations of what he has and what he must achieve roll through him like waves.

[yes]
And smarter, and faster. Is this it? Is this what his quirk has been trying to do all this time?

[yes]

I have to learn to use my quirk instead of letting it yank me around. He has to use this. He has to become a hero.

[YES]
Dear

Chapter Summary

An interlude with Inko.

Chapter Notes

Heeeyyyyyyyyy yeah I'm really late. Wow has it been over a year? Wow. I had no idea, ha, haaaaaa... Oops.

dear [deer]

adjective
1. beloved or loved.

noun
2. a person who is good, kind, or generous.
3. a beloved one.

adverb
4. dearly; fondly.
5. at a high price.

Izuku is three years old and Inko can only watch in horror as a seizure makes her boy's spine bend in a way that should break him as he arches off the hospital bed. His muscles twist and tremble under his skin, straining with exhaustion and trauma as sweat turns his twitching skin damp. When the seizure stops, Izuku moans, trembles, spits up stomach acid onto the coarse hospital blanket, and begins to scream—

Izuku is six years old and his mother may not be the most observant woman in the world, or the smartest, but she is not stupid.

Inko knows that there is something wrong with her boy.

She also knows that very young kids can go through a lot of changes very quickly. Their interests and habits can shift further than continents as they discover more of the world and themselves. She knows that it is not reasonable of her to expect Izuku the six-year-old to really be all that much like Izuku the three-year-old. Three years is a lot when you're only six. It's been half Izuku's life. He's changed, and she wouldn't mind that... if that was the only problem.
During *The Incident*—three days in the hospital listening to her boy cry and scream; another four days of the doctors poking and prodding only to tell her that they can find no explanation—the doctors told her that Izuku might have… problems. The physical and emotional trauma Izuku's body had gone through simply couldn't have left him unscathed, and therefore… there was very likely going to be some more permanent damage, even after he recovered.

At the time, she thought it had been a ridiculous, cruel thing for them to say. Ridiculous, because they had no idea what had happened to Izuku, no answers to give for why everything suddenly hurt him and why he had a headache so bad it made him scream (oh, *oh*, those were not human sounds he had made as he had arched his back into a horrific C-shape through a seizure, she can still hear those wailing screams when everything else is quiet and it makes her want to cry for him again). Cruel, because if it was true, then it was massively unfair. Izuku had just burned through three days of hell, why should he have to suffer for the rest of his life in consequence for three days of something that seemed to have happened *for no reason*?

*Insidious* is the word that doctors sometimes use when they cannot determine the cause of an injury or defect. She heard that word far too many times, and wished that they would use one that sounded a little less scary.

*Possible brain damage*, they had said. Inko had denied it frantically while Hisashi stood there with the displeased frown on his face, his orange eyes oddly cold (resigned, hurt, disappointed; tired).

And then there was the lesser-known fact that children with any sort of damage or imbalance in the brain were seventy percent less likely to manifest a quirk. Quirks depended on brain chemistry to develop properly, of course, and so… Hisashi had been very upset.

Very upset.

When Izuku didn't start to develop a quirk even after all his classmates had, Inko wasn't surprised when Hisashi left.

(Even now, she doesn't think that Hisashi was a bad man. Maybe he was not a good one, and maybe he didn't love his son like a father should have, but he never purposefully hurt her or Izuku. He never went after them, hit them; did anything at all to be cruel. His abuse was the neglectful kind, and none of it was unexpected. She knew what he was like when she married him. She had hoped that he might change, but wasn't shocked when he didn't.)

It seems rather obvious now that the doctors were right. Izuku is quite a bit more different than he should have been after what happened. And Inko knew he would be different, because that entire week must have been terrifying for Izuku. She got a front-row seat to all the pain he was in and she knows that, had it happened to her, she would have been different afterwards too. To a three-year-old, something like that must have had some sort of traumatizing impact.

But her boy, who wanted to be a hero more than anything, stopped wanting anything to do with heroes. And he stopped liking colors and music. He stopped playing with toys and with Katsuki. He stopped watching TV. His voice lowered to a hushed mumble even when he was happy and he absolutely refused to play outside.

But then he started going to the park. He would come back tired sometimes, or irritable, but he mostly just came back with that gleam in his eye like even if he was tired and irritable for his efforts, he had gotten what he wanted out of the ordeal.

(It is disturbingly similar to Hisashi, but despite herself, Inko thinks that's one trait they share that might not be so bad. Curls, freckles, and determination aren't a terrible combination.)
Inko still has no idea what it is he wants or what he gets out of going to the park when he obviously doesn't want to go outside at all, but it seems to make him feel better, so it makes her feel better too. Just a little bit.

Izuku is six years old and Inko, ever spinning with the speed at which her life is changing, wonders if she's a good mother.

It has to be asked, she thinks. Because she's seen bad mothers, lots of them, but they were all bad in a way that seemed so obvious from the outside looking in. She can see where a mother spoils or coddles or pressures or discourages a child, and it's obvious, because she's watching it happen. But she has to wonder if she can see herself and Izuku clearly, or if she's too close and too emotional, because she knows that something is wrong. She knows it like she knows her own quirk. But she cannot, for the life of her (of her son), see what it is.

What am I doing? she asks herself, because she doesn't know. She can see everybody else, but not herself. And whoever said hindsight is 20/20 was an idiot, because she's looking back at everything she's done as a mother and cannot even begin to sift out the right from the wrong.

She sees Izuku today, though, coming home from one of his trips to the park. Some part of her says that he's only six years old and that he shouldn't be allowed to go anywhere alone (and she is the one allowing it; she is the one who will be responsible if something happens to him), but she also knows that he's… fine. This is a good neighborhood, full of families, full of children, full of young heroes cutting their teeth on keeping peace in an already-peaceful place, and no matter where Izuku goes, he's never really alone. Not around here. This is a family place. Musutafu is sort of like that as a whole. There are villains, sure, but this where people come when they think their children have a shot at being heroes. It's a training ground for the upstanding youth, so to speak. And besides that, she's not sure that she could really… stop him.

(Should she? Is it a sign that she is a bad mother, that she bends to all his whims, that she allows him such control, that she asks no questions of him even though there should be answers? He said he didn't want a therapist, so she didn't make him go to one, but should she have? Should she have forced him? Would he hate her for that, and would it matter? Should she put her foot down and say no, demand that they fix it all even if it can't be fixed, and should she toughen up and prepare for his resentment because it's what's responsible whether he likes it or not? Should a six-year-old be allowed this kind of control over his own life? Is it about him being a child or about him being a person? What is she supposed to do?)

His expressions are so oddly adult on his childish face. It used to look silly to her, enough to make her giggle and want to take a picture, but that's not the case any longer. Izuku doesn't pout or whine or giggle or make silly kid jokes or repeat himself just to get a reaction or try to make people laugh or act out for attention or give the silent treatment or pitch tantrums or act shy. He never asks for things, either, or at least, not the things that child would ask for. He doesn't ask for toys or for her to take him somewhere or to have a day with friends (does he have friends, anymore? She hasn't seen Katsuki for a long time and Mitsuki never… mentions it). He doesn't act like a child should. And that, she thinks, is part of why she can't bring herself to act.

Today, he comes home with a smile. That's rare. Inko's so startled that she doesn't know whether to be hopeful or wary.

"The park was nice," he says before she can ask, trumping her effort before she can make it. She feels oddly passed over, and she doesn't even know what she would be passed over for.

But she's been feeling like that for a long time.
Izuku goes to his room and closes his door behind him, like he always does. That doesn't bother her as much as it should, because she knows that his bedroom is a safe, easy space for him. None of the things that seem to bother him are there. And she rather likes the room too, because it is so incredibly soft and clean and peaceful. Sometimes she wants to curl up in there and not face the world, too. So. She can't blame Izuku for that.

When she goes and knocks on the door so that she can check on him, he lets her in, but doesn't seem to spare her any attention. He sits on his bed with a notebook and a pen, ever-quiet with a calm focus despite the speed with which his pen flies across the page. 

*How does he do that?* she wonders. *How does he write so quickly?*

She couldn't write that quickly when *she* was six. And even if she could, she can't recall having much that she would write about. Actually, she's not even sure if she can write that quickly now. But maybe he can't either. Maybe this is just his way of playing pretend. She hadn't thought, before, that he wrote at all. When she first gave him a notebook, she assumed that there would be more along the lines of therapeutic angry-scribbling than actual writing, because he was *four*, but she was obviously wrong. 

(She wants to look in his notebooks. On some days, when he's not home, it will suddenly occur to her that the notebooks are there and she could look without him knowing if she wanted to, and then it's a temptation for the rest of the evening. But she promised not to look, or let anybody else look. That's the point. They're supposed to be safe. Like his room, but even more sacred, the notebooks are his safe place. So, most of the the time, it doesn't even occur to her, but sometimes—)

He glances at her, before she leaves the room, initiating brief, momentous eye-contact. He gives her that soft smile again, and then returns his focus back to his notebook (did he even stop writing, though, even when he looked at her? It seemed like his pen kept moving, sure and steady. That's ridiculous, of course, but she couldn't see if he did…).

She closes the door behind her and hopes that this is good.

Dinner is always a struggle, for both her and Izuku. The issues are these: Izuku has difficulty eating, Inko cannot make him eat, but when he doesn't eat, she cannot bring herself to eat, even when they are both hungry. And, sometimes, Izuku simply… won't even try.

She can't remember how many times she's set the table for two, only to watch Izuku walk into their small dining room, look as though he's about to gag, and walk right out again. On those nights, she eats (stirs her food around, picks and pecks), alone, and stares at his untouched dish. She packs the leftovers into the fridge when she's done, but those are rarely eaten by anyone but her.

Tonight, he sits at the table.

As usual, she can tell that he's struggling to get his food down and keep it down. He doesn't *look* like he's struggling, exactly, but he eats slowly, methodically, like he's forcing himself through the steps in order to finish. This is simply how he eats, when he eats, and Inko is grateful that he can manage it, even if it's hard to watch.

They eat. And, miracle of miracles, Izuku does, in fact, finish his food. He looks like he wants to fall over, but he has eaten it all, and she can't remember the last time he did that, or even the last time he tried.

She hugs him when they're done, without explanation, because she knows that he knows she was worried, and he wonders if he forced himself to eat it all for her sake. But then she lets go, because
she knows he doesn't really like hugs anymore, or any touching, really, and he still looks like he's about to fall over, but he offers her one of those small, soft smiles, like he's too tired to show his teeth.

"Thanks, Mom," he says, and briefly brushes his hand over hers. It's the most physical affection he's shown in awhile. "Dinner was good."

And then he goes to his room for the night, and she's tempted to ask if he wants to be tucked in, but she knows… he doesn't.

She stays up for some time after that, and she wonders if this will happen again, and if it was even a good thing, and if she should get her hopes up. Maybe. Maybe not. She doesn't know.

Just before she goes to bed, she peeks through the crack of Izuku's door and finds him blessedly asleep, with one of his journals hugged to his chest. Anybody who didn't know Izuku would think it was the sweetest sight, and Inko does too, but she thinks of it as more of a sweet relief, because her boy is calm and relaxed and embracing the one comfort object she's successfully given.

It's cute. But it's more like she can actually breathe for a moment, because this is alright. Tonight was alright. And if they can have one more alright night after this, and then maybe another, and then… well. Then maybe this will all be okay.

Inko is twenty-something years old and she's not sure if she can say that she's ever had a best friend. As a child, she was shy and plain and not at all popular, and when she got older and grew into her looks, people simply seemed to find her and her emotional outbursts to be… annoying. Her relationship with Hisashi had been unique, and she likes to think that they were friends, of a sort, even if neither of them were very good at it. But now Hisashi was gone, she isn't on speaking terms with her own family, and all she has are her son and her neighbors.

So, she supposes that if anyone is her best friend, it's Mitsuki.

"You're too skinny," is the first thing Mitsuki says to her after they've gone almost a year without communicating, and that's how Inko knows that everything is okay.

"I know," says Inko, because she does. She is, without a doubt, too skinny, and while she is not of the opinion that holding onto extra fat is healthy unless you're living in a very cold environment or are a body builder, she knows that her current state of skinny is not at all healthy.

"I see your bones, kid." Mitsuki drops a takeout box in front of Inko's nose. "Here, eat."

Inko doesn't even recognize the food she's being offered. The smell of spices is overwhelming, and she can't remember the last time she's had food like that, so she starts shoveling the food into her mouth without caring how disgusting it probably looks.

The food isn't even that hot, but it scalds her mouth with flavor. It's wonderful.

"Yikes," Mitsuki says in that flat tones that means yikes less than it means what the hell, Inko.

"Ish'guud," Inko tries to say. She fails and takes another too-large bite.

Mitsuki stares at her for a little while before finally sitting down and staring some more.

"Shit, Inko, take a breath. You're hurting me," she says, but doesn't move to stop Inko. "What happened, did your bastard ex-husband take all the food with him?"
It's callous. Harsh. If Inko were less concerned with her food, she might start crying, but she is currently more likely to cry from getting spices up her nose than from anything Mitsuki says, because she's used to Mitsuki, but she's forgotten about spices.

"Nuh," she tries to explain, but food is good and talking about Hizashi will make her lose her appetite, so she shakes her head and keeps eating.

Mitsuki sits there, arms folded, radiating an electric calm, and doesn't speak again until Inko has eaten everything and is scraping sauce out of the bottom of the box.

When Inko is scraping sauce out of the bottom of the box, Mitsuki breaks her silence.

"You're a mess," she says.

Inko licks her lips and tastes salt. Amazing.

"I know," Inko admits. "I'm sorry."

Mitsuki snorts. "Don't apologize to me, Inko. I know things have been bad. I just didn't realize you weren't eating. What kinda stupid stunt is that?"

A defense rises and fizzles out just as quickly in Inko's mind, because she doesn't know how to explain where, between Hisashi leaving her and Izuku's difficulty handling even the smell of most foods, she had lost the sense and the will to keep her body in proper order. It's not as though she stopped caring about what she looked like without Hisashi around, but every single day has just gotten so damn heavy, so who cares about makeup and nice clothes and eating, when she's just struggling to hold herself together for her boy?

"I don't really care about why," Mitsuki says. "Hisashi's a bastard and we both have problem children. Is he sending you money?"

It takes a moment for Inko to realize what Mitsuki is talking about.

"... Yes?" she finally answers, because she's barely touched the money that Hisashi sends. She deposits the cheques, yes (she never looked at the amount because she doesn't really want to know, but she imagines that Hisashi is, as he always was, very generous), but she had her own savings that Hisashi never touched.

"Good." Mitsuki nods sharply. "Then we're gonna use that money and get you some proper lunch, right now. And then we're gonna get groceries so you can have real food in your house. And we're gonna get you one of those weird order menus from the pizza place that's close to the apartment so you can at least order that."

Inko thinks of bringing pizza into the house with Izuku and wants to say, no, no way, but she thinks of eating pizza and decides that at least having a menu won't hurt.

Izuku is six years old and something has changed. Inko doesn't know exactly what it is. It might be good. Might be bad. It's hard to tell because she wants, if she can, to make life soft and easy for her boy, because he is so incredibly fragile. People who have seen him or know her will ask about his condition, as if he's ill, and Inko guesses that he really is, somehow or another. And that, the concept of it, has been easy enough to handle, because it rid her of Hisashi, and gave her an excuse to be a soft as she wanted to be.

Her little boy always embraced that.
He does not embrace it anymore.

It seemed to happen over night, for how fast the change has been made. Izuku has gotten harsh, in a way. He forces himself through things that are obviously difficult for him, and at first she's glad because those things are food and talking and sometimes even touch, but then she starts to worry because there's something far too determined and deliberate about it. Yes, he makes himself eat food, but he has no interest in sweets or treats. Yes, he talks, but it's stiff and unnatural, like he's trying to write a script of normal human speech. And yes, he touches her sometimes, more than he did before, but it's just as strange as the way he speaks, as if he doesn't know how it works. He pats her hip like a greeting when he passes her, occasionally gives her quick pecks on the forehead on the sad days when she thought she was doing a good job of hiding her hurt but apparently wasn't, and will put his hand over hers for a brief moment when he finds her sitting over their accounting with a lost look on her face. It's all very practiced and slightly mechanical, but it's still genuine, and Inko is torn between hating the fact that her son doesn't know how to touch and rejoicing in the very fact that he's even trying.

(It's so much like Hisashi, but worse.)

*Be happy*, she tells herself, because she's gotten what she asked for, hasn't she?

Izuku's eyes on her paperwork shouldn't mean anything because he's six and he should still be struggling to read if he's anything like she was at his age (he's not), but she's suddenly self-conscious, like this is something that should be hidden from him. But she doesn't have the energy, and she does have a headache, and the numbers are swimming.

"It's okay, Mom," he says. His hand settles over hers and she wants to cry.

He sits on the couch with her for the rest of the evening, wincing away from the gentle late light of day and watching the TV with one eye. Coverage on some hero she doesn't know barely seems to interest him, but he doesn't leave or change the channel, and she doesn't mind having it on because he keeps the volume at its lowest setting. How can he even hear it?

Sometimes Izuku hums to himself. Not notes, like a song, but like he's talking without opening his mouth. She thinks it's a leftover of the mumbling habit he used to have, and it's a comforting sound, to hear a remnant of old behavior in her boy.

She's not sure if it's his hushed humming, or the low drone of the TV, or just because she's too tired *all the time and especially* today, but she leans back for just a moment and—

and suddenly there's a blanket tucked up to her chin, the TV is muted, there's no light coming in from the windows, and Izuku is sitting next to her, wrapped up in his own blanket, and chewing on a celery stick.

She stares at the TV for a solid minute before realizing that it's a news channel covering a drug bust, which Izuku probably shouldn't be watching, but he seems completely undisturbed, and Present Mic is, well, present at the scene. Inko knows that Present Mic is one of Izuku's handful of heroes he actually likes. Maybe Izuku doesn't really think that scary things are scary as long as one of his heroes are there.

(She misses his obsession with heroes. It made it so easy to make him happy. Hero merchandise was common and usually cheap. But she no longer has an easy-to-please child, and she is ashamed that she's had to remind herself not to resent that.)
"Did he do a good job?" Inko asks after awhile. Her voice is heavy with sleep.

"Yes," is all Izuku says in answer. *Crunch*, goes the celery stick.

"Why's the volume off, sweetie?"

*Crunch. Chewchewchew. "You were asleep. "Crunch.*

"I'm up now. And there's no school for you tomorrow. We can stay up and watch if you want."

*Chew. "Okay."*

"Do you want the volume back on so you can hear it?"

"Whatever's better for you." *Crunch.*

Inko clicks the volume up by only a few notches. She can't really hear much of it, but Izuku doesn't seem bothered at all.

She didn't even check to see what time it is, but she knows without looking that it's too late and she's too tired to finish the accounting. The money's alright. As she suspected, Hisashi's financial contributions are generous. It can wait for tomorrow.

But she goes to put it all away, only to find the work finished.

Numbers are filled in and filed in neat lines. Receipts are sorted and stapled in groups by month. The bills and groceries and other expenses have been budgeted well within reason, which is something she was always terrible at doing.

It's in her handwriting.

"Izuku," she says. It's a question, but she doesn't say anything else.

"Are you done working, Mom?" he asks. He doesn't look away from the TV. "Do you want pizza again? Since we're staying up."

She does want pizza, especially if Izuku doesn't mind. Especially if she's finished her work. Which she doesn't remember doing, but as mind-numbing as it was, she can easily imagine falling asleep and forgetting all about it. So, pizza seems to be in order.

Might as well celebrate.

Izu is six years old and he comes home with dirty, skinned knees, like a six-year-old boy should. His hair is damp and sticking to his forehead. There's dirt and grass stains on his clothes. He's *smiling* and it's sweet and bright and a lot like spring.

This is not something Inko ever thought she would see.

"I ran," he informs a mildly panicked Inko. He's got a funny, hint-of-teeth smirk on his face that lands somewhere between proud and mischievous, which are two things he's never been. "I also tripped. I'm fine."

There's a vivid line of blood running down his leg. She's not used to seeing blood on him at all. He's not fine.
She tries to help him and wants to scream when he bats her hands away and takes the first aid kit for himself. She wants to scream louder and with more vigor when he begins to gently and effectively clean and bandage his own wounds better than she probably would have (probably? please, she doesn't know how to do this, she always wanted kids but she was never really cut out for the responsibility of being a mother). She wants to scream a lot, actually, because she is trying, so hard, and he doesn't even seem to need—

"Thanks, Mom."

She stares at her boy.

He smiles at her. He hasn't smiled this much since he discovered Present Mic.

"Thanks for... letting me do things," he says, and his expression isn't quite bashful, but close enough that she can imagine that he's a little bit sheepish, although she can't think of why. "I don't think some parents would, but you do, and it helps."

It helps?

It helps.

Inko starts to cry.

Crying, of course, becomes violent, full-body sobbing, because while her son seems to have lost the ability, she still can't make herself stop. She's never cried in half-measure. It made her wedding day, if it could be called that, very difficult. And, now, she's a grown woman whose son is patiently wiping her tears away. She feels him press a tissue to her nose, and she takes it just to spare herself some dignity.

While this specific situation is new, the basic idea of it is old and tired. Inko crying, strung-out and in over her head, while Izuku, the one who's suspected of being unstable, gently tries to help her in a way that is not at all childish. What happens next, though, is unexpected.

Izuku hugs his mother.

It rings out a new round of uncontrollable sobbing and shaking, because Inko struggles to remember the last time her son hugged her.

The way he pats her back and lets her hold him too tightly like a comfort object should be humiliating for her, as an adult and his mother, and maybe she'll be ashamed of this breakdown later, but for now, it's not like that. It's just Izuku, being Izuku.

"Why were you running?" she asks him when she can finally breathe. She thinks he must be tired from hugging her for so long.

She feels him smile against her neck.

"Because I wanted to."
Explode

Chapter Summary

In which Bakugou Katsuki is a very unreliable narrator.

Chapter Notes

I don't know if I like this chapter or if I got it right. I'm considering it… a published rough draft, up for heavy review.

This chapter was difficult to write. Mostly because Bakugou has always been slightly beyond my comprehension, so writing him as a character that made sense to me, without justifying his bad behavior, was a challenge. It was also emotionally… interesting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

explode [ik-splohd]

verb

1. burst or shatter violently and noisily as a result of rapid combustion, decomposition, excessive internal pressure, or other process, typically scattering fragments widely.

TECHNICAL: undergo a violent expansion in which much energy is released as a shock wave.

2. a. (of a violent emotion or a situation) arise or develop suddenly.

b. (of a person) suddenly give expression to violent emotion, especially anger.

c. suddenly begin to move or start a new activity.

3. increase suddenly or rapidly in size, number, or extent.

4. show (a belief or theory) to be false or unfounded.

Bakugou Katsuki is born at noon. He is Quirkless, as the majority of newborns are, and he has almost no hair at all. He has ten fingers and ten toes. He has a screaming fit and then falls asleep. He is average in every way, and born of an average labor that came right on schedule after an average pregnancy. There is nothing special about him at all.
He grows to be energetic and forward, fearless, but still... average. Physically and mentally, he performs no better than any other child his age, no matter his effort or enthusiasm. The only thing that sets him apart is his competitive ambition, and the fact that he seems determined to be utterly better than everyone in every way, even though, at his age... well, there's no telling. His parents have average, unimpressive quirks, and average careers not really worth noting, and they live in an average apartment in an average neighborhood that is only desirable to live in because it is very safe and relatively close to a successful heroics academy.

Nothing much is expected of Bakugou Katsuki by anyone but the boy himself.

When Katsuki is three years old, he only has one friend. This is alright with him because it's not as if he has the time or patience for two friends (ugh), but there is always that awful nagging feeling he has whenever he has to share Izuku with other people, because as much as he has been praised, Katsuki still sort of knows that everybody likes Izuku better.

Izuku is polite and quiet. Izuku is plays nice and never gets into trouble. Izuku is funny and smart. Izuku is what the adults call "charming" and "sweet." People volunteer to babysit. They like him. He's the kind of kid that people want. Cute, well-behaved, and full of potential.

Izuku is going to leave Katsuki behind.

Katsuki never remembers to be polite and he doesn't even know how to be quiet. He doesn't play nice and he barely manages to stay out of trouble. He is smart, but maybe not as smart as Izuku, and he's never been funny. He is what the adults call "trouble-maker" and "a pistol." And, sure, he thinks that he likes being called those things because he's pretty sure that they mean he's tough and strong, but no one volunteers to babysit him, and... well, his father likes him. To admit that he is not the sort of child that people want is not something that his three-year-old brain can fully comprehend, much less admit to, but he knows that he is not cute or well-behaved. And his potential is of his own making and, at the age of three, there isn't much of it except in the ambiguous sense that he could do anything because he isn't anything yet.

For all these reasons, Katsuki prefers to keep Izuku to himself. Because if Izuku plays with the other children, if he strays from Katsuki, then he might come around to thinking that he's better than Katsuki. Which, which, he's not, of course, because Katsuki is the best and he's going to have the best quirk, but Izuku might start forgetting that, so Katsuki doesn't give him the chance to realize that he might possibly be slightly better than him (but he's not, he's not). If Izuku starts thinking that he's better —he's not better— then he might think he doesn't want Katsuki around anymore, which is stupid because Katsuki is a great friend, but if Izuku were to get that idea, then Katsuki would go from having one friend to no friends at all.

It's stupid. It's not going to happen because Katsuki is obviously the best friend for Izuku, and they've already got a plan to be heroes together, and that alone will keep them together forever. Sure, Izuku will probably end up being Katsuki's sidekick because Katsuki will undoubtedly have the better quirk, but that's just fine. That'll be more than enough.

It makes a great game, too, because they're not heroes yet, but they can pretend.

Katsuki is three years old and he has a raging, explosive tantrum when Izuku doesn't come to play with him. One day without Izuku might have been manageable, but it's been over three days and he considers this to be unacceptable because he can't even remember a time he's gone that long without Izuku.
His parents, as always, give in to the unstoppable force of a screaming child. Eventually.

He's too young to know to be worried, really. He's never had someone in his life be seriously sick. He's only faced death in small concepts, like a dead bird at the park or a swatted spider. He doesn't realize that anything more than his own good mood is at risk.

Because of this, he's more demanding than sympathetic. Izuku seems okay, and so it's fine. This is all a waste of time, as far as he's concerned.

Later, he doesn't remember a lot about the hospital. It was new and vaguely interesting, but his memories are more of those learned imprints of now knowing what a hospital is like instead of remembering what it was. Because later, he remembers the smells, and the noises, and the lights, and the weird clothes people wore, but he doesn't really remember all that much about what happened, because that wasn't important.

Because it doesn't matter that Izuku was sick.

Because Izuku would be just fine.

[He's not a friend. He doesn't see us. He doesn't see anything that he doesn't understand, and he does not understand much. That's alright. He's a child. He won't understand until he recognizes and accepts his own ignorance.]

Will he, though.

[Perhaps.]

Katsuki is four years old and Izuku has been acting really weird for forever now. It's stupid, and Izuku should go back to normal, but his mom says it's because he was sick in the hospital. That's stupid.

People only go to the hospital when they're sick if they're sick really bad. He understands that. But then they get better. If they don't get better, then they have to stay in the hospital. Izuku was let out of the hospital, and that means he should be better.

But he's not.

Not really.

He's so… slow. And quiet. And he doesn't want to play anymore. He doesn't seem to mind exploring so much, so Katsuki explores a lot and takes Izuku with him so that they can see cool things, and that's better, but Izuku is still really quiet. But Izuku being quiet isn't really that weird, because he's always been kinda quiet, but the thing is that he doesn't cry anymore.

Katsuki would think that's a good thing. You can't be a hero if you're a crybaby.

But Izuku smiles less, too. And doesn't mumble anymore. And the mumbling was stupid and sometimes Izuku smiled too much, but even at four years old, Katsuki know that something about this is very, very wrong.

And he doesn't realize it, not yet, but he's… scared.

He's less scared when his quirk manifests, bright and loud and perfect. It's his and it's him. And so
he looks to Izuku for approval, because that's, y'know. What matters. Because Izuku is the one who knows all about quirks and how to be a hero and which quirks make the best heroes so it will be Izuku's words that hold any weight, because it will be Izuku who can tell Katsuki that his quirk is good, brilliant, the best, and that they can be heroes, and that all this weirdness is over now and they can be alright again.

(It will be Izuku who can fix this broken thing this.)

Izuku doesn't say that, though. He doesn't say anything. Not even congratulations, which even the people who don't really care still say.

Izuku flinches from Katsuki's quirk and looks away.

Katsuki is four years old when Izuku comes to school with news. And Katsuki thinks that it's about time that Izuku got his quirk, because everybody else has theirs and Izuku's is late, but whatever, because this means that they'll finally get to play Heroes and Villains the right way (maybe Izuku will want to play again at all, because he hasn't in forever), with their quirks, because now they'll both know their quirks and they'll start making real plans about what kind of heroes they'll be.

(And maybe Izuku will stop looking away. Maybe Izuku will talk to him more. Maybe things will go back to the way they were before, but better, because they'll have quirks, so they'll be fine.)

So Katsuki waits and waits for first recess, and in that time, he starts to wonder. What is Izuku's quirk, anyway? Because a quirk better than Katsuki's just isn't likely, no sir, but Katsuki has heard his parents talking about this. Uncle Hisashi can breathe fire. That's… really cool. That's a great hero quirk. And Auntie Inko is telekinetic, just a little, which isn't as cool. But quirks, Katsuki knows, are like math. Sometimes you just get one quirk from one parent, and not the other one. But sometimes, if you're really cool like Katsuki, you add both quirks from both parents together, you get a new, better quirk.

\[1 + 1 = 2\]

Fire-breathing plus telekinesis equals pyrokinesis. Probably.

That's… that's not better than Katsuki's quirk. It's not. But everybody wants pyrokinesis because of Pro Hero Endeavor, who's had the Number Two spot on the rankings for forever. And Katsuki doesn't precisely know what that means yet, but he knows it's important.

Katsuki wanted pyrokinesis, and he thought Explode was as close as he could get.

But Izuku might have it. Izuku might have the quirk that everyone wants.

There's a hot, heavy feeling prickling behind Katsuki's sternum, and he thinks he might be getting a tummy ache, too. He feels gross. He wants to make sparks, or scream, or just go home, and he wants to curl up in a ball and become a bomb but he also can't stop squirming.

\textit{You're full of dynamite, son.}

He doesn't know why. It's stupid, it's so stupid, and he can't even find the words for how stupid this is. But, for a brief moment, his bottom lip trembles and his breathing comes a little fast, so he clenches his teeth and sneers at his desk.

He's angry, that's all. He's mad because he had to wait too long. Because his teachers are dumb. Because Izuku was late.
It'll be okay, right?

They rush out to the playground at recess. Katsuki is pushier than usual, but his tummy still hurts and so does his chest and so he stomps, glaring, and doesn't care if anyone is in his way because he's bigger than them so it doesn't matter.

Izuku finally shows up, late, looking weird. He always looks weird now. Mama says it's because Izuku was sick really bad and sometimes when you're sick bad enough to go to the hospital, then even after you're done being sick, you still don't feel good for a long time. And being sick for a long time makes you looks weird.

(Skinny. Izuku is the skinniest.)

But Izuku has his quirk, now. Quirks make people strong. So Izuku will feel better soon because he's stronger.

Izuku shuffles out to meet Katsuki. Izuku never does anything fast. Katsuki pops a few sparks that make Izuku look away with a scrunched-up nose, but it makes him feel better, so he does it a few more times.

Then Izuku says—

He says—

He says something that turns that hot feeling in Katsuki's chest into lava, and his achy tummy flips a few times, and the tiny sparks turn into fire-bright cracks of nitro, and Katsuki almost screams.

But he doesn't scream.

"Quirkless, heh?"

Katsuki knows about Quirkless people. He's heard his parents talk about that, too.

Quirkless people aren't heroes. They don't get to be important. They're weak. The weakest. Quirkless people don't get to be anything because they aren't anything. One day there aren't going to be any Quirkless people at all.

(He remembers what his mother said when she thought he wasn't listening. Quirkless people die.)

"That's no good," Katsuki says. That hot feeling splashes around his ribs and his heart is thump-thump-thumping away and so he bares his teeth and the sheer desperation almost turns the expression into a smile but no no no he is not smiling. "You're useless without a quirk."

Useless. Hopeless.


Izuku, Katsuki's friend who is going to die, just blinks slowly with huge eyes and long eyelashes and no sign of life.

"Maybe it's just late, Kacchan," he says.

Maybe it is. But Katsuki knows it's not. He should have known before.

Izuku was never going to get a quirk. Izuku was already broken. He's been broken since he went to
that stupid hospital.

"Useless," Katsuki huffs. It sort of hurts. But he thinks of the kanji he knows and comes to what he thinks is a pretty smart conclusion, which he sort of noticed before but never brought up because it didn't apply and it wasn't nice.

It applies now. And who cares if it's nice?

"Deku."

Katsuki doesn't know that word as well as he likes to know words, but he's heard his mom use it a few times and he knows the kanji is sort of the same.

"That's what you are. A Quirkless Deku."

And then, when it perhaps should have ended in tears, or yelling, or any reaction at all from Izuku, the boy just stares, blankly, loose-limbed and shrinking.

Like a deku.

The lava-hot feeling, the one making Katsuki sweat so hard that his shirt is sticky?

It finally explodes.

He's hit Izuku before. He doesn't exactly remember doing it, but he knows he did because he remembers the day it happened and, also, his mom mentions it sometimes. She calls it pushing buttons. She says, all kids do it, ya brat, but you're the worst. You don't just push the buttons, ya smash 'em. But Katsuki doesn't remember being angry at Izuku. He just did it because he could.

This time, he's angry.

So, with fire in his heart and a stinging cry held behind his flushed face, Katsuki hits Izuku as hard as he can. It's not very hard, he knows, but he's popping off bright flashes from his hands, too, and those sting like a real slap.

Izuku doesn't do a thing. He doesn't cry. He doesn't try to run away. He doesn't fight back.

Izuku is going to die.

Bakugou Katsuki is four years old and he has many friends, but none of them are Midoriya Izuku.

Whatever he thought when he was three is dust in the wind. It is he who has left Izuku behind. Izuku was going to be so great, everybody could tell, but he's not great anymore, or even good. He's useless. He's Quirkless, which is bad enough because that means he's going to be defenseless for the rest of his life (a short one, because there are really old Quirkless people and a few young Quirkless people but no Quirkless people in the middle, because the really old ones are just leftovers and the ones who should be in the middle are dead and the young ones won't get to be in the middle either because they'll die too), someone who will always need to be protected, but he's also… damaged.

If Katsuki had any hope that Izuku would get better, or get his quirk, or both because that would be the best thing, he no longer holds that hope.

And, sitting at his kitchen table while Mitsuki makes lunch, he can't hold the words, either.
"Stupid Deku blanked out like an idiot today."

Katsuki never calls him Izuku anymore. Not out loud, at least. It doesn't feel right.

His mom slows her task of chopping vegetables, but doesn't stop.

"Katsuki, you know that's not his fault," she says, quietly. She doesn't say much that quietly. Her voice is a bit hoarse. "He can't help being that way."

Katsuki isn't used to hearing quiet from his mother. She's usually at high volumes. Inside voices aren't really her thing. But they've had this conversation before, and her saying the words quietly does not make them easier for him to swallow.

"I know," he grunts. "It's just stupid. He used to be smart but now he's stupid."

She doesn't look at him.

"Izuku's sick, kiddo."

She doesn't say that Izuku's not stupid, though.

And Izuku's not sick. Sick people cough or blow their noses. Sick people throw up. And sometimes, if they're really sick, they go to the hospital. But then they get better.

Izuku isn't getting better. He's worse than ever and he doesn't even have a quirk.

"He's not sick, he's broken," Katsuki mutters, folding his arms over the table and shoving his face into his sleeves. He glares across the cheap, fake woodgrain of the tabletop and eyes the tiny scorch marks littering the surface with temptation.

He could make more of those.

"Don't call him that," she says, like he doesn't say Deku every single day. Like she doesn't know what that means.

"But it's true," Katsuki insists.

The conversation devolves from there, because Mitsuki isn't great at explaining things at a reasonable volume, or at all, and Katsuki isn't great at listening to anything he doesn't want to hear, and Katsuki's father is terrible at interfering.

But, from what his mother is yelling about, Katsuki gathers this: that the hospital visit (which Katsuki only remembers because it came immediately after the royal tantrum he had when Izuku wasn't there to play with him for three days in a row) happened because Izuku's head was hurt, really bad, and sometimes when you get a really bad hurt on your head, it can make you different for the rest of your life.

It happens all the time, his mom says. In car accidents, or in sports, or when someone trips and falls. You can bump your head and be fine later, but sometimes you're not. And sometimes, if you're like Izuku, and you hit your head before you get your quirk, you might never get your quirk at all.

"Good thing I didn't drop you as a baby, huh?" she asks with a fake chuckle, ruffling his hair.

Yeah. Sure.
Katsuki is five years old and he has a favorite toy, one that he has treasured for nearly two years: a mecha toy, painted army green and rust red. It's styled after the Jaeger from those super-old Pacific Rim stories, so it looks fairly retro in comparison to newer mecha models, but the moving parts rearrange smoothly and its shiny lights never flicker and the tiny motor inside barely makes a sound when Katsuki turns it on. It has a voice, too, and it has a variety of pre-recorded responses that are just robotic enough to match its metal body but just emotive enough for him to make-believe that it really wants to talk to him even if it can only say so many words.

Katsuki has the empathy levels of a brick and typically doesn't anthropomorphize his toys. They're just toys. One day they'll all be gone, and he'll have new ones. But this one, he names Gipsy Danger, after the jaeger from that really, really old movie that his parents would never have let him watch if they had remembered how old he wasn't. This toy looks nothing like Gipsy Danger, but Katsuki is five and he doesn't care.

His parents know how much he loves it. They aren't terribly surprised when he loses control of his quirk (of his temper) and accidentally breaks it.

They usually don't bother trying to fix his toys. They did at the beginning, but he breaks so many that they've stopped trying. But they do their best to fix this one, because they know it was an accident, not to mention his favorite.

(They know he loves it. That he's actually tried to be gentle with it. And consider how little he loves, and how much less he bothers to be gentle with, they care enough to try to fix this.)

It mostly works by time they're done poking and prodding its innards. They proudly present it to him, and it has scratched-up paint and a dented helm, but it still walks and talks. He's very happy to have it back, and the dents make it look like it got in a fight with a kaiju, so he doesn't mind those.

But then.

It walks, yeah, but it's jerky and stiff and sometimes it falls over because on leg won't move as fast as the other. And the voice still works too, because it says all the same words it used to say, but it sounds less friendly and more electronic.

It's disappointing, but not so bad. At least it works.

But then the voice gets more and more of that strained, fake tone, kind of staticky and definitely not even a little bit like it's actually talking. Not how it used to.

There's no tantrum. One isn't expected, really, because he doesn't tell his parents that their patch job didn't work.

Gipsy is wrapped up in an old shirt, put in a shoe box, and shoved in the back of his closet. Because Katsuki doesn't think it's really Gipsy anymore.

He misses Gipsy enough that he doesn't throw her away. But he doesn't open that shoebox again.

Katsuki is six years old and he didn't think that hitting Izuku would happen again.

Okay, that's not… exactly true. He didn't plan to hit Izuku again. He had shoved Izuku a lot, though, which was kinda like hitting but not as bad. And he had used his quirk around Izuku a lot,
too, which wouldn't be so bad, except he would get close enough that Izuku would get burnt. Which was also... not unlike hitting. Especially since he was kinda-sorta doing it on purpose, or at least not avoiding it.

So it's not as if he could honestly say he would never hit Izuku again, especially considering how often he wanted to.

But he never thought it would be as bad as that first time. He was just mad that day. But today is their last day of school before summer break, and here's the thing:

He's still mad. And, to no surprise, Izuku is still getting worse. So Izuku is dumber and Katsuki is madder and y'know what? Izuku doesn't even call him Kacchan anymore. Or Katsuki, because that would be okay too. But, no. It's Bakugou, like they haven't been raised together, like Katsuki doesn't call Izuku's parents Auntie and Uncle, like they didn't both get flu for the first time together, like they weren't basically brothers.

So what's it matter if Katsuki gets fed up? Since none of it matters, who cares?

Who cares if he fires up his quirk and hits the Quirkless loser?

"Wake up!"

*You're not Izuku.*

"Cry! Cry!"

*You're a fake.*

Deku doesn't try to get away.

*Izuku is gone.*

Why not? Even dumb animals run away from Katsuki's quirk. Has Deku gotten that dumb?

*He died in a hospital.*

Gipsy is still in a shoebox. Katsuki hasn't looked at her in almost a year. He didn't think he'd miss her anymore, but he does, because Izuku was quiet and still but Gipsy still walked and talked and played with him.

*My best friend is gone.*

Now she doesn't, though.

*He left me behind.*

He's got new friends who tell him he's cool. But he doesn't care. They just follow him around. And they're not very smart, like Izuku, or cool, like Gipsy.

*Why are you even here?*

But he doesn't have Izuku or Gipsy anymore. It's weird, because he can't remember not having either of them. Even Gipsy was a present from forever ago.

*You're empty.*
Actually, now that he's thinking about it… he doesn't remember, exactly, but he thinks Gipsy was a present from Uncle Hisashi. He hasn't seen Uncle Hisashi in a long time.

You're not him.

"Cry, you s-stuh-stupid *Deka!*"

Izuku would have cried.

Bakugou Katsuki is six years old, and Midoriya Izuku does not cry.

Chapter End Notes

As someone with health problems that have damaged my ability to function normally, and with a relative whose personality was altered as consequence of a head injury, let me tell ya. This felt so gross to write.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!