there's an angel and he's shaped like you

by janeives

Summary

"Guess I owe you one, huh?" Richie chuckles.

Across the table, the boy blinks at him with those dark eyes, slow and calculated like a cat. For a moment Richie is struck with the terrible fear that he’s going to end up in shreds and spatters of gore, too, but then the boy simply shrugs his narrow shoulders, digging his spoon back into the bowl and helping himself to another mouthful of Froot Loops. In the yellow kitchen light Richie catches the remnants of blood on his chin.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Or: Richie, on the cusp of fifteen, knows he should be worrying about kissing girls and sneaking out and keeping his grades up just enough to warrant fewer trips to the principal’s office. ‘Harboring a runaway half-vampire in my bedroom in exchange for saving my life’ was never supposed on that list. Richie still isn’t sure it should be.

Notes
tw in this chapter for a dead animal, a single use of a homophobic slur and generally violent-ish content

See the end of the work for more notes.
When Richie was nine, though he's wont to admit it, he was petrified of the dark. Not that it was an unusual fear; Bill and Stan had readily admitted to dreading the night hours, too. But he was Richie, always too proud. He was scared of nothing, of no one, and he hated the way the shadow-soaked earth and the soft creaking of the house as it settled in the early hours of the morning were always enough to send him scurrying into his parents' room, seeking refuge. They'd turned him away, usually, and Richie would slump back to his bedroom, all defeat and darting eyes. One morning over breakfast he'd asked his papa when the dark would stop being so scary. "Never," Wentworth Tozier had told him with a straight face. Richie's toast had gotten stuck in his throat and his father went back to reading the paper.

And yeah, up until now Richie was always sure that was just his dad being an asshole. But as he bikes through the trees with not a trace of light to be found, the familiar feeling of unease is niggling at the back of his mind. Stan had swore up and down that this was a shortcut home from the Aladdin, but with every second that passes the foliage is getting thicker and the path is getting harder and harder to make out, like no one has ever even bothered to wander this way and Richie is really pretty sure Stan is a lying sack of shit.

No, Richie thinks. He's not really afraid of the dark itself anymore, not of the midnight creatures he'd cooked up in his head as a child, werewolves and the bogeyman and all sort of fantastical, ugly things. What he's afraid of now is the people who hide in the shadows, people who are crueler and uglier than his imagination could have ever come up with.

There's something blocking the trail up ahead, and instead of slowing Richie squints into the dark and tries to make out what it is. If he keeps at it with enough speed, he figures he can probably just hop right over it. He just wants to know what it is, is all. Mentally, he can see Stan shaking his head. "You're an idiot," Imaginary Stan huffs. "Yeah, well...maybe if you hadn't sent me into this fuckin' maze I wouldn't have to be!" Richie snaps back to the voice in his head. His eyes adjust to this new level of darkness, and suddenly the shape in the dark takes on a familiar form, albeit not one Richie's ever seen in real life.

It's a deer. Or at least it was.

Now the mess on the ground sort of resembles a deflated pinata post-birthday party beatdown, only with a lot more blood. The whole thing looks strangely flat, as if its insides have all been sucked out with a vacuum. Which is true, at least in part — half of its innards are lying on the surrounding ground. Intestines here, kidney there, both dusted with a generous coat of squirming maggots. Its fur is matted and crunchy with blood, head torn mostly away from its body. Richie doesn't like dead animals at the best of times, but seeing one taken apart like a child's half-finished art project on the forest floor is something else entirely.

And yet he can't look away.
At the last second he cuts his wheel, and the front tire hits something sharp. Richie stumbles forward, legs tangling in the frame of a bike that's too small for him after his freshman year growth spurt and bringing it down with him. His glasses go flying. A loud hiss escapes the punctured tire.

"Fuck me!" Richie yells, exasperated, into the empty blackness around him. He flops onto his back and closes his eyes. The things he can see with them closed versus what he can see without his glasses is nearly identical, so he kneels with another irritated huff and begins feeling around in the dirt for them, wary of the dead deer in close proximity. He really can't wait for the day he gets contacts and can finally stop being a living, breathing parody Velma fuckin' Dinkley.

"That can be arranged." Richie's heart nearly stops dead in his chest when another voice comes through the dark blur of his vision. It's a voice Richie knows better than he'd like — not that narrowing it down is hard or anything. It's definitely not one of the Losers, and it certainly isn't an adult. Not because adults in Derry don't say that stuff (Richie's come across more than his fair share of leering men and women whose eyes feel like the scalpels dissecting his frog-body in biology class and he thinks over and over again, This can't be normal, can it?), but because he'd be stupid not to recognize the voice behind the second-worst beating he's ever gotten in his life. (No, he doesn't want to talk about the first, thank you very much.) "Took you long enough to ask for it, Tozier."

Richie rolls his eyes, still fumbling around in the dirt with one hand as he scans his surroundings for an inkling of movement.

"You're projecting, Hockstetter. Can't believe you're still mad I almost caught you and Henry jerkin' each other in the handicap stall last year." The words are already hanging in the air between them before Richie realizes what he's said. He should come with a warning sign slapped to his back. CAUTION: MOUTH OPERATES (MUCH) FASTER THAN BRAIN. "I swear, dude, I didn't see anything," he adds pathetically in a feeble attempt to rectify the situation, but the damage is done and for the first time in a long time Richie is terrified Patrick might actually kill him.

He yelps when he finally feels a sweaty hand on the nape of his neck, dirty fingernails pressing into the skin there as he's yanked to his feet. "Can I please just get my glasses and go home? We can reschedule, I swear. My schedule's wide open, except for now."

That makes Patrick laugh, and it's weird that Richie feels kind of proud, right? It's weird. "Why's that? You scared of ending up like Bambi down there?" Richie doesn't need to see to know he's talking about the maggot-infested deer corpse.

"Yeah, kinda. You kill it?" Richie sneers, trying to quell the panic rising up in his gut. "Guess you're more of a psycho than I took you for, huh?"

"Ha! I wish," Patrick snorts, and Richie truly believes that he does wish that. "Unfortunately, my schedule isn't as empty. So whaddya say, faggot? Bet that mouth's good at something better than bullshittin'."

Richie wants to make a grand speech on the irony of Patrick calling him a faggot and in the same sentence asking Richie to blow him, but he settles for making an exaggerated gagging sound instead. "Oh, c'mon, can't you just kill me instead?"

The thing about Patrick Hockstetter is that he's not even that bad, at least compared to Henry Bowers. Patrick is infinitely more patient with Richie's antics, and for good reason — he likes to play games. Henry will let Richie run his mouth for about two seconds before punching the ever-loving shit out of him, but Patrick will keep him going for minutes and minutes on end if he can. Maybe that's actually more evil, now that Richie thinks about it, because it lulls him into a sort of misguided ease. He gets so caught up in spewing insults that he forgets that he's even really in danger.
But he can feel it in the air, now, the way Patrick's patience is wearing thin.

He needs to get away. Fast.

"Or maybe I could tie you up out here and let the bears getcha, hm? How's that sound?" Patrick pauses, as if he actually expects Richie to respond, eyeing the deer thoughtfully. "Take a nice dirt nap with this ol' guy right here." He adjusts his grip on the scruff of Richie's neck and pushes down with enough force to get him to his knees and then his belly. Richie gasps into the dirt and ends up with a mouthful of mulch. There's the press of Patrick's boot down between Richie's shoulder blades; he has a rock stuck in the grooves of the sole, and it catches on the knob of Richie's spine and god, he doesn't want to cry because he never cries but it fucking hurts like hell. Richie presses his face down into the dirt and gasps again, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. God, why hadn't he just taken the normal way home?

It's like he's trying to breathe through a straw like this, especially when he feels Patrick's weight sink down onto the backs of his thighs, so he turns his head as much as he's able and comes face-to-face with the deer in the path.

He stares at the corpse in front him and it stares back, bug-eyed and unblinking. Richie's stomach turns violently. It's just you and me now, Bambi, he thinks bitterly. He has this strange vision of he and this deer as a couple of stuffed trophies lying side-by-side in Patrick Hockstetter's living room.

There's a soft swishing noise that Richie recognizes as the flip of a pocket knife. Fear rattles through him openly now, and he can't hide it. There isn't a point in pretending he isn't afraid. "Patrick, dude, you really don't fucking have to do this, please-" he gasps sharply when he feels the cool edge of the knife brush the side of his throat, skimming down to his clothed shoulder.

"I really don't, I know," Patrick snorts, casual as if they're sitting here discussing the latest Simpsons episode. "But I want to. It's my pleasure, really." There's an edge in his voice that suggests that he's actually getting off on this, and panic sends Richie's brain into overdrive.

Then there's a hand on his arm, holding him in place, and a white-hot streak of pain as Patrick drags the knife across the back of Richie's shoulder. The blood leaking onto his shirt is so warm. Richie presses a cry into the forest floor and does not beg for help, because it's never done him any good in the past and at this point he figures he might as well just cut his losses.

The tip of the knife dances lightly across the surface of his skin again, this time coming to rest firmly at the nape of his neck. Richie might not be the most well-versed in human anatomy, but he knows that the chance of Patrick hitting something vital in his neck is much greater than anything in his shoulder. "Please," he begs, and he means to sob but it comes out as kind of a laugh instead, and he sounds weak and afraid because he is.

He thinks: I am going to die. He thinks: I'm not ready to die. He thinks: Wonder how long it'll take mom to realize I'm even gone. He thinks: I'm going to haunt the shit out of Stan for suggesting this shortcut in the first place.

Harder still presses the edge of the knife. Richie squeezes his eyes shut tight, then opens them again when he feels Patrick's weight sink down onto his lower back and his throat ceases entirely, and there's a terrible, awful sound, the kind of shriek ripped from the throat of an angered animal. He doesn't let confusion keep him down; Richie forces himself up, body aching. Several feet away now, limbs twisted strangely as if he's been thrown or dragged and dropped, Patrick Hockstetter is curled in on himself like a wounded animal, and he is wailing, and maybe it'd be funny except there's so much blood.
"Oh, fuck," Patrick gasps. He opens his mouth again, eyes meeting Richie's across the clearing, and a gush of blood spills from between his lips. More of it drips out of the wound on the side of his throat — the flesh there looks like it's been put through a shredder. Richie stumbles backwards with a gag, still reeling from the turn of events as he struggles to find his footing on the uneven ground. There's a crunch from under his shoe, one Richie recognizes from a childhood of accidentally stepping on his own glasses, and he immediately reaches back to grab for them and shove them in place. One lens is cracked horribly, rendering it almost useless, but the other is only a little dirty. He can see, and it's only the two of them in the clearing. No beast to be found, and yet.

"What the fuck was that?!" Patrick screams. His fingers slip through the red coating his throat as he pukes up another mouthful of it, thick and black and very, very real. Only now does Richie catch the torn fabric of his shirt as it's doused in the blood from his mouth.

Blood still drying on his chin and dripping down his back, heart pounding on cymbals, Richie doesn't ask questions — he thanks his lucky stars, then turns and runs the rest of the way home.
an encounter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you are not fed love on a silver spoon/ You learn to lick it off knives

— Lauren Eden

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Once in fifth grade, Richie's teacher had asked her students to draw a portrait of their families in front of their homes. Bill had gotten a shiny A+! Great job! :) sticker for his depiction of the Denbrough family smiling in front of a strikingly realistic rendering of his home, complete with its white picket fence and huge upstairs windows. Richie had done the assignment, too, complete with a neon red WELCOME TO HELL sign above the front door and a bottle of vodka in his mother's hand, and wound up in after-school detention for a week.

Back then he hadn't understood what the big deal was, or why he was being punished for being just being honest.

He still doesn't.

Richie swears that as he slowly ascends the porch steps, aching in places he didn't know it was possible to ache, he can feel the figurative flicker of WELCOME TO HELL across his face, red red red and ugly like the blood on his clothes, ugly like the things waiting for him just inside the front door.

He tries the handle. Unlocked. Richie rolls his eyes. Of course it is.

He is surprised when he hears the television on in the living room; he'd have placed bets on his mom not even having gotten out of bed, but clearly he was mistaken.

"Went?" There's a familiar inflection in her voice, one that matches the faint reek of whiskey and the pot on the stove she seems to have forgotten about. Richie turns off the burner and tosses the pot in the sink; the black, smoking ring on its base indicates that it's probably beyond saving at this point.

"No, mom," Richie answers, peering around the corner. She's sprawled on the armchair in front of the television with her feet propped up, thin face bathed in flickering blue light. A mostly-drained bottle of whiskey sits on the end table atop a stack of papers, her reading glasses and a pen nearby. Richie wonders — as he tends to do — if his parents are finally getting a divorce. "It's just me."

His mother exhales without even turning to look at him, and her overt disappointment twists like a knife in Richie's side.

He could have died, out there in the woods with nobody but Patrick Hockstetter to listen as he sobbed and shook and bled out in the dirt. He wonders how long it'd have taken her to notice. Hours? No. Days, likely; Richie once counted almost four full days where he didn't see her a single time.

"Okay, well," he says quietly, padding over to the stairs. "Night, mom."
"Night," she responds halfheartedly, and that's that. They'll probably talk again in a few days. Richie can see it now: he'll say Hi, mom and she'll sigh that familiar, tired sigh of hers and reply Hello, Richie and Richie will want to wither away under her gaze, one that manages to be both hypercritical and completely disinterested. She'll ask How is school? and Richie will say It's fine and then they'll be fresh out of things to talk about, because at the end of the day they both know that Maggie Tozier had spent years wishing for a daughter, a little girl to swaddle in lace and baby pink cotton, someone through whom she could relive her days as a pageant girl, a prom queen covered in glitter. She got Richie instead.

And she'd tried to love him. Richie knows she had; but years crawled by and they all got sick and tired of pretending. And he gets it, because he knows deep down he's an unlovable thing, something to be marveled at and promptly forgotten (or worse: remembered for all the wrong reasons.) But he doesn't get it, and it's not fair, because she should fucking love him, shouldn't she? She's his mother, for fuck's sake, and she should never have had to try even if Richie hadn't been what she wanted. Right?

Richie doesn't know what he deserves. He hates that.

The dull ache of it weighs heavy on his shoulders as he kicks off his shoes in the upstairs bathroom and sheds his bloody shirt, his muddy shorts. He doesn't bother to check his shoulder in the mirror, just turns the shower on high and sets his busted glasses on the counter before he practically crawls into the steam. The water is so hot that it hurts but Richie likes it that way, likes it when the burn finally subsides and all he's left with is a strange tingle of numbness in his fingers and the tips of his toes.

He brushes his fingers over the cut on his shoulder and is surprised when his lower lip wobbles; his hand does not come away bloody but the water that rolls down his back is a murky brown-red when it hits the floor of the shower and spirals down the drain. Good, Richie thinks. He wants to wash away every trace of this night and then he wants to wash himself down the drain, too, and wind up somewhere he is wanted and his mother doesn't drink herself into oblivion and his father is around more than once or twice a week but that's his fault, too, isn't it? Richie imagines his parents must have been happy together at some point. The pictures on their night table in the bedroom attest to that — together on their wedding day, all smiles and bright eyes; in Europe for their honeymoon, glasses of wine in hand, his mother with her head thrown back in breathless laughter; at the carnival as teenagers, posing in front of the ferris wheel with their frizzy hair and cotton candy-sticky fingers.

Richie has never seen them love each other like that. He thinks that everything must have gotten poisoned when he came along, like with his birth came a tidal wave of unhappiness, of infidelity and screaming matches and slamming doors and Richie doesn't know if it really makes sense but he knows it's all his fault anyway. They're always fighting. Always. Mostly about Richie, but if not about him then about money, and if not about money then about work or sex or the quality of picture on the television and if there's nothing to argue about they'll find something to argue about, like they don't remember who they are when they aren't shouting in each other's faces.

Richie lets the hot water wash over his face. When he closes his eyes, he imagines himself curled up in the dirt next to the dead deer with maggots crawling out of his ears while his mother swallows another mouthful of whiskey; she laughs at something on the television as a family of mice make a home in the decaying hollow of his chest.
The shower takes a long, long time — so long that by the time Richie gets out, dries off, and changes into the comfiest pajamas he can find, his mother has already gone to bed. The house has gone dark and quiet again, and Richie is grateful for it. It's still lonely, but it's the comfortable kind where he can sink into the pipe dream that he never had a mother or a father at all, that it's just him living it up here alone like an adult, all grown up at fifteen years old.

He's headed back downstairs for a midnight snack of whatever he can find in the pantry, marveling at how pruned his fingertips are from being under the spray for such a long time, when the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. It's the same way that he can always sense when the television has been left on in the living, even when the volume is all the way down and he's upstairs in his bedroom behind a closed door. ("It's b-because you can hear the h-huh-humming," Bill had insisted, but Richie would be nothing if he let things go easily. "No," he'd protested, narrowing his eyes. "It's 'cause I'm psychic.") Something just feels — off, somehow.

He takes a detour to grab his old metal bat from the front hall closet where it's been retired to, fingers tightening around the handle when he hears the soft rustling coming from the kitchen. The lights are all still off. Rats, maybe, or a raccoon. It wouldn't be the first time. But it's always up to him to take care of these things, because his mother sure as hell isn’t going to.

Rapping the bat threateningly against the tile at the kitchen entrance, Richie flips on the light, prepared to swing or scream or both.

It's kind of difficult to see, even in the light — after his shower he'd put on his backup glasses, which are a few prescriptions behind his current state of vision and a little too tight for his head, but it becomes very obvious very quickly that the intruder is almost a head shorter than him, and far more preoccupied with tearing open a fresh box of Froot Loops.

"Hey," Richie says, lowering the bat slightly. "You're just a kid.

The boy who is currently raiding his pantry stares back at him, and Richie is taken off guard by how dark his eyes are — it's as if his pupils are blown out, or maybe his irises are black, too, and his gaze makes Richie feels strange and naked and a little bit small.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?"

No response. Barely a blink. He looks like Richie used to when he was caught sneaking extra cookies from the cupboard as a child, only without the guilt. He just looks lost, mostly. A little afraid, too, as if he's on the receiving end of a break-in instead.

"How'd you get in?"

"Door," the boy replies as if that explains everything, seeming more focused on seeing what's on the top shelf of the pantry than anything to do with Richie.

"What're you doing here?" Richie repeats, heart caught in his throat.

"Running."

"I meant, like, what are you doing in my kitchen specifi- you know what, just forget it. What are you running from?"

"Home." A frustrated look flits across the boy's face as he shifts his weight from his toes to the balls of his feet, gaze shifting around the kitchen like he's not quite sure what to do, and Richie doesn't know why he feels compelled to help someone who has just broken into his home and is now attempting to steal from his kitchen, but he does.
"Bowls are in that cabinet up there," he says dumbly, pointing to the cupboard behind the boy's head.

"Milk?"

"Fridge." Richie gestures to the humming, off-white unit to his left.

The boy shuffles over to the refrigerator and tugs it open, studies its contents, and then looks to Richie again. "Chocolate milk?"

Richie scoffs at that. The fucking nerve of this kid! "Who do I look like, Scrooge McDuck?" The reference clearly goes over the boy's head, but before he can ask, Richie continues, "I think we've got chocolate sauce around here somewhere. Hold on."

He doesn't find the chocolate sauce, but he does find a few old Tootsie Rolls in the back of the pantry. They've been sitting back there for god knows how long and probably aren't even edible at this point, but Richie tosses one to the boy anyway. He also grabs a bowl for himself, because if he's going to be serving a trespasser in his own kitchen he sure as hell isn't gonna come away with an empty stomach.

And then it's the two of them on either side of the kitchen table, two boys and two bowls of Froot Loops and a million questions hanging in the air between them like thick cobwebs, a million questions Richie is too afraid to ask.

He expects a grand showdown of holding out to see who will dare to take the first bite, but clearly his mystery guest has other plans, because he just digs the fuck in. The tarnished silver of the spoon catches the light, and Richie swears in this light that his teeth look too sharp. Everything about him looks too sharp.

"Why are you here?" he tries. He's trying to be compassionate, because — so far, at least — this kid seems pretty harmless, or as harmless as a midnight intruder with too-sharp teeth can get. And he's clearly hungry. Richie knows all about being hungry.

"I followed you."

*Oh.* Richie's stomach goes cold. "What?"

"I followed you," the boy repeats.

"From where?"

"Woods."

"You were there? In the woods? You saw me?"

The boy nods.

"Did you...did you see what was out there? The kid...Patrick, the one who was there with me. The one with the knife, you know? He got all...messes up. Like, one second he was on me and the next his throat was all torn open and bloody. Did you see what got him? Do you know what it was?"

Richie wants a yes. He wants something. Anything. He wants some kind of answer other than the one that's materializing in his head, the one that has an ugly coil of dread forming in the pit of his stomach. He wants this to be a dream. He wants to open his eyes and find himself facedown in the dirt with a knife in his back again.
But Richie never really gets what he wants. All he's given is a stare, one that's both chillingly blank and brimming with emotion. It's not blank like the looks his mother gives him when she's on the other side of a few glasses of wine, the ones that make Richie's skin feel too tight, but it's still hard to read. He doesn't know how to take this look apart. He doesn't know what it means, so in lieu of dissecting it, Richie looks into his eyes dead on and feels like he's drowning. This isn't real. This can't be real. The tickle in the back of his mind turns to a full-blown itch, and a voice in his head is screaming RUN, RUN, RUN, but it can't be real. This doesn't make any sense. It was a bear, or a wolf, or something —

After a long bout of silence and several bites of cereal, Richie decides to just suck it the fuck up and cut to the chase. "What are you?" he asks. His voice wobbles, just a little.

"I'm Eddie."

That pulls a laugh from the depths of Richie's panic, a sound tinged with hysteria. "Nice to meet you, Eddie. I'm Richie, but maybe you already knew that, I dunno. But what I meant was, like...you're not..." God, it sounds so fucking stupid. "You're not, um. You're not a human, are you?"

More than anything, Richie wants this boy — Eddie — to laugh in his face. He wants Bill and Stan and the others to come stumbling out of the pantry, tears of laughter streaming down their reddened faces. You should've seen your face, Trashmouth! Seriously, a fucking vampire? Please! Richie wants that so badly, but it does not come. The boy does not laugh, and there is no grand reveal, no rug pulled out from under Richie's feet.

"Mama is," Eddie answers.

"Your mom is — " Richie swallows thickly. There's a Froot Loop caught somewhere in his throat. "Human?"

"Yes," Eddie says.

"And your dad is — "

"Not."

Precisely the answer Richie was afraid of, and at this point he doesn't even know what the fuck to do except what he always does — keep fucking talking. Keep talking until this all blows over and he wakes up from whatever kind of trauma-induced fever dream this is.

"Vampires aren't real." He doesn't know why he feels stupid saying that, because it's the truth, isn't it? If it's the truth, why does he suddenly feel so stupid, like he's on the outside of some kind of joke? The word feels awkward in his mouth, like a jagged shard of glass. Vampire, vampire, vampire.

"I'm real," Eddie says, just as plainly.

And Richie can't really argue with that. There's a vampire...human...thing, sitting at his kitchen table, eating Richie's Froot Loops, and holding a conversation with him. Or trying to, at least.

"Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You — attacked him. You made him bleed." The words don't feel real coming out of his mouth; it's like he's listening to them being spoken through his shittiest pair of headphones in a voice that sounds nothing like his own.
Eddie's eyes get big and they look infinitely more dark like this; Richie feels as if he's standing on the shoreline at midnight, the encroaching blackness threatening to lap him up and swallow him whole. "He was hurting you."

"Well...yeah. But you don't even know me."

Eddie chooses to ignore that and instead dives in with another question. "Why was he hurting you?"

Richie snorts. "Because he's an asshole, that's why." A look of confusion crosses the boy's face, and Richie's stomach does that weird twist again, the one that says something isn't quite right. "A dick."

That same look again, brow creased with a lack of understanding. "He's just not a nice guy."

The boy seems to understand that well enough. "Oh." He pauses briefly to study the cluster of Froot Loops on his spoon, then shovels it gracelessly into his mouth. "Are you okay?" he asks through a mouthful of colored sugar, and Richie laughs.

"I could be worse, I guess," Richie answers truthfully, very aware of the sudden pang in his shoulder, then takes a bite of his own cereal. He waited too long; they're soggy and disintegrate in his mouth, but he swallows them down with a shudder regardless. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." The words sound strange and unpracticed coming out of the boy's mouth, as if he's never actually said them aloud before.

"Guess I owe you one, huh?" Richie chuckles nervously.

Across the table, the boy blinks at him, slow like a cat and for a moment Richie is struck with the terrible fear that he's going to end up in shreds and spatters of gore. But then the boy simply shrugs his narrow shoulders, digging his spoon back into the bowl and taking another mouthful of Froot Loops. In the yellow kitchen light Richie catches the remnants of blood on his chin. Richie thinks of the dead deer on the forest floor, taken apart at the seams. His stomach lurches.

"I'll take that as a yes."

They sit in silence for a few more minutes, accompanied only by the uneven sound of Eddie's chewing. When his Froot Loops are gone he tips the bowl back into his mouth to drink the rest of the milk, and it makes Richie grin a little despite himself; he does that, too. It makes this whole thing a little less scary, makes Eddie seem a little more human.

"I'm looking for him," Eddie says finally, shifting a little in his seat. He has a milk mustache that clashes terribly with the flecks of red on his jaw.

"For who?" In between exchanges, Richie pushes his own mostly-full bowl towards Eddie in offering — it's a gesture that he hopes says both Please don't suck my blood, thanks! and Hey, you look pretty hungry, pal, and I actually don't feel that great anyway.

"My dad." Eddie accepts the bowl happily with a quiet, grateful little noise.

Your vampire dad, Richie almost says. "Is that why you ran away?"

"Yes. He ran away, too. Will you help me?"

Richie is taken aback by Eddie's forwardness. "Help you find him?"

Eddie nods, looking frustrated, now, and maybe a little sad. "Please." This sounds less rehearsed, like maybe he's used to begging, and the dread in Richie's stomach is back now, heavy as lead. He
has so many questions (Who are you, really? Where did you come from? How are you real? Are you even real at all? Are you going to kill me now, too?) and none of them feel quite right, especially when he takes a moment to study the boy more closely, squinting through the obnoxiously thick lenses of his glasses.

There are deep, dark circles under Eddie's eyes. His hair looks like it's probably supposed to be kind of fluffy but now is mostly just sticking up at weird angles, wavy strands clinging to his forehead. A spatter of freckles across the pale bridge of his nose. There's blood on his clothes, too, Richie realizes now that he looks closely. He looks like someone who just escaped a crime scene.

Eddie yawns then, mouth widening into a little O, pointed incisors framed by pink lips and all Richie can think is cute, cute, cute, which is probably a weird thought to be having about someone covered in blood who can tear him to shreds, but he thinks it anyway. It's a little like the skinny stray cat Beverly had rescued from the sewer last month. Careful, Ben had warned her, you could get mange, but Beverly had merely shushed him with a flap of her hand, and that was that. But she's so cute, Bev had cooed, scooping the creatures into her arms and kissing the cat's nose.

Stray cat, stray vampire. Same difference, Richie thinks, right?

God, he's fucking delusional. He must have hit his head really hard.

"Okay, look. There's a lot going on right now, and I promise that in the morning we can talk all about this, but it's been a long night, okay, and I'm beat. You could, you know...you could stay here, for tonight. If you need to. Get cleaned up and whatnot. No offense, but you look a little rough." He might as well have just purchased himself a one-way ticket to a bloodless grave, but Eddie doesn't actually seem to mind.

"Stay here tonight," Eddie repeats carefully. "With you?"

"I mean, uh —" Richie stutters like the idiot he is. "We don't have to put a label on it." He fights the urge to slam his face down onto the tabletop just to shut himself up.

Eddie cocks his head, puzzled.

"Yes. With me," Richie clarifies.

"Yes," says Eddie, and that's that.

Luckily for Richie, Eddie seems fairly well-versed in how to use the shower, so Richie can go back to his room in peace and wallow in his awkwardness without having to worry about the other boy accidentally causing a leak or ripping a hole in the shower curtain. Even luckier, they manage to skip over the awkward 'no, YOU sleep in the bed, I'll take the floor' debate entirely. By the time Richie returns from making sure the bathroom is intact and drying the floor, Eddie has already made a nest for himself atop Richie's bed, cocooned in a pale blue threadbare blanket. His clean, wet hair hangs in his drooping eyes and Richie's heart squeezes; he doesn't want to think about why.

"Cool," Richie mutters. "I didn't even want to sleep in the bed anyway."

If Eddie registers the sarcasm in his voice, he doesn't acknowledge it. "Good," he says, a tired smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "'Night."

Richie just stares, even as his hand moves almost robotically to switch off the bedside lamp. "I, um...yeah. Goodnight."

There's still a chunk of Richie's brain that is convinced that this is nothing but a dream, that any
moment now he's going to wake up face-to-face with something dead with 130 lbs of Patrick Hockstetter pressing heavy on his spine. Or maybe he'll skip straight to the pearly gates, or the road to hell, or something, anything but this. Or maybe he'll wake up on the floor of his bedroom with his own bed perfectly intact, no sign that Eddie was ever there in the first place.

He barely sleeps a wink the entire night, kept awake and alert by the persistent ache in his shoulder and the knowledge that the boy in his bed — the one that is still there, despite all the facts saying that he shouldn't be — is something that shouldn't even exist, someone who could kill him in an instant, but Richie does not regret it.

Feeling strangely safe, strangely protected by someone he’s known for only a night (and the irony isn’t lost on him, how he feels safer with a creature he thought only existed in the movies than he does with his own parents), sleep finally takes him just as the dawn starts to break.

Chapter End Notes

it's 3 am and i have to get ready to drive two hours for a weekend-long filming project but i fucking finished the chapter god dammit
little ghost, are you listening?

Chapter Notes

tw for the graphic description of a dead body because apparently i like consistently trying to find newer and grosser ways to describe corpses. i'm not really sure what that says about me

also richie has really gone full sad boi in this fic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's underneath my skin/
I realize I'm just like him

— The Mowgli's, Monster

Richie isn't sure what time he actually winds up finally falling asleep — only that when he peels his eyes open again, it's a quarter to noon and he's officially way too fucking late to school to even bother showing up at all. There's a crick in his neck from being curled up on the floor and his bones all ache. His glasses lie unfolded next to his head, clearly having fallen off at some point while he was asleep. Why had he slept on the floor, again?

Oh. Right.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, Richie forces himself to sit, scared of what he might find in his bed. Scared of what he might not.

But there's no Eddie, just a mess of rumpled bedsheets, and Richie knows logically he shouldn't feel disappointed but there's something wistful about waking up all alone that tugs the corners of his mouth down. He gets up carefully, trying to pinch feeling back into his numb fingers as he pads downstairs. He can hear his mother snoring faintly from beyond her bedroom door, so Eddie definitely didn't drain her blood while she slept. No Eddie in the kitchen, either, or on the couch or in the bathroom. He's not hiding in the pantry, though Richie observes that the box of Froot Loops has gone missing, the only indicator that last night even happened at all aside from the two empty cereal bowls in the sink and the stinging wound on his shoulder. He reaches back to touch it, instinctively. And just like that, Richie is alone again. He turns on the kitchen sink to rinse out the bowls, and the noise echoes through the quiet.

It's not a nice quiet, the comfortable kind the Losers fall into sometimes that Richie likes to sink his teeth into to their dismay. It's an ugly quiet, makes him feel like a rotting boy trapped in a rotting house — he can leave for days on end but he always comes back, tied to the end of a string. He hates it here more than he's hated anything; more than school, more than running laps in gym class, more than the aftermath in the boys' locker room where he and Stan are always in a race to see who can change the fastest.

What would a rotting boy in a rotting house with a scar on his shoulder and no glasses do? Breakfast
seems like a good option. Brunch by now, really, and Richie likes that better because it sounds fancier, makes it sound like he didn't just sleep half the day away. Oh, me? Nothing much. Just headed out to brunch with the folks.

But the Froot Loops are gone and the bread bin is empty. There's an unopened but expired jar of strawberry preserves in the pantry. Richie sighs, downs the rest of the carton of milk from the fridge and makes a mental note to ask Bill if he can stay over for dinner tonight.

He's contemplating the benefits of just going back to sleep when something scratches, soft but insistent, at the back of his mind, a thought trapped inside a locked room. He closes his eyes and he can see Patrick Hockstetter writhing on the ground, clutching his punctured throat, and then wonders if it had happened at all. He thinks of the deer, its eyes wide in a silent, permanent plea. He thinks of Eddie and his too-sharp teeth and soft voice and the way he had seemed to exist just outside of the fabric of reality, something half-formed and wispy, and before he can think it through any more he's tugging on a mostly clean pair of shorts and a worn-in red sweatshirt, already out the front door with his shoes untied.

It's a cloudy grey day, eerily still, and the deeper in the woods he goes, the more Richie feels as if he's toeing the edge of the River Styx. Something in his mind is screaming at him GO BACK GO BACK GO BACK but Richie can't, not until he checks. He has to check.

The smell gets him first, and it's enough to stop him if only for a second or two. But Richie is stubborn.

He steps into the clearing, which in the daylight is only identifiable due to the lone deer lying in its center like a sacrifice (Richie's heard about those, too, kids who go into the woods and skin rabbits and squirrels and paint their faces with the blood), and nighttime is supposed to make things worse but the corpse doesn't really look that much better right now, either. Its flesh is starting to wear thin, stretched tight over its broken rib cage, the sound of maggots squirming where its lungs should be.

But that's not what Richie is looking for.

Richie has only ever seen one other dead person before, at his grandma’s funeral when he was eleven. It had been an unbearably muggy day and the heat inside the church had felt oppressive; Richie was sweating and restless in the stupid suit his father had insisted on. He remembers walking up to the body and feeling — not afraid, not really. Just uneasy, like his skin had suddenly shrunk to a size too tight as he tried to peer over the lip of the coffin from where he sat in the front row, squished between his parents. It gave him the same creepy-crawly feeling he got from looking at mannequins; almost human but not quite. Her skin had looked waxy, face painted crudely with blush she probably never would have worn when she was alive. Too bright. Arms laid across her stomach, fingers curled slightly. "She's beautiful," Richie's mother had cried to the funeral director, squeezing her hand gratefully. "Like a sleeping angel." Richie wasn't too sure about that, but he bit his tongue.

He had come home from the funeral with a vivid description to tell the rest of his friends. "Her skin was all leathery and her mouth was stitched shut," he had told them, wide-eyed and pausing for dramatic effect. "Someone should try stitching your mouth shut, Rich," Stan had quipped. Richie had laughed at the time and gone home imagining pulling a needle and thread through his skin.

And the thing is, Patrick Hockstetter is one of the worst people Richie knows but that doesn't make it any better when he's still lying in the same place he was last night, arm twisted underneath him, throat cut to shreds. Richie thinks he catches the gristle of his windpipe through the ribbons of skin hanging there.

His eyes are wide open and unblinking and this is what it must be like, Richie thinks, to look the
devil in the eye.

Dead. Not sleeping. Not injured. He's dead and he's gone and the dirt is soaking up his blood like a sponge and he isn’t coming back and Richie isn't sure whether he should be relieved or horrified. He's learned in school what happens to your body once you're dead, knows all too well that pretty soon he'll end up like the deer and then disappear entirely, his bones eaten up by the earth and somehow that's even worse, thinking about Patrick Hockstetter being forever immortalized in the soil. Patrick Hockstetter as part of the earth itself, all around him, forever. Richie's skin is crawling. He almost wants Patrick to reach out and grab his ankle. *Boo!* he'd yell, giddy with ugly laughter and it would be terrifying but it couldn't be worse than this.

Richie's reaction is delayed significantly; for several breaths all Richie can do is stare, brain working itself into a frenzy, and then a rat pokes its head out from the collar of Patrick's shirt. Its eyes are black and beady, like two drops of oil on its face, and it blinks at Richie and he's reminded, sickeningly, of Eddie blinking at him from across his kitchen table. *Do you mind?* The rat's eyes seem to goad in his direction. *I'm eatin' here; either help yourself or get lost!*

It's that thought that does it, sends Richie stumbling backwards and he's down, down, down on the ground in the leaves like he was last night except now everything is different and he was wrong, because this time in the light everything is worse. Everything smells like rot, like death, like an empty house with only Richie to fill it and no matter how loud he talks there are always dark corners he can't reach and he's so fucking lonely he could scream, and he needs the Losers and he needs them now. He needs Stan's smart mouth and Bill's gentle wisdom and Beverly's sunshine laugh and Ben's pink cheeks and Mike's unending kindness and Richie scrambles to his feet with all of these things in the front of his mind, because he just needs to get out of here. He doesn't belong here.

A glint catches the corner of Richie's eye as he turns, just a few feet away from Patrick's outstretched hand. Richie kneels Shakily, brushes away the dirt with trembling fingers and unearths the pocket knife that was used to carve anguish into his shoulder just last night.

The handle is a little warm, a little wet from being nestled beneath wet, rotting leaves all night long and it feels weirdly delicate in Richie's hand, fragile like a bomb. The blade is crusted with a dry, brown layer of blood and Richie knows it's his own. There's something strange about that, about seeing something that used to be inside of him all dried out in his hands.

Richie drops it like it's on fire, letting it fall into a pile of leaves, and runs.

/  

He pukes a bellyful of milk and mostly-digested Froot Loops all over the old, ragged welcome mat on the front porch. He doesn't mean to. It's just — he thinks about himself facedown in the dirt with the maggots with a knife in his back, imagines that instead it's Patrick leaving his body there to rot overnight. The Losers would come looking, eventually, if not his parents. What would be left of him when they finally found him? Anything at all? What would his mother say to the funeral director this time? "*He looks like an angel.*" He imagines himself lying stiffly in a coffin in a church filled with people whose names he doesn't know, powder and wax keeping his face intact just long enough for everyone to get one last look at another troubled kid at the wrong place at the wrong time. Yes, troubled. That's what they'd call him in the papers. *Troubled. Unruly, but a good kid.* Even the teachers who hate him the most know better than to speak ill of the dead, Richie thinks.
He squats on the front steps for a long time, trying to wash away the images in his head, strings of bile dripping from his mouth, and kicks the vomit-stained mat out of the way as he heads back inside. He'll toss it in the trash later, once his head stops spinning; he doesn't even want to bother trying to salvage it.

Richie doesn't know what to do. Go to the police? Tell his parents? Tell his friends?

More than anything, he wants his mom, wants to crawl into bed next to her like he'd always try to do when he was small. She'd let him, sometimes, if his father wasn't around, and Richie would snuggle into her side and for a little while all would be right with the world, no bullies or monsters or mean teachers.

Seeking that feeling, desperate for it, craving affection and comfort, Richie totes off his shoes at the top of the stairs and approaches his mother's room, imagines he's that little boy again.

"Mom?" he murmurs, knocking on the door gently as he swings it open.

She groans quietly and shifts under the covers, the top of her head barely visible. There's a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a overflowing ashtray on the nightstand. Richie's nose wrinkles. He hadn't even realized she'd started smoking again.

"Ma?" he tries again, taking a few more steps into the room.

She lets out a long-suffering sigh and sits up in bed, clearly irritated, and Richie shrinks back instinctively, feeling all at once too much. He's too much, too loud, too abrasive, too excitable, too much too much too much —

"What is it, Rich?" she asks wearily, tearing her fingers through her hair.

Mom, I almost died last night. Mom, there's a dead guy in the woods. Mom, the kid who killed him slept in my bed last night, and he's not even really a kid. Mom, we don't have anything edible in this house and I haven't eaten an actual meal in two days. Mom, I'm going to need a new pair of glasses. Mom, I didn't go to school today, did you even notice?

What actually comes out of his mouth is, "I puked on the welcome mat."

For a moment, a look of genuine concern crosses her face and Richie wants a fucking picture of that look to keep close to his heart on the nights that she won't even look him in the eye. "Are you sick?"

Richie shrugs. "Just an upset stomach, I guess. It's fine."

His mother sighs again. She's always fucking sighing. "Your father won't be too happy about that." Then she adds, "About the mat, I mean." As if she needs to clarify. No one gives a shit if Poor Wittle Richie has an upset stomach.

"I know."

"Did you toss it?"

"No. I will, though."

"Okay. Good."

Richie shifts from foot to foot. Her patience is clearly running thin, but he still wants her to hug him. He still wants to be here with here, wants to snuggle up next to her and forget about the past twelve
hours entirely for a little while. He swallows thickly.

"Mom, I was...I was wondering if maybe I co-"

"I'm tired, Rich," she interrupts, wrapping her arms around her knees beneath the comforter. "Just go rest. If you need anything, let me know." Richie almost laughs at that. What is she gonna do? Buy him medicine? Take his temperature? Tuck him into bed and kiss his forehead and make him soup? Fat chance.

But the image sticks, the thought of his mother acting like an actual mom, and this time Richie does laugh, a harsh sound that thankfully is overriden by the sudden ringing of the phone downstairs. One ring, two.

"You gonna get that?" he asks to no one in particular. His mother makes a noise but makes no move to get up, and Richie sighs. "Didn't think so."

He catches the phone on its final ring.

"Hello?" he croaks.

"You didn't tell me you were playing hooky." Bev's voice comes through the line clear as day, and Richie can picture her so plainly, her brow creased in disappointment, blue eyes narrowed accusingly, and the tension in his stomach begins to unravel. He wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand and clears his throat.

"Sorry, toots. Last minute decision, you know how it is." And the words come out right and all fucking wrong at the same time, and Beverly notices, because of course she fucking does. She notices everything.

"You sound like shit. Everything alright, or do I need to take names?" Beverly asks. "I'm popping my knuckles now, by the way. It'd look cooler if we were talking in person."

No need, he thinks, and it's the worst feeling in the world. "No, I'm...I'm good." He reconsiders that. "Actually, no, I'm not good. You free this afternoon? I could really use some company."

"We were actually all planning on going down to the Barrens in a bit; s'why I called. You in?"

"I'll have to check my schedule." Richie pauses briefly, and bites the inside of his cheek when he hears Bev snort on the other end of the line. "You're in luck! I've got just enough space to squeeze you guys in."

"In between what? Sleeping and practicing Street Fighter? Or is there a new side project I don't know about?"

"Hey!" Richie shoots back, feeling better and better with each exchange. He needs this — interaction, someone to talk to, to banter back and forth with. "Street Fighter is serious business."

"Whatever you say, kid," Beverly laughs. "Come to the butcher's in like...half an hour. Mike's got a delivery to make, and then we'll all head down together."

"Sounds great, dollface." Richie makes an exaggerated kissy noise into the phone.

"See ya." There's a familiar coyness in her voice and then the line goes dead and Richie misses her already.
"No, really! Thanks so much for the directions, Stan the Man. I fucking love wandering around in the dark for hours," Richie says with feigned enthusiasm, then crosses his arms over his chest as he paces the sidewalk in front of the butcher's shop. "Some fuckin' shortcut, dude."

Stan gives him a look. It's one Richie knows well. "What are you even talking about?"

"I'm talking about your quote-unquote shortcut from the Aladdin that took me to the middle of bumfuck nowhere!"

Stan scrubs his hand over his face. He looks like an exhausted housewife and if Richie weren't still aching with fear, maybe he'd laugh. "You probably just went the wrong way."

"Did not!" Richie quips back defensively. "I went exactly the way you told me. Cut through the park on Pine and Birch, then make a left into the woods at the Kissing Bri-"

"Oh, my god. I said make a right at the Kissing Bridge! You know, right, also known as the general direction your house is in from there?"

"Okay, hold the fuck up!" Richie throws his hands up, and normally he'd just be embarrassed and try to play it off but he can't, not after the night he had, not after this morning. "You definitely did not fucking say to make a ri-"

"I definitely did, Rich-"

"Well then maybe you should talk slower when you're giving people directions!"

"Maybe you should pay more attention when someone is trying to give you directions!"

"Will you two just f-f-fucking quit it!?" Bill is typically so patient, so soft-spoken, that the raised volume of his voice has them both stepping backwards, startled and silent. "Does it actually even matter anym-m-more? What's done is done." Bill's tone is returning to something that resembles normalcy now, the kind he adopts when he's about to take on the role of peacemaker, as he turns to face Richie head-on. "Richie. Are y-you okay?"

Over Bill's shoulder, he can see Stan glaring and fights the urge to flip him off. "Just fuckin' peachy, Big Bill."

Bill doesn't seem convinced, but the answer at least seems to satisfy him.

"G-good," he says finally. "Then l-let it go."

"Finally," Beverly murmurs, pushing a few strands of curls out of her face. "Maybe we can actually try being productive now."

"Productive?" A new voice comes out of nowhere, warm and honeyed. "Have you met these guys?" Mike steps out of the alley, propping his bike up against the bricked side of the shop and then it's all six of them, complete at last, and Richie is so relieved he could cry. He doesn't know when he got so fucking needy, only that right now he wants to smush himself like a sardine in the middle of them all,
even Stan, and never leave.

The rest of the walk to the Barrens is awkward, but not unpleasant. Richie is grateful for the routine of it all. Bill leads and the rest of them follow; Stan is directly behind him wearing a poorly-masked look of longing with Richie hot on his heels just to annoy him. Ben and Bev are next, walking side-by-side. Sometimes their arms will brush and Ben will turn bright pink and Bev will laugh. Mike stays on the outskirts at the tail end of the pack, rounding them out, making them whole. It feels good, being surrounded by his friends. Richie feels safer this way, and for a little while the memory of Patrick's body in the woods dims.

The afternoon passes in a haze of laughter and several games of War, courtesy of the deck of cards Mike had brought with him. The clouds finally break, and the sun hits its peak in the sky just as Richie wins his third game in a row, and the rest of them decide they don't want to play anymore.

Evening inches closer. Mike is trying to teach Ben to skip rocks while Bev and Richie are parked under a nearby tree, exhaling puffs of grey smoke like twin dragons.

"Look at them down there," Richie says, nodding down the hill where Bill and Stan are sitting in the grass, gazes tipped towards the sky, so close their shoulders are nearly brushing. Every so often Stan will point towards something in the trees or flying overhead, voice animated even in its softness, and Bill will nod as if Stan has just divulged to him the most interesting thing in the world. "I don't even think Bill likes birds." He rolls his eyes.

"I think it's sweet," Beverly says softly, her own gaze also trained on them.

Richie gags, and she smacks his arm lightly.

"It's getting late," Beverly says matter-of-factly, eyes trained on the fading light that falls between the trees. "We need to get going soon." Her head is tipped back, body bathed in dying sunlight. She's beautiful. Richie understands completely why Ben and Bill are so smitten with her.

"I hate going home," he mumbles, picking up a rock from the ground and wiping the dirt off with the hem of his shirt. It's kind of orange, kind of cool-looking. Richie sticks it in his pocket.

"Me too." Beverly offers him a wan smile, and Richie finds himself wondering — not for the first time — what kind of horrors live beyond her front door. He wants to ask, doesn't. After all, Beverly doesn't ask him why he flinches away from open palms and slamming doors. They're the same, the two of them, fifteen and angry and banging around in the dark for the exit. "Let's just...not, one day, yeah? We'll just grab our shit and get on a bus and go."

Richie loves that idea, and he loves her so insanely that for a moment it's hard to breathe. "Go where?"

Beverly just shrugs. "Anywhere."

Richie knows — and he suspects Bev does, too — that it isn't that simple, but maybe it could be. After all, anywhere is better than here. "Anywhere," he echoes. "Yeah. That sounds good."

"Good," Beverly says.

"One more stoke?"

Beverly laughs, rolls her eyes, fishing around in the large, crudely sewn-on pocket of her dress for the weathered carton of Camels. "Fine. One more." She taps the edge of the carton and the last two cigarettes slide out; she takes one for herself between her teeth and hands the other to Richie. "You're
lucky I like you so much."

They sit in companionable silence as the world darkens around the edges and their cigarettes burn down to blackened stubs, and Richie considers asking for another until he remembers she’s out. He doesn’t want to go home; he wants to stay here, shielded by the presence of his friends, safe from loneliness for just a little while longer.

"I really gotta go," Beverly says, pushing herself up from the ground just as Stan and Bill come clomping up the hill and Richie knows he’s run out of time.

She squeezes his fingers once and then she’s gone into the night, quick like a fox, off to take a bath or go to sleep or fight a war at home.

He grits his teeth the entire walk home and keeps an eye out for two things — evil boys come back to life and the soft glint of sharp teeth.

It's only as Richie is sitting on cement steps in the back with a new box of Froot Loops in hand, praying that Spielberg knew what he was talking about when he made E.T., that he remembers he was supposed to make an excuse to have dinner at Bill's tonight.

No matter, though. He has cereal now, at least, that he paid for at the counter with an obnoxious pocketful of change.

Cereal, and a plan.

"Hello," he whispers into the night. It feels a little stupid, talking to nothing. But with any luck, nothing might turn to something soon. Someone. In the grass is a neat line of Froot Loops that Richie arranged neatly from the treeline all the way to where he's crouched on the steps, because it fucking worked for the kid in E.T., damn it.

He wonders then if it's a little inhumane to be dumping the cereal on the ground for Eddie. Aside from the fact that he literally feasted on Patrick Hockstetter's corpse and clearly doesn't have any standards for where his food comes from, Richie still thinks he deserves a little bit of dignity.

"I'll be back," he tells the emptiness, and slips back inside. When he returns with a bowl in hand — because yeah, Eddie might not have standards, but that doesn't mean a bowl to eat out of isn't preferable — he is not alone.

"Hi," Eddie says, and Richie feels his face split into a smile so wide it hurts.

"Hi," he says. "I got more cereal, see? And I have clothes you can borrow, if you, uh. If you need to stay the night."

"With y-"

Richie doesn't hesitate this time. "Yes," he answers, firmly. A little desperate. He hopes Eddie doesn't mind. "With me."
Eddie devours half the box of Froot Loops and then asks to take another shower, which is good, Richie thinks, because even though it's only been a day he looks completely worn out, face smudged with dirt. He's still in the same clothes he was wearing when he snuck in last night and there's more blood on his cheek now, too, blood that was definitely not there after he showered last night. Richie hopes it was only a rabbit this time. Or Henry Bowers, maybe. Richie thinks maybe that would be okay, too, but then he imagines Henry lying on the ground next to Patrick, neck twisted at a horrible angle, and thinks better of it.

Richie sits in the hall and waits for Eddie while he showers and steam creeps under the crack in the door, feeling safer and oddly at peace. He's even starting to doze a bit when Eddie finishes up.

Thin, crackling light from the bathroom slips through the gap in the door left ajar, leaving Eddie caught in a sort of sad-looking halo. Richie lets out a breath and for a moment forgets how to inhale, lungs squeezed empty like vacuum-sealed bags. Eddie looks — ridiculous. He's rolled Richie's pants, far too long for his own legs, up so they bunch around his calves. The shirt fits okay; it's something older of Richie's, something from childhood, but it's still strange to see it fitted on someone other than him. Ridiculous, yes. But Richie has never seen anything less dangerous. The dead deer and Patrick Hockstetter writhe and moan their plight in the back of his head, but it's impossible to connect that violence with the boy standing before him now, all tousled wet hair and Richie's faded blue Freese's shirt.

"You look like an extra from *Newsies,*" Richie laughs.

"*Newsies*?"

"It's a movie. Don't worry, it looks good on you."

Eddie's mouth sort of twitches, then, just around the corners as he fights a smile and Richie feels all lit up inside like a Christmas tree.

"So tell me again why you're running away?"

They're back where they were last night, bathed in faint yellow lamplight — Eddie curled up in Richie's bed, hugging a pillow to his chest while Richie camps out on the floor, though this time he had the good sense to bring a pillow down with him.

"To find my dad." Eddie pinches the fabric of Richie's sheets and rolls it between his thumb and forefinger.

"And how's that going so far?"

Frustration creases Eddie's forehead. He's a cute pouter, even when one of his pointed teeth catches sharply on the plush of his lip. "Not good."

*If you're looking for a dad, I've got one up for grabs if you want him. He's a piece of shit, but he...*
definitely...exists. Can't say the same about yours, Richie almost says, but Eddie sounds sweet and determined and Richie really doesn't want to step on any toes or crush any dreams here, especially not when he's still this hopelessly confused about where Eddie even fucking came from.

"Your mom doesn't know where he is?"

"She says he's dead," Eddie says, and he says it so plainly that Richie is a bit taken aback. "But I don't think that's true."

Richie frowns. "Why would she lie?"

"To protect me," Eddie says. Richie shakes his head. He's heard that a few times from a few different people, and he's never understood it. When has lying ever protected someone? Then again, his parents always speak their mind, and that hasn't done a whole lot of good either.

Maybe everyone is just fucked.

"To protect you," Richie repeats. "From what?"

"Everything." Eddie hugs the pillow tighter to his chest, tucking it under his chin. "She said they'd hurt me if they knew...what I was."

"And what are you?" Richie needs to hear him say it. He needs to know he's not crazy.

Eddie's eyes get sort of big, sort of lost. "I don't know."

"Okay, well. I'm gonna ask you a couple questions, okay? And you can just nod yes or no. Make sense?"

Eddie nods, though one of his brows vaults in suspicion.

Richie breathes in deep. "So you...you drink blood, right?"

Eddie nods without hesitating, and Richie already mostly knew that, of course, but having it spelled out plainly in front of him like this from the boy in his bed makes his stomach twist, a thrill of fear that makes him shiver a little even in his sweatshirt.

"And if you don't drink it you'll die. Is that...is that right?"

Another nod.

"So you're a vampire. Right? I sound fucking crazy saying that, Jesus Christ. Fuck."

Eddie tilts his head.

"You've never heard that before?"

Eddie shakes his head vigorously.

"Really?" Richie asks, raising his eyebrows. "How have you never heard it? There's, like...a million horror movies about you guys."

"Vampire," Eddie repeats carefully, testing the word on his tongue. He says it sweetly, like a child. Richie's heart seizes.

"So your mom just never told you what you were?"
Eddie shrugs, lowering his gaze, suddenly antsy. "She — I don't...she never said. Just that I wasn't normal. That my dad was bad, like me. That's why he left."

"I don't think you're bad," Richie offers. Now probably isn't a great time to bring up the fact that the kid whose throat he tore out last night is still lying dead somewhere, body being picked apart by vermin.

"I don't think so, either."

"Oh. That's good."

Eddie chews his lip, and it doesn't seem to take much pressure before it bleeds, a tiny spot of black blood that he quickly swipes away with his tongue. "Vampire," he says again, nose scrunching with aversion at the word this time.

"What, you don't like it?" Richie chuckles a little.

"Sounds weird. I'm just Eddie."

"Okay, Just Eddie. Whatever you say." That makes Eddie laugh, and Richie beams with pride for a moment before nudging the conversation forward again, curiosity getting the best of him. "So your mom sounds like a real charmer."

"She's a nurse," Eddie says, as if that has any bearing on Richie's comment. Still, it catches him off guard.

"Here? In Derry?"

Eddie shrugs, and Richie immediately tries to recall the whole two times he's actually been to the hospital, aside from being born — once when he was six and choked on a snail for a dare and once when he was twelve and snapped his wrist after cartwheeling off Bill's trampoline. Mr. Denbrough had taken him that second time, even though Richie had insisted through gritted teeth that his swollen purple wrist was completely fine. No face stands out in his mind as particularly resembling Eddie, and Richie has no last name to go by, so his inner detective skids to a halt and gives the fuck up.

A horrible, awful thought occurs to him then, a slowly settling thing that makes his nerves tingle with unease, and he doesn't even want to ask because he's terrified of there being even a half-percent chance that he's right.

"That's where, um," he starts, bile thick at the back of his throat. "That's where she gets the blood, isn't it? For — for you."

Eddie nods. "Blood bags."

Richie is going to faint. He's really and truly going to pass the fuck out. He just gave blood last year, didn't he? Yeah, he had, because he remembers they'd been offering lemonade and cookies to whoever donated and Richie figured that was worth a few minutes of being poked at with a needle by nursing students with unsteady hands. What if Eddie has already tasted his blood and doesn't even know it?

That means Eddie already has a taste for him, and Richie wonders if vampires are like dogs — once they get a taste of your blood it's game over.

Instead of voicing any of this, though, he just croaks out, "That's kinda fucked up."
Eddie cocks his head.

"I mean, like...it's supposed to go to people, right?"

"I'm people." Eddie says it like it's simple. It's not, of course, but his expression is so far removed from any sort of ill intent that Richie's stomach twists anyway.

"I meant sick people. People who need it," Richie clarifies.

"I need it," Eddie protests, but he isn't angry. His dark eyes are big and almost sad, and Richie immediately wants to take back everything he's said but he doesn't know how.

"Yeah, yeah," he says quickly. "I guess you're right."

Eddie yawns, eyes fluttering. He's got long eyelashes, Richie notices, then wonders if that's a strange thing to notice. He doesn't think it is. It's kind of like how he notices Bill's eyes are the same color as the clear blue water in the quarry, or how Stan's nose crinkles when he laughs, or how Ben has a cute dimple in his cheek that pops out when he smiles really big, or how Mike is stronger-looking than the rest of them, broad-shouldered and sturdy.

"Tired?" Richie asks. He almost wants Eddie to say no. He doesn't want him to go to sleep yet.

"Tired," Eddie agrees, rubbing at his eyes and yawning again. This time, Richie yawns too, and they both laugh.

Eddie falls asleep first. Richie thinks at first he's faking it, because vampires aren't supposed to sleep, are they? Or they're supposed to be sleeping in coffins. He can't really remember, but thinks it over as he watches Eddie, unable to succumb to sleep himself, nerves still all lit up with disbelief.

Eddie is making these quiet purring noises, almost like a cat, curled up feline and protective on Richie's bed, and Richie shouldn't feel comforted by that but he does, he does, he does.

"Thank you," Richie whispers across the room, and this is it, he realizes, this is the feeling he craved earlier in the day, the one he's been trying to recapture for years and years of being starved of touch and affection from the people who are supposed to love him, supposed to protect him — the same feeling he felt when he was little and curled up with his mother in her bed. No dead deer or dead boys or cold shoulders or broken glasses here, no, and maybe his mother might not know or care that he almost wound up dead last night but someone did. Eddie did.

Safe, he thinks. Richie feels — safe.

Chapter End Notes

gonna b dramatic for a sec and say that i honestly love this fic so much and i love all of u and i love writing it so much and all yr comments have given me the warmest of warm fuzzies so THANK U! also, assuming this fic is set in '91 that means that newsies actually hadn't come out yet but it doesn't matter because richie is a newsies stan and it's canon bc i said so
Richie was nine when his mama was pregnant with her second baby. "A girl," she announced to Richie on the couch one evening, hand gliding idly over her flat stomach. Her eyes had sparkled, the word finally never leaving her lips but there all the same. "A baby girl. You're going to have a little sister, Rich."

Richie had contemplated that, short legs dangling off the edge of the couch. "Okay," he'd said, shrugging. "Cool."

Imagining his mother as a giggly, glowing pregnant woman was hard, and not just because Richie had never seen her as one; he was well aware that her pregnancy with him hadn't been an easy one. He was a big baby, she'd always told him. "Such a burden to carry," she'd laugh, and Richie had tried not to shrink under the double meaning and bit his tongue when it threatened to let out the words: Was it worth it, though? Was I worth it?

Richie's lack of enthusiasm was more than made up for by his mother's, whose every move seemed to be a dance even as her stomach grew; she flitted from room to room light as a fairy, lighter than Richie had ever seen her. The nursery was painted and repainted in anticipation, his parents comparing paint swatches side-by-side on the floor. (What's it matter? Richie had muttered from the doorway. Pink is pink.) There had been a beautiful porcelain doll pulled from the top shelf in his mother's closet — it had belonged to her mother's mother at one point, passed down from daughter to daughter, its satiny white dress and painted pink cheeks kept in pristine condition by their careful hands.

And eventually Richie began to, despite himself, like the idea of having a sibling. Even if it was a sister. Even if it meant his presence in the house would shrink. Even if it meant his mother's attempts to connect with him would dwindle into nothingness because she was finally getting what she always wanted. He liked the idea of having another kid in the house and was excited by the thought of having someone look up to him. He dreamt of a little baby girl with dark curls like his mother's, pink-cheeked and gurgling, and smiled. How much longer? he'd ask his mother impatiently at least once a day, tugging at her shirtsleeve, and she would smile and shush him, brushing a hand through his hair. Soon, Rich. And Richie had pouted, lower lip jutting out, and whispered hurry up in there, I want to meet you to his mother's belly.

But soon came sooner than expected — Maggie Tozier went into labor three weeks too early, and
Richie had sat in the waiting room with his cheek pressed against his grandma's arm, breathing in the strange perfume she always wore, a scent that wasn't unpleasant but not really pleasant, either, especially when it mixed with the intensely sterile smell of hospital chemicals. By the time father had come out of the delivery room hours later, pale-faced with red rings around his eyes, Richie was dozing.

He doesn't remember much, but he thinks maybe his father had been crying. Vaguely he can recall his grandmother weeping loudly, falling into his arms, and Richie had been left in his chair, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "What happened?" he'd asked, voice too loud in the excruciating quiet. "Where's the baby?" But his father never answered and his grandma had only wept harder, and then Richie was left confused and alone in the waiting room while the doctor pulled them aside.

Eventually the nurse from the delivery room had come and sat down next to Richie and explained, as gently as she could manage, that there would be no baby. Not anymore. Richie had been too young to fully understand it then, but the words still hit him like a kick in the chest. No more baby. No little sister. No tiny, shrieking life to fill up the nursery his mother had spent months tinkering with, arranging and rearranging.

"Can I see my mom?" Richie had asked shakily, wrapping his skinny arms around his knees. His glasses had gotten a little foggy from unshed tears, and that surprised him. He hadn't realized how invested he'd been in the idea of having a sibling until it had been torn away, and all he wanted then was his mama. He needed to make sure she was okay, needed to make sure she knew that she had lost one baby but she still had him. So the nurse had led him into the room, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder.

"Margaret," she'd said gently, urging Richie into the room because fear had suddenly planted his feet in the doorway and wouldn't let him move. "You have a visitor."

His mother had peered up from where her face was buried in the sheets, and she looked so empty, so sad, cheeks pale and sunken, that then Richie really did start to cry. It was as if all the life and laughter she'd gained from being pregnant had died with the baby, and so Richie went to her on shaking legs.

"Mama," Richie murmured, had reached up to touch her face. Her own tears had long since dried and left streams of salt lingering on her cheeks. "Don't be sad, I love you."

She had looked back at him, and Richie can still recall with clarity sharp as a knifepoint how cold his blood had run at that look, the kind that went right through him as if he weren't in the room at all. She'd never looked at him like that before. It was as if the weight of the disappointment his existence created all came crashing down at once — a tidal wave, a thunderstorm, a collapsing building, and Richie had trembled beneath it. His small shoulders were not meant to bear such a burden, and he wondered then as he wonders now if that's a sign he was never meant to exist at all. It seems like a fundamental flaw that he's always been on the verge of caving in on himself.

He'd fled the room, stricken with the force of rejection and shaking all over, but he never forgot that look. How could he? It's one he knows well now, recognizes like an old friend, a look he thinks maybe he'd be lost without, fearing he'd fallen into another dimension where his mother actually acts like one.

His mother came home from the hospital two days later, but she might as well not have, Richie thinks. She was never quite the same after that.

The woman who came home in his mother's place was a shell, a flickering mirage who drowned her days in bottles of liquor. She never let Richie sleep in the bed with her anymore, not even when his
father wasn't around, but she always fell asleep clutching that stupid porcelain doll, the one given to
her by her mother, the one that she was supposed to give to her daughter. A family tradition cut
short, an heirloom with no place left to go. "You like that doll more than me," Richie had muttered
one night as he stalked out of the bedroom after being turned away for the millionth time, and his
father had caught him in the hall and left a burning red mark on his cheek, eyes wild and dangerous.
"She's grieving, Richie. Don't be so selfish," he'd said, and so Richie had shuffled back to his room
clutching his cheek, bewildered and afraid and ashamed. His father had never hit him before.

Don't be so selfish, his father had said, and Richie is as confused about it now as he was then,
because he asks for nothing; even then he'd been content to endure the harshest criticisms for one
glittering second of praise, just a single moment in the warmth of someone else's attention.

Don't be selfish. But that's what he is, isn't he? Just a selfish boy, too loud and too brash and too loud
and too much, waving his arms and screaming LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME,
pathetic and harboring a child's desire to be noticed for anything, good or bad, and even more
desperate to just be held. How fucking pitiful, Richie thinks — a fifteen year-old who still wants to
sleep in bed with mommy.

Selfish. The word sits on his tongue like acid and for years it burns.

This time when Richie wakes with a start, Eddie is above him, staring him down like an intensely
curious house cat, and Richie's first thought is: I'm fucking dead. I'm going to move half an inch and
he's going to tear my throat out.

"Richie," Eddie says, and Richie is briefly paralyzed by the realization that it's the first time he's
heard Eddie say his name. It comes unpracticed off his tongue and Richie wants nothing more than
for him to say it again, and if he's going to die he's at least glad he got to hear it once because it's the
most strangely thrilling thing he thinks he's ever experienced.

"Hi," Richie croaks, voice still thick with sleep. "What's up?"

"You were having a nightmare."

Richie blinks, trying to recall what he just woke up from — something about bloody pocket knives
and his mother's pregnant belly, a room with no windows and a shattered china doll. Frowning,
Richie flexes his hand and when he peers down at it there's no pocket knife there, no blood staining
the webbing between his fingers.

"Yeah," he mutters weakly, head thunking back against the carpet, still unsure what the nightmare
has to do with the fact that Eddie is halfway on top of him. "I guess so."

"Are you okay?" Eddie tilts his head curiously, eyes still wide with concern. His irises are less dark
now, Richie notices, and he's not sure if it's a product of the light or something else but they're
definitely more convincingly human like this, deep brown instead of black.

Instead of answering the question (because what the fuck is he even supposed to say? No, I'm
actually not okay at all?), Richie asks, "What's it mean when your eyes are lighter?"

Eddie blinks a few times, as if maybe he hadn't even noticed it himself. "Not thirsty."
Richie swallows thickly. "So when they're darker it means you...are?" Eddie nods. "You coulda just asked for some water, you know. It's free." Eddie scowls and Richie snickers at his own joke, sticking his tongue out playfully as he forces himself to sit up. His alarm clock reads 9:36. "You keep making me miss school," he accuses, as if up until now his attendance record has been anything other than patchy at best.

"School?" Eddie repeats, then frowns. "Oh. You go to school." He says it slowly, like he's working through it in real time.

"Uh...yeah." Richie isn't sure if being called down to the principal's office multiple times a semester to discuss his excessive absences really counts as going to school, at least not in the consistent way that Stan or Ben do — Stan in particular, who could lose a limb on the walk to school and would drag himself the rest of the way with minutes to spare. "You know, you keep saying you're from here, yeah?" Eddie nods again. "But I've never seen you around, and I think I'd remember a face as cute as yours."

Richie isn't sure if vampires are supposed to be able to blush, but it sure looks like it, the way Eddie ducks his head suddenly and emits a tiny squeak that sounds more like a mouse than the terrifying snarl that ripped through the woods two nights ago. "Don't say that," Eddie mumbles with his face buried in the carpet, hands over his head like he's in a Duck and Cover video.

Richie laughs. "Don't say what? That you're cute?"

Eddie turns his head slightly so that he can look at Richie with one eye. "Yes," he answers, short and clipped, voice muffled by the rug.

"Fine, I won't say it. Won't make it less true, though," Richie points out, and Eddie hides his face again. "C'mon," Richie urges, reaching out with great hesitation to gently tug Eddie's hand away from his face. "So if you're from here why haven't I seen you?"

Eddie rests his hand flat against the floor and pointedly avoids Richie's curious gaze. "Long story."

"I've got all day."

Eddie seems taken aback by that answer, like he wasn't expecting to actually have to explain. But Richie's not letting him off that easily. He's slept on the floor two nights in a row and has been living off dry Froot Loops and nothing else for the past few days — a small price in exchange for saving his life, sure, but still. Richie's curiosity has always gone beyond the realm of simple interest; basic answers are never satisfying enough. *It's called being nosy*, Stan had said once.

"Alright, fine," Richie relents with a sigh after his stomach lets out a particularly pathetic-sounding gurgle. "You don't have to tell me now, but later you've gotta let me know what's up, okay? Otherwise I can't help you. And I wanna." Eddie doesn't nod this time, but he seems to consider the validity of that. "Now let's go eat. I'm fucking starving."

"Froot Loops?" Eddie asks hopefully.

"Oh, boy. You're in luck, because they're the only thing on the menu." Someone in this house really needs to go grocery shopping soon. Dry Froot Loops are great and all, but he could do with some variety. His mouth waters when he thinks about Mrs. Denbrough's homecooked meals, sauteed potatoes and rosemary asparagus and the most incredible roast beef Richie has ever tasted.

Ten minutes later they're downstairs on the couch in the living room, matching bowls of sugar cereal in their laps and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on the television, a show that Eddie is immediately
both confused and fascinated by.

"They live in the sewer," Richie explains through a mouthful of dusty cereal. "Some idiot kid dropped them in there and they got fucked with some radioactive slime and started talking. His loss, I guess, 'cause now they know karate."

"Oh," Eddie says as though that makes perfect sense, mouth set in a straight line that eventually wavers and breaks into a small, toothy grin. "Cool."

"Right?" Richie laughs.

They watch cartoons for a while, wrapped in silence that feels far too comfortable to be shared with someone Richie only met two days ago. Every so often Eddie will laugh or gasp or tap Richie on the shoulder to ask, 'Who's that?' and Richie has never felt better knowing everyone else is slaving away at school while he's watching cartoons in his living room. With a vampire. A cute one, who apparently doesn't particularly like being called cute. That just makes it cuter.

"So," Richie says as it cuts to commercial and the clock on the wall inches closer to noon. "Do you actually need to eat human food or are you just eating me out of house and home for shits and giggles?"

"Don't need to," Eddie says, even as he takes another Froot Loop between his teeth. Ah. Just as Richie had suspected. "Like to."

"In that case," Richie says, reaching out and plucking a piece of cereal from the bowl in Eddie's lap, tossing it into the air and barely managing to catch it in his mouth.

Eddie stares at him for a moment, expression unreadable, and he could kiss him or kill him right now and Richie wouldn't know for certain until it happened, but then he simply dips his fingers lightly into Richie's own bowl and steals a Froot Loop from him, popping it in his mouth.

"You know," Richie points out, "for someone who technically doesn't need actual human food, you sure do eat a lot of it."

Eddie sticks out his tongue at him and somehow it's not what Richie expected from him, but it makes him laugh anyway.

They go back upstairs and Richie makes Eddie listen to The Clash and Billy Squier, and it's hard to read the look on Eddie's face but Richie thinks he likes it, especially when London Calling fades to a close and from his spot at the edge of the bed Eddie says, "Again."

"It's good, right?" And Eddie simply hums in what Richie has to assume is agreement, as though he doesn't want to give Richie the satisfaction of knowing he's actually enjoying himself. There's something remarkably charming about that in a way Richie doesn't want to think about, so he hits the rewind button on the stereo and sinks his teeth down into his lip.

"It's best during the summer," Richie says once the song finishes again, just to fill the silence. "I bring this bad boy..." He raps his fist lightly against the top of the stereo, "down to the quarry and we spend all day down there. Good music makes for good times, y'know." He can already feel the
phantom ache in his arms from lugging it around on his back in the blistering heat, but it's worth it because it means he gets to play the music he wants. *House rules, or whatever,* he'd explained with a dismissive wave of his hand when Stan had tried to protest.

Eddie's nose wrinkles up in confusion and it's the sweetest thing Richie has ever seen. "Quarry?"

"Yeah, it's like a lake. We go swimming there a lot." Richie chews his lip. "I'll take you sometime, if you want."

The suggestion is met with an enthusiastic nod from Eddie, and Richie barely has time to blink before Eddie is across the room and halfway out the window.

"Woah!" Richie shoots up from his chair, alarmed. "Where're you going?"

Eddie blinks at him. "Quarry."

"Oh!" Richie laughs, startled and a little relieved. "I didn't mean — I mean, I guess we could go now. It's just...getting kind of late and some of the older kids hang out there at night and I'm not really sure if." He cuts himself short as Eddie's face falls. "I swear I'll take you soon, okay? We'll go swimming and I'll even introduce you to the rest of the Losers, yeah? When you're ready." More like once I figure out how to explain your existence without sounding like I've lost my fucking mind.

Eddie narrows his eyes. "Losers?"

It's easy to forget, that the name still holds a negative connotation when the six of them have worn it proudly for so many years. A smile tugs at one corner of Richie's mouth. "Just — my friends."

Richie feels strange, sometimes, calling them friends. They *are* friends, and it shouldn't be weird and he knows this, but sometimes he feels like he's more of a hanger-on than a friend to them. Some irritating noise in the background that they're always trying to drown out, and he knows that's not true but part of him doesn't, not really, and he's always so terrified that one day they're going to shove him away for good and close the circle tight and Richie will really be alone then. He's terrified of being forgotten and he's terrified of being alone and the only way he seems to know how to make himself known is by being as obnoxious as possible which in turn just pisses them off more, and one of these days Richie knows they're going to be sick of him for good. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy; nobody ever taught him how to be important, how to be special, how to be someone worth loving. He had to learn all on his own, and he's pretty sure he never got it quite right.

"Friends," Eddie repeats, staring down at his hands in his lap, twisting and turning. He looks back up at Richie with an expression that's far more vulnerable than Richie was prepared for. "Are we friends? Am I your friend too?"

And Richie doesn't know why but the question makes his heart fucking *hurt* in the most incredible way, and he's struck with the intense urge to throw his arms around Eddie's tiny frame and squeeze him tight because for half a second there he actually felt needed, like for once he wasn't the only one who's achingly lonely.

The urge almost gets the best of him, so Richie sits on his hands and rocks back and forth and tries not to smile big and stupid. "Do you want us to be? Friends, I mean."

"Yes," Eddie answers quickly. He sounds as desperate for it as Richie feels. "I mean, I don't — I've never really had one. A friend. Not for real, anyway."

Richie is caught between wanting to ask what Eddie means by that and running as far away from the question as possible because his brain is churning with horrible, ugly theories and he's not entirely
sure he wants to know. Not yet, anyway.

"Well," Richie says, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically shy, as though maybe Eddie's just stringing him along to turn him down. "Now you do."

"Friends," Eddie says, the word delicate as it leaves his tongue.

He smiles, and it burns so bright, so real, that Richie has to look away.

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Richie goes back to school the next day; it's a decision he makes all on his own, which he thinks is very mature and responsible of him. Eddie nearly tears his alarm clock in two in a panic when it goes off, but Richie assures him it's fine and also begs him to please not destroy anything while he's gone, because they're already down a welcome mat.

"I'll be back soon," Richie swears, hoping that maybe by using the word soon he'll be able to mentally block out the next eight hours.

"Can I come?"

And Richie wants to say, *Fuck yeah, crawl in my backpack and come everywhere with me for the rest of forever,* but that'd be stupid and since when was he so fucking needy, anyway? "Trust me, you don't want to," he says instead, heaving a sigh, the kind of long-suffering ones his mother lets out all the time in his presence. He doesn't like the idea that maybe she feels the same way about him as he does about school — a useless and often painful obligation. "Just...stay here, okay? My mom probably won't even get out of bed but if she does she won't come in here, so just...stay. In here." He considers the state of Eddie's eyes, far darker than they were yesterday morning, the way they occasionally flicker to the world outside the bedroom window as if he's looking for signs of life. "If you need to...um. You know. If you need to go...drink, you can, uh. Go through the window, I guess. Just try to be quiet."

Eddie chews his fingernail and nods, curling up into a loose ball atop Richie's covers and facing away from him. "'Kay."

"Are you *pouting?*" Richie asks, incredulous.

Eddie doesn't even look at him, just pulls the covers over his head. "No."

Richie chokes out a laugh. *Unbelievable. Look, Eds, I'd much rather stay here and continue introducing you to my great taste in music and other worldly pleasure, but I've *realllllly* gotta go.*

Eddie pokes his head out so just his narrowed eyes and nose are visible. "Don't call me Eds," he says, voice muffled in the sheets.

"Ah," Richie says. "Whatever you say, Eds." And then he's out the door, tripping down the stairs with laughter caught in his throat when he hears Eddie groan in frustration from behind the closed bedroom door.

Richie misses him already.
He very quickly comes to the conclusion that coming to school was a mistake. Usually the halls are swarming with kids talking all kinds of shit, the sort of gossip that's so boring Richie can't help but tune it all out. He really doesn't need to know how Mr. Labonsky is probably getting a hair transplant because his wife left him, or that Greta Keene got to second base with Edward Corcoran over the weekend — would've been third, apparently, if Mr. Keene hadn't walked in on them. (Which is, Richie admits to himself, actually pretty fucking funny.)

It's different today, though.

"...in the woods, you know, by the Kissing Bridge..."

"...like he'd been there for days..."

"...a mountain lion, but I don't believe it..."

Part of Richie knows he should just keep walking, wading through the throng of students as if he has no idea what they're talking about, but a larger and louder part of him wants to go running for the hills, out the double doors at the front of the school and down the steps and into the trees until he can't go any further, and the worst part is that he doesn't know who he's more afraid for — himself or Eddie. Like, yeah, sure, he might go to juvie or something for not reporting the fact that Patrick Hockstetter was killed three nights ago, but Eddie...

What would they do to Eddie, if they knew?

Panic squeezes his heart all through Geometry, even as Ben keeps sending him worried glances from the front row (Richie had been banished to the back corner in the first week for being "too disruptive" and hasn't managed to redeem himself since.) They can't find out about Eddie. They can't. And Richie is very well aware that Eddie can take care of himself, but that's not the point.

From what Richie can gather from the incessant whispers, it was Betty Ripsom who found Hockstetter's body. She and Jason Burner — the latest in a long line of Betty's romantic conquests — had been "on a walk" together late Tuesday evening, which everyone knows is just code for fucking, when they stumbled upon the bloodied body in the woods and gone running straight for the police. They were going to fuck in the woods, and Richie wonders why they even bothered trying to convince anyone otherwise.

There's a sharp knock on the classroom door, and Richie is forced to look up from where he's buried his head in his crossed arms on the desk, trying to ward off the sudden, awful memory of the way death had smelled when it looked him in the eye, unblinking. The principal walks in first, which isn't worrisome on its own, but the person hot on her heels makes Richie's stomach crash through the floor.

"Mr. Tozier," Principal Meyers says, her face deathly pale, and for once Richie is pretty sure it has nothing to do with the terrible, off-shade drugstore powder that's always caked over her nose and forehead. "Sheriff Bowers would like to speak with you."

The man in the doorway wouldn't be terrifying if Richie didn't know who he was. If Richie were to see him randomly on the street, he probably wouldn't even notice him. He's of average height, with a face that's pretty unremarkable, but Sheriff Bowers has a reputation that precedes him. ("Everyone knows Henry Bowers' daddy beats him," Beverly had said very casually to him at the lunch table one day through a mouthful of her peanut butter and banana sandwich. "Probably why he's so fucked up. Not like that's any excuse.") The badge pinned to the front of his uniform shines dully in the fluorescent classroom lights.
Twenty-three pairs of eyes land squarely on his face, and for the first time in his life Richie wishes the attention were on anyone else but him.

"Can I take a message?" Richie chuckles nervously before he even realizes what he's saying. A few groans rise up around him, maybe a snicker or two. Across the room, Ben is shaking his head quickly.

"Mr. Tozier," the principal repeats, crooking her finger at him. "Now."

Richie heaves a sigh, one that he hopes masks the way that his entire body is shaking so badly it feels like he might fall apart. This is it. Fucking shit, Rich, you've really gone and done it now. Whispers flutter up around him, the name Hockstetter catching in the shell of his ear, and Richie wants to scream but he feels like his best bet at this point is to pretend he has no idea what the fuck is going on, so he follows Mrs. Meyers and Sheriff Bower down the hall, sandwiched between the two of them, completely trapped. There's nowhere to run here, nowhere left to hide, no amount of jokes or smart remarks to get him out of this.

He should have never come to school today. His sense of self-preservation is, contrary to popular belief, sometimes present.

"Sit," the principal instructs him when they reach her office, a room Richie is exceedingly familiar with, from the water stain on the ceiling to the long, jagged scratch on the side of her desk. Richie sits. Sheriff Bowers sits across from him, feigning nonchalance with one ankle crossed over his knee as the door clicks shut and then they're alone, just the two of them, though Richie can feel Mrs. Meyers' intrusive presence through the door. He doesn't blame her for being nosy, not really. Unease prickles the hair at the back of his neck, and Richie isn't entirely convinced that the school system wouldn't look the other way if he were to mysteriously disappear after this conversation.

"So I'm sure you've heard the news by now," the sheriff says.

Richie clears his throat, puts on his best mask of ignorance. "'Fraid not. Mind getting me up to speed?"

Sheriff Bowers doesn't beat around the bush. "Patrick Hockstetter was found dead last night in the woods off Maple. His throat was slashed to ribbons. Any of that ringing a bell yet?"

Richie's throat bobs, and the weight of the words makes him sag in his chair a little. On one hand, it's almost a relief hearing them, because it means he's not crazy. That night in the woods was real, and Eddie is real and not just some wonderful mirage Richie's brain has concocted to aid his growing sense of loneliness. It also means Hockstetter is actually dead, and it's one less voice Richie will have to listen for on the streets, one less reason to live in fear.

On the other hand, it means Richie is fucked.

"And what does that have to do with me?" he croaks.

Sheriff Bowers grunts a little as he shifts in his chair, elbows resting on his knees now as he leans forward and Richie fights the urge to shrink away. "Listen, kid. Either you cooperate and answer my questions here," he says as his sunglasses slide down the bridge of his nose a little, beady eyes behind them boring right into Richie's, and Richie thinks of the rat hiding in the torn flesh of Patrick Hockstetter's throat, of Eddie's dark irises brimming with curiosity, "or I can bring you down to the station and we can have this same conversation with a lot more officers."

"I am cooperating," Richie vows. He feels cold all over, like he's sitting directly beneath the AC or
something, but it's still only March and they probably haven't even switched it over yet. "I just want
to know what it has to do with me."

"I'll give you a hint: it's got something to do with the fact that we found your bike at the scene of the
crime."

Richie's breath catches. He'd forgotten all about it in his panic, but he can see it clearly in his head,
lying abandoned between two corpses on the forest floor.

"You can't prove it's mine," Richie says, crossing his arms tightly over his chest, and he's barely
taken another breath before the sheriff pulls out a familiar-looking sticker — a gunshot smiley with
the words PROPERTY OF RICHIE TOZIER scribbled over it in red sharpie.

Okay, so apparently he can.

"Yeah, so it's my bike," Richie mumbles, eyes glued to the sticker. It had been a gift from Beverly,
who had found a whole roll of them in a bag of trinkets she'd gotten for ten cents at the thrift store,
and Richie had immediately stuck it to the frame of his bike. "Big deal. What's that got to do with
anything?"

"It puts you at the scene of the crime, kid."

"But I didn't do anything. He was messing with me. He broke my glasses and cut up my shoulder
and everything. Can I have my sticker back now?" Its sticky backing is covered in a nice layer of
dirt, rendering it useless, but he still wants it.

"No can do. It's evidence." Sheriff Bowers reaches to fish something out of his pocket; his hand
comes out holding a plastic baggie, which he drops Richie's sticker into.


Sheriff Bowers closes his eyes and rubs his graying temples. "Look," he says gruffly, and Richie
must be crazy because he actually sounded almost sympathetic for a second there. "I know he gave
you and your friends a hard time."

"Yeah," Richie agrees, floored. "He did." He chews his thumbnail, realization creeping up on him.
"Woah, woah, woah. If you're sayin' that means I had a motive to kill him...I mean, yeah, he was
messing with me that night. But I got away and I ran like I always do and that's all,
I swear it."

What he really wants to say is: Look, I know your son had a hard-on for this kid and I know you
don't approve, so even if I had killed him, it'd really be me doing you a favor, don't you think?

"I swear," Richie add quietly. "I wouldn't do anything to him. It was probably a bear or something."

"And that's the story you're sticking to, kid?"

"It's the truth." Richie sees it in the sheriff's eyes. He knows Richie didn't kill him, knows
Richie couldn't. He's loud and obnoxious and overbearing but he was never built for violence, and
anyone who looks at him can see it.

He also seems to realize that Richie isn't willing to budge, and Richie almost cries with relief when
he finally stands with a resolved sigh, wiping his hands on the front of his pants. "Alright. Come on.
I'll give you a ride home."

And normally Richie wouldn't be one to pass up on a get-out-of-school-early card, but right now he's
having trouble thinking of anything he'd like less than spending an entire car ride with the father of someone who Richie considers only *slightly* less of a sociopath than Hockstetter. Like father, like son. That's what they say, right? And Butch Bowers certainly does possess the same sort of oppressive, terror-inducing energy as his son, though in his case it's covered in a beige police uniform and a car with the words *PROTECT AND SERVE* decaled ironically across its side.

"I can go back to the class," Richie says, shooting up from his chair so fast that his vision goes black for a second, probably courtesy of his Froot-Loops-only diet for the past few days. He turns and prepares to book it down the hall back to Geometry, but Sheriff Bowers claps a hand over his shoulder and leads him to the patrol car where it's parked on the curb and Richie can do nothing but follow him.

The ride back to his house is painful enough that *awkward* feels like a painfully inadequate way to describe it. Richie feels like crawling out of his skin the entire time, knees drawn to his chest in the front seat. The walkie on the dash buzzes every now and again, familiar voices speaking in unfamiliar tongues, codes and phrases Richie has never heard.

"Thanks for the ride," Richie mumbles before the vehicle is even in park in front of his house. Has it always looked so weathered and droopy and sad, or is it only when he's in the company of others that he realizes how pathetic it looks, how pathetic their family must look to anyone paying attention?

"Not so fast, kid." Richie is already halfway to the front door when Sheriff Bowers steps out of the car too, joining him on the walkway, and Richie really isn't sure things could get much worse.

The sheriff rings the doorbell, and Richie tries not to laugh. "Nobody's gonna answer, you know," he mutters, but Sheriff Bowers acts like he hasn't spoken.

As Richie predicted, they're greeted by nothing but an eerie stillness that seeps under the door and makes everything outside feel colder than it actually is. Richie wraps his arms around his middle and sighs heavily, sinking down onto the same porch steps he retched all over just days ago at the thought of Patrick Hockstetter's corpse being eaten up by weeds. "We're gonna be waiting a while. Might as well make yourself at home."

Sheriff Bowers just grunts and rings the doorbell again, followed by a series of urgent knocks; it seems like all the adults in this town communicate exclusively through grunts and moans and sighs, like living here for so long has dissolved their tongues, cursing with the inability to form actual words for the rest of their days and Richie knows realistically that's not true but it's just another reason he needs to get out of here the second he turns eighteen, before this town swallows him whole.

In his peripheral Richie catches the flicker of movement in an upstairs window, and he has to bite down a squeak of surprise when Eddie appears, nose pressed against the glass. Richie, both horrified and relieved, mouths a very stern 'Get the fuck down' while Sheriff Bowers concerns himself with the voice coming through his crackling radio. He mutters something back, something along the lines of "...if anyone even fuckin' lives here..."

It takes another five minutes for Maggie Tozier to actually come to the door, pale blue robe pulled tight around herself. "What's going on?" she asks, suddenly more alert than Richie's seen her in a long time and maybe that's not saying much but it's still *something*, and Richie wants to cry at the fact that it takes the Sheriff showing up at their front door for her to even give half of a shit. "Is everything okay, Butch?"

Sheriff Bowers moves his mouth like maybe he's going to reprimand her for using his first name, but opts to give her a polite half-smile instead. "Everything's fine, Mags," he tells her. Richie has only ever heard his father call his mom that, years ago when there was still a shred or two of love left
between them, and he doesn't know why that makes him want to vomit but it does. The sheriff leans in closer to her, then, and says something too quiet for Richie to hear, but he gets the idea when his mother gasps, hands flying to her mouth and her gaze shifting to Richie's face like she's seeing him for the first time.

"We'll be in touch," Sheriff Bowers promises, squeezing her arm once before he turns to go, and Richie hopes he doesn't follow through with that promise even though he knows he will.

The sheriff doesn't close the front door behind him when he leaves and so Richie does it instead, wasting time fussing with the lock before he turns to face his mother. He's as tall as she is now, courtesy of his agonizing growth spurt in freshman year that sent him shooting upwards like a weed, but still feels small and insignificant when she looks at him.

"You're worrying me, Rich," she says quietly. She looks so tired, and Richie tries and fails not to feel like it's his fault. Even if it isn't. "What happened that night? Why didn't you tell me?"

Richie actually feels his heart crash through the floor as his composure flies out the window, breath catching in disbelief.

"I didn't do shit, mom! He almost fucking killed me that night, though, and you know what? I wanted to tell you! I tried to tell you, and you'd know that if you just paid attention to me for one fucking second!"

He might as well have smacked her. She actually takes a step backwards, stunned, and Richie expects her to yell or beat him until he's blue in the face, but she just looks at him with this unbearable heaviness in her eyes, and Richie has to look away, a sob threatening to bubble up in his throat that he won't let out. There's an apology crawling up the back of his throat but he won't let that out, either.

"Richie," she says softly, and suddenly Richie is seven years old again and all he's ever wanted is to feel loved in return. "Rich, baby -"

He can't do this.

"Just forget it," Richie mumbles, shoving past her and tearing up the stairs faster than she can follow. And she won't. No matter how bad she feels it's never enough, and she won't follow him, won't go out of her way to make things right. She never does.

Eddie has apparently had his ear pressed against the bedroom door for god knows how long, and he nearly falls over when Richie throws it open, skittering back on the carpet when Richie slams it shut again and presses his back against it, sinking to the ground. "Fuck," he whispers, more to himself than anything. "Fuck."

"Richie," Eddie says quietly, scrambling over to him, kneeling beside him. There it is, his name again, wrapped in a voice that is very quickly becoming something of a safe haven, an immediate comfort that makes Richie want to curl into him. "Richie," he repeats. "Are you okay?"

All Richie can do is let out a shuddering laugh. "Yeah. No. I don't know." He laughs again, letting his head loll back against the door. "It's cool. It'll be fine, you know? It always is. It's always fucking fine eventually." He's babbling now. "It just sucks, you know, because, like...I just wish someone would fucking see me, you know? Like...I'm out here existing and shit but no one ever sees me unless it's for something shitty and that just...it just really fucking sucks. And I know that's so stu-"

"Richie," Eddie cuts him off, pressing a cold hand against Richie's cheek, and the sensation of it is so
startling that Richie actually *gasps* and Eddie rips his hand away as if he's touched a hot shove, clutching his wrist, eyes huge and guilty.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No!" Richie answers quickly, so much so that Eddie startles, jerking backwards a little. "No, not at all. I just. It was just. Weird. Fuck. Not weird, like...I don't know." He takes a breath and a moment to regroup. "It didn't hurt. It was nice. I was just...surprised, I guess."

"Oh." Eddie puts his hand back, thumb pressed soft against Richie's jaw. Richie feels as though he's going to melt.

"Yeah. I like it, I think," Richie murmurs, fully aware of the way his body seems to automatically shift even closer to Eddie's. Given an inch he'll always take a mile, greedy and selfish and desperate. Maybe his dad was right, all those years ago. "It's nice."

"Nice," Eddie echoes. He takes his hand away and Richie feels pathetic when he tries to follow it, but then Eddie is settling next to him with his back against the door, too, so close that their knees knock together, and his lungs feel empty when Eddie presses his head against Richie's good shoulder, arm wrapped across him in an awkward half-hug.

It's the best thing Richie has ever felt.

"I see you," Eddie says softly, and when Richie looks down in surprise Eddie is looking up at him expectantly and Richie doesn't know why but he's suddenly reminded of a conversation he'd had with Ben once on the concept of soulmates. *You don't just go looking for them*, Ben had insisted, always the romantic. *They just kind of...fall into your life, I think, when you need them most.*

And Richie swears to himself he has no idea why that conversation is coming to mind now of all times, but a soft, insistent voice in the back of his head whispers, yes, you do.

"Thanks," Richie murmurs. He doesn't really hug back, not yet, but he closes his eyes and lets himself sink just a little further into Eddie's embrace — his grip is surprisingly strong considering his size. "I see you, too." *It'd be hard not to,* he doesn't add. Nobody else knows Eddie exists, at least not yet, but once they did they'd never be able to look away. He's special in more ways than one, special beyond the sharpness of his teeth and the darkness flickering in his eyes.

Eddie doesn't say anything back, but Richie swears he tucks his head a little further into the crook of Richie's shoulder, and *nice* seems like too weak a word to describe how he feels in this moment.
don't drink the water

You said, 'There's nobody here but us'/
I looked up and the banks were empty

— Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body

"So when exactly were you planning on telling us you ran into Hockstetter that night!?"

Richie bites his tongue and imagines it coming clean off. He's known since this morning that the questions were coming, but now they're here and he isn't prepared to answer.

"Stanley, my dear boy!" He's trying halfheartedly to channel his inner Brit, but his voice is still foggy from sleep — he doesn't know how long he's been out, only that when he finally dozed off in Eddie's embrace it was still light outside and now the moon is high in the sky. It can't be too late, though, because Stan is still awake, and his bedtime is a very strict 9:30, up a whopping thirty minutes from what it used to be in middle school. "It's so good to hear from you. What can I do for you, young chap?" He almost laughs, then, because he can fucking feel how exasperated Stan is even through the phone.

"What the hell, Richie?" Stan hisses. "Is there anything else you haven't told me? Anything else I should know before a SWAT team shows up at my door?" He's half-whispering into the receiver, an indication that he's calling from the phone mounted on the wall just outside his kitchen. Rabbi Uris has ears like a hawk, though, and Richie knows it's only a matter of time before Stan gets caught. That just makes him want to laugh harder.

"Actually, yeah. I'm leaving you for another woman. Sorry to tell you on such short notice, Stanny Boy, but the heart wants what it wants."

"I'm serious, asshole!"

"Woah there. Someone's touchy."

"Seriously? Can you blame me? My dad is freaking out, Richie! I find out Patrick's dead and then out of nowhere Sheriff Bowers is showing up up during Chem to interrogate me...I almost had an aneurysm!" Richie has a little internal giggle at the mental image of the vein in Stan's forehead throbbing. "And all this time I've just been assuming you were fine and everything that night was fine! Why didn't you say anything?"

There are a lot of reasons, Richie thinks, but if he were to actually list them off then they'd be here all night and he's not really in the mood. He gets the feeling Stan isn't, either.

"Dude, chill out." The itch under Richie's skin is back, the one attached to the voice that hisses ugly things into the back of his mind like a rattlesnake. His voice takes on an edge of irritation. "Does it even matter? It's not like you had to lie to him or anything, 'cause you didn't know. If anything, I did you a favor."

"A favor?" Stan sputters, voice bordering on hysterical. "Is that seriously what you want to call it? Because I think I'd rather call it selfish."

Richie can't help the wounded noise that Stan's words pull from his throat. From somewhere on high,
his father's voice and a burning handprint on his cheek. Don't be so selfish. And god, he's not trying to be, he doesn't try to be, he doesn't, he wants to be good so bad that his bones ache with it, he wants to be so selfless that he never hurts anyone ever again but he can't stop ruining everything no matter how hard he tries, like his very existence is some kind of curse oh god oh god oh god —

"Fuck off, Stan," he mutters, cutting Stan's inevitable apology short with the press of a button.

The kitchen sink is leaking. Richie can hear it, the uneven drip of it jarringly loud even from all the way down the hall as he presses the phone back into the cradle. His stomach gurgles, and he tries to recall the last thing he ate and when. Looking back on it, it's almost as if his hunger never had a beginning at all, and Richie wonders if there's an end in sight. He's always been starving, is the thing, if not for food then for comfort or attention or touch or time, a million things out of his control.

This hunger, in all its forms, is eating him alive and maybe that would be funny if it didn't hurt so badly. He can recall the very first time he'd been tasked with making his own breakfast; he'd gone bounding into his parents' room with a taste for pancakes and, for the first time, his mother had waved him off with one hand, rubbing her temple with the other. The air had been tainted with what Richie hadn't recognized at the time as vodka. Go get it yourself, Rich, she'd mumbled. You're old enough to be doing these things yourself now, don't you think? And Richie had nearly tripped over his own feet in his excitement because at the time there'd been something about the idea of making himself breakfast that was so unfamiliar and grown up and when he was small Richie wanted nothing more than to prove that he could roll with the big kids, that he was strong enough and brave enough and smart enough to take on anything the world wanted to throw his way.

But he realized quickly that the more she pushed him away, the more she urged him to just grow up already, the more he tried to cling to her.

Richie held his mother's hand until he was nine. He wonders if and when he would've grown out of it, because he never really got a chance to — he was forced out of it instead, shoved unceremoniously out of childhood's door by her hands. But maturity never really suited him either, and why should it? Why should he need to be all grown up at fifteen? So he's stuck like this, toeing the line between the two like a shaky tightrope walker and there's a part of him that's terrified that it'll be like this forever. He just wants to know where he fits into everything, or if he was even ever meant to at all.

He doesn't know where he fits in the world. He doesn't know how to make that realization stop hurting.

The thing is, Beverly hurts and Richie sees it (they all do, he thinks), but Beverly has made herself something dangerous in all of her softness, something hard to kill; she's got a mean right hook even without the brass knuckles she keeps in the pockets of her skirts. She wears beauty and grit equally well, balanced perfectly on either side of her. Richie's never told her that, but he hopes it's in one of the poems Ben is always shoving into the slats of her locker when he thinks nobody's looking, because she deserves to know.

Richie doesn't feel dangerous, though, and he doesn't think he ever will. He feels paper-thin, like an exceptionally fragile stick being whittled away at by the elements. Like all it'll take is one more strong gust to snap him in two.

He's thought that for years, though, and the gusts keep coming and Richie is still standing. Somehow. Maybe that should make him feel a little better, that he's clearly at least somewhat stronger than he's given himself credit for, but it's hard to feel much of anything else with that single world eating away at him.
Richie comes back to his room feeling like he's on the verge of combusting with self-loathing. Eddie is curled up on the bed, in the same spot he'd crawled over to sleepily when Richie had finally untangled their limbs to go answer the phone, and he looks so small, like a child, that for a moment Richie considers not waking him up at all.

"Eddie," he says instead, loud enough that Eddie stirs instantly, because he can't fucking help himself.

"What happened?" Eddie asks. From the way he's rubbing at his eyes as he sits up, he was clearly more content asleep, and Richie knows he should've just let him be. SELFISH. "Are you okay?"

"Let's go down to the quarry."

Eddie's expression is stuck somewhere between elation and concern as he scoots off the edge of the bed. He doesn't move any closer, and there's this huge gap between them now that both of them are too afraid to cross. "Now?" He peers at the night sky through the cracks in Richie's blinds. "It's late."

"Yeah, why not?"

Eddie is studying him carefully, the same way the mortician is probably hunched over Patrick Hockstetter's corpse right about now. Richie shudders. Eddie's gaze is ancient and all-knowing and so young at the same time, and Richie feels a little lost in it.

"I'm fine," Richie insists in response to a question that Eddie doesn't ask, already hustling over to the window and fussing with the blinds. "You wanted to go, so let's go."

Eddie's brow creases, and for a moment Richie worries that he's upset him and that just makes him hate himself a little bit more. Christ, why can't he do anything right? Why can't he be gentle for half a second, especially to someone who has been so painfully careful with him?

But Eddie isn't upset, just confused by the sudden shift in behavior. Richie can't really blame him for that — ten minutes ago they were wrapped up against Richie's bedroom door, warm and sound asleep and surrounded by something bigger than either of them are ready to acknowledge.

He inhales shakily and the exhale is just as uneasy. "Sorry, I'm just...it's fine. Let's just go, yeah? It'll be fun." He turns around to face Eddie fully and forces himself to smile, and almost cries in relief the moment he senses Eddie's resolve break.

"Okay," Eddie says, voice impossibly soft, eyes still huge with concern. Richie never deserved this sort of kindness, and he knows it.

"Okay, so I usually like to get my foot on that ledge there," Richie explains, pointing to the jutting shingles just below his window. But Eddie appears to have other plans, because without warning he just...steps the fuck off the edge, landing on the narrow gravel path below on all fours like the stray housecats that come around Richie's window in the winter.
"Holy cow!" Richie laughs, and the tension in his gut starts to unravel. "You're like Spider-Man."

"Spider-Man?" Eddie looks up at him, one brow hiked.

"Spider-Man is...remind me to tell you later, okay?" He's got a sizable collection of comics in a box under his bed, and he mentally curses himself for not remembering them sooner, if only because they'd give Eddie something to do while he's gone. Richie is always forgetting how little he seems to know about...everything, really.

Eddie nods.

Once Richie clambers down to the ground himself with far less grace, he makes Eddie duck with him behind the neighbor's shrubs until he's sure there are no cars coming. He hates curfew. It happens every now and again; someone will go missing or they'll find remains from a million years ago buried in someone's backyard and they'll slap a curfew over the town like that fucking fixes anything. This is Derry, though, so nothing ever actually gets resolved. But time passes and people start to forget and the fear fades and the curfew is lifted and life goes on until it happens again, and it always does. The adults in this town seem content with moving along as if these things never happened, but the kids never forget. Richie knows he hasn't.

The path down to the quarry is a familiar one, a trail he could navigate in his sleep. Eddie treads along silently behind him, hopping lightly over exposed tree roots and crawling over large rocks with unpracticed nimbleness. It's only once they both step into the clearing at the top of the cliff that Richie finally feels like he can breathe again.

"Oh," Eddie breathes, taking a step closer to the edge. Richie follows.

"Cool, right?"

"Is it clean?" Eddie asks, peering over the edge curiously, face bathed in blue.

"C'mon, Eds. Do I really look like someone who would go splashing around in shitty water?" What follows is a silence that goes on too long to be anything other than intentional, and Richie narrows his eyes. "I should've said don't answer that."

Eddie dissolves into giggles, and Richie can't help but smile. That's the thing about Eddie. He makes Richie forget himself, even if it's just for a little while, and it's the most precious gift Richie can imagine.

"Can you swim?" Richie asks, very aware that this is a question he probably should've asked back at the house. In his defense, he wasn't thinking straight then, mind fogged over with the desperation to get out of his skin for a while. This is almost as good.

Eddie shrugs.

"I'm gonna need a little more than that, Eds," Richie says. "A 'maybe' isn't exactly comforting."

Eddie turns to glare at him. "Don't call me that." Now it's Richie's turn to giggle. "And I don't know. I've never tried."

Richie considers that. This probably isn't the best time to be giving a swimming lesson. Actually, Richie probably shouldn't be giving swimming lessons at all, given his unsuccessful track record of trying to teach people in the past. He'd half-taught Bill, who then taught Stan when Richie failed to do so. "We can just hang out up here, if you wa-"
"No," Eddie cuts him off, mouth set in a determined line. "I want to. Just tell me what to do." Richie gets the distinct feeling that he isn't going to take no for an answer.

"So you just like...you jump in, and then you kinda have to doggy paddle to keep yourself up. I told that to Bill when I was teaching him to swim and I swear he kept calling it doggy style for like a year after that. It was super funny. But doggy style is, uh...I mean, it's. Nevermind." It's clear that Eddie has no idea what he's talking about anymore but he's got this ridiculously amused smile on his face anyway, both eyebrows raised like he can't quite believe Richie is real. That makes two of us, Richie thinks.

"Anyway," he continues. "Doggy paddling-not-style just means you have to keep your arms out and kinda kick your legs so you don't sink. Like this." He sits on the ground and kicks his legs wildly in a mockery of swimming, and Eddie laughs. Richie wonders if he'll ever get tired of making this boy laugh. He doesn't think so. There's something thrilling and special about it, knowing that he's the only person who's ever made Eddie laugh like this. He's the only one who's ever even had the chance to, he knows, and that doesn't seem fair to Eddie but Richie wants, selfishly, to hold onto that. He wants to be special to Eddie just for a little while longer. He likes feeling needed. SELFISH.

"Just like that?" Eddie questions with a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"It's hard to explain when we're not in the water, okay? But you get the idea," Richie says defensively, then proceeds to pull his shirt over his head while dropping his shorts in the same breath. Stan has always said that being able to strip yourself of multiple items of clothing at once isn't a real talent, but Richie begs to different. Just wait until we're in high school, Stanny Boy, and then you'll see how useful it can really be, Richie had teased once years ago, poking Stan in the ribs, and Stan had simply shook his head. There definitely hasn't been any of...that yet in high school, but Richie still thinks it's kind of cool in a lame way.

Eddie looks a little taken aback, ducking his head and fussing with the hem of his own shirt. Well, it's Richie's shirt, technically, but at this point Richie has essentially opened his limited wardrobe for Eddie to raid at this point. So maybe it's their shirt.

"Not to rush you or anything, dude, but we are planning on actually getting in the water at some point, right?" It's probably only actually been a minute but it feels like an hour has gone by. Richie has never really had a problem being naked (or almost naked) in front of anyone, but it's a little weird when he's the only one with his clothes in a pool on the ground next to him.

"In our underwear?" Eddie looks up at him and Richie is surprised to find that he looks timid, unsure. Embarrassed, almost.

"Well, yeah." It seems so simple, and yet Richie realizes it really isn't. Not to Eddie. "It's not a big deal."

"Okay," Eddie says, but he makes no move to look up at Richie or shed his own clothes. He chews delicately at his thumbnail, and the silver moonlight catches on his sharp incisors. Richie shivers and not from the chill in the air.

"I mean, you can stay in your clothes if you want. That's not a big deal either," Richie adds quickly. "I think it's probably just easier with them off, you know, less weighing you down. But if, uh, if it makes you uncomfortable and you'd...if you'd rather just-

But he doesn't even get to finish, because Eddie is wriggling out of his own clothes and then he's standing half-naked and unsure in front of Richie before Richie can even blink. He looks embarrassed and lost, like maybe he'd just stripped to get Richie to stop babbling, and Richie would
laugh if he didn't think Eddie would automatically assume that he was laughing at him.

"Cool," Richie says, trying to keep his voice casual. It's not weird, not any moreso than it is with any of the other boys or even Bev. There's just something about it that feels — different, somehow, and he can't quite put his finger on it. He's not sure he wants to. "So, you ready?"

Eddie nods. His determination is admirable, Richie thinks. And adorable. Really, really adorable. Then, without another word, Eddie holds out his hand to Richie, fingers flexing a bit as he offers it up the same way Richie's mother did to him as a child when she wanted him to hold her hand.

"Oh," Richie breathes, a lump in his throat. "Sure."

He takes his hand, squeezes. Eddie squeezes back.

A running start (because Richie insists, really), and then they're airborne.

They're like a pair of stars falling through the night.

Richie hits the water first. It's so cold. He's not sure at what point during the fall they let go of each other, only that by the time he's kicking his way back to the surface, his hand is empty. The world above the water is calm and quiet and Eddie is nowhere to be seen. Richie turns this way and that, hoping that he'll see him a few yards away, watching Richie with that all-knowing stare, but there's nothing. Nobody. His breath hitches.

"Eddie?" The name bounces off the quarry's walls and echoes inside his head.

Eddie surfaces with a sputtering gasp just as Richie is contemplating diving under to make sure he hasn't sunk like a stone. That happened to him once — it was like out of nowhere he'd completely lost control of his limbs and he could do nothing but watch as the surface got further and further away, lungs cramping and squeezed tight as bubbles flooded from his nose no matter how hard he tried to keep them in. He'd been on the verge of blacking out when Mike had finally come to drag him back to shore, and Richie had been shaken for the rest of the afternoon and refused to go back in, opting instead to sit on the rocks. He'd watched the rest of them splash and play in the late summer sun and had gone home wondering if something else inside of him had broken.

"Fuck!" Richie laughs, relief flooding through him so suddenly that his head spins.

"Fuck," Eddie repeats, and it sounds weird coming out of his mouth, so much so that they both laugh. "You say that word a lot."

"Fuck yeah, I do," Richie agrees, grinning smugly. He ducks his head under the surface and comes back up with a mouthful of water, shooting it at Eddie through the tiny gap in his front teeth. It's something he likes to sneak up behind the other Losers and do when he's feeling particularly playful. Stan hates it. Beverly will spit water right back at him. The rest of them tolerate it in vary degrees, the same way they seem to tolerate Richie in general.

"Hey!" Eddie squeaks. He's gotten the hang of keeping himself afloat. The water laps at his clavicle but doesn't really go any higher than that. "How'd you do that?"

"Magic." Richie waggles his eyebrows. "I also chewed a lot of straws as a kid."

It's not really the best time to be swimming. There's curfew, sure, but Bowers and the rest of them have never paid the rules any mind and Richie half-expects them to come clomping through the trees any second now, seeking retribution. It's also only just tipped into springtime and the weather is still a mess, like it can't quite decide if it wants to make them wait for warmth or not. As a result, the water
is a little too cold for comfort even after they've settled into it, but Richie likes it anyway, the way it makes his fingers and toes and little numb, and Eddie doesn't seem to mind it either. Richie wonders if he can even feel it.

Richie floats on his back for a while, all fanned out like a gangly starfish. Eddie swims lazy circles around him over and over again without seeming to tire, and Richie wonders if this entire thing was just a ruse to show off. Maybe Eddie is just good at everything.

They should not be here, bodies bathed in freezing water and moonlight, but it's one of the first times in a long time that Richie has felt anything real.

His lips are blue and shaking by the time they decide to pull themselves from the water. Eddie seems mostly unaffected, though he definitely notices the state Richie's in, because he eyes him warily like he's not sure if Richie is going to roll over and die or not. They sit side-by-side on the rocks as Richie tries to pinch feeling back into his legs, rubbing them with his hands like a pair of matchsticks.

In the orange lamplight of his bedroom, wrapped up in Richie's clothes and Richie's blankets, eyes burning down to a dulled amber rather than black, Eddie could almost pass for human.

Out here in the night with only the stars and moon casting shadows across his face, it's not even close. Richie can't help but stare.

An angel, Richie thinks. It's the first word that comes to mind, but that doesn't feel quite right. It's close, though. There's something ethereal about him like this. The way his body is free of any scars or bruises, like an untouched canvas, pale and blank and too unmarred to be human. Something kept precious and hidden away for years. His eyes are so dark, lashes so long they cast shadows across his freckled cheeks and the soft slope of his nose.

Not an angel, no. But not a monster either, something beautiful and terrifying caught in the in-between. Richie feels possessed by him, like he couldn't look away if he tried, even as Eddie shifts to look him right in the eye and it should feel uncomfortable but it doesn't. An almost unbearably pleasant calm settles over the two of them, and Richie isn't sure if he's imagining it or not but it feels so good either way that he doesn't care.

"What?" Eddie asks, voice a touch coy.

"You're just..." Richie starts, then stops himself, and only then is he finally able to tear his eyes away, tapping his fingers idly against the rock beneath his legs. He feels stupid and childish and in far too deep. "Nevermind."

"Oh." Eddie averts his gaze, too, like maybe he was hoping for something else.

"Don't be stupid, Richie."

And Richie knows he is, but he also knows his own truths. The words are still lingering on his tongue. He could still say them. You're beautiful. But he doesn't think he's ever said that to anyone, and the unknown of the aftermath is enough to send all four syllables skittering back down his throat.

"What's that?"

Richie's head perks up at the question. "What's what?"

"That." Eddie's gazed is fixed firmly on Richie's shoulder, mouth pressed into a thin line.

"Oh, it's just —" Richie swallows and tastes bile, can feel dirt on his face and blood dripping down his back. "From that night in the woods. Before you, uh. Before you helped me."
Eddie stiffens. He doesn't try to touch him Richie time, only brushes the air around it with his fingers as he studies it closely. It's starting to heal nicely, or as nicely as Richie lets things heal. He's always picking and scratching at scabs, unable to help himself.

"He gave this to you." He doesn't need to use names for Richie to know who he's talking about.

"Yeah, he did," Richie says, reaching back to thumb absently over the mark, and he's unsure if he should shrink away or try to press himself into Eddie's touch. "He's dead now."

"I know," Eddie answers. He says it so easily that Richie is a little startled. "I killed him."

"Yup. You definitely did." Richie feels cold all over. He hadn't seen Eddie that first night in the forest. "Don't feel bad, though. He was a douche."

"I don't." Eddie's eyes are still on Richie's shoulder.

"Oh." Richie chews his lip, then releases it, tucking his chin against his knees. "That's good, I guess. You probably shouldn't go around killing everyone who's ever hurt me, though. It's kind of a long list." Richie doesn't know why he says it, isn't even sure he meant to in the first place, but then Eddie is leaning his head against his good shoulder, soft curls tickling his chin. He keeps his hands around his own middle, but Richie knows that if he asked Eddie to hold him, he would do it in an instant.

It's a lot to process.

"Thanks for taking me here," Eddie murmurs as he looks out over the water, a black abyss below them, and the vibration of it hums against Richie's arm.

Richie can't even think of anything snarky or funny to say to that. He's not sure he even wants to. "Yeah," he says, so soft it could be a whisper. Maybe it is. "]Course."

The moonlight touches the pale, smooth skin of Eddie's back and turns him blue, and Richie's fingers twitch. He's inclined to touch the same way a child in an art museum might feel the urge to duck under the velvet ropes and get their hands on the exhibits, just to see what they might feel like under their fingertips. The freckles on Eddie's back beckon him to touch. Richie just wants to see if his skin is really as soft as it looks in the pale blue light.

He won't, though. He learned a long time ago that his touch was poison, dirty, rotten. It's the same reason his mother never let him touch the porcelain doll handed down to her. You'll ruin it, she'd clucked, holding it out of his reach even after Richie had scrubbed his hands pink and raw in the bathroom sink.

Richie breathes in shakily and Eddie breathes out in a quiet, smooth exhale. A chorus of crickets chirps nearby. A cloud inches across the sky to cover the moon. Richie thinks that if it weren't for Eddie's arm brushing his, the night would swallow him whole.

I dreamt about someone like you before I even knew you existed, Richie thinks, but he does not say it.

The next few days drag by, hours stretched out like taffy in the sun whenever Richie is away from
home. Which is weird, because usually it's the opposite; time at home seems to move at a snail's pace, while his time away from its oppressive silence has always felt too short no matter how many hours he goes without it. He could be gone for days and it'd feel like an hour. No time away from that house will ever be long enough until he gets to leave for good.

But now Richie feels restless and irritated the moment he walks out the front door, an underlying prickly sensation that doesn't go away fully until he's bounding back up the front steps at the end of the day. And the house is shitty as ever, but now it has Eddie in it, tucked away in Richie's room like something precious, and Richie thinks about him all day long. It's become something of a ritual between them — Richie waits until the last possible second in the morning to leave for school, and even then it's usually dragging his feet at Eddie's insistence. He shows up to homeroom ten minutes late and does not regret it.

He comes home from school on Friday afternoon to find his mother's bedroom door open. A rare sight indeed. Part of him goes into instant panic mode, praying that Eddie has stayed put in his room and hasn't gone wandering through the house like Richie knows he typically does, even though he denies it over and over again. Richie can't really blame him. This place sucks, and he imagines a world for just the two of them far away from here, realizes that's stupid, and tries to forget he'd ever imagined it at all.

"Richie?" Her voice drifts down the hall from her room, and it quells the unease in his gut, if only a little.

He tiptoes over to her door and peeks in. It's very dark inside, as it usually is, but the bed is made and her hair is brushed and pulled away from her face. She's lying on top of the covers in faded jeans and a blouse, as if she'd been merely taking a nap instead of lying in bed all day.

"Mom," he says, trying to keep his voice indifferent but that never works. There's always love leaking in — the word is always tinged with little boy neediness.

"Baby," she murmurs, stretching one thin arm out towards him, beckoning. "Come lay with me a bit."

Richie hasn't been allowed to crawl into bed with his mother since he was eight years old and scared witless by the monster hiding in his bathroom mirror, but she's asking him to now and so he goes, perching himself on the edge of the mattress and letting her pull him down beside her. He still hasn't apologized for his outburst the other day, and guilt sits heavy on his chest.

There's blotchy, purple-black bruise on her forearm, and when Richie reaches out to ghost his fingers over it she winces and he hates himself for it. He thinks about the bottle of sleeping pills she keeps under her bathroom sink and wonders how many he could swallow at once, how many mouthfuls it would take to finally kill the ugly noises in his head.

"I want to apologize for the other day," she says, throat bobbing as she swallows thickly. He wonders how long she's spent sitting at the edge of her bed and rehearsing those words, crafting them carefully as a skilled playwright. "I think I could have approached it better. I was just...surprised. That's all. And worried. I worry about you all the time, Rich, and I know I don't do a great job of showing it and I'm sorry for that." She studies his face carefully, even though his gaze is still locked on the bruise on her arm. It's shaped a little bit like a banana or a crescent moon. He wonders how she got it. (He already knows.) "What happened to your other glasses?"

Richie chokes out a laugh.
His mother's lip quivers for half a second and he wants to tear his fucking hair out because he hates the way it makes him feel, like maybe this is all his fault. If he were just a little less reckless and a little more tidy, a little less this and a little more that, a little less himself and a little more like someone else —

"It's no big deal," he mutters, shrugging awkwardly.

"Richie," she scolds, voice taking on an authoritative tone he's unused to hearing from her. "It is a big deal."

"Okay," Richie agrees, even though he doubts she actually thinks that. Even if she does, moments like this are like lightning in a bottle, impossibly rare and precious and painful to the touch. He'd like to believe that she's going to start caring for good this time. He'd like to believe her, wants it so bad he can hardly breathe, but he's been burned too many times before. He knows better now.

(And yet he still hopes. Dreams. Wishes. Like a child.

Pathetic.)

"How is...everything else? How is school going?" She's terrible at small talk, but she's trying. For now.

"It's okay. I'm okay." Richie shrugs again. The cut on his shoulder sings.

"Your teachers?"

Richie snorts, and doesn't miss the way the corner of her mouth twitches. Something almost fond.

"And your friends? You still see Bill around? And Stan?"

*I've seen them more in the past week than I've seen you in the past six months.*

Richie's throat bobs, unshed tears collecting on his lashes, and he reaches up quickly to wipe them away. *Don't cry. Don't cry in front of her. The last thing she needs is to see you fucking cry.*

She's smiling at him, that funny little smile she used to give him when he was just a kid and she'd laugh and her nose would wrinkle just so. *My silly boy,* she'd say, and then she'd kiss his forehead. "Sweet boy," she says this time, adjusting the scooped collar of his shirt and thumbing one of the loose, frayed threads. "You need new clothes, hm?"

And that just makes Richie want to cry harder.

"I miss spending time with you. I feel like I hardly know you anymore, Rich," she says, watery gaze falling to her pillow again. "I've been...I've been a bad mother, haven't I?"

"No," Richie answers quickly, and if she knows she's lying she doesn't show it. "No, mom, you're — you're not." Clumsily, he adds, "You're the best."

That makes her laugh, this terribly sad noise that makes Richie want to curl in on himself and disappear. "No, no...I haven't been there for you like I should be, Rich, and we both know it." She reaches out to card her fingers through his hair. "We'll do something soon, yeah? A movie or something. You tell me what looks good and we'll go, okay?" Richie thinks back to simpler times, fingers sticky with popcorn butter and his head on his mother's arm, the way she'd shush him gently when he got too antsy in the front row. The way they'd walk home hand-in-hand, Richie recounting scenes from the movie in the best impressions he could muster, his mother laughing all the while.
She's lying. She doesn't know she's lying, but she is. She means it now, and then the idea will get flushed away by a bottle of Jack. Richie gives it four hours, tops, before she forgets this exchange entirely. But Richie can't say that now, especially when she seems so happy, so genuine. Even if she isn't. So what comes out instead is, "Yeah, mom. I'd like that."

And the lie is absolutely worth the smile he gets in return. It's tired, faltering at the edges as if she's already drifting back to sleep — which isn't entirely unbelievable — but beautiful nonetheless, and Richie wants to hold onto this moment with everything he has. Simultaneously he is repulsed by it, by how easy it is for him to fall back into her embrace because he loves her, and loving her is hard to do sometimes. When she gets bad again he knows he'll think of this moment specifically and it will make it that much harder to pull away.

When he goes downstairs later that evening, there's food in the pantry for the first time in two weeks, a bowl of slightly bruised apples on the kitchen table.

Richie knows it's not something to cry over, but he does anyway.

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Stan apologizes on Monday, because of course he does. He keeps his voice and eyes low, focused on his twisting hands in front of him, and Richie knows he means it. He accepts the apology easily, mostly because he was never really mad at Stan in the first place. (It was your own fault, Richie, you're selfish, you know -)

"No harm, no foul, my good man. Sorry I didn't say anything about it. I should've told you, I just...I know it was shitty of me, I just di-" Richie cuts himself off with a soft gasp of pain, because Stan has just wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug, and it'd be nice except his hand is right over the spot where Patrick Hockstetter's knife pressed into his shoulder. "Wow, Stan. I didn't know your feelings for me were so strong." He waggles his eyebrows and Stan shoves him, lightly but with enough force to let Richie know that yeah, they're gonna be okay.

"Beep-beep, idiot. I was just worried about you. We all were. That's all."

"Oh." Richie can't quite find the right words to convey how grateful he is, suddenly, that Stan actually gives a shit at all. It's easier to forget, or to convince himself otherwise, and he knows that by tomorrow things will be back to normal entirely between them and Stan will sigh and roll his eyes and Richie will wonder if he'll ever stop being a burden to his own friends. "I, uh. Thanks."

Stan walks home with him that afternoon even though his house is clear on the other side of town, and their shadows dance across the sidewalk like a pair of knock-kneed twins. The silence between them is familiar, comfortable, albeit tinged with Stan's lingering guilt. Richie knows he's only walking with him because he feels bad, but for now he's actually okay with being the object of Stan's pity if it means he has some company on the way home.

They turn the last corner in tandem. If he looks close enough, Richie swears they've left scuff marks on this exact curve from just how many times they've turned it throughout the years. It's enough to make him smile, the kind that has him biting at the inside of his cheek because he doesn't really want to give Stan the satisfaction.

He hears Stan clear his throat, and when he looks up the smile drops off his face so fast it's almost
"Fuck," Richie breathes, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk.

The figurative neon WELCOME TO HELL sign burns brighter than ever in Richie's mind, just above the spot where his father's '74 coupe is parked in the driveway. (It's an ugly car, which Richie has always secretly thought was fitting for someone like his dad.) He's definitely not imagining that.

"Fuck," he says again, because there's nothing left in his mind but a flurry of expletives and an overwhelming panic that's building itself from the ground up in pit of his stomach. He thinks of his mother just the other day, curled in close to him and promising to be better, as if she'd sensed something was about to shift. The calm never lasts.

Because the sun is warm on his back but suddenly Richie is so cold. Because Stan is at his side, still, and yet it's suddenly like Richie is all alone and staring down his own front door like it's the mouth of hell. Because Eddie is gentle touches and soft words and curiosity and something just on the edge of magic and that helps, sure, but even he's got nothing on Wentworth Tozier when he's angry.

Maggie Tozier is a lot of things, existing in shades of blue and gray, sad and faded like the watercolor painting of a woman that's been mostly washed away. She makes Richie feel a lot of things, too — useless and small and insignificant and disappointing — but Richie is not afraid of her.

His father, though, has always been a different story entirely.

(There's a world, Richie thinks, where Eddie has cherry popsicle juice on his chin instead of blood, a world where his mother loves him more than she loves the idea of reliving her adolescence, a world where he doesn't flinch every time he's touched, a world where his father's car in the driveway doesn't send alarm bells blaring inside in his head.

This is not that world.)
Here's the thing about having a wild imagination — it only gets worse as the years go by.

Now here's the thing about being a kid — you're standing on the front porch steps, and you know the house in front of you is just that, a house, albeit one with a broken porch light and a faded outline in front of the door where a welcome mat used to be, but the longer you stare the more it twists into something terrible, the front entrance no longer a doorway but some gaping maw leading straight into the belly of the beast. It's a little like a movie, the scene just before the climax, except Richie has no wisdom or powers or lead pipe to keep the monsters at bay, just a smart mouth and an L-shaped scar forming on his shoulder.

"Do you want to come back to my house?" Stan had asked as they stood at the corner, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, but he looked like he was about to take off running for the hills, and Richie didn't blame him one fucking bit. He'd liked to have done the same. He still does.

It's remarkable how soundproof the walls of their house actually are, Richie thinks, because the second he gathers his wits enough to actually go through the front door the intensity of his parents fighting dials up to an almost laughable degree, as if someone has accidentally leaned on the TV remote. Fuck, it is laughable, so Richie ducks his head and muffles one into the back of his hand. It's either that or cry, and he'd rather swallow broken glass than cry in front of his dad. Or his mom. Or anyone.

They're fighting. Of course they are. How stupid it would be to assume that they could coexist under the same roof for more than five minutes. Richie laughs again, probably louder than he should, and their screams come to a halt. It makes his stomach lurch the same way it does when he goes on the chair swing at the winter carnival after drinking three cups of hot chocolate. Even despite the whole vomiting thing afterwards, it's a nice memory, one Richie keeps at the ready in one corner of his mind as he urges himself forward. Just think of the carnival, Richie.

His parents are in the kitchen, and when he turns the corner they're both looking towards the doorway expectantly. Think of the carnival and how Stan always screams like a little girl on the ferris wheel. The room reeks of whiskey, but Richie doesn't need that hint to know his mother is fucking trashed. No wonder the argument seemed extra loud. She always gets loud when she's in too deep, as if she's trying to get someone's attention to help drag her out of it, but Richie doesn't know how and his father doesn't seem to care enough to try.

There's a very specific approach one must use when talking to someone like Wentworth Tozier,
Richie has come to learn over the years. It's sort of like stumbling across a venomous snake — be calm, don't bother it and it won't bother you. But Richie has always had a nasty habit of prodding at things he shouldn't, and his father has never been an exception to that. Richie's had his mouth washed out with soap more times than he can count; the bitter taste of it isn't something he'll ever forget, but it's never stopped his brain from letting his mouth just say whatever the fuck it wants.

"Hey, pops. Good to see ya. It's been a little while. Didn't realize dentists did so many overnights at the office."

His father looks at him, and Richie can't tell if he's taken aback or offended or angry or a terrifying combination of the three, but the expression on his face is so ridiculously perplexed that Richie wants to laugh again. He has to bite down on the inside of his cheek very, very hard to keep himself from doing so. Think about Georgie begging Bill to give him a piggyback ride because his feet are tired from walking.

There's a split second where Richie is absolutely convinced that he's about to get smacked across the face, but then his father simply hooks a finger under the loop of his own tie to loosen it. It's burning up in the house despite the cool March air outside, and his father's looking a little swollen, sleeves clinging a little tighter to his forearms in the heat, tie leaving a red mark around his throat like a noose. Richie can't be held responsible for the shameful thrill the idea brings him.

"Sit," Wentworth says after what feels like an eternity of terrifying silence. Richie sits, balanced uneasily at the edge of the kitchen chair. His parents do not. His father has his arms crossed over his chest, looking like a sleazy car salesman rather than a reputable dentist, red-faced and sweating in his white button-down and wrinkled black slacks. His mother is still in her robe. She has a glass in her hand, half-empty. It clearly isn't her first. She won't look Richie in the eye.

"Richie." His name sounds ugly coming from his father's mouth. It makes Richie's skin crawl, the way his voice wraps around the two syllables and colors them with such disdain that Richie wants to fucking scream. He sinks his teeth into the flesh of his lip. Think about Ben and Mike pooling their extra chore money to buy you another hot chocolate just because you won't stop whining after puking up the first three.

"That's me." He considers tacking on something else to the end of that. Maybe a 'don't wear it out!' or even a 'surprised you even remember', if he was feeling extra ballsy.

It's another one of those things that would get him into trouble on any normal occasion, but today his father merely sighs wearily, rubbing at his temples like Richie's very existence is a burden weighing him down. Richie is surprised at this. Based on the way they'd been screaming at each other two minutes, he'd have figured he was in for much of the same treatment. Huh. Maybe his dad is just tired. Richie can't blame him. It must be tough, getting into a screaming match with one woman the second you've walked into the house after having another woman sitting on your cock for the past few days.

(Richie swears he'll never be like his dad. He'll throw himself off the roof or swallow an entire medicine cabinet's worth of pills before he lets that happen, and even though he's pretty sure it won't that worry is always there in the back of his mind, that maybe genetics have cursed him with growing into an actual piece of shit and there's nothing he'll be able to do about it, so he has to die.)

"Your mom was just catching me up on all the trouble you've been getting yourself into this past week." It doesn't even matter that he says it in a voice that's teetering on the edge of something violent, the calm right before a storm; Richie still almost rolls his eyes at the irony of it all. Oh, great. Did you catch her up on how nice that new intern's tits are?
"Gee, thanks for keeping it on the down low, Ma," Richie says, half-kidding, as if it even matters, and immediately wishes he hadn't. His mother's face twists into an expression caught somewhere between anger and guilt. The bruise on her arm is darker than ever in this light, and it seems to laugh, taunting him. Richie wants to scream. Think about the lights and the laughing and the cheap unmixed cocoa powder on your tongue.

His father's hand hits the table in front of him, so close and so loud that Richie flinches, jerks back in his chair so suddenly it nearly tips over.

"One of these days you're gonna wise up and just keep your mouth shut, realize you don't have room to be talking that way," Wentworth Tozier preaches as if he doesn't do worse on the daily (or at least, the days he's around), blunt fingernails scratching lightly against the surface of the table as his fingers curl. The sound makes Richie's skin crawl.

As if he even gives a shit. But Richie knows that if he brings this up he'll either wind up with a nasty bruise or, even more ironically, a lecture that two wrongs don't make a right, blah, blah, blah. At this point Richie thinks he'd rather take the hit than listen to this hypocrite talk down to him like he's some kind of bigshot in his sweat-stained business clothes. It makes Richie feel a little better to know that this is how his father, varsity football team captain and celebrated member of the community back when the people here actually had energy to celebrate, wound up — balding and angry with the beginning of a gut pushing stubbornly against his shirt, stuck in a loveless marriage with a woman who's insides are probably like 50% hard liquor at this point, fucking pretty redheaded interns whenever they're desperate enough to spread their legs for him, which seems to be often (Richie doesn't understand that.)

A smirk threatens to play on his face, but Richie squashes it. "If you're gonna ask if I did it, the answer is still no." He kicks idly against the floor, sneaker scuffing the tiles.

That actually makes his dad laugh; a forced, alien noise that reminds Richie of a really old cat trying to clear its throat. He doesn't like it one bit. "Actually, I wasn't. Your mom and I both know you don't have it in you to kick a stray cat to the curb even when you should, let alone...that."

"Then what gives?" Richie shrugs exaggeratedly, shoulders up to his ears.

His father straightens up slowly. The snake is skeptical, unsure if it needs to strike again. Messes with his tie some more. "I went down to the station earlier, talked with Sheriff Bowers for a while. He said it seemed like you took quite a beating the night that boy died." He doesn't sound happy but he doesn't sound particularly bothered by it either, and Richie didn't expect him to but it's still one of those things that hurts in the moment. Think about how you can hardly feel your nose by the end of the night but you don't even care because your face hurts from smiling so much.

Instinctively, Richie reaches back to grip his shoulder, fingers pressing sharply against the scab hidden under two layers of clothing. A week later and it still stings. Infected, probably, or maybe just cursed. He presses harder. He wonders if they found the pocket knife buried in the leaves, stained with Richie's own blood. He wonders if the deer is still there, worn down to nothing but a reeking pile of rotting, leathery flesh and yellow bone.

"Yeah, well. You know." He doesn't elaborate, and he's pretty sure his dad won't ask him to. "Same old, same old."

"He was always giving you trouble, yeah?" Richie nods uneasily, unsure where this is going. "Same with that Bowers boy. His father's a good man, though. Shame our kids don't always take after us."

Anger flares up in Richie's stomach, cooled only by a coinciding wash of painful humiliation. "So
was there a point to this conversation other than making me feel like shit?" he snaps, jaw clenched. "Because if not, you already struck oil, so you can quit drilling now." He tries once to raise his eyes to meet his father's, but he chickens out just before their gazes lock and drops his stare to his own lap, his own hands, long fingers twisting anxiously around each other.

The clock on the wall ticks. His mother's index finger taps unevenly against the side of her glass as she stares down its center like she's trying to dive in and get lost in it.

"The funeral is Wednesday. Closed casket, obviously, considering the...circumstances, but the whole town's invited. 'parently his old man is pretty broken up about it."

Fuck. Richie's throat closes.

"I'm not going."

"Richie. A child is dead. One of your classmates is dead. You're going. It's not up for discussion."

Richie thinks classmate is almost as much of an overexaggeration as child, considering he's pretty sure Hockstetter was going on his third try at senior year. Third time's a charm, right? Guess they'll never know now. Too bad, so sad, Richie thinks. This thought surprises him. Last week he was horrified at the realization that Hockstetter was dead, sick and guilty over the body left to rot in the dirt. Now he's just annoyed. The kid was a sociopath and there's not a single person in town who thinks differently, not if they're being honest with themselves. What's with the pity party now? Why does a dead monster have to be turned into a martyr, drawn with a halo where his horns should be? It's not fair.

Think about Bev laughing with snowflakes in her hair. Think about the lights, Richie, all the pretty pretty pretty colorful lights and how for just a little while this town almost seems like less of a shithole than it actually is —

He wonders what was even left of Patrick Hockstetter when Betty Ripsom stumbled upon his body in the woods. (Had the rats and rabbits had finished gnawing away at the shredded flesh at his throat or had they made a hidey-hole out of it instead? Had the maggots from the deer corpse nearby wriggled on over to see what all the fuss was about?) He wonders what's left of him now that the coroner has taken him apart and stitched him back together.

"I bet you guys wish it was me that died," Richie mutters, slamming his palms down on the table like a petulant child and pushing himself to his feet.

There's a part of him that says it purely with the hope that his father will turn around and finally just fucking hit him already. He wants him to turn around and push him so forcefully that the chair really does tip over and Richie along with it. He wants him to scream and shove a finger in his face. Something. Anything. Fucking anything.

But his father has already busied himself digging around in the drawer for something and muttering under his breath while his mother stares at him with this blank, watery gaze that indicates that she wants say something but won't. She's afraid of him. Richie's brow twitches. If he were feeling up to it he'd turn their silence into a gag. Hello, hello? Mic check, one, two. Is this thing even on? But they both seem to have forgotten that he's even here, his father stalking off to the living room and his mother standing in the corner like a ghost, facing the wall, fingers shaking around her glass and Richie can't find it in him to think any of it is funny anymore.

"Mom," he tries, and his voice comes out cracked and raw.
She breathes in sharply through her nose, closing her eyes and resting her forehead on the lip of her glass. "Not now, Richie."

And that's what does him in. He can deal with his dad being an asshole. He can sort of deal with the fact that in two days he'll once again be occupying the same space as Patrick Hockstetter's corpse while his shoulder burns, a space he never ever wanted to occupy in the first place. He can deal with all of it, but not this. Not when he remembers how her eyes had looked that afternoon in the bedroom, when she'd thumbed over his cheek and called him *sweet boy*.

Richie doesn't really know how he makes it up the stairs, but he'll put it down to the thought that Eddie is in there, waiting for him, even though there's a nagging feeling at the back of his mind that something is amiss. His father's presence has thrown everything askew. The door to the bedroom bangs open, and it takes about two seconds for Richie to realize with his heart caught in his throat that the room is empty. The window is open just enough that Eddie could've reasonably squeezed out, probably to grab a drink. Richie imagines him in the late afternoon sunshine with blood dripping down his chin, and he wants desperately for him to be here now. Chilly air leaks inside and catches at Richie's skin like the spindly fingers of a ghost.

Richie squeezes his eyes shut tight. He hopes that maybe when he opens them Eddie will be here again, all wrapped up in Richie's clothes, hands reaching for him, arms ready to hold him because above all Richie really just wants to be fucking held right now. He needs someone to remind him that he's real. He needs to know he exists.

When he opens his eyes, the room is still empty and without Eddie to occupy the space it no longer feels like a haven. There is nothing safe about this room, this house. The walls feel like they're closing in on him. A lump rises in his throat. He needs to get out.

"Don't be out late. Your mom's making dinner," is the only thing his dad says as Richie storms back through the front hallway, halfhearted over his shoulder from where he's made himself at home on the couch in front of the television, the same spot Richie had sat knee-to-knee with Eddie not long ago, cereal in their laps, stealing Froot Loops out of each other's bowls.

Richie sincerely doubts that unless she plans on serving them all Smirnoff soup, but he doesn't say anything, just slips silently out the front door.

It isn't until he gets to the end of the block that he can finally breathe again.

Richie was twelve when he decided he wanted his feet to touch every damn inch of the earth. He wanted to swim in every ocean and crawl through every cave, wanted every single grain of sand and blade of grass in the world to know him.

"Impossible," Stan had said with a roll of his eyes when Richie told him.

"Nothing's impossible, asshole," Richie snapped back, feeling tender all over like the day after laying out in the sun without sunscreen. Of course he knew it was impossible. He didn't understand why Stan couldn't just let him dream for two fucking seconds.

"Actually, Rich, s-suh-some things a-are actually i-im-impossible..." Bill had piped up unhelpfully, but he did it in such a way that Richie couldn't even really be mad. Instead he sighed, resigned.

"Yeah, I guess. Whatever."

So he was twelve and he decided that all he wanted was to map out the world all over again, no
matter what anyone said.

For now, he's sticking to walking aimlessly across town, zig-zagging through parks, over the Kissing Bridge and doubling back around when he reaches the edge of the trees with a sick feeling in his gut. He wonders logistically how long he could keep roaming like this, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, head low, discreet in a way he usually isn't, before someone noticed. It's hard to tell in a town like Derry.

The thing about wanting every inch of the earth to know the press of your weight is that it's really fucking hard growing up in a place like Derry, a town that's a prison in and of itself. People leave but they always seem to come back.

Richie has only ever left once, at eight years-old. His father had a conference in New York, and Richie and his mama had tagged along, back when they used to try to do things as a family. The city was bright and bustling and fast, blinking lights and a million bodies moving, moving, moving. The nights were dark and chilly and dangerous and even back then Richie had known almost instantly that this was where he was meant to be.

That's where he's going the second he turns eighteen. Every cell in his body buzzes with need whenever he thinks about it. He's going to get on a bus and go and never, ever look back, and it doesn't matter if he has nothing to his name. He could die on a street corner near Central Park and be smiling at his last breath. Anything is better than here. He remembers what Beverly had said. We'll just grab our shit and get on a bus and go.

But eighteen feels perpetually too far away even as it draws nearer (albeit slowly), and Richie wants to leave now.

Speak of the devil and she doth appear.

"Hey, Trashmouth! Where're you headed?" Her voice drifts to him on the wind, playful and comforting, and Richie turns with what he hopes is a knowing smile to find her pedaling lazily towards him on her crudely-painted blue bicycle. There's a single red-orange curl hanging in her eyes.

"You look like shit," she says as she nears him. The smile drops from her face and the light in her eyes dims with sudden, brimming concern; she swerves dangerously at the last moment just to avoid colliding with a fire hydrant.

"Aw, Bev, baby! You really know how to make a lady swoon." Beverly rolls her eyes, playful but knowing, too, and Richie knows he isn't going to be able to talk his way out of this one.

"Seriously, though. What the fuck happened to you, kid? We all find out you're getting mauled by Hockstetter the night he dies and now you're trudgin' around town looking like you just got hit by a truck?" She crosses her arms over her chest. "'Fess up."

If it were anyone else other than Beverly, Richie would tell them to fuck off because it's not even anyone else's business. It's not really Beverly's business either, but she and Richie have grown accustomed to keeping each other's secrets. Sometimes he thinks she knows more about him than he does.

"Would you believe me if I said it's nothing?"

"Not a chance in hell."

Richie sighs. "Didn't think so."
Beverly is chewing on the inside of her cheek, one foot tapping rhythmically against the road, like she's debating on whether or not she should actually say what she's thinking. That scares Richie a little bit, her hesitation, but even if she says something mean or terrible it's going to come out in a really nice way, because that's just the kind of person Bev is. If he were going to die in forty-eight hours of some sort of terminal illness, he'd want her to be the one to tell him. Short and sweet and to the point. She'd probably offer him a stoke or two, too, just to ease the shock of it all.

"Your dad?" she guesses finally, except it isn't really a guess and they both know it. Richie has to admire the way she maintains eye contact with him while she asks. She doesn't pity him. She's not ashamed, just curious. Just worried. He thinks about Stan, smothering him in an uncharacteristic hug. I was just worried about you. We all were. Richie realizes that although those words had sounded genuine at the time, he cannot make them sound real inside his head.

Richie shifts from foot to foot, shoves his hands in his pockets just to give himself something to do. His fingers press against something small and kind of sharp — the plastic ring he'd rescued from the bottom of the Froot Loops box. If he hadn't he'd pretty sure Eddie would have eaten that, too, along with the box. He doesn't seem particularly picky about his food. Wild deer one day, stale cereal the next.

Eddie. Richie wonders where he is right now. If he's safe.

"I'll take that as a yes," Beverly answers for him. Her voice is softer now. She lets her bike drift forward a bit, and out of the corner of his eye Richie can see that she's trying to catch his gaze.

"It's everything," he chokes out, face heating up. "He's making me go to the funeral. Like, as if Hockstetter didn't torture me enough in life, he's gonna be torturing me in death too. Bet he's havin' a real good chuckle in hell right about now."

"Is he seriously? Even after what happened to you that night? Fuck him." She says it with such intense loathing that a droplet of spit flies from her lips. They both watch as it hits the cement at their feet. Richie laughs. Beverly does not. Her eyes are burning. Richie doesn't know if he'll ever stop being struck by how much he loves her.

"What, your old man isn't making you go?" he asks, half-kidding.

Beverly snorts — a dark, sad noise — and tucks a sweat-damp curl behind her ear. "Hell no. Though I'm not sure what's worse...being stuck in the house with him or bein' stuck in a room with a bunch of people trying to be sad that Hockstetter's dead."

"It'll get you out of school, at least. Now that I think about it, that's a pretty fair trade-off." It actually isn't; Richie would rather go to school every day for the rest of the year, summer included, if it meant he could stay as far away from that funeral as possible.

Beverly laughs, shaking her head. "You're terrible."

"Says the one who's laughing! That makes you terrible, too."

"Never said I wasn't," Beverly says with a shrug and a coy smile. "C'mon, walk with me. Feels like I haven't seen you in ages."

Richie does walk with her, for a little while, trying to feel the warmth of the sun even through the cold in his bones. But there's something reckless and stupid churning in his head because being with Beverly gets him too loose, too safe. He's too comfortable with her.

He stops walking. Takes a breath.
"There's something else."

Beverly turns sharply enough that Richie is surprised her bike doesn't tip all the way over; she pedals a wide, graceful loop around where he's stopped in the middle of the street, like a cheetah circling a gazelle.

"Oh?" she says casually, raising an eyebrow.

Richie can hear the blood rushing in his ears, and he's glad for it, because it means he can't entirely hear the words he says next. It's easier that way.

"I know who killed Hockstetter."

Beverly skids to a halt, and this time her bike really does fall over — she half-catches herself, though the chain scrapes against her shin and leaves a greasy black smear there. "You what?"

Richie tugs his lower lip between his teeth and scratches absently at a spot behind his ear. He's like a toddler being put on the spot after being caught trying to steal extra cookies from the pantry.

"It's a long story," he says finally.

Beverly's eyes flash. A dangerous look indeed. "Good thing I've got time."

There are a million different versions of the past week crawling over each other like a colony of ants in the back of Richie's throat. It's a little like Russian Roulette; he opens his mouth and is never quite sure what's going to come out. Maybe something awful.

"Before you say anything," Beverly says, holding up a hand and effectively keeping his mouth sealed for the time being. "I meant it when I said you looked like shit. You look like you need a stoke. And a Coke." She giggles to herself.

"A Coke and a stoke," Richie echoes, and he feels himself start to smile. "Careful there. You might be giving Ben a run for his money."

"A poet and I didn't know it," Bev agrees with a wink, nodding towards the pegs at the back of her bike. "Hop on."

Twenty minutes later they're sitting side by side near the dumpsters behind a diner near the edge of town, each with a smoking Camel in one hand and a sweating styrofoam cup of Coca-Cola in the other. A slightly soggy carton of steak fries sits between them on the ground, and Richie is only half-ashamed that he's already devoured most of them. Beverly doesn't seem to mind, and Richie has the nagging suspicion that she only said they were to share so he didn't feel bad about the fact that she's trying to feed him.

The next hour (or two, or three; Richie loses track) passes by in a succession of bug-eyed gasps and no way's, courtesy of Bev, who listens raptly to Richie's recollection of the past few days even as he stumbles through the parts of it that sound the craziest. That's the thing he loves about Beverly. He always knew that one day he'd come to her with the most outlandish story in the world and she wouldn't question it for even a second.

"You probably think it's crazy," Richie says by way of conclusion. He's pretty sure his face is red.

"It is crazy," Beverly agrees, licking salt off her lips and taking a final swig of her drink. Her gaze is
fixed on the horizon, eyes thoughtful. The corners of her mouth are twitching as if she's fighting a smile, and for a moment Richie wonders if she really doesn't believe him. (Not that he could blame her, really.) "No wonder you've been missing in action lately."

Richie laughs then, giddy and relieved.

"So he ran away," she says slowly, "but you have no idea where he came from."

"Nope," Richie answers, popping the p. "I don't think he wants to talk about it."

"Well he's gonna have to squeal, and soon. There's already a manhunt brewing for Hockstetter's murderer."

"Oh, please. Why's he any different from anyone else who gets killed in this dumb town?" If anything, Richie thinks, he's even less worthy, and for once he actually wishes everyone would just keep their heads down and be done with it. He's dead. It's over. *Let's all move on, folks. Nothing to see here.*

It's awful. He's awful. Richie knows he's awful.

"Just think about it! He was Bowers' best friend, Richie. Now I don't know if that means his daddy's gonna be trying any harder than he would otherwise, but you and I both know Henry and the rest of his goons are gonna pick up the slack. Even if it means going after someone innocent." Her expression shifts to something bordering on fearful. "And if he knows you were there that night, I...I just don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Eddie's innocent," Richie insists, feeling the color drain from his face. Bev's right. "He was just...protecting me."

"Look, I'm not saying he's not. I don't know him. Hockstetter was a fuckin' psychopath and I'm definitely not upset that he's dead, but we've gotta be realistic here." She lowers her voice. "You have to find out where he came from. He said he's lookin' for his dad, right? But we've gotta start somewhere."

Richie really doesn't want to talk about this, and he isn't sure why. Talking about Eddie out loud with anyone other than Eddie himself feels...strange and wrong, somehow, like he's just divulged something far too close to his heart. *You can't keep him a secret forever, selfish boy,* his mind hisses. *It's not fair.* And Richie knows that, of course. Logically. But his heart hurts when he thinks about Eddie going away, and he's not ready to let go. It's too soon for that. He just needs a little bit longer. Just a little bit.

*Keep telling yourself that, selfish boy. Nothing's ever enough for you.*

"Start where?" he asks finally, voice coming out a little more raw, a little more tender than he'd anticipated, but if Beverly notices, which she likely does, she doesn't say anything about it.

Instead she cocks her head, and Richie swears he can see the light go on in her head. It's the look she gets whenever she gets an idea, the dangerous kinds that are either the bane or the high point of his existence. He knows that look well — he gets it sometimes, too. They're birds of a feather in more ways than one.

"Can I meet him?"
The house is predictably dead — no dinner in sight, courtesy of Maggie Tozier — and the sky is a deep, dark blue tinged with the remaining strands of pink and yellow by the time Richie pushes open his bedroom window, heart pounding in his ears because he hadn't shut it before he left, which means —

"Eddie," he breathes as soon as he's hauled himself into the room, and Eddie is at his side in an instant, amber eyes brewing with a mixture of relief and uncertainty.

"Richie," he whispers urgently, gaze flickering to the door, taking a step closer like he's trying to back Richie towards the window, hands gripping at Richie's forearms. The spots he touches are the only places on Richie's body that feel warm. Real. "There's someone here, Richie, a man —"

"Eddie," Richie cuts him off with a watery, adoring laugh, placing a hand on his shoulder. Eddie pushes up on his toes, just a little bit, so his shoulder can fill Richie's palm entirely. It's something he does often, Richie's noticed, and he understands. He isn't the only one who needs holding sometimes. "It's just my dad. Sorry, I wanted to be here when you got back, I just — I just had to go."

"Oh." Eddie's brow furrows, cheeks turning a little pink. Richie almost wants to correct him. No, don't be embarrassed. It's sweet. Plus, my dad's a jackass. You've got every right to be worried, honestly. But before he can, Eddie's lips pull back from his teeth in a snarl, eyes focused on something just over Richie's shoulder, and maybe he'd laugh because Eddie is just cute, but it's actually kind of scary, the way he shits from soft to terrifyingly inhuman so quickly. Were his teeth always that sharp, the pale blue veins in his face always so visible in this light? Richie doesn't think so.

He knows exactly what Eddie's looking at, though, and he needs to act fast to keep this from escalating any further. Hockstetter is one thing, but he would never forgive himself if he let something happen to Beverly.

"It's okay," he promises, circling around so he's behind him and reaching out to tug Eddie back a little just as Beverly pops her head in the window, light eyes big and curious, nose wrinkled with unease. "Bev's a friend." Eddie's posture loosens but he doesn't really budge otherwise, still positioned like a snake ready to strike, and Richie goes over the pros and cons of having a kid with a built-in kill switch sleeping in his bedroom every night.

"Yeah, I'm a friend, you hear that?" Bev chuckles as she hauls herself easily over the sill and into the room. "It's okay, Eddie. Richie told me everything. I'm here to help." She sticks out her hand to him. Eddie stares at it like she's just offered him a ticking timebomb. His gaze shifts from her outstretched palm to Richie, then back to her and back to Richie again.

"Eddie," he says slowly. "This is Beverly. Bev, meet Eddie."

He turns to Eddie and nudges him gently, adding in a whisper, "And maybe put the teeth away."

They've been talking for upwards of an hour, the three of them in a peculiar arrangement on Richie's bedroom floor. Well, Beverly has been doing most of the talking while Eddie stares back, stone-faced and suspicious, wedged protectively in front of Richie, which Richie assured him a million times was very considerate but completely unnecessary. Every so often Eddie will turn to give Richie an accusing look.

"So where are you from, exactly?" Beverly pushes, tongue pressed against the back of her teeth in
frustration. Richie bites the inside of his cheek. He'd warned her on the ride over that Eddie was stubborn.

Eddie just shakes his head, indicating that he's done with being interrogated. But Beverly has never taken no for an answer before, and she won't do it now, even when the boy in front of her is responsible for ripping someone to shreds a week ago.

"Okay, here," Bev sighs. "Can we play Twenty Questions? You don't have to tell me exactly where, but I'm going to ask you questions and you can answer with yes or no. Or I guess you can just nod, if you want. Make sense?"

Eddie just stares.

"C'mon, humor me here, kid. I'm begging."

Richie wonders if Eddie can feel him shaking with laughter.

Eddie seems to be at war with himself, fingers tapping quickly against the floor by Richie's knee. He wants to inch his leg closer so that Eddie will be touching his leg instead, but he's not sure how to do it without making it obvious.

Finally and with no lack of reservation, Eddie nods. "Okay."

"Is it nice?"

Eddie rolls his eyes. "No."

"Okay, fair enough. Did you have food there?" A nod. "Water?" Another. "Radio?" A shrug. "TV?" Vigorous head shake. Beverly sighs, crossing and uncrossing her legs, freckled and nicked against Richie's bedroom floor. "Would you be able to find it if you had to?"

Eddie cocks his head slightly, considering that. "Yes."

"Will you show us?"

When Eddie speaks this time, his voice is small. Almost afraid. "Why?"

Bev extends her hands again, and Richie nudges softly at Eddie's ribs in a way that he hopes comes across as encouraging. "It's okay," he whispers, so close that the curly wisps of hair around his ear flutter.

"Because I want to help you. We both do," Beverly says. "Richie says you're looking for your dad. I think we might be able to help you, if you let us. Our friend, Ben, he's real smart. And Mike, well...his family knows everything about this town. I promise we can help, okay?" She pauses to breathe, a little shaky like maybe she's as unsure about this as Eddie is. "You just have to let us."

Slowly, tentatively, Eddie reaches out and offers one of his hands to Beverly. She takes it in both of hers and squeezes, and fuck flowers, Richie thinks, because the breathless smile that blooms across her face puts every rose in the world to shame.

"Friends," Eddie says, slow and unsure.

Beverly nods eagerly, chewing on her lip. "Friends." Eddie squeezes her hand back, and for the first time all night Richie feels warm.

"I hate to break this up," Richie interjects, and immediately hates how out of place his voice sounds.
in the comforting quiet Beverly and Eddie have created from Bev's gentle, soft words. "But it's like...midnight, and Bev and I have school tomorrow."

"Fuck!" Beverly chuckles, rubbing at her eyes with the back of her hand like she's only just now realized how tired she is.

"Fuck," Richie agrees, laughing as he muffles a yawn into the collar of his shirt.

Eddie looks between the two of them, brow creased in thought, his gaze swinging like a pendulum from Bev's face to Richie's.

"Fuck," he echoes with a bashful, open expression, like he's asking 'Did I do that right?'

There's maybe half a second where none of them make a single sound, and then Bev doubles over with a squeak and Richie throws his head back and the three of them laugh so loud he's sure the entire town can hear.

"Fucking hell," Beverly gasps once she's mostly sobered up, only to dissolve in laughter all over again. Her cheeks are pink and her eyes are sparkling and Richie's sure his must be too. He can't quite catch his breath, and he shakes against Eddie even after his own hiccuping laughter has ceased, who's still curled up near him, his own smile a little timid but pleased, too. Proud. Richie can't remember the last time he laughed so hard.

"Tomorrow?" he pipes up as Bev and Richie finally manage to get their heads level, though every so often one of them will titter quietly.

"Tomorrow?" Bev repeats, straightening up. "Tomorrow you'll show us?"

Eddie doesn't hesitate this time. Just nods once, determined like he'd been at the quarry. "Yes. Tomorrow."

"Okay, cool. After school then. I'll walk home with Richie and then we'll go, yeah? Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Eddie nods again. His fingers are starting to tap idly against the floor.

"Tomorrow," Richie chimes in just because he's starting to feel like he exists on the outskirts of this conversation, though there's a bit of an upwards inflection at the end and he couldn't sound more apprehensive if he tried. Part of him, he thinks, is a little jealous that Bev was able coax this kind of admission out of Eddie in just one night when he's had an entire week to try. But you didn't try, his mind hisses.

Richie isn't really ready to face the truth behind that.

Beverly makes Eddie pinky swear on it before she goes, an expression that Eddie has never even heard of. ("It's like a promise," Bev explains, and Eddie nods, expression relaxing. He knows what that means.) She kisses Richie once on the cheek, quick and chaste, another gesture that Eddie observes with guileless fascination, as if he's never seen anything quite like it before. The soft, wispy haze that has started to reform in Richie's gut darkens like a storm cloud.

Beverly slips out the window and back into the night with one last 'Tomorrow' and Richie is still smiling, cheeks a little sore, but by the time he sees her reach the end of the block the storm cloud in his stomach is pitch black with dread.
homecoming

Chapter Notes

tw in this chapter for panic attacks, homophobic slurs, and more dead animals oh my
dedicated to my darling dearest windy, whose support and talent both know no bounds

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How can I begin to move on?/The
wounds still have something to say

— Noor Shirazie

In the dream, Maggie Tozier is a princess. Not the locked-in-a-tower, fire-breathing dragon kind, but a princess nonetheless.

But that's not really a dream, is it? It's what she was, once upon a time just like in the storybooks Richie's never read. Margaret, Maggie, Mags — Richie hears stories even today from people who tell him that she flitted between three names as easily as a butterfly. Beloved daughter, homecoming queen, golden girl, everybody's best friend. Even in its prime, Derry was always something of a wasteland, all dead leaves and sagging bodies in the late summer heat, and in the midst of it there she had been, shining and celestial. There had been so many people starving for that kind of girl, slavering like rabid dogs, bad men with good hands, crooked smiles, ugly thoughts who wanted to sink their teeth into her light. Richie supposes that her being consumed by one of them was inevitable.

In the dream Richie watches her fall in love with a wolf disguised as a prince, broad-shouldered and charming, who promises her the world with his hands on her hips. In the dream the princess believes him, if only because all she's ever wanted is to be adored like her mother before her. In the dream the wolf has teeth dripping with saliva. In the dream the wolf wears his father's face.

In the dream he's in the hallway of his house, and everything is the same except the walls are white instead of the ugly forest green they are now, and the photos hanging up and down the hall are ones he only knows from the messy stack of them in the back of his parents' closet. In the dream his mama is standing in the living room window, fingers tracing shapes against the frosted glass. She's singing to herself, softly, lips just barely moving with words Richie can't make out; she's heavily pregnant, and somehow Richie's dream-self knows that the child growing her belly is him, too, even as he stands here watching.

In the dream, Richie is within and without. (His dream-self knows that's a line he's heard before, but he can't put his finger on where. Something that Stan's said, maybe, or something overheard on the cusp of consciousness.)

In the dream he's thrust into the world in an abrupt burst of painful white light. In the dream his parents only stare down at him, unblinking, for a long time, as he gurgles and clenches his splotchy pink hands. In the dream they stare down at him until their eyes go black with disappointment and
their faces turn blue and then gray and their skin peels away from their faces like the flesh of an apple and they rot and they rot and they rot.

"What about this one?"

Everything trembles suddenly, violently. Equal parts panicked and annoyed, Richie jerks up from where he started to doze in the cradle of his arms, leaving a puddle of drool on the worn dark wood of the library table. He blinks wearily as he comes to his senses, stomach lurching painfully just as the image of his parents in shades of dead and deader disappears entirely, and wipes at his mouth with his shirtsleeve. He shoots a glare at Beverly, who has just deliberately slammed a book down in front of him. She smiles back innocently, unrelenting.

"I hate you," Richie mutters.

"No, you don't."

Richie holds her gaze for maybe three seconds before he breaks. "Fair point," he concedes. His spine pops noisily as he leans over on his elbows to study the thick, worn paperback she's dropped onto the table.

_They Thirst_ in dripping blood letters with the screaming subtitle THEY COME TO DEVOUR A CITY! Richie cackles.

"Think it's accurate?" Beverly asks, plopping down across from him. She turns to a random page near the middle and begins to read aloud. "She thought she'd seen a face as white as gossamer and within it a pair of eyes that shone in the dark like a lowrider's headlights." She snickers, tongue between her teeth.

"He's not even that pale!" Richie laughs.

"Yeah, but for all you know the human part of him that's keeping him from lookin' like a cadaver," Bev shoots back, wrinkling her nose as she loses interest in the book in front of her and pushes it to the side.

"You guys are into supernatural horror now?" Stan asks out of nowhere from where he's leaned over Richie's shoulder. He's so close that Richie could kiss his cheek if he wanted to, and Richie _does_ want to, if only because Stan gets kind of funny when Richie does stuff like that — weird and irritable and blushy. If they were somewhere else, somewhere safer than the school library, he would.

"Oh, Stan! Good, you're just in time...dear Bev and I were just getting to the hot vampire sex scenes. You should see what these guys can do with a wooden stake and some spit." Richie grins wickedly and nods to the slowly-growing stack of books next to Beverly. "You want in?"

"Hard pass." Stan rolls his eyes, returning to his own chair beside Bill to at the next table over. Richie barks out a laugh and earns himself a stern look from the librarian from over the thin rims of her glasses.

"You sure? You're missin'. Out. Big. Time."

"B-beep-beep, Richie," Bill says by way of warning, though he still reaches across the slight gap between their tables to poke Richie's cheek fondly. Richie pokes back with his middle finger, then turns his attention to the other books Bev has accumulated while he was passed out. _Research_, she'd called it, though Richie doubts they're going to find anything in here that's genuinely helpful.
Still, he slides the pile over and runs his fingers lightly over their weathered spines, trying to summon a single ounce of wonder, the kind that shines in Ben's eyes as he tears through page after page after page. Richie's head has always moved too fast, though, and he finds himself growing bored quicker than he'd hoped.

*Those of My Blood*, whose tattered cover features a man and woman embracing each other in front of the full moon. Richie rolls his eyes. The *Silver Kiss*; a young woman cradled in the arms of a man with pale skin and white hair and a dark, heavy coat; he mostly resembles the kind of vampires Richie's seen in movies. Eddie's not like any of those, closer to *Lost Boys* than *Dracula*, but even that isn't quite right. He's too freckled, too gentle, too sunny when he's framed in soft yellow light, one of Richie's sweatshirts pulled tight over his back.

Richie pushes the stack back towards Bev with a loud sigh. "You should probably put those back, unless you really do wanna read some freaky vampire sex."

Beverly opens her mouth, eyes narrowing in challenge, but whatever she was going to say is cut short by the sharp ring of the dismissal bell. The library is supposed to be a quiet place, Richie knows, but once that bell rings it's fair game. The room comes alive with the sound of chatter as students start to flood into the halls, shouting and laughing and pushing and shoving, a stream of bodies all itching for the exit.

"You gonna help me put these back or what?" Beverly asks, one eyebrow arched expectantly. The rest of the Losers are shoving papers and pens back into their bags. Bill dog-ears a page in his book before tucking it under his arm, a gesture that makes Ben cringe.

"Sorry, toots, you know the rules. You take 'em out, you put 'em back!" Richie answers cheekily, sticking his tongue out at her and walking backwards towards the entrance. "'Sides, I gotta take a piss real quick."

"Jackass," Beverly mutters, rolling her eyes, but Ben has already picked up the slack, holding out his hands for half of Beverly's stack. She smiles at him gently, gratefully, then shouts to Richie, "Meet me out front in ten! Don't forget!"

And that's funny, because Richie's stomach hasn't stopped turning since they'd come to the agreement last night. He couldn't forget if he tried.

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Eddie is waiting expectantly on the edge of Richie's bed when they arrive with his legs crossed, Richie's old maroon windbreaker tied around his waist, shoes laced neatly and knobby knees bouncing. Richie considers that maybe he's as anxious about this as Richie is. He also looks...off, somehow, but maybe it's just the fog in Richie's brain.

"You ready to go?" Beverly asks. Her expression is open and kind, even though she's practically vibrating with the suspense of it all. It's the face she wears when she really wants something and intends on getting it. She's smart like that. It's the kind of thing Richie loves about her, but in this moment he hates her for it. He can feel her anticipation from here. It makes his palms clammy, and he wipes them against his jeans.

"Yes," Eddie answers, voice quiet but steady, face tight with resolve.
It's unanimously decided that Eddie will ride with Bev and Richie will walk, since he's unsure if he's ever even getting his bike back. Eddie clambers up awkwardly onto the bike pegs and they both titter as the bike sways briefly while Bev struggles to get her footing.

"Should've asked Mike to borrow his basket. I could've hitched a ride in there," Richie snickers. Beverly rolls her eyes.

"You're all legs, Trashmouth. You'd fit in it about as well as a baby giraffe."

That seems to settle it; Bev peddles slowly as Eddie guides her, never offering more than a 'turn here' or 'that road, there'. Richie strides alongside them, kicking rocks with his heart in his throat. Eddie has his chin hooked curiously over Bev's shoulder, like he wants to see exactly what she's seeing. He looks mystified, and Richie longs to see the world through his eyes, just once, so that these cracked sidewalks and overgrown front yards seemed like something so much more than what they are.

"This road. This is the one," Eddie says, and Richie frowns. Can they really be so close already? Was Eddie really hiding right under their noses all these years? It's strange, to think that there's a road in this town Eddie lives on and it's one that they know like the backs of their hands, one they've walked down over and over again without ever once looking up.

But there's something about this road that feels particularly familiar to Richie, and though he can't place it exactly it's enough to make the hair on his arms stand up even in the afternoon heat. He can taste his own heart beating in the back of his mouth. Dread. Richie knows it well, but not like this. Please don't stop here, please don't stop here, please don't stop here.

"Here," Eddie says, and all the air in Richie's lungs leaves in one long exhale. The world spins, because Richie knows this house.

There's not even anything wholly spectacular about it or anything, which is maybe why it's so terrifying to think that it's where Eddie comes from. Richie tries to make that connection in his head, but it doesn't click. He does not understand, because it doesn't make sense. Richie doesn't know what he expected — a ramshackle cabin somewhere deep in the woods, or maybe a bunker hidden underground. But it's just a house. Familiar, with its faded yellow paint and forest green shutters.

And yes, Richie knows his mother.

Knows of her, at least.

Sonia Kaspbrak is a nurse, just like Eddie had said. Widowed, supposedly. She's tall and top-heavy with short, tight brown curls and small eyes framed by wired glasses. Physically, her presence is overbearing. She's lonely, clearly, because that's what they all say about women without husbands and it shows in the way she moves through town like a ghost, but she's always seemed friendly enough. The kind of woman who participates in her necessary share of gossip with the other ladies at work just to keep people out of her hair.

And she's Eddie's mother.

Richie and Bill had even mowed the lawn for her once. Well, Bill had. Richie had sprawled out under the tree and sipped from a juice box and shouted vaguely flirty things at Bill to make him blush while beads of sweat dripped down his neck, only half-joking. (Those sort of things have always come naturally as breathing to him, and though Richie's never said the words out loud, he doesn't need to. He knows his own truth and it's the least of his worries. He already knows he's a surplus of
disappointments crammed into a body too small to fit them all — *queer* is just another to tack onto the end of the list. He hardly thinks they'd mind.)

It had been early last spring, somewhere in the small window of time each year where Derry is green, lush and thriving. They'd spent all morning in Ms. Kaspbrak's front yard, laughing and joking under a canopy of purple flowers. She'd offered them sweet tea and they'd laid side by side in the freshly cut grass to drink it, and sweet, dear Billiam had even split the money with Richie for his moral support. It was a good day, and like the winter carnival it's something Richie's always remembered fondly.

And all the while Eddie must have been inside, somewhere, trapped in the dark, cutting his own lips on the sharpened points of his teeth.

Richie feels sick.

"This is it?" Beverly asks, breaking the silence. She's pale, and looks as taken aback as Richie feels. "You're sure?"

Eddie nods firmly, staring down his own front door much the same way Richie did yesterday afternoon, throat bobbing with what Richie knows is nothing but fear.

"Is your mom home?" Richie hardly hears Beverly ask over the blood rushing in his ears.

"No," Eddie answers without even looking towards the empty driveway.

Richie surprises himself at what he asks next. "Can we go in?"

Eddie looks at Richie over his shoulder. "You want to go in?" His face is full of uncertainty.

"Yeah, we do," Beverly cuts in. "Maybe we'll find something to help us figure out who your dad is, yeah?"

That seems to do him in. He silently leads them around the side of the house, slightly overgrown with flowery weeds that they flatten beneath the soles of their shoes, a path less traveled. The back slider is unlocked. Eddie seems to hesitate before he opens it, drawing a shuddering breath before pushing it aside and stepping away, eyes downcast.

"I can't go in," Eddie says quickly, shaking his head so suddenly Richie would be shocked if he didn't give himself whiplash. "You go. If you want."

Beverly frowns, fingers lingering on the doorframe, one foot in the house and one still on the back step. "You don't want to come inside?"

"I'll stay here," Eddie insists, the rigidity of his posture indicating that he's already rooted himself like a tree where he stands.

Richie follows Beverly inside almost mechanically, feet moving on their own accord even though his brain feels like it's wormed its way out of his skull and plopped onto the ground by Eddie's feet right next to his bleeding heart. His senses are immediately assaulted by a blast of hot air; the sound of his shoes against the hardwood echoes through the house and the empty, ringing silence of it all, steeped with neglect, is one Richie is so accustomed to that for half a second his brain tricks him into thinking that maybe they've turned themselves around and he's broken into his own house instead.

His skin prickles with unease. He really doesn't want to leave Eddie outside — whether that's for Eddie's sake or his own, he isn't sure.
Richie turns back to the open window where Eddie is standing stock-still with his arms wrapped around himself, chewing anxiously at the inside of his cheek. "Eddie," he says, trying to make himself sound gentle and patient like Beverly, but that particular Voice has never been his strong suit and it just comes out strangled, panicked, desperate. Maybe because he is. Richie holds out his hand. "C'mon, I swear it'll be okay. Bev and I are here with you, yeah? Besides, we need a tour guide."

The corner of his mouth quirks, and the half-smile must be more convincing than his words, because Eddie visibly relaxes. Richie wonders if the myth about vampires needing to be invited in holds any truth; then again, Eddie didn't need any prompting to come into Richie's kitchen that first night.

Eddie's smile fades. He purses his lips. "Are you sure?"

"That it'll be okay?" Richie asks. When Eddie nods, he answers, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Bev and I got your back." The thought is a little silly, that Eddie needs anyone to look after him in the first place, but as he compartmentalizes the apprehension in Eddie's gaze Richie is starting to wonder if maybe he does, if he needs more than he lets on. Richie wonders if maybe he's just been too stupid to notice, and he fights the sudden urge to pinch himself through his clothes, dig his nails into his palms until they welt, red half moons etching justified violence into his own skin. *Wake up, selfish boy.*

Eddie steps inside, shuts the door behind them and it's suddenly as if the light of the afternoon never existed at all. Beverly is waiting for them a few paces away, and then it's the three of them in the back hall of this poorly-lit image of suburbia, standing at the edge of some great terrible darkness, toes touching the floor just outside the monster's reach.

"So this is your house, huh?" Richie says conversationally. Stale air fills his mouth and crawls up his nose, meeting somewhere in the back of his throat before taking a dive into the pit of his aching belly. His eyes travel to the ceiling. A thin crack in the plaster here, a slightly brown water stain there. Nothing unusual.

They walk down the hall in a single line, Beverly Richie Eddie, in that order. From here the front door is visible, the kitchen off to the left. It's so dark, but it looks so normal. A dam of questions starts to line the inside of Richie's bottom row of teeth.

There are dishes piled in the sink, crusted with leftover food that must be days old by now. The trash can by the back door is half full. An untouched cup of coffee sits on the kitchen table, skinned over with a thin film of dust, next to the Sunday paper. Patrick Hockstetter's latest yearbook photo leers back at Richie from the front page.

"Like she just up and left," Bev muses softly. Her eyes scan the room, catch on things Richie doesn't want to see. Eddie's gaze is fixed firmly on the floor, hexagon tiles in black-and-white.

On the counter sits a collection of thick glass bottles, arranged neatly in a line next to a gleaming silver funnel. Any closer and Richie thinks his skin might start burning, so he turns around with Eddie hot on his heels.

Beverly opts for the living room, drifting in on shaky legs — her fingers move out to touch things and pull away just before her skin makes contact with them — while Richie ascends the staircase near the front door, one hand on the banister and the other hanging limp by his side like he hopes maybe Eddie will reach out and link their fingers together, but he doesn't.

The second floor is small, nothing more than a landing with a couple of doors on one side and the narrow, rickety stairwell on the other. Only one of the doors is open, so Richie chooses that one to peer into. Sonia's bedroom, he has to assume. The bed is made, sheets and comforter pulled tight and neat over the mattress. It's the same sort of uniform tidiness that he imagines she must conform to at the hospital, but it's the only part of the room that isn't in a state of disarray.
The closet door is ajar, from it a river of clothing and crumpled paper that litters the floor. A leather-bound notebook peeks out from beneath the mattress. Richie pulls it out gingerly by its corner and a stack of papers goes fluttering to the floor, so loud in the quiet that his heart crashes against his rib cage. He stoops low to gather them up in shaking hands. There's a paper-clipped stack of photographs that Richie is too afraid to inspect closely right now. Other papers look like letters, covered top-to-bottom in someone's messy scrawl. The dates at the top of most of them jump out at him like playful ghosts — 1970, 1976, 1982, 1989...

"What happened here?" Richie asks, but when he looks over his shoulder Eddie is nowhere to be found. Richie turns back to the bedroom one more time, and a hot arrow of fear striking the space between his shoulder blades. He leaves before his curiosity can pull him in any further. Some things, Richie knows, are better left undiscovered. His curious brain tends to disagree with that statement, but not this time.

The house is eerie, sure, and dark and too warm, but there's something about how ordinary it is that's more terrifying than anything his mind could have cooked up. Maybe it's the ever-present feeling that he's being watched, or how everything is off-kilter just slightly, as if without Eddie its remaining occupant just up and left in the middle of everything.

Richie realizes that theory isn't entirely out of the realm of possibility.

He's in the hall near the back door, nearly tripping over are a pair of worn pink slippers he hadn't noticed before. He can hear Beverly back in the kitchen, sneakers squeaking against the tiles as she moves, repulsed and entranced by the paralyzing implications of every item in the house. Hers are the only footsteps Richie can hear, though, and he worries his lip between his teeth.

"Eddie?" he calls, and he swears he's trying to be quiet but the aching loneliness of this place makes his voice boom. "Eddie, where'd you go? Bev, is Eddie with you?"

"No..." Bev yells back, voice unsure. "I thought he was with you?"

"No..." Bev yells back, voice unsure. "I thought he was with you?"

Richie stalks down the hall, past the rust-red back door. "Eddie?" Around the corner, into a tiny half-bath with a bucket in the corner, its rim crusted red. "Eddie?" Doubles back around, headed towards the front hall again, past an inconspicuous white door, maybe to the furnace or a coat closet, when something grabs him by the scruff and jerks him to a violent halt.

The sick feeling in Richie's gut intensifies, spreads like poison. He doesn't know why he stops, only that something beyond that door feels like it's calling to him. He cracks it open and the darkness pierces his vision like the point of a needle. It's no longer calling to him, not anymore — it's screaming. Wailing, agonized. And Richie knows that it's all in his head, it must be, because over the roar of the pleading doorway he can still hear Beverly fussing around somewhere down the hall, blissfully unaware. She's calling Eddie's name now, too.

He pulls the door open wider; the dim light of the hallway illuminates the first few steps of a descending staircase and Richie knows, he just knows there's something awful there, something so much more than just his fear of the dark and the monsters that live in it.

He feels a presence next to him before he sees it, and when he turns his head Eddie is standing beside him, his own gaze focused intensely on the vast blackness beyond the doorway in front of them. Richie doesn't miss the way his chin wobbles.

"What's down there?" Richie asks. He's too afraid to take the first step. His younger self — and perhaps his more fearless self, too — is sitting on his shoulder, sneering in a voice like Patrick Hockstetter's, in a voice like his father's, in a voice like Eddie's, in a voice that's his
own, pussy. Chanting *I dare you, I dare you!* But Richie can't, and it isn't so much being afraid of the dark as it is being afraid of what he'll find once the light comes on.

When no answer comes, he looks at Eddie again just as the boy exhales loudly. It's a watery, broken noise that goes straight to the lump in Richie's throat. The foul taste of trepidation is thick as buttercreme on his tongue.

"Eddie." Richie starts, voice wavering. He reaches out to touch his shoulder, maybe to steady him, maybe to pull him away, maybe to turn that terrified, stricken face towards his own.

That's when the dam breaks.

It's a blink-and-you-miss-it kind sort of thing — one moment Eddie is standing up straight next to him and the next he's on the ground, knees drawn to his chest, fingers curling in his own hair, dragging down his face as his breath comes in short, ragged gasps.

"Richie, I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here, I need to go, I can't...I can't, she'll lock me away again, please, Richie, I want to go!" He tears his fingers through his hair again, tugging so hard Richie is surprised it doesn't rip clean out of his scalp. He sinks to his knees next to him.

"Eddie, hey, Eddie, c'mon. I need you to breathe for m-

"I can't!" Eddie's voice dances on the cusp of a snarl, undercut only by the desperation in his tear-stained gaze. Richie has always known that comfort was never his strong suit, but the dismissal still hurts like hell.

"What's going on!?" Beverly appears at the end of the hallway, glowing like a sentinel in the blur, eyes big. A few open envelopes are tucked into the waistband of her skirt. Richie looks helplessly from her to the boy in front of him, running his hands down the sides of his arms but Eddie is having none of it, shaking him off.

"Eddie," Richie tries again.

"I want to go!" Eddie repeats, voice cracked open and pleading. "I need to go, I need to get out, let me out of here!"

So they go.

The three of them fly down the back steps, tumbling into the dying grass. Bev scrapes her knee on the walkway and leaves a dot of blood there. Eddie's elbow catches Richie right in the stomach, and for a second he's sure he's going to vomit, head spinning. They're all panting as if they've just spent the past ten minutes holding their breath. Richie thinks they might as well have been.

"Come on," Beverly urges, hauling Richie to his feet with a sense of urgency. Now that Eddie has brought it to their attention it's like they can feel it now too, the gut sensation of encroaching danger, the need to put as much distance between themselves and the house as possible.

"Eddie, come on, let's go," Richie begs, struggling to find his own footing in the grass. The sun is hot on his back. Was it daytime when they'd gone inside? He cannot remember. How did they get here? Why did they go in there?

Eddie looks up at him then, and it's almost too much. His eyes are rimmed red and there are angry dark scratches all down his cheeks, black blood trapped underneath his fingernails. In the dark it's the kind of thing that would be frightening but in the light it's just awful, pain and violence under an inescapable spotlight.
"You made me go in there!" Eddie wails. Richie's breath catches, his own remorse pouring down so heavy he thinks he's going to drown in it. And he deserves it, doesn't he? He can never let things stay good; he doesn't know how. His hands are shaking as he reaches out to help pull Eddie to his feet, but Eddie recoils so violently that Richie gasps, a startled wet noise. "Don't touch me."

"I didn't know!" Richie shoots back, louder than intended. His whole body is crying out with a tender sting because all he wants is to reach out and touch Eddie's hand but he can't even do that now. He's selfish, selfish, selfish and now he's going to lose his one good thing. "Look, how was I supposed to know that it was going to be that bad? You haven't told me shit since we met!"

"Richie," Beverly warns, clasping a hand over his shoulder from where she's stood behind him, but Richie couldn't turn around if he tried, too caught up in the agony he's inflicted on the boy in the grass.

"But I told you," Eddie protests, angry tears spilling over the apples of his cheeks. "I told you I didn't...I couldn't. But you made me go anyway."

Richie's heart is beating double-time in his chest. He can feel Eddie drawing further and further into himself. "Eddie, I -"

"Leave me alone."

Eddie turns and starts jogging down the path back to the front gate, and Richie takes maybe two steps in that direction before Beverly's arms come around his shoulders, fingers clasping at his chest right over the place where his heart is pounding, aching, screaming.

"Eddie!" he calls, body heaving as he tries to twist out of her grasp, but she holds him fast; his everything aches with the need to go after him. "Eddie, wait! Jesus, Bev, fucking let me go!

Her mouth is so close to the back of his neck that he can feel her lips move, trembling when she speaks. "No," she says sadly, tightening her arms and Richie should feel grateful for the contact but now he just feels helpless. "You need to cool down, okay, and let him do the same. It was...bad in there." She's shaking too, all over, and Richie hates himself for taking advantage of it when her grip falters for just a moment, wrenching himself from her hold.

"Richie!" she calls, but Richie doesn't stop, mind spinning like a game show wheel where every colored panel blares Eddie's name.

Until now, it's always stung a little bit that nobody has ever wanted to come to his house. They don't go to Bev's much either, but her apartment is tiny and her dad doesn't like her having boys over. There's nothing wrong with Richie's house, on the other hand, no actual reason they can't come, but he doesn't have a trampoline like Bill or acres of open space like Mike or a huge back porch like Stan or a weird collection of true crime artifacts like Ben and nobody ever wants to come over unless it's for drinking, and most of the time not even then. Your house makes me sad, Stan had told him when he was ten years-old and too young to know better. Too many ghosts. And he hadn't been wrong, but Richie had spent the rest of the night searching room by room for the ghosts Stan was talking about.

He gets it now, finally, and he understands. Stan hadn't been wrong about the ghosts.

But the Toziers' ghosts have nothing on Eddie's.
Time is stretched thin like cheap drugstore gauze, the color of the light coming through the trees the only indicator that any time has passed at all. Richie is lost. He's been yelling Eddie's name for a length of time he has no name for. But there is no Eddie, the breeze in the trees and the snap of twigs underfoot his only company. His knees are bloody and his palms are dirty and there's a hole in the elbow of his shirt. He can't stop thinking about the leather bound book he'd left behind in the grass in Eddie's backyard.

He doesn't really remember falling asleep or even sitting down to rest, but he must have, because when he hears footsteps come crashing through the trees and someone's hands shaking him awake, the world is dark save for the bright circular beam from the flashlight in his savior's hand.

"Y-yuh-you're such an idiot," comes a voice from somewhere on high, just outside the thick blue fog in Richie's mind. His head lolls. Eddie, he wants to say but his tongue is too heavy. I need to go find Eddie. Sleep pulls him under again.

When he opens his eyes the next time, he's lying across the couch in Bill Denbrough's living room, a spot familiar to him that for the first time he wants to be as far away from as possible. He can't be here. He doesn't want to be here. He doesn't deserve to be.

And Eddie. Where is Eddie? Panic makes a hardened fist in his throat.

"Where're your folks?" Richie asks, voice hoarse. From his position on the couch he can't actually see anyone else in the room with him, but he knows Bill is there. Call it intuition, or the fact that he can hear the familiar sounds of Dragon's Lair coming from Bill's Gameboy.

"Date night," comes Bill's answer. With no small effort Richie pushes himself into a sitting position, stretching his sore neck and finding Bill sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the couch, head leaned back against the armrest. He looks up at Richie with blue, blue eyes, and Richie's stomach twists.

"What were y-yuh-you doing out there?" Bill asks.

"How'd you find me?" Richie counters.

"Bev c-cuh-called and said she w-was worried about you. She said you n-never s-sh-showed up to meet her after school, so we all w-wuh-went looking." Richie's face flushes, and whether it's more from the fact that Bev covered for him or that the Losers spent time stumbling around in the dark searching for him he can't tell.

"Oh, yeah. I just...needed some time alone, I guess. Went for a walk and lost track of time, decided to take a little nap in the woods. You know how it is." It's the worst lie he's ever told, but he's too tired and his chest feels too tight to think of anything better.

Bill looks at him with an incredulous expression, like he can't understand why Richie is lying to him. His own mother's voice in his head, weary and frustrated. I don't understand you sometimes, Rich. Richie tucks his face into the cushions just so he won't have to keep staring into Bill's sad blue gaze.

"Fine," Bill says after a long time. Not angry, just resolved. Disappointed. What else is new? Richie thinks, but he does not say it. "Let's g-guh-go to bed."

"Woah there, big boy." Richie shakes his head and sits up straight. "Who said I'm spending the night?"
"I did."

"Well, if you put it *that* way..." Richie says, throwing a wink Bill's way. Bill throws a pillow at him and for a second Richie forgets the day, forgets the crushing darkness of that doorway in the hallway of Eddie's house, forgets the way Eddie had begged not to go in.

"I'm sleeping on the bed with you," he grumbles once they're upstairs, kicking off his shoes by the door, and Bill snorts but doesn't object, just scoots over and holds the covers up for Richie to crawl in. Richie does, and it feels like being small again. It's also the first time in over a week that he's slept in an actual bed, since Eddie's been taking up his.

Richie rolls over, away from Bill and curls up small, eyes squeezed shut. Eddie had told him. He'd begged, practically, as forcefully as he could manage. He'd said, *I can't*, eyes big and trusting and fucking frightened. The depraved monster in the back of Richie's throat crawled up under his tongue and said, *Yes, you can.*

This gluttony is endless, Richie is starting to realize.

He glances over his shoulder at Bill's sleeping face, the same face Richie has loved endlessly since childhood. Bill, his brother. Bill, his best friend. Bill, too fucking *good* and bright for someone like him.

For Richie, rest never comes.

He leaves the house early the next morning, so early that even Bill's parents are still snoring away in the bedroom across the hall. He slides across the wooden landing in socked feet and finds his shoes near the front door. They're much less muddy than he remembers them being, and he wonders if sometime during the night Mrs. Denbrough came and cleaned them off. She must have, because he'd kicked them off into the corner of Bill's room last night, and he's suddenly crushed beneath the unbearable weight of embarrassment because he doesn't deserve it. He can't even take care of himself anymore, too caught up in chasing after the best comfort he's ever known. The comfort he lost, because he always does this, always pushes too far and too hard and wrecks everything.

He walks through his own front door at exactly 6:04 AM with the intention of getting roaring drunk. His father's car is missing from the driveway. Surprise, surprise.

He knows where the booze is — cases of warm beer on the bottom shelf of the pantry, but the hard stuff is in the tiny cabinet over the fridge, put there with the intention of keeping them out of Richie's reach. But it's been a good five years since she started using that spot, and what used to be true isn't anymore. Eleven, twelve, thirteen year-old Richie couldn't reach the cabinet, and at fifteen Richie has never wanted to. Not until now.

It's Wednesday. Eddie is gone. Patrick Hockstetter is being buried today. Richie's insides writhe like eels.

"Rich?"

Richie is so startled he drops the bottle in his hand, turning on his heel to find his mother standing in the doorway, dressed all in black. It crashes loudly, and then for a moment there's nothing but the sound of birds starting to chirp outside as they both stare at the mess on the floor. It crawls across the tile, the shattered glass all spread out like stars, touching the out edges of Richie's socks. He curls his toes in and the liquid creeps closer.
"Mom, I -" He doesn't know what he plans to say. Make an excuse? No. No point in doing that. Apologize? He feels like he should. He always feels like he should, wants to say sorry for a million things even if they aren't his fault just to make her stop hurting so bad all the time.

"I got it," she says, not so much irritated as she is exhausted. She must be tired. He's surprised she's even up and ready. Richie knows logically that there are feelings worse than this one, but he can't think of them right now. "Just...go upstairs and get ready, okay? Please don't argue with me today." She punctuates it with a pleading stare, one that takes to Richie's mouth with a needle and thread, sews it shut tight lest he try to protest.

So for once, he doesn't.

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The funeral home is overcrowded and Richie is suffocating in a suit that's too short, the same one he wore to his grandma's funeral three years and six inches ago.

Sheriff Bowers and Henry are there, too, looking about as distinguished as Richie'd expect from someone whose first name is Butch and his son. To be fair, it's not like the rest of them look much better. For all its dead, Derry has never really seemed to have gotten a handle on the whole 'mourning properly' thing. Henry's face is red and blotchy, and Richie wonders if it's because he's been screaming or because he's been crying. The former seems more likely, but he's not really ready to rule out the latter. Richie wasn't kidding that night in the woods when he'd spit the line about Henry and Patrick jerking each other in the bathroom.

It's a quiet funeral, muted in such a way that it's almost embarrassing considering the amount of people squeezed into the rows of pews, crammed so tightly together Richie swears the seats are startling to buckle in the middle. This is what it all comes down to. Nobody, not even Hockstetter's grieving father, seems keen on waxing poetic about him; even if his torn throat and glassy eyes were put on full display, there's no sugar-coating the kind of person he was.

Shamefully, Richie's glad that for once everyone seems to agree with him.

He excuses himself to go to the bathroom once the priest starts talking about how everyone dead always leaves some of their light behind for the rest of them or something like that, because Richie's pretty sure Hockstetter never had any light to give in the first place. Someone in the crowd clears their throat loudly, awkwardly. Clearly Richie isn't alone in that sentiment, and it makes him feel a little better.

He's washing his hands methodically in the bathroom sink to kill time, scrubbing and rinsing and scrubbing again with pale pink soap the way he's watched Stan do a million times when the door swings open. Richie wouldn't even bother looking up, but then footsteps stop right behind him and so he turns, uneasy, and comes face to face with Henry Bowers.

Richie knows he shouldn't laugh, especially not when he's the one in a suit that barely comes down to his ankles, but he does anyway. He doesn't know how he wound up here, cornered in the bathroom by one tormentor at the funeral of another.

"Holy shit! Almost didn't recognize you without Patrick's dick in your mouth." Henry's eyes are wild, burning with warning. Richie knows he shouldn't push his luck just the same as he knows he
shouldn't have laughed just now — so he does, naturally. "But I guess that'd be kinda sick, huh? Unless you're into maggots." He gags exaggeratedly.

Henry's hand twitches at his side. His face is red — little Richie, three years-old, waving out the window at the blaring firetrucks on the road, WELCOME TO HELL in cherry neon, blood dripping down the length of his spine in the woods — and Richie thinks, not for the first time this year or this month or even this week: *I'm going to die*. He pulls the truth of that around his shoulders; it fits snugly like a second skin over the bulk of his clothes.

But Henry doesn't touch him. Doesn't even move. He's turned into a statue of himself, frozen in place, his entire body shaking like he's actively fighting against an invisible straitjacket. Richie guesses he probably knows all about those. (*Which would you rather be, Richie, a selfish boy or a crazy boy? Or maybe you're just both.*) He's a coward without his right-hand man —

**YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE TOO, AREN'T YOU, SELFISH CRAZY COWARDLY BOY**

— Richie's always wanted to see him like this, tongue-tied and helpless, but now that moment is here, the two of them so close they're sharing air in a humid funeral home bathroom, Richie doesn't feel triumphant or powerful or even glad. That's the problem; it's always feeling too much or too little. He doesn't know how to get it right, constantly dancing on one end of the scale for too long.

"You fucking faggot," Henry snarls. His lip curls just so, enough to offer a glimpse at the white of his bared teeth. Richie thinks: *wolf*, and his heart jolts. The words come quiet, like a secret. Henry's voice is shaking. *He's* shaking, as if he's a bomb on the verge of detonating. His and Patrick's insides probably look the same. Richie wonders if he'd look the same covered in them, dripping with gore when the crowd inside finally came running.

Henry takes another step into Richie's space. This close, the first thing Richie notices is that the top button of his shirt is starting to pull away from the garment, hanging loose by a single thread, moving closer and then further and then closer as he breathes.

"You know you're not going to get away with this," Henry says. They're practically toe-to-toe now, and Richie remembers being so young and shrinking in Bowers' shadow like a dying weed. He'd never stood a chance back then, tiny fists useless and reflexes lacking, relying solely on his own two legs to carry him out of harm's way. He's as tall as Henry now but no less afraid.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He clears his throat and stretches, reclaiming some of his personal space in the process, a maneuver he'd never attempt if he were any less hopeless than he is right now.

"You can play dumb all you want, Tozier. You'll suffer more for it later, just you fuckin' wait."

And that on its own isn't scary. Richie doesn't care anymore. He's suffered and suffered and suffered, it feels like, so what's a little more? But his mind jumps to Eddie, and *that's*...*that's* a problem. *Hurt me all you want*, Richie thinks. He'd bare his throat for Henry to tear into with his teeth, take a thousand more knives to his back so long as Eddie stayed away, somewhere safe and secret.

He wonders if Henry could ever even hurt Eddie as bad as Richie has.

"Sorry for your loss," Richie mutters, shoving past Henry and out the bathroom door while his face is still twisted in confusion.

He sits back down next to his mother, leans into her the tiniest bit like a child, and wonders if she can feel him shake.
"You cut your hair," is the first thing out of Richie's mouth when they get back into the car directly after the service. He hadn't wanted to linger around any longer than necessary, and his mother had seemed to share the sentiment. Sometime near the end of it he had looked over and realized how much shorter her hair was, something that hadn't caught his attention through the haze in his mind this morning.

Maggie Tozier halts putting the key in the ignition and instead reaches up self-consciously to touch the dark hair that now falls to her chin rather than below her shoulders, as if she's making sure that yes, she indeed cut it. She looks at Richie then, a tiny sheepish smile on her face. Richie adores her so much it aches. He can't stop.

"I thought a change would be good," she says, then laughs like it's ridiculous, but it makes Richie's chest rise with a childlike swell of hope. His mother chews her lip and starts the car, then arches a brow in Richie's direction. "Do you hate it?"

Richie has never seen a version of his mama without her hair curling down past her shoulders. She looks different like this, like someone who isn't his mother. Like his mother from another dimension, another reality. Then again, he thinks, she hasn't looked like his mama in a long time and it's got to do with plenty more than just her hair.

"I don't hate it," he answers honestly, and watches her bite the inside of her cheek with what he hopes is a smile.

The car rolls past the familiar turn onto their home street, slows to a stop at the stop sign at the next corner.

"Where are we going?" Richie mutters against the car window. His breath fogs the glass for a moment, then dissipates. He huffs out through his nostrils extra hard just to watch it happen again, then turns away from the window and to his mama in the driver's seat, vaguely alarmed. "Ma?"

Maggie Tozier flicks her gaze sideways for a brief moment before easing the car through the intersection. There's something there in her eyes that Richie hasn't seen in a long time, and he's not sure why it suddenly makes him feel infantile, like he should be sitting in the backseat on a pillow to keep the seat belt from going over his head.

"Thought we'd get lunch," she says simply, as if that's something they've done at all in the past six years. "Unless you're not up for it." Her fingers tighten microscopically around the wheel, and Richie watches her knuckles whiten. She's trying. He knows she is. His heart is pulling in every direction.

"I, uh. Sure. I mean, that'd be...yeah," Richie answers. His tone is as casual as he can manage, which isn't very; he clears his throat to try to dissolve some of the awe in his voice. "Nicky's?"

"Nicky's it is," she says, voice easy like it was once upon a time.

She gets a cup of black coffee even though it's well past one at this point, though Richie can't say he really expected anything less from someone who's frequently inebriated before ten in the morning. He decides he can try stomaching a chocolate milkshake himself, even though he's not really hungry. He'll force himself to be just for the occasion, because they never do things like this anymore.
When they used to do this, everything was in reverse — Richie always insisted on black coffee just because it felt like the grown up thing to do, like he was a nine-to-five businessman grabbing a cup of joe and the paper before work. It never once tasted good, even despite the cream and sugar he added to it in spoonfuls. Maggie, on the other hand, had been the connoisseur of all things sweet, milkshakes in the summer and hot cocoa in the winter, always making sure to save some for Richie when he inevitably admitted that the coffee wasn't so good.

("I'll tell you a secret, Rich,' she'd laughed with a dot of strawberry ice cream on the very tip of her nose. 'I don't like it so much either.'

"Then why do you drink it?" Richie asked, expression puzzled. He was accustomed to his parents' routine of starting the morning off with a pot of coffee; he never understood how it smelled so much better than it actually tasted.

Maggie had smiled. 'I do lots of things I don't like for your daddy.' Even back then it hadn't sounded right, left Richie with a cold wispy feeling in the pit of his tummy. He still thinks about it sometimes.

But his mama is tired now, and Richie doesn't want to feel grown up, so he ignores the way his stomach is twisted and sips his milkshake through a thick red straw.

"I really do like your hair like that," he says. "With the dress especially, it's very...goth chic, Bev calls it." Bev. Richie's stomach drops. He really hopes she isn't too pissed at him, though he guesses she has every right to be. He's already lost Eddie. He can't lose her too. He can't.

His mother laughs, tired but so fucking real, and for a split second he's his mom again, the woman she was before she'd gone into the hospital with a baby girl in her tummy and come out empty-handed. Richie loves her, loves her, loves her.

The bell above the door chimes and a few girls Richie knows from school roll in, still wearing their ugly black dresses from the funeral with skates on their feet. Greta Keene is among them, making sure to roll her eyes at him as she passes, blonde hair pulled back with a lopsided black ribbon.

They're all laughing like they've forgotten that they're supposed to be pretending to be sad, mouths sticky with bright pink glitter gloss, bumping shoulders and knees as they settle into a booth in the corner. Maggie Tozier watches them with the kind of intensity that makes Richie wonder if she's seeing herself in them — who she used to be.

She's stuck. Richie knows what that feels like, but what he doesn't understand what it's like to feel caught between three versions of yourself like she is — who she was, who she wants to be, who she is. Was: Spit-shined beauty and long dark eyelashes, silver tiaras and giddy laughter, not yet soured by the weight of the world. Wants: A home in the suburbs with a nursery adorned in pink and white lace, a wide-eyed little girl cradling a doll in her arms, another in a long line of women brought up with the same end goal.

But reality always rears its ugly head eventually. And here she is in all of her glory, hunched over a mug of shitty coffee in a booth in a crowded diner, shaking hands and bruised under eyes. Tired, tired, tired.

She's beautiful. Richie still thinks he's beautiful. She was always too good for his father, always too good for this town even if he's never personally known a version of her that wasn't at least a little distant. He wishes she'd never let it eat her alive like this, but he knows in his heart of hearts that his very existence is part of the problem.

"Your dad and I are getting a divorce."
Richie blinks. "When?"

"I don't know yet." She sighs, setting her mug down on the table and pressing a thumb to her temple hard enough to bruise. "We don't know much of anything yet, really. But it's what he wants, Rich, and I — I think that's for the best."

That's not really what she thinks; Richie can tell by the way her eyes go filmy like she's about to cry.

Richie doesn't know what to say to that, exactly, because he's so relieved he could scream — _selfish, selfish, selfish, try caring about someone other than yourself for once, why don't you_ — but he can't just fucking say that, not when she looks like she's about to break like this, but then the friendly chatter and sporadic bursts of noise inside the diner are split down the middle by a scream, loud and earth-shattering and somewhere just out of sight.

Everyone stops talking at once. One of the waitresses drops the pitcher of water in her hand, mutters _shit_ under her breath. A baby in a booster seat at the next booth over starts to cry. Greta and her friends have their noses pressed against the window, searching for the source of the scream.

The second scream is what brings everyone outside. They all funnel out through the front door, pushing and shoving with anticipation and dread, and a few gasps come from the front of the hoard but Richie can't see over them, tall as he is now. He uses his elbows to forge a path through the throng and winds up at the front of the pack, and then he sees it.

A dead deer right there in the road, and maybe that wouldn't be terribly shocking but it's fucking _disfigured_, dismantled just like the one in the woods that night. That first time, though, had been experimental, Richie knows, picked apart curiously by hands that had never touched a deer before, blinded by thirst.

This violence is intentional, systematic. Liver here, lungs there, an eyeball rolling to meet its heart over on the other side of the road, its hide pulled open at the ribs to showcase the emptiness inside. Violence for the sake of violence. Richie feels chocolate crawling up his throat.

Eddie didn't do this. Eddie is violent by nature, but not on purpose. Not when he doesn't need to be.

Eddie didn't do this, but it was meant for him. For Richie, too. For both of them. A trap or a warning, he isn't sure which.

Over the sound of shrieking children and retching and panicked chatter, dozens of voices trying to take apart the scene in front of them with words, Richie hears an engine squeal, the sound of tires spinning on asphalt, the kind of angry reckless driving he's always associated with one person in particular. Like a moth to lamplight, his heart leaps to his throat.

"Richie?" his mother says as she finally shoves through the crowd to meet him, but Richie can't find his voice. "Rich, we should go." She won't look at the deer in the road. Her face is pale and tight with worry.

He thinks she says his name again, maybe even reaches out for his hand like he's wanted her to do for so long now, but Richie is already running.

Chapter End Notes
true life: maggie tozier in this fic is actually just a mutilated love letter to my own mother

i mean what...who said that lmao

this fic's playlist is now on spotify (moved it there bc i feel like ficmixes are ever-mutating things and spotify is more easily able to adapt to my indecisive brain but no one cares god shut up tahlia)
suck it up, buttercup

Chapter Notes

tw for the usual amount of blood, mentions of vomiting, homophobic slurs bc henry bowers ain’t shit and some weird self harm-ish? thoughts near the end idk man this kid really needs a fucking hug and some therapy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Precious little boy with a heart of gold/He's gonna hold you 'til your blood runs cold

— Barcelona, Paper Lion

Oftentimes in his relatively short life, Richie has had a singular, persistent thought: I'm a moth, a fly, an insect. Small and insignificant, ready to be swatted at, stomped on, constantly chasing pinpricks of light with one arm outstretched, tripping pathetically over himself in desperation. No, no, no...Please, please don't leave me, I'm so fucking lonely, please.

Maybe it's that thought that spurs him on, because he's tearing through the streets of Derry faster than he thinks he ever has, heart waterlogged with fear and his mind caught on one thing, one name, one boy in between flashes of gore. Eddie. Deer skin laid down the center of the road like a carpet. Eddie. Car tires rolling over crushed bones. Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. Chocolate milkshake rises to the back of Richie's throat. He swallows the sickly sweet taste of it back.

He's not even really running anymore, just wandering, frantic and aimless, and it isn't until the third or fourth time he passes one that he realizes the face staring him down from the MISSING posters taped crudely to the sides of bus stops and streetlights is Sonia Kaspbrak's. MISSING! in bleeding green marker, like her disappearance wasn't even enough to warrant the printer ink it'd take to print all those copies.

Richie slows to a stop to glance at one stuck to a telephone pole near the motel at the edge of town. The Sonia Kaspbrak in the photo is at least ten years younger and twenty pounds lighter than the one Richie is familiar with, wearing waxy red lipstick with her corkscrew hair pulled back. He wonders if the photo is one that was hung up somewhere in the house. He wonders who'd gone inside to get it. Had they also felt the same, unshakable evil, or had the three of them just made it up inside their heads?

Richie shakes his head to clear the fog and ends up with a sudden earful of shrieking laughter, the kind that he's learned to listen for since he could walk and was branded loser with a capital L. The laughter is short a voice, now, but that just makes them louder in their taunts, baying like animals (Richie thinks — wolf, hyena, wild dogs, glistening yellow teeth and claws) in an effort to compensate for the loss.

Under normal circumstances, Richie thinks he'd be torn between running away — coward, selfish, coward, coward, coward — and wanting to help whatever poor kid is stuck facing the wrath of Bowers and his hangers-on. He was braver when he was younger, reckless, eager to lend a helping
hand just for the thrill of the chase. He's always been itching to feel something real.

But this isn't just some random kid. Richie forces himself towards the noise, one foot in front of the other.

The motel comes into view, the sign out front gleefully advertising color television and a pool that was drained five years ago. Its dark green roof droops pathetically, brick walls once covered in white paint that's faded entirely in some spots, revealing the rust-red underneath like patches of blood. It's a one-story building with maybe two dozen rooms, though from the almost-empty parking lot Richie has to assume that most of them are vacant. Which makes sense. No one ever wants to come to Derry; they're all just passing through. The blinds in the motel office are drawn shut. It faces the road with its back to the woods and all its evils, and it's around back that Richie finds them.

Henry Bowers is still dressed in his funeral attire sans suit jacket, flanked on either side by his two remaining lackeys. All three of their faces are contorted in varying degrees of delight, and though none of them wear it quite as alarmingly well as Patrick Hockstetter it still makes Richie's stomach curl. His eyes catch on the gleam of silver pressed into Henry's palm. He's too far away to know for sure if it's the knife, but wouldn't it be just like Bowers, Richie thinks, to want it as some sort of weird keepsake? He wonders if it's still got traces of his blood on it. He wonders if Bowers had to steal it from his daddy or if the sheriff gave it to him.

None of them seem to notice Richie's even there as he crouches in the weeds just around the corner. They're too caught up in the current object of their torment, just out of sight. From this angle it's impossible for Richie to see much more than the toes of a pair of white sneakers, but he doesn't need to. He already knows, and he squeezes his eyes shut tight in preparation for the bloodbath to come, bites down hard on his tongue.

Except the taunting continues. Richie opens his eyes and presses his hand flat against the side of the building, brows drawn together with confusion. He waits another breath, then two. Waits for the ear-splitting snarl, the screams. Three Mississippi, four Mississippi...

But the carnage doesn't come, he realizes, because Eddie's not fighting back.

He frowns. Gathering his wits, Richie peeks around the corner, and his heart crashes through the ground.

Eddie's pressed himself against the motel wall like he's trying to disappear into it. He's still wearing Richie's windbreaker, pulled tight around his frame, but it's torn in several places. There's a cut on his arm. His knees are caked with mud, scratches all down the length of his legs. There's a dead rabbit in the grass a few paces away, its black eyes bulging, fur crunchy and matted with blood. More blood still on Eddie's chin, his mouth, his hands.

"Hey!"

It takes a second for Richie to even realize he's said anything at all, that the voice that just broke the dead air was his own. But then Henry's head snaps up, focus shifting from Eddie to him instead, and he figures that since there's no take-backs here he might as well just really fucking go for it.

So Richie yells, "Go hop back on your dad's cock, asshole!" And yeah, in retrospect it probably sounds a lot less biting than he'd wanted, considering he's still half-crouched in his hiding place. He'd really lucked out back at the funeral home, but it's clear from the look on Henry's face now that Richie is all out of second chances.

"Looks like we've got company, boys!" Henry shouts, arms open wide like he's welcoming Richie
"You lookin' to play knight-in-shining armor today, Trashmouth?" Belch chuckles, lumbering a few steps towards him before he stops. He looks kind of lost, like he isn't quite sure what to do without someone giving him orders. Now that he's closer Richie can see the way his pupils are blown almost all the way out; Vic and Henry's are, too. They're fucking high, and Richie doesn't know if them being high makes his chances of getting out of this unscathed better or worse.

"Belch, buddy old pal! It's been a while, hasn't it?" Richie doesn't have to force himself to be loud, borderline manic — his fear and desperation do that for him. "You look great...I see you've put on a couple more pounds for the whole 'fat-redneck-trucker-at-a-funeral' thing you've got going on here. It really suits you, man, and I mean that." He looks at Eddie out of the corner of his eye. What the hell is he doing?

Belch's jaw hardens and bulges like he's chewing a jawbreaker. "You little fucker, yo-"

"Really, you're gonna let this faggot talk to you like that?" Henry rolls his eyes. He still has the knife in his hand, and Richie's kind of surprised that he hasn't started flipping it open and shut like a movie villain at this point.

Eddie still hasn't moved. Richie looks at him again, more insistently, and tries to very clearly communicate a single message: Run. But Eddie's own gaze is distant, like he's looking right through Richie and to the trees behind them instead. Richie's panic swells. He doesn't know how much more time he can kill. Why the fuck isn't Eddie running?

"Uh...yeah. Seriously, Belch, you're, uh...you're really gonna let little old me talk to you like that?" Richie clucks, hoping the jab isn't undercut too much by the way he knows he's starting to fumble with his words. "Why don't you do something about it, big boy? I'm right here." He edges closer, trying to position himself between the three of them and Eddie, throwing his arms out wide with a shrug and an attempted smirk, offering himself up like a pathetic sacrifice, the easiest prey imaginable.

"Tempting...but we're not talkin' to you, shitstain. We wanna talk to your friend," Vic faux-coos, softness coated in slime as his gaze settles on Eddie again. Eddie, who is still pressed against the wall, looking more lost than Richie's ever seen him.

Richie shudders but doesn't budge. "He's not my friend."

There's a rustling from the motel office, then a pair of eyes peeking through the blinds. Richie turns desperately, trying to meet the prying gaze, a plea for help written in his own expression. But of course nobody does. The blinds snap back into place and the door to the office stays shut and everything goes quiet again like whoever's inside is holding their breath and waiting for the storm to pass. Richie could scream in frustration, tear his hair out, split himself in two.

Henry nudges Vic out of the way, invading Richie's space the same way he had back at the funeral home, a knowing smile playing on his mouth. There's a crunching noise — the rabbit, its bones snapping under the sole of his boot. He smells like sweat and booze and something else Richie can't place. He thinks of the dead deer in the road, torn apart beyond recognition, and swears he can see again it now in Henry's eyes. (In the woods that night, if it weren't for the dark, Richie wonders if would he have seen the deer on the trail in Patrick's eyes. He wonders why their gazes always seem to hold more dead things than a cemetery.)

The thing is, back at the funeral they'd been on semi-even ground, Henry knocked a notch or two down just from being in the same building as his dead friend. But out here in the open air Richie

into their space. It's not even funny, but Vic and Belch laugh like it is.
feels small as ever, standing between Henry Bowers and the boy who saved his life like there's anything he can do about what's going to happen.

"You sure about that? Because it sure looks like he is. You know wanna know what I think?"

"No," Richie answers automatically, as if it matters.

"What I think, Tozier, is that you're just scared we're gonna hurt another one of your faggot friends."
And, yeah. That's part of it. When it comes to his friends, no matter how often he questions his place among them, Richie will put his life on the line every single time to protect them. "But we just wanted to play with girly boy over here. Didn't we?" He directs that last part at Eddie, who looks back at him like he's seen a ghost, mouth open but no sound coming out.

He looks terrified. But mostly, Richie realizes with a paralyzing wash of guilt, he looks sick.

"Leave him alone," Richie begs, voice choked with desperation as his cocky front crumbles. He turns microscopically to look at Eddie with pleading eyes. "Eddie, please, you need to go."

Bowers, Belch and Vic roar with mocking laughter. "Eddie, please!" they parrot, closing in like vultures, like a pack of wolves. Richie takes another step backwards, but he's running out of space and he's not leaving without Eddie — which means, likely, that he's not leaving at all.

"Hey, Bowers, fuck off!" A new voice rings through the air and suddenly, like an angel, Beverly Marsh is in their space, suddenly, shoving in between Richie and Henry. She's at least a head shorter than Henry but her jaw is set firm, eyes blazing, and Richie loves her.

And she's not alone. Bill comes crashing through the trees a second later, followed by Stan, then Bill and Mike. They're all red-faced and panting as if they've been running. Maybe they have been. Richie's knees buckle with relief.

"You really want to do this now, Henry? Today?" Mike asks with an arched brow, voice even and calm as ever. Richie wants to kiss him.

Henry doesn't seem discouraged, exactly, but he does look surprised. He might be high and crazy with any caution he had left thrown to the wind, but he's also very abruptly outnumbered. He and his goons always have been, sure, and though it's never stopped them before, it's also never really been the same as it when the Losers were younger, with their string bean limbs and nothing but luck keeping them out of trouble.

This, though. This is different. Richie feels it, and from the look on Bowers' face, he's felt it too; all seven of them staring down evil to protect one another, and if there's anything about them that's ever been terrifying then this is it, he thinks, the lengths they'll go to protect their own, even when it's a kid with a dead rabbit at his feet that 5/7 of them have never even met.

"If you think this shit is over you've got another thing coming," Henry snarls, giving Richie a final shove towards the wall. "That goes for all of you losers. Especially you, girly boy."

None of them move until they hear the familiar kick of the Trans Am's engine, the squeal of tires against the road growing further and further away, then gone entirely.

Someone says his name, but Richie ignores it, everything else drowned out as he turns to face the boy behind him.

"Eddie," Richie says, the word smothered by the weight of relief, touched by love, even in the presence of the rest of the Losers who stand, motionless and confused and curious. But something
else prickles at the hairs on the back of his neck, something unfamiliar. Eddie is deathly pale, eyes blown out and bloodshot. He stares back at Richie with the same far-off expression he wore earlier, mouth obscenely red against snowy skin. His cheeks look sunken, shadows catching on all of his hollow spaces. Richie swallows. "Eddie?"

Eddie doesn't answer, just opens his mouth and vomits a waterfall of spiny black blood.

The Hanlon's farm is the closest and feels the safest, so it's where they go.

The six of them and their new companion stumble into the darkness of the now-defunct barn on the edge of the property, lonely and faded, air thick with the mingling scents of hay new and old; it was replaced years ago by one larger and closer to the house but is still used for storage. It's also got plenty of great hiding places; when he was younger, Richie's favorite spot during hide-and-seek was behind a few blue barrels of chicken feed in the corner.

"What the hell is going on?" Stan shouts the second the barn door swings shut, and they're all briefly paralyzed in the dark until Mike flicks on a flashlight. They all draw in close to the single beam of light like moths, but Eddie stays planted where he is and so, for once in his life, Richie does too. Eddie hisses quietly when the flashlight is turned on him, blinking against the glare.

Stan is holding said flashlight in shaking hands with an accusatory look on his face while Mike fumbles around in the dark, presumably for the light switch.

"Get the fucking light out of my face, Stanley," Richie snaps, irritated and too flooded with worry to care about explanations right now. They can wait. Eddie can't.

Clearly, Stan disagrees. "Are you...are you serious? How about you tell us what the fuck just happened instead? I can't be the only one who doesn't know what's going on, right?" Stan turns to look at the rest of them, who all shrug, murmuring softly in agreement with their eyes trained on Eddie — even Beverly, bless her heart.

Richie opens his mouth to answer, or maybe just tell him off, but then Eddie lets out a horrible, pathetic moan; he sways slightly and leans into Richie's side, fingers gripping his arm with an urgency that makes Richie's throat close. He'd give anything for Eddie to push him away like he did yesterday, because that had hurt like hell but this is worse.

Somewhere in the shadows Mike makes a triumphant noise; there's a click, a gentle buzz, and then the barn is flooded with weak yellow light from the fixture over the door. It's better than nothing.

"Look, I swear I'll explain everything that Bev hasn't already later, but right now we really, really need to help Eddie, okay?" Richie begs, and for once he hopes they don't miss the way his voice wavers at the end. "Please."

None of them move a muscle. Eddie is starting to tremble; Richie eases them both to the splintered floor, panic fluttering in his chest as Eddie's head lolls slightly. Another string of blood drips from the corner of his mouth, and Richie would wipe it away if he thought it'd do any good.

"Guys," Richie repeats, and he feels so small, curled up here on the floor in a dress suit several sizes too small with this strange, dying — no no no Richie shut up shut up shut up he's not dying, he's not,
he can't — creature while they all stare down at him like he's crazy. Which he is. But it's nice not to be reminded sometimes. "Guys, please."

"Eddie," Beverly says finally, breaking the quiet and stepping forward to kneel in front of them. In her eyes Richie can see everything — worry, fear, anger, helplessness. "Eddie, what's going on?" She reaches out to touch his cheek and Eddie rests all his weight in her palm, pitching forward like he's hoping she can make this stop just by holding him.

"I don't know," Eddie whimpers, voice raw. His dark hair is matted to his forehead with sweat now while shivers wrack his body. He choke out a sob, and the sound goes straight to Richie's heart. "It hurts."

"What hurts?" Richie finds himself asking automatically. "What hurts, Eddie?"

"Everything," Eddie says helplessly. His body shudders violently as he lurches forward, heaving another mouthful of blood onto the barn floor. "Fuck," he hisses as if he's been doing it for years, and that almost makes Richie laugh, but then Eddie looks at him with glassy eyes, chin freshly coated in red, and there it is again, the lump in his throat.

"The blood," Beverly whispers. Her eyes widen a little bit.

Richie frowns. "Huh?"

"You said so yourself. He used to drink from blood bags...that's human blood, yeah? But he's just been drinking animal blood since he ran away."

"Wait, drinking blood? I thought you were kidding, Bev! This is a joke, right?" Stan is starting to panic now, looking between Richie and Beverly and then to the others for some kind of explanation. "Can someone please tell me what's going on?"

Richie ignores him, considering Beverly's words instead. "You think it's making him sick? But...blood is blood, isn't it?"

"Maybe it's like changing a d-duh-dog's food. You're suh-suh-supposed to d-do it slowly so they don't get sick," Bill offers, and Richie knows he's being serious but he kind of wants to smack him. "Shut up, Bill. That's not real." "It is, actually," Mike interjects, not unkindly. "Same thing with goats, just ask my granddad. Change their food too quickly and they could die."

"Okay," Richie says, because none of this is doing anything but making him want to puke right over the spot where Eddie just did. "Great lesson and all, but Eddie isn't a dog or a goat." And he's not going to die, he wants to add, but he's not sure if that's actually true and he's so sick of lying.

"Yeah, no. Just a vampire, right?" Stan agrees sarcastically, still sitting cross-legged in the corner. He looks vaguely traumatized and beyond frightened, and Richie starts to feel bad, but only a little.

"You're not fucking helping, Stanley!"

"Well, what do you want me to say?!"

"Can you two s-sh-shut the hell up?"

"I mean...maybe we should test it."
Six heads shoot up to look at Ben, who has been predictably quiet this entire time; the expression he wears is open and thoughtful, if a little unsure.

"What do you mean?" Bev asks.

"You mean," Stan says, swallowing so thickly that Richie can hear it, "we should let him drink our blood!?"

"Just a little bit," Ben answers defensively. He says it so calmly, as if he's suggesting plans for the weekend, and Richie is both grateful and unnerved. "To see if it helps. It can't hurt, right?" He looks around the circle of them, cheeks turning pink at their varying expressions of alarm.

Mike is the first to offer any sort of support. "Ben's right," he agrees.

Bill blinks. "H-he is?" He looks torn, like he's trying to decide whether or not to squash the obvious fear written all over his face and be the brave one.

"Shit," Stan whispers, fingers coming up to curl uselessly at his collar as if it's a python tightening around his neck as opposed to just a fully-buttoned polo shirt, though Richie knows from a single experience that those two things tend to feel one in the same. "This is insane, guys, this is really fucking insane..." He's going into a full-blown panic now, breaths coming in short little gasps. Give him another minute and he's going to pass out.

Richie cuts him off. "I'll do it."

Bill, Bev, Stan and Mike all look at him like he's lost his mind. (He has.) Ben seems almost pleasantly surprised, like he didn't actually think anyone was going to take his suggestion seriously. Eddie doesn't look at him at all, face pressed into his arm, but he does mumble a firm, "No."

"Why not?" Richie asks.

Eddie shifts just enough to look him in the eye. His eyes are black as moonless night. "What if it hurts you? I don't...I've never."

"You won't," Richie says, and maybe it's an empty promise but he still believes in it. "You wouldn't hurt me." There's something greater at stake here, though, unspoken but burning in Eddie's eyes. It's not so much what if it hurts you as it is what if I kill you? And Richie is far from fearless, but he's spent the last few weeks flirting so closely with death that the possibility of it hardly fazes him.

"How are you so sure about that, Rich?" Stan pipes up uneasily. He's right, but that doesn't mean he should say it and he certainly doesn't mean Richie wants to hear it. His mind is made up, was made up the second Ben suggested it. He owes it to Eddie.

"Not on purpose," Eddie agrees, hiding his face again as he grits his teeth against another wave of tremors. Richie hurts just looking at him.

"Eddie, listen to me." Richie grips Eddie's shaking shoulders tightly, lowering his voice just enough that it gives the illusion that this conversation is something more intimate than what it actually is; he thinks of yesterday afternoon and how he'd tried to hold him just like this, the way Eddie had pushed him away, a slowly-built sense of trust gone in the blink of an eye. Maybe this'll help him get it back, and it's scary to think that's the price he's willing to pay for it. "You wouldn't hurt me. I'll be fine," he insists, smoothing his thumb along the prominent line of Eddie's collarbone through his jacket.

Eddie doesn't seem convinced.
"Seriously, it'll be fine." Richie swallows. "I think. They'll all be here too, yeah? Just in case something goes wrong." He gestures to the rest of the Losers, all of whom are standing and watching with baited breath. "Just...um. Maybe not in my neck."

Eddie shakes his head quickly, assuring Richie he hadn't even considered that as an option. "No," he says. "Your arm, I think." Richie thinks back to freshman biology class, the one he'd managed a B+ in even though he'd slept through most of it and still somehow hadn't earned a lick of praise for that achievement. No Well done or Keep it up! :) in bleeding red ink, no claps on the back from his dad, no trips to the ice cream parlor like he knows Bill still gets for good grades even though Richie is pretty sure he's too old for it, no siree. Praise or no praise, though, he knows the major artery in his arm forks off into two smaller ones in the forearm. Fork in the road, fork in his arm, Eddie's teeth in his arm —

Richie can't help what he asks next. "What does it feel like? When, uh...you know." Eddie looks and sounds miserable when he croaks again, "I don't know." Then, without warning, there's a flash of teeth in the dark and he's sinking his fangs into his own arm.

"What the fuck?" Richie yelps as Eddie pulls his arm away with a wounded expression on his face, and despite everything Richie can't help the hysterical laugh he chokes out. "I didn't mean for you to try it, stupid!"

Eddie just shrugs, licking over the fresh wound on his arm like a cat. "Doesn't hurt," he says, shaking his head. His bottom lip is still wet with blood.

Richie has no choice but to believe him, so he hauls himself onto a bale of hay, sits up straight and tries to be very, very still, the way he imagines one might have to sit when getting a particularly intricate tattoo. He's endured plenty of painful things before — breaking his wrist in Bill's backyard, skinning his arms and legs on hot asphalt after a few sad attempts at riding his bike off a makeshift ramp, slicing open the sole of his foot on a broken bottle at the quarry. He never cried once, had even laughed in the back of Mr. Denbrough's car on the way to the ER.

He can handle this. He can. He tells himself that over and over again, breathing in deep through his nose in a way that he knows makes his nostrils flare ridiculously, like a dragon.

"I have a request," he says loudly enough to startle everyone in the room; Eddie stops abruptly and draws away. "And you can't laugh when I say it."

"W-wh-what is it, Rich?"

"Someone's gotta come hold my hand." He's met with five almost-identical stares. Something like a cackle hitches in Beverly's throat, and Richie glares at her. "I'm serious, you assholes. Now which one of you big boys is brave enough to come hold my hand?"

Of course it winds up being Mike; Richie takes his work-weathered hand gratefully in one of his own and flips Beverly off with the other.

"Okay," he breathes, looking down at Eddie and trying to channel nothing but trust into his gaze. He trusts him, he does, it's just — scary, like all unknown things are, but the thought of Eddie getting sicker, of Eddie dying over something so simple and stupid is worse. "Just do it."

"Do you trust me?" Eddie asks quietly, voice wavering like maybe he's begging Richie to say no. Like maybe he doesn't think he should trust him. Sonia Kaspbrak's missing poster flickers in Richie's mind's eye.
"Yeah," Richie says, and his voice might be shaking but the answer is nothing but honest. "Yeah, I trust you. Now just go and do it before I wuss out, okay?"

Part of him wonders if it'll just be like getting a shot at the doctor's office, where you aren't really sure what's even happening until they've already taken the needle out and slapped a smiley face bandage over the mark, or maybe —

*Oh.*

Oh, no. Richie definitely feels that.

And he doesn't mean to make a sound, he really doesn't, but the sudden, sharp burst of white-hot pain in his arm is enough to pull a wet gasp from his parted lips. For a moment it's unbearable. He squeezes Mike's tight hand while he grits his teeth against the foreign, terrible sensation of teeth in his arm, puncturing the thin skin there to get to the redness beneath.

He bites down so hard on his own lip that he's pretty sure he's drawn blood there too, open and bleeding in two places at once, and so he decides to focus on that self-inflicted twinge of pain in his mouth instead. His eyes roll downwards slightly to see if Eddie has pulled away, but he hasn't...and yet suddenly Richie can hardly feel a thing. The inhuman sharpness of Eddie's teeth is still there, but the feeling of it is muted now, smothered by an abrupt, inexplicable calm.

Eddie pulls away. It's probably hasn't even been a minute, but Richie's been lost in his own thoughts for what feels like hours, and those thoughts threaten to pull him under again when he focuses on the fact that this time the blood on Eddie's chin is his.

His blood in Eddie's mouth, his blood on the blade of Patrick Hockstetter's knife, his blood everywhere but inside of him. Richie doesn't understand how he can still be so selfish when he's constantly giving so much of himself away.

The skin stings as Richie runs his fingers over the two raised marks where Eddie sank his teeth in, no larger than a couple of pinholes, but Eddie was right. It doesn't hurt. Not really. He's a little woozy, though, thinking about how easily Eddie could have gone for his throat instead, bitten into his windpipe like an apple and exposed the gristle of it to the light like he did with Patrick Hockstetter. It's that realization that makes Richie's heart skitter like a frightened animal.

It's surreal. Because Eddie's got Richie's very soul in his soft, cold hands and Richie's heart between his teeth. There's something terrifying and extraordinary and thrilling about it — that he's handed Eddie the power to tear him in two and yet Eddie chooses only to heal.

Eddie had asked if Richie trusted him, and the yes Richie responded with he means more than ever now. Yes, he trusts Eddie, trusts him more than he trusts anyone else who isn't in this barn with them right now. Maybe more than he should.

"Okay?" Eddie asks. His teeth are sharp. So so so sharp. Richie's head spins.

"I-I just...hold on. Give me a second." Eddie makes a quiet, helpless noise of disappointment, which Richie supposes is probably a good sign. That means it's working, or at least he hopes it does. He adjusts himself awkwardly on the hay bale, takes off his smudged glasses and sets them in his lap. The less he can see the better. His hands are shaking. "Okay," Richie breathes as the feeling in his fingertips starts to fade. "Okay, I'm ready." He screws his eyes shut and tries to squeeze Mike's hand again; he's left with a strange, far-off tingle when Mike squeezes back.

Eddie takes his arm again. There's a strange tugging sensation in Richie's chest, like someone's sunk
a fish hook into the softest part of his heart and he's helpless to do anything but let it reel him in. He is not afraid, just curious and sleepy, eyelids drooping. Everything goes quiet and hazy for a little while.

When he opens his eyes again he's lying on his side; he can feel pieces of hay leaving impressions in the flesh of his cheek. The light coming in through the tiny gaps in the barn's construction is pink, orange, purple — sunset or sunrise? Richie isn't sure. It feels like he's been out for ages.

Something moves microscopically against his back, so light it might as well be a bit of hay fluttering at the base of his spine. With great effort he rolls over and finds Eddie curled up next to him, facing the other way.

"Eddie," Richie says, but does not hear himself say it. He can't hear much of anything, actually, like he's sitting on the tarmac waiting for his ears to pop.

Eddie stirs gently, lifting his head. Richie sees his lips move in the shape of his name, though it doesn't sound like anything at all. Eddie looks so much better now, pink-cheeked and eyes the color of honey, and Richie is overcome by a flood of relief.

"Angel," Richie says, only because it's the first thing that comes to mind. He grins stupidly, feeling loopy and happy and not quite in control of his own tongue. But the word feels true, so he says it again. "Hi, angel."

Eddie tilts his head, a puzzled smile on his face. "Me?" Richie guesses that although Eddie has probably had a plethora of names thrown in his direction over the course of his life and even the past week, none of them have come close to the world angel. That's okay, though. Richie likes the idea of being the first.

"Yeah, you. Thanks for not suckin' me dry," he jokes weakly. Eddie swats playfully at his arm, trying and failing to put on a look of disapproval. "Guess this means we're even now."

"Even?"

"Yeah, even. You save me, I save you. Y'know...balance." Richie wonders if this is what it's like to feel completely wasted; he's only ever been buzzed off a few shitty cans of beer down at the quarry with the others, on the last nights of summer when they're all desperately trying to cling to each other before falling headfirst into another school year. If this is what drunk is really like, Richie thinks, he doesn't understand why his mom is so sad all the time.

Eddie seems to consider that, then flashes Richie a toothy grin. "Even."

"I guess I...I guess I kinda still owe you, you know," Richie mumbles, keeping his gaze fixed on a piece of hay as he twists it between his fingers. "For makin' you go in there yesterday. The house, I mean." And just like that he's aching again. "I shoulda listened to you but I didn't."

He wants to say sorry, but the word doesn't feel right on his tongue. It doesn't feel like enough, especially when he closes his eyes and can still hear the way Eddie had screamed. Nothing is enough to make up for that. Richie doesn't even know where to start. He doesn't know how to apologize for anything, not really. That part of his brain has been broken for as long as he can remember.

It's because of this broken thing inside of him that he whispers, "I'm sorry." He hurts all over and his head is screaming like a tornado siren and when he closes his eyes all he can see is a stairwell leading down, down, down into the darkness. "I'm so sorry, Eddie, it was such a dumbass selfish thing for me to do, and if after this you never wanna see me ag-"
Eddie's fingers tighten abruptly in the fabric of his shirt.

"No," Eddie says. Richie is startled by the intensity with which he says it. Eddie isn't pleading with him; he's demanding. "Stay."

"You want me to stay," Richie says stupidly, tongue-tied and emotionally haywire. He doesn't know where his head is at. He doesn't know what's happening. All he knows is that Eddie wants him to stay.

"I want you to stay," Eddie assures him. He cups Richie's face in his hands. His palms are cool, and Richie's eyes flutter a little. "Missed you."

"Fuck," Richie laughs, and then he pulls Eddie close as he can to squeeze him tight. He was so convinced that after yesterday he'd never feel this again, this foreign comfort only Eddie can give just by looking at him. His chest swells with elation. "Missed you too." And god, did he. Missed doesn't even feel like the right word. It feels like Eddie's absence tore a hole in his chest where something vital used to be, and now he's back and it's flooding with liquid gold and Richie can hardly breathe. This is not normal. Richie knows this. He does not care.

He doesn't care, because he smiles at Eddie and for once it doesn't feel like a ghost is sitting on his chest. He smiles at Eddie and fear feels so far away, like the fading memory of a half-formed dream.

He looks over at the boy next to him and feels that same tug, even without teeth in his arm. Eddie himself is a fish hook, he realizes, and he's sunk the silvery curve of it so deep into Richie's heart that Richie is briefly overcome by the terrifying thought that he'll die if he tries to pull away. His heart will split in two and bleed dark red all over the barn floor. It's not the same feeling he gets whenever his mama smiles, when he remembers the way she used to hold his hand and listen to him rattle on about his day from across the table, but it's close.

Richie wonders how he could manage to sink his own hook into Eddie's sluggish, strange little heart. He's not very good at getting people to love him, but Eddie makes him want to try.

Someone clears their throat, and it effectively startles Richie enough that he shoots up like a spooked animal. Mike, in the corner with a book in his lap, looking at them knowingly. Next to him, Bev, smiling softly with her head on his shoulder and legs across Ben's lap. Then Bill, knees pressed against his chest. Stan paces in the adjacent corner, too restless to sit, his expression uneasy.

"Oh," Richie mutters, sheepish. "Hey, guys." They all titter awkwardly when he ducks his head.

"Losers," Eddie notes happily, eyes bright as he scans over the group of them and then back to Richie, and this time when they laugh it sounds real. Stan even manages a half-smile, like he can't quite help himself.

"Glad you've been t-t-talking us up, Rich," Bill says. The corners of his mouth are turned up wryly.

"He has," Eddie confirms without a hint of irony, and they all laugh again, turn all their nervous energy into something better, something more until they're all howling with it, even Eddie; they fall into each other, red-faced, gasping, and for just this one flickering moment there are no dead animals in the road or bullies with vengeful minds or houses that are too quiet and too empty, and Richie thinks: *Family*. Richie thinks: *Home*. 
Richie hates that it takes him time to warm up to the idea that Eddie should stay with Mike for now. Mike and Ben are the ones who suggest it, and Richie hates himself for hating them for it. *Yes, Richie, it's because you're selfish, after all of this you still want him all to yourself like a little boy with a toy* —

But it'll be better for him here, they all agree. Safer and much easier to keep himself hidden. Well, most of them agree. Richie agrees inside his head, but he can't say it out loud, too busy trying to fight the sting behind his eyes. He's not an idiot. He knows it's true — between the combined threat of Henry Bowers' insatiable homicidal tendencies and the looming mystery of whatever or whoever gutted the deer in the road, it's much safer for Eddie to stay here than cooped up in Richie's bedroom, but that doesn't make it any easier.

The rest of the night is bogged down with a million questions from the Losers, most of which Eddie has no real answer for. (*If you're a vampire, why don't you burn up in the sun?* "I don't know." *Is Richie gonna turn into a vampire now too?" "I don't know. I don't think so." *So what's your dad's name anyway?" "I don't know.") What Richie's realized is that Eddie is almost as clueless about himself as they are about him.

He leaves the farm well past sunset with Stan and Bill in tow to make sure he doesn't suffer a belated death from blood loss on the way home, promising he'll be back first thing in the morning before school. He knows that like last night, sleep won't come easy; somewhere along the way his brain decided to turn Eddie into his own personal sleep aid, and Richie knows that without him he'll likely toss and turn until the sun breaks open the sky again in the morning.

He's mostly right.

His dreams are scarce, like anthills in the deep valley of wakefulness. Small but there nonetheless. In them, Richie is back in Eddie's house; one moment he's standing all alone at the top of the stairs again, looking down into the blackness and the next he's in it, paralyzed and staring up at the open doorway. From here it's no more than a thin column of light a million miles away, but when Richie tries to reach for it a shadow appears in the threshold. The form is faceless, and it seems to waver around the edges, shifting right before his eyes. First it's a heavyset woman with rollers in her hair, then it's a tall, gangly teenager who waves gleefully down at Richie with a knife in hand. It's a man in a white lab coat with a disinterested disposition, it's a woman in a homecoming queen sash and a ratty bathrobe holding a half-empty bottle of vodka, it's a knock-kneed, curly-haired boy in a windbreaker too big for him with blood on his hands. An angel corrupted. Richie's subconscious seems to like that shape the most, because it settles on it.

The boy's face comes into view last; Eddie's features are curved into something like hatred, something like anger, something that makes Richie cold down to his bones.

*"Eddie?"* Richie calls, but his voice doesn't sound like his own.

Dream-Eddie stares down at him with a terrifyingly familiar indifference, gaze fixed on something just above Richie's shoulder. Richie is too afraid to turn around.

*"Eddie, it's me!"* Richie tries again, but when he goes to reach for the light it disappears altogether; his words are punctuated by the heavy sound of the door at the top of the stairs banging shut. There's nothing but an impenetrable blackness, and it opens its stale, sleepy mouth wide to swallow Richie whole, fills his parted lips, leaks into his lungs. He can feel hands warm and cold, wrinkled and smooth, alive and dead all grabbing at him in the dark — his face, his throat, his shoulders, tracing over the knife scar on his back. There's a humming coming from somewhere on high, a continuous
chant of selfish, selfish, selfish that crawls into his ears on either side, wriggling like larvae until all at once everything goes quiet.

A hand on his shoulder. Warm and a little damp. Sweat, maybe. But Richie doesn't think so.

"Sweet boy," the shadow whispers —

— and Richie wakes up.

It takes a few minutes of shallow, gasping breaths and a good, long scream into his pillow before he's able to pull himself together, and even then everything still feels a little crooked, thrown askew no matter how many times Richie rubs at his eyes. His heartbeat stubbornly refuses to slow, like it's preparing for something else to jump out at him and send it thundering against his rib cage all over again.

He just wants Eddie to be here, the same way a toddler might want a stuffed toy to hug after a nightmare.

But Eddie isn't here, so he heads downstairs, aiming for a glass of water and, if he's lucky, a shrink-wrapped double fudge brownie, the kind Richie's pretty sure don't have anything in them that wasn't manufactured in a lab and taste all the better for it. He finds the house all lit up like a maximum security prison instead.

His parents are both wide awake despite the ungodly hour, hunched over the kitchen table with a slew of paperwork in front of them. The air in the room feels so thick Richie thinks he could chew it like bubblegum, smack it between his teeth to break the tension.

"You guys didn't tell me you were having a party," Richie mutters, rubbing at his eyes.

"We're busy, Richie," Maggie answers without looking up, voice completely void of any of the emotion it held earlier at the diner. "You really should've washed up when you got in earlier." Richie stares at the back of her head. She hadn't even bothered to check up on him when he'd finally come home after running off this afternoon. And he's long given up on trying to understand her, but sometimes, especially moments like now, it's so frustrating he actually has to to fight the urge to just scream.

"Whatever," he grumbles, hand shaking as he fills a glass with water from the tap. The tree outside the kitchen window taps gently against the pane and it sounds like sweet boy, sweet boy, sweet boy.

"Richie," his father scolds halfheartedly, also without even raising his gaze. He leans in closer to Maggie and points out something on the page in front of her; she sighs heavily, rubbing her temples as she studies the space below his finger. Richie is reminded of how sad she'd sounded earlier this afternoon when she'd told him they were getting a divorce and still doesn't understand why. His dad is poison — but remember, Richie, you are too, you're just as bad for her and you don't even have to try.

"Don't you worry," Richie says, heading for the doorway with his glass in hand. "I'll be back out of your hair..." he pauses, clucking his tongue at the exact moment his toes touch the hallway floor, ". . .starting now. Ta-da."

His father mumbles something unintelligible under his breath, but otherwise they both appear to have already forgotten that Richie was ever there in the first place.

Back upstairs, Richie downs the entire glass of water in two long gulps, then lays on his side and absently traces his hand over the L-shaped mark on his shoulder like that's going to ease the ache in
his chest instead of just making it worse. *Why an L?* Bev had asked in between bites of an expired package of Fig Newtons when he'd finally swallowed enough of his pride to show her, and Richie had just shrugged, pulling the fabric of his shirt back over the scar. In truth, he hadn't really thought about it, just assumed that was the natural shape any sociopath would start with before proceeding to skin you like a pig.

LOSER, he realizes now in the lonely dark of his room. That had been Patrick's intention that night in the woods, the screaming words he'd planned to carve into Richie's back. LOSER.

Richie almost wants to laugh, because how fucking predictable can one guy be? Loser, for fuck's sake! And he does laugh this time, pressing the edge of a smile into his pillow, because he wishes that was all. What a life it would be if loser was the worst thing he was! He thinks of all the things he is besides that: selfish, crazy, selfish, greedy, selfish, cowardly, selfish, invisible but still somehow too much too much too MUCH —

Those hurt way worse than loser ever will. Richie feels every single one of them screaming under his skin, trying to burn their way out so everyone can see, and curls up tighter under the sheets despite the thin layer of sweat forming over his goose-pimpled skin. He moves his hand from the mark on his shoulder to the fresher bite wound on his forearm, pressing hard enough against it that he gasps into his pillow.

He wonders if it'll leave a scar too, two little white dots right near the crook of his elbow that, when he's bored, Richie can connect with the tip of his finger or a ballpoint pen or the dull end of a stick. Part of him hopes so. It's nice to remember the good things sometimes, even if he doesn't deserve them. He thinks about how Eddie had looked at him back at the farm, asked him to stay, touched his face like he was worth more than he is.

And Richie doesn't deserve it. He knows he doesn't deserve it. Not when for so long he'd wanted Eddie to stay something secret, tucked away and his. He feels suddenly grateful that Eddie is several miles away, safe on the Hanlon farm and away from this greedy, monstrous thing inside of him. He doesn't know how to make it stop, doesn't know how to make that part of himself go quiet. Maybe it's too big to kill without killing himself in the process.

Fingers pressed to the place Eddie bit down and healed himself, he watches the night change outside his bedroom window; he makes a conscious effort not to think: *I love you*, but Richie knows better than anyone that not thinking of something doesn't make it any less true.

The following weekend is the first time Eddie brings up kissing.

The seven of them are gathered in Mike's living room watching movies, all together for the first time since the night in the barn. It's both predictable and completely remarkable how easily they've all adjusted themselves to let Eddie settle into the group, as if he were meant to be there all along. There's still some apprehension, some confusion, some very understandable fear — from Stan, mostly, who still seems half-convinced this is all some sort of elaborate early April Fool's joke no matter how many times Richie and Bev try to it to him — but it's manageable.

Eddie likes Mike, that much is obvious; he's been talking Richie's ear off about him all night long, and the only reason he's gone mostly quiet now is because he and Richie are the only two in the
room left awake. Everyone else is either snoring (Bill, Ben and Mike), comatose (Beverly), or, likely in Stan's case, convincingly pretending to be asleep.

Despite most of the room's occupants being asleep, Raiders of the Lost Ark is still going onscreen, Karen Allen playing doctor as she leans over a very shirtless Harrison Ford. 'Where doesn't it hurt!?' she snaps. 'Here.' If Bill or Bev were awake, Richie would wink and nudge them and they'd all giggle like children together. But they're not, so he watches Eddie's face while Eddie watches the screen. The sound of a kiss being pressed into the crook of an elbow. 'This isn't so bad.' Another press of lips; a forehead, this time, if Richie is remembering it right. He doesn't care enough to look.

When he finally does manage to shift his gaze back to the movie for a brief moment, Indy and Marion are kissing full on the mouth. Eddie is watching intently, with big eyes, nose wrinkled in confusion.

"They're kissing," Richie says quietly before Eddie can ask. "You've really never seen anyone kiss before?" He mentally smacks himself for that one.

Eddie takes a long time to answer, transfixed by the scene in front of him. "Just here," he says absently, voice equally as quiet, touching his index finger to his own cheek, then his forehead. "But not like that." The furious curiosity in his eyes when he finally does look at Richie is enough to strip the breath from his lungs.

"Oh," Richie answers in a squeak. "That, uh...yeah, that makes sense."

"Kissing," Eddie says, chewing at his lip. "Why do they do it then? When it's like that."

"I mean, they do it for a lot of reasons, I guess. 'Cause they love each other or something...but like, in a romantic way, not like a friend way. It means you care about each other." Richie knows, of course, that this isn't entirely true; his parents probably kissed each other long after they'd fallen out of love. He's seen plenty of people kiss just for the fun of it, but he figures going into specifics in this case isn't really going to make things less confusing, so he'll leave it at that.

"I care about you."

Richie almost chokes on his own spit. Eddie's eyes widen in alarm. "Richie?"

"Yeah! Yeah, no, I'm good. I'm great. It's just, uh..." Richie stammers. He's trying to keep his voice at a situationally-appropriate volume, but it's hard when his head is a jumble of possibilities, one thought screaming above all the rest: He wants to kiss you, stupid. "I...yeah. Thanks. I care about you too, you know. A lot." And it's not even like he's embarrassed to admit it or anything, because it's the truth, but he still prays that Stan is actually asleep.

Eddie nods, smiling brightly, and Richie has to wonder if his face was that close just a second ago. He's bathed in flickering blue light from the television, and it's not quite the same as the moon-blue of the quarry at midnight, but Richie thinks he looks nice like this anyway.

With no small effort, Richie adds, like a man held at gunpoint, "But I don't think you really get it, Eds."

Eddie's face falls. "Huh?"

"Kissing, I mean," Richie clarifies, and he wonders if he'll ever be able to say something to Eddie that doesn't make him feel like the worst person alive. "It's kind of a big deal, you know? And I don't think you should just go around kissing people all willy-nilly." It's not entirely a lie; for Eddie, at least, kissing is a big deal. Everything is. Richie just doesn't want to sour the experience for him.
"But you *said* —"

"I know what I said!" Richie doesn't mean to snap, especially not with five other people sleeping in the same room — one of whom grumbles quietly in her sleep, burrowing deeper in her sleeping bag — but it's better than saying what's actually on his mind. Yes, Eddie, *I actually do want to kiss you very very very badly and I'm not sure where that came from or what it means exactly, aside from the obvious, but I know it's not a good idea.* "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I just think that maybe it's not such a great idea right now. Maybe you should...I don't know, think about it some more first." Given time to think about it, Richie knows Eddie is likely to change his mind. And yeah, that kind of fucking stings, but it's for the best.

"I am thinking about it," Eddie insists, crossing his arms over his chest. He looks like a grumpy toddler. It's hard not to giggle.

"Well, think about it more."

Eddie stays quiet for a bit, eyes fixed on Richie's face and very obviously counting off the seconds in his head. "Okay. I thought about it more."

Richie's giggles threaten to turn to full-blown laughter, and he has to clap a hand over his own mouth to muffle the noise.

"Why are you laughing at me, Richie?" Eddie asks miserably, but Richie can tell he's trying not to laugh along with him.

"Because you're funny, Eds. Anyway, I know you think you know what you want, but I still think it's a really bad idea." Eddie opens his mouth to protest, but Richie just holds up a hand and tries not to start laughing all over again at disgruntled expression he gets in return. "I'll make you a deal though, okay?"

Eddie looks equal parts annoyed and intrigued. "What deal?"

"I'm gonna say what I've been saying, which is that you really need to think this through. If in...I don't know, a week? Two weeks? A month? Whenever, I guess, you decide that you actually, really want to —" and Richie has to pause and swallow past the lump in his throat, a blush rising to his cheeks because thinking it is one thing and saying it aloud is another, "— kiss me...then, uh, I guess we can. When you're sure you're ready."

Eddie had seemed more enthusiastic about the idea of making a deal than he does about actually making it; his expression has soured considerably, disappointment steeped with exasperation. "When I'm ready," he repeats flatly before heaving an exaggerated sigh. Richie laughs again.

"When you're ready," he agrees, offering Eddie his outstretched pinky finger. Eddie knows what that means now, and so he links their pinkies together. Richie feels his stomach swoop. "Now it's official."

Richie thinks: a week, two weeks, a month. He thinks of the deer torn apart in the road and wonders if they'll even have that much time in the first place. It's an odd thing to wonder in a place like Derry, where it usually feels like there's too much time. But the thing is, Eddie wants to *kiss* him. Eddie wants to kiss *him*. Him, of all people. Not that his options are exactly infinite at this point, of course. He doesn't really know anyone else.

Richie's kissed people before. Bev, once, out of pure and childish curiosity, and they'd blinked at each other and laughed afterwards, her head falling into the crook of his shoulder. Bill, on a dare,
and Richie had felt the unfamiliar sting of it on his mouth for hours afterwards, brain caught on the way Bill had kept his eyes wide open (thanks to Ben, Richie's seen enough sappy romance movies to know you're not supposed to do that — but then again, he supposes, he'd been looking too.)

The idea of kissing Eddie is different for a lot of reasons. Most of them are terrifying, but the ones that aren't tickle his ribs like quivering butterfly wings.

"Kissing," Eddie says again, softly to himself, like he's testing the weight of the word on his tongue.

Richie ties the word into the back of his mind like a knotted cherry stem. Eddie falls asleep with his head on Richie's shoulder, fingers curled in his shirt. The movie ends. The credits roll. The screen goes fuzzy, the room awash in grey static.

Kissing. Kissing Eddie. He presses his own lips together in the silence, and the thought sits heavy on his chest all night long.

Chapter End Notes

annoying but important note regarding the content of this chapter: although in vampire fic blood drinking is often depicted as sexual in nature that is NOT at all the case in this fic nor is it ever my intention for it to come across as such...for richie and eddie in this verse it is very much about cementing a bond and a feeling of closeness/emotional intimacy (and in this case not even necessarily romantic yet) rather than physical. also they're fifteen lmao

tumblr
fic playlist
Chapter Notes

we love a chapter that went through three from-the-ground-up rewrites (дорогой мир)

anyway maggie tozier is dark-haired sarah paulson and no one is gonna change my mind about that ever. enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're not a curse, you're not too much/
You are needed here/ You are enough

— SYML, Wildfire

Courtesy of the second deer in the road and whispers of foul play, the DPD drops a brand new curfew on the town just in time for Spring Break.

Spring Break, apparently, is something Richie's been too caught up in everything Eddie-related to realize is approaching until it smacks him upside the head, and suddenly he's staring down an entire week of free time he has absolutely no idea what to do with.

The Denbroughs are in Disneyland until mid-week and Stan is spending the next few days with his great aunt in Nebraska, leaving the other four of them with an eight o'clock curfew and to their own devices. Five of them, counting Eddie. And Eddie does count, and not just to Richie anymore, which is as terrifying as it is a relief — the rest of the Losers have pulled him into their circle so effortlessly that it feels like maybe he was always meant to be there, like there was never a time they were without a seventh member.

The whole Eddie thing is...complicated. For now, at least, it's a secret they've agreed to keep. Richie made them all spit swear on it (metaphorically, in the case of Stan, who had rattled off a very, very, very long list of things he'd rather do than touch Richie's saliva-slick palm.) They're good at keeping secrets. After all, they know better than anyone that different doesn't always mean dangerous, that other isn't always such a bad thing. And yeah, it's scary, knowing Eddie isn't just his secret anymore, but Richie feels a little lighter every morning he wakes up knowing he's not keeping this secret alone.

And it feels like it shouldn't have been so easy but it is, because the Losers are terribly unalike in most ways and painfully similar in others, above all in their unshakable loyalty. They're so good it doesn't seem real sometimes, and way in the back of his mind Richie knows he probably doesn't deserve them. But Eddie does.

When it comes to the Losers, the whole 'lack of plans' thing is never really an issue either. It's barely a quarter to ten on the first Saturday of break when he's startled awake by his mother's voice.

"Rich!" she calls from the bottom of the stairs. "Phone's for you!" And really, Richie could give less
a shit about whoever's on the other end of the line. He's more surprised at the fact that his mom is actually awake and answering the phone at an hour that normal people are awake and answering the phone. They've missed a lot of calls over the years because of her apparent inability to leave her bedroom before two in the afternoon — a blessing when it comes to Richie's spotty attendance record and a curse when it involves stuff like utility bills and groceries.

He can hear her still chatting away with whoever's on the phone as he pads downstairs, scrubbing sleep from his eyes with the heel of his hand. She sounds happy, awkward but amiable, like she doesn't quite remember how to have real conversations anymore but is trying nonetheless. He's rounding the corner when she laughs, and his heart does a funny little twist in his chest at the sound of it.

"Hi," he says, slightly breathless as he stands in the doorway.

His mother turns, startled, receiver still pressed to her ear. Then she smiles at him. She's wearing blue jeans and an off-white button up, hair brushed back behind her ears, and she looks more awake and alert than she has in a long time. The kitchen table is still cluttered with paperwork and Richie would bet money that she hasn't eaten much if at all, but she looks good. It feels like something out of a dream.

"Sorry, sweetheart, give me just a second — morning, Rich — yeah, he's right here. I'll let you go now, hon, but it was great talking to you. Take care of yourself, okay?" A pause, a wavering smile. "I will. Thanks, hon." She presses the receiver briefly against her shoulder and mouths the name Beverly Marsh to Richie, as if it's some sort of secret and Bev doesn't call on the regular. Then again, Maggie's not usually the one answering.

"Thanks," Richie mumbles, still a little stunned as she hands him the phone. "'Lo?" His mother squeezes his shoulder on her way past, and he watches her go until she turns the corner at the end of the hall.

"So your mom sounds good," is the first thing out of Beverly's mouth, voice coming through the receiver plain as day. She sounds as pleasantly surprised as Richie feels.

He waits until he hears footsteps on the stairs to answer. "Yeah. I guess she does."

"Well, tell her I'm keepin' my fingers crossed for her," Beverly says. "Actually, maybe don't tell her that. But just know that I am."

Richie chews the inside of his cheek, humming thoughtfully. "Good, 'cause I am too."

"Double the luck, then." He doesn't need to see her face to know the exact smile she's wearing. His toes curl against the kitchen tile. "Anyway, get ready and meet me at Ben's in fifteen." In saying this, her voice takes on slightly manic edge that suggests she's either looking forward to something or has spent the entire morning downing an entire six-pack of Kool-Aid. Part of Richie almost hopes it's the latter.

"What's the rush, sunshine?" Richie asks, clucking his tongue. "My beauty regimen is time-consuming, you know."

Beverly cackles. "Looks like you're gonna have to cut it short this morning, pretty boy. We've got shit to do."

Richie has an inkling of what that means. He chews his lip.

"That's awfully vague and mysterious of you. If you guys were gonna murder me you'd tell me,
right?" he chuckles, but the line is already dead. He huffs a sigh, slams the phone back into the cradle, and goes upstairs to get dressed.

Richie isn't really one to take his sweet time getting ready, but there's no way to skirt around the fact that today he's dragging the process out as long as possible. He knows that stalling at this point is fruitless, but he can't help it; he knows exactly what Beverly meant by 'shit to do'. Somewhere hidden in the back of her closet is a stack of envelopes and a leather bound journal that neither of them have even dared to touch since the afternoon that procured them. Bev tells him that every single night she can practically hear them clawing at the inside of the closet door, taunting her, What are you waiting for?

Apparently, Bev's decided that she's done waiting, and logically Richie knows this is a good thing. Getting answers about Eddie, for Eddie is a good thing, but that doesn't keep the idea from twisting his stomach into knots.

So maybe he's stalling. Maybe he's been stalling for a while now.

He's shaking out a pair of mostly-clean jeans from the closet floor when something small and colorful falls out of the pocket. It's the stupid Michelangelo ring he'd rescued from the empty box of cereal a few weeks ago, the one he'd carried around in his pocket and pressed his thumb to as he told Beverly about Eddie for the first time. He rolls it between his fingers in the sunlight, all smooth orange and green plastic, the inkling of an idea rapping its knuckles against his skull.

Richie contemplates it a moment, then shoves the ring back into the pocket and finishes getting dressed with newfound haste.

Beverly is sitting in Ben's open bedroom window when Richie walks up, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth like silver screen tough boy, as if she's Butch Cassidy instead of a little redhead from a white trash town in Maine. Richie waggles his fingers at her, and she blows him a smoke-colored kiss. Through the triangle her bent leg creates with the sill, Richie catches a pair of eyes staring him down, catlike and curious. The corner of his mouth twitches. His face feels warm, and he ducks to hide it.

Mrs. Hanscom is nice. She offers him toast, Poptarts, cereal, anything he wants. When he refuses, she insists he at least take a glass of orange juice or chocolate milk up with him. "Or both," she laughs, so Richie takes one of each, sipping them one after the other and grimacing at the less-than-stellar combination.

"I love you," is the first thing Eddie says when Richie nudges through the door to Ben's bedroom, and Richie nearly swallows his tongue as Ben and Beverly squeak with laughter. He swings his gaze between the three of them in confusion. He can feel a drop of chocolate milk quivering at his bottom lip, but he suddenly can't remember how to make his tongue work to lick it off.

"Huh?"

"Now you're supposed to say 'I know.'" Oh. Richie isn't sure whether to be relieved or incredibly disappointed. It still startles a hysterical-sounding laugh out of the deepest part of his chest, but it comes out sounding like deep blue ache and Richie kind of wants to die.

"You watched Empire Strikes Back without me?"

Eddie nods, a little coy.

"Alright, which one of you fuckers popped dear Eddie's Star Wars cherry?" Richie snaps, only really
half-bitter. He's still kind of rattled from hearing the words I love you, directed at him, in Eddie's own voice. The world is a cruel, cruel place.

"Nice choice of words there," Beverly says with an amused smile. "But don't look at me. It's all his fault." She nudges Ben playfully; in turn, Ben turns bright red as if he's actually done something wrong.

"Sorry," Ben says quietly, staring down at his hands. "Guess I got a little carried away."

"It's fine," Richie sniffs, and god, he doesn't know why the fuck it comes out sounding like he's annoyed but it does. Or jealous, maybe. Yeah. He sounds really, incredibly, stupidly jealous right now and it's embarrassing and uncalled for and he's suddenly struck by the intense urge to sink through the floor and disappear. Instead, he awkwardly lowers himself into a sitting position on the ground, both of his glasses still in hand.

Beverly clears her throat awkwardly. "Well then," she says. "Ready to get started?" She ghosts her fingertips over the collection of things they'd snagged from the Kaspbrak residence, all laid out on the floor in front of her. A small stack of envelopes, some torn and others still sealed; the leather-bound book Richie had found in the bedroom, the one he'd thought he'd left behind in the backyard in his haste; more stacks of papers still, seemingly copies of things Ben found at the library.

Richie tries to swallow back the bitter taste of guilt that surges forward at the realization that even Ben's been doing more work looking for Eddie's dad than he has. Everyone, it seems, has set their sights on that end goal since it was brought up as something Eddie wanted. Everyone but Richie. He really doesn't want to think about why.

Ben and Beverly make quick work of digging into the piles, and Richie has finally, slowly started to inch his hand towards the journal when, suddenly, his glasses aren't on his face anymore but on Eddie's instead, balanced precariously on the tip of his nose. He looks kinda cute, from what Richie can see.

"I need those to see, you know," Richie gripes, but he can't even really force himself to look upset. "I don't wear 'em just 'cause they look pretty."

Eddie merely hums in response, resting his chin in his hands and gazing this way and that, studying each part of the room with narrowed eyes. Yeah, Richie thinks. Definitely cute.

"If you have to squint, that means they're probably not working," Richie offers up under the guise of being considerate, and Eddie smacks his arm gently but returns the glasses to him, sliding them onto Richie's face with graceless caution. Richie blinks a few times as his eyes readjust, and he's met with the sight of Eddie peering at him head-on just an inch or two away, far closer than would be considered friendly if it were anyone else. But this is Eddie, and Eddie is...Eddie. Richie is trying desperately to keep these things in context, but that's easier said than done when Eddie's huge dark eyes are so close and staring him down, gentle and curious and just a little bit playful, too, like he's satisfied with himself.

"Hi," Eddie says, arms crossed in front of him on the floor, legs kicked up behind him. He knocks his ankles together and Richie is almost tempted to just watch that instead of his face because it's way easier and he's less inclined to want stupid stuff like Eddie to kiss him if he isn't looking him in the eye.

"Hi," Richie answers. He fails miserably and meets Eddie's earnest gaze. With Pop-Tart crumbs on his chin and a smear of strawberry filling at the corner of his mouth, Richie's mind drifts back to the conversation they'd had on Mike Hanlon's living room sofa, the way Eddie's face had softened when
he'd told Richie he cared about him. He wanted to kiss him then, and staring at him now Richie almost wishes he'd let him that night, because at least in the dark it would be easier to pretend he wasn't ruining him. But in the light like this with one of Ben's blankets pulled over his shoulders like a cape and a mustache of candy sprinkles, there's no mistaking it — the fact that Eddie is too good.

"I found a name!" Beverly shouts triumphantly, and Richie whips his head around to find her clutching excitedly at the edges of an unfolded letter. "Frank He's mentioned a few times here. That's got to mean something, right?" She waves it in their faces, too quick for any of them to really catch what's on the page.

"Who's it from?" Richie asks.

Beverly frowns. "Don't know. No return address. No signature, either."

"Frank," Ben echoes, turning to Eddie. "Eddie, that name sound familiar?"

Eddie purses his lips and shakes his head no. "Sorry," he mumbles, looking apologetic.

Beverly exhales shakily as she comes down from the brief high brought on by the discovery, setting the paper aside and grabbing another envelope from the pile at her feet. "That's okay. We'll just have to keep looking. I'm sure we'll find a pattern eventually, right?" Ben nods enthusiastically. Eddie drums his fingers against the floor, frustrated, like he wants to help but isn't sure how. Richie, finding his courage all at once, snatches the journal from its place on the floor, scoots until his back hits the wall, and draws his knees to his chest.

He can feel all of their eyes on him, the way they're trying to read him, burning holes through his knees as he slouches lower so he can't see them anymore. At some point he hears Beverly sigh, heavy with exasperation, before she returns to rifling through papers. Ben does the same. Richie sits with the unopened book in his lap; it has one long, light scratch running jagged down the center of its otherwise nondescript cover. Richie traces the line of it with his finger, over and over again. He wonders what it's from, then decides that maybe he's better off not knowing.

His progress is still at a blaring, angry zero when he looks up from his lap and finds Eddie staring at him over the tops of his knees. Richie opens his mouth, maybe just to say hi again, but then Eddie is shuffling around so he can sit beside him instead, drawing up his own knees and slumping back against the wall so he's eye-level with Richie. Their legs touch, creating a wall that narrows the world down to nothing but the denim of their jeans. Richie's heart shudders.

"Hi," Richie whispers, so awestruck by the simple gesture that he can't quite find his voice.

"Hi," Eddie whispers back, and when he smiles with little boy giddiness Richie can see with crystal clarity every sharpened point of his teeth and he is not afraid. "I'm excited."

"Yeah?" Richie's brow lifts. "What for?"

"This," Eddie says, gesturing to the journal held tight in Richie's fingers and then to the papers
scattered on the floor beyond their bent legs. "We're going to find him. My dad."

A lump starts to form in Richie's throat, and he's not sure if it's because he's more terrified they won't actually find him or that they will. Both are paralyzing to think about, so Richie just nods, trying to keep his expression light.

He splits the book in his lap open and, finally, begins to read.

**25 December, 1977**

_First Christmas without Frank in many, many years. They say the first is always the hardest, harder still because I took a piece of him with me, and not just his name._

_This child of mine is so unlike his father, so precious and uncorrupted...there is still human in him, after all. There is something inside him that is good. I believe that with all of my heart. I'm not foolish enough to believe this peace will last forever, but for tonight I am at ease._

_Edward. Eddie. I've always liked that name._

Richie brushes his lips together and tries to figure out why his stomach hurts so badly from reading something that isn't even all that terrible. He flips through the next few pages, all of which appear to be similar journal entries. Maybe the ache is because knows his own mother had journaled for a while when she first had him; he'd found it tucked in the bottom drawer of her dresser once, but had been too scared to open it. Somehow, he'd thought, she would find out and she'd be more disappointed in him than she already was, more disappointed than whatever was written on those pages let on.

Pushing back his own discomfort, Richie continues on a page or two later, skipping through entries with his lip caught between his teeth.

**12 February, 1978**

_Teething infants are a pain, and even if I didn't learn this firsthand I'd still know due to the insufferable women at work bemoaning it. According to them, motherhood is nothing more than sleepless nights, sippy cups and pacifiers, diapers and talcum powder. I envy them because I envy their comfort. Things could be worse, I tell them, a lot worse. They smile politely and agree, but roll their eyes when they think I'm not looking. I never elaborate. They've never asked me to._

_Eddie has started teething. For a month or so I convinced myself that perhaps he wouldn't, but it's here now and miserable as ever for both of us. He is still so small, but with every day that passes I start to see more and more of his father in him. It's not my imagination either. The hardness of his infant gaze makes me wonder if the good in him is enough to be salvaged. It scares me._

_But he is still part me, and I adore him the way a mother must. I can only hope that as he grows, he will love me as much in return._

**31 October 1982**
Does it make me a bad mother that on nights like this, I start to resent my own son? That I regret the lying and the running away? It could have been simple. My life could have been simple.

I know it's terrible. But it's Halloween night and all evening long I've been bombarded with children at my door, dressed as ghosts and princesses, the wolfman and Dracula...that last one always makes me laugh...and I am sad for son and I am sad for myself, because neither of us will ever get to experience childhood or motherhood the way they should be experienced. On nights like this it's hard not to think about all the men I've known in my life...Ted, the investment banker, Jerry, the contractor, Dean, the aspiring entrepreneur? They were good men. With them, I could have had a good life. Not perfect, but better than this.

I feel trapped in the hole I've dug myself into.

12 August, 1985

Working with other women is both a blessing and curse. None of them are smart enough to question anything I tell them, but they're so nosy! Always pestering me about my personal life, wondering why don't I have kids? Sarah is four months pregnant with her third baby — third! — and can hardly go five minutes without chirping in my ear about how fulfilling motherhood is. Sonia, she says, you're still so young! There's still time!

The thing is, as a nurse I'm surrounded by mothers, tending to them in the aftermath and aside from the odd case they're always glowing, always happy, always blessed, they tell me, like they're mocking me. As if they know, deep down, that I will never know that kind of happiness. For a split second, I think I did, when Eddie was first born. I was alone and in pain, but for just a moment I think I believed that somehow this child would make everything okay.

24 May, 1987

He's been throwing tantrums lately, worse than I've ever seen. He is so loud, so violent...it keeps me up all night. I think he likes that...knowing he's keeping me awake. He resents me through all the good I've done for him. Like all that good I've done means nothing.

I worry one day he'll blame his father's absence on me. I worry that day may be my last.

18 July, 1987

Nothing I try works. He hasn't drank in over a day and refuses to now...he thinks this means he is punishing me, as if I am the child needing to be scolded. Nursery rhymes do nothing to placate him anymore. He wants nothing to do with me...tells me to go away. He does not know of death; he does not understand it, but sometimes I think he wants to die. He wants to be left alone to rot. He acts as if that's what I'm doing to him. When he was smaller he would cling to me constantly, shaking with tears whenever I bid him goodnight. Those days are behind us now and they aren't coming back.

I can feel his trust waning, along with it his love. Every boy loves his own mother, but sometimes he looks at me and I wonder some dark thing in him wishes me dead instead. I am terrified for him. I am terrified of him. Without love, what's to stop him from succumbing to the kind of beast his father was?
Richie's throat feels swollen shut. At some point while reading he must have bitten all the way through his lip, because he can taste blood.

He can hardly pry his gaze away from the book to peek down at Eddie where he's still resting against Richie's arm, tracing the edges of a beam of sunlight with his finger. Richie has seen him smile and cry and snarl like an animal. Richie has seen him soft and asleep, feral and covered in blood. Richie has seen him elated, angry, terrified, devastated. One line from Sonia Kaspbrak's journal keeps looping around the perimeter of his mind: *Without love, what's to stop him from succumbing to the kind of beast his father was?* As if Eddie were no longer human if he wasn't pressed under her thumb, starving and desperate for love. As if he were no longer good.

The thing is, he sees Eddie now, a strawberry jam stain on his shirt and his hair unruly, and he loves the same things in him that he hates in himself. The things his mother sighs over, the things that make his father's eyes glaze over in disappointment — he sees those same things in Eddie sometimes, and he adores them.

For a brief, flickering moment, he wonders if with Eddie, he could like himself. No one loves themselves, not really. Richie knows that much. But with Eddie, he thinks maybe liking himself isn't such an impossible thing.

His heart is in his throat as he drags his gaze back towards the journal, chest aching with emptiness. He imagines the darkness behind the door in the hallway, imagines Eddie trapped in it, terrified and alone and untouched by anything but his mother's calculated hands. He scoots a little closer to Eddie, and Eddie peeks up at him through his lashes.

"Do you, um." Richie's voice comes out thick and hoarse, like he's on the verge of tears. Maybe he is. "Did you want to read it?"

Eddie shakes his head quickly and Richie feels stupid for asking. Of course he doesn't want to read it. Why would he? Why bother reading something you've already suffered through once firsthand?

"You find anything, Richie?" Ben's voice drifts over the wall of he and Eddie's legs, and Richie straightens up, blinking like he's trying to wake up from a bad dream.

Richie waits for a second to answer. He's overcome with the urge to lie. He's not sure why, but he wants to tell them no, nothing useful here, no mentions of a Frank anywhere to be found. His tongue feels heavy as lead.

What eventually comes out is, "Yeah. She mentions Frank a few times in here. He's definitely...that's definitely his dad's name." And he could cry with relief and terror simultaneously, because being honest feels like winning as much as it feels like giving up. He wants Eddie to find what he's looking for but he doesn't want Eddie to leave, doesn't want to lose him now. Not yet.

It's just — it's nice to feel needed, is all.

Mrs. Hanscom knocks three times quickly on the door and pokes her head inside. "Ben, sweetie, I've got errands to run and then I'm meeting Sheryl later this afternoon. You kids are more than welcome to stay for lunch," she offers, seemingly unphased by Eddie's presence at Richie's side. "We've got plenty of bread for sandwiches."

"Thanks, Mrs. H," they answer in unison aside from Ben, who blushes when his mother pinches his cheek and ruffles his hair before she leaves.
"She knows about Eddie?" Richie asks as he watches Mrs. Hanscom's car pull out of the driveway.

"She knows he's Ben's partner for our end-of-year English project," Beverly says, and Richie cracks a smile.

Eventually they do all drag themselves downstairs to the kitchen, weighed down by the things they'd read upstairs, the half-truths they've started to uncover. Lots of names but no real answers as to where Eddie's father has gone off to, if anywhere at all. From the sound of it in Sonia's journal, it seems more like Sonia had been the one to run off instead.

"Can I walk you back to Mike's?" Richie asks after they've all eaten on the back porch and Ben takes their crumb-covered plates back inside. Eddie nods eagerly.

They stay on the main sidewalks that zigzag through town. They do not go into the woods, off the hidden paths and shortcuts. Richie doesn't trust them. Back at Ben's Beverly had mentioned something about Bowers being on a witch hunt, still eager to avenge their dead friend. They're the only ones who even still give half a shit. Richie thinks maybe they're just hungry for blood. And he knows Eddie will protect him if things go awry, sure, but who protects Eddie?

You, his mind whispers, and his arm starts to throb in the place Eddie had bitten him. He feels the press of the stupid plastic ring in his pocket. The weight of Sonia's journal smuggled in the inside pocket of his jacket, having snatched it from Ben's bedroom at the last second. You protect him, too.

Richie looks over at Eddie, the bounce of his hair as he walks, the way he Sneaks glances over at Richie from the corner of his eye when he thinks Richie isn't paying attention, and thinks that he could run to the ends of the earth and back to protect this boy and it still wouldn't be enough.

But that won't keep him from trying.

/ 

A brand new pair of glasses are waiting on the edge of Richie's bed for him when he finally gets home later that afternoon.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get around to getting you new ones," comes a voice from behind him, and Richie swivels on his heel, glasses still in hand. His mother is in the doorway. "You gonna try 'em on?"

Richie opens and closes his month like a fish out of water a few times before pulling off his current pair and sliding the new ones onto his face. It's a little disorienting, honestly, suddenly being able to see better than he has in nearly a month. "So what do you think?" he croaks. Every part of today has felt like a dream, the good and the bad. He's worried that if he talks too loudly he'll shatter the illusion and wake up. "Am I Man of The Year material yet?"

"Oh, very," his mother answers, tweaking Richie's cheek playfully before she takes the old glasses out of his hands and tucks them back into the top drawer of his night stand. Over her shoulder, she says, "How was Beverly? I'm so glad you two still talk. She's a nice girl."

"She's good. She's fine. We just hung out at Ben's for a while," Richie says, trying to stave off the awkwardness he always feels whenever his mom tries to initiate a real conversation with him. "She said-" He stops to clear his throat, taking off his glasses and turning them over in his hands so she's
reduced to a blurrier version of herself. "She said you sounded good."

"Oh." Richie doesn't need to see it to know she's smiling, the kind she has to hide into the back of her hand. "Well, tell Miss Marsh I said thank you."

"I will." Richie stares down at his shoes. "Thanks for the glasses, by the way." He expects that to be the end of the conversation aside from maybe a goodnight even though it's not even five yet, but she lingers in the doorway with a nervous energy that matches Richie's own. Somewhere along the line they forgot how to be good at the whole mother-son thing.

"Actually, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to head down to the Aladdin and catch a movie with me." Richie's head snaps up. He can tell from the look on her face that she isn't actually in the mood; she looks exhausted. And that's what gets him. She's tired, but she's still trying.

She's trying really, really hard; he can tell by the way she rings her hands, tugging a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She looks more like an anxious child giving a presentation than she does a mother someone fit. Maybe, Richie thinks, some people just aren't meant to be mothers, but here she is and here he is and this is what they have right now. There's no going back.

It's not that part that bothers him, though, not really. It's the fact that things are fine and dandy right now, but tomorrow he'll wake up and there's a chance she won't even sit up in bed to look at him.

And Richie hates that he's angry at her for it because he knows it's not entirely her fault but, god, it's like whiplash, the way she goes from one extreme to the next, and he doesn't know how long he can keep doing this back-and-forth thing.

But she's trying. In this moment, right now, she's trying. It only feels right to try to meet her halfway.

"Let's do it."

"You sure you're not too old to be seen out with your old woman?" his mom asks. The question is accompanied by a short laugh, but there's a flicker of insecurity lingering behind it, like maybe she's worried it's too late. Or maybe she just doesn't want people to see her. Maybe she's ashamed; Derry's got plenty of alcoholics far more noteworthy than Maggie Tozier, but that doesn't keep judgmental, nosy folks from being exactly that. Richie wants to hug her.

"I mean, I'm a pretty hot ticket around here if you didn't notice, Mags." It's been a long time since he called her that, but it suddenly slides off his tongue so easy it might as well have been yesterday.

"But I guess I can let it slide," Richie says in his best impression of a disinterested teenager.

The laugh that comes out of her then is almost startling; for half a second Richie thinks maybe he's made her cry. But no, she's definitely laughing, loud and full-bodied and real. He hasn't heard her laugh like that in years.

They spend the entire car ride to the Aladdin arguing over what to see, and by the time the car is parked on the curb Richie's sides hurt from laughing. They finally agree on the new TMNT movie, only because Maggie refuses to take him to Silence of the Lambs.

Richie doesn't even really pay attention to the movie, and if someone were to ask him about it later all he'd be able to recall is that the animatronics are still as unsettling to watch as he remembers, Michelangelo is still his favorite, and there's a Vanilla Ice cameo. It's not great. It's not even good,
really, but Richie has a good time and they both leave the theater smiling and for that alone he deems it a worthy successor.

It's the most fun he's had with his mom in as long as he can remember, and when she squeezes him tight before bed and presses a goodnight against his temple, all Richie can do is hope that this time it sticks.

That night in bed, he's jolted awake by the screeching of tires on asphalt, the booming sound of Henry Bowers' car radio and Belch Huggins' laughter roaring loud in the night. It's well past curfew, but Henry and his lackeys are untouchable. For a horrifying second Richie is convinced that they're coming for him, but the noise comes and goes and he's left staring at the moon through the cracks in the blinds, heart still beating loud and wild in his chest. He wonders if Eddie is safe. He thinks of the Hanlon farm and all of its nooks and crannies, how Will Hanlon has kept a shotgun in his bedroom ever since his first encounter with Butch Bowers and how he and Henry are very much the same. He thinks of Jessica Hanlon's unwavering kindness and strength.

Of course Eddie is safe. But that doesn't mean Richie is going to fall asleep anytime soon.

Sliding a hand under his pillow, his fingers brush the edge of Sonia Kaspbrak's journal. He pulls it out, studying the cover in the blue light before flipping it open just past where he remembers leaving off.

4 April, 1990

It was a good night between us, a quiet one, until he told me, plainly, that he wishes he could die.

Normally I would not indulge him. Normally I would ignore it. But something in his words, the way he said them so easily, triggered an anger in me, one I've not felt in a long time...how dare he? How can he wish for death when I have given up everything for him? Does he not understand the burden his existence has placed on my back? And still I care for him, still I keep him safe! For years, I've done this and gotten nothing in return. And he wishes for what? To die!

You're going to be waiting a long time, I told him, and watched his face crumble. I do not regret it.

And the final entry, one dated just a couple of months ago, about a month before Eddie found him in the woods that night —

1 February, 1991

After all this time, he's just now gotten it into his head that his father is alive. I don't know how he could possibly know that, but he's insistent. He says he wants to see him, and every time I tell him the same thing. His father is dead. His father has always been dead. His father is not coming back.

But he won't take no for an answer. This morning, he told me he hated me with blood on his mouth. Blood I'm risking my job, my reputation and my freedom to get for him, to keep him alive. I keep him alive. I can sense his frustration growing every day, but what else can I do? It's far too late to go back now. This is the only way to keep him safe.

There are no entries further than that. Richie's arms suddenly ache. He's half-consumed with the urge
to crawl out the window and run all the way to the farm just so he can throw his arms around Eddie just so he can know for sure that he's real and safe and far, far away from his mother.

The edge of the stack of photos sticks out from the corner of the journal; Richie pulls them free with shaking fingers and shuffles through them, swallowing hard with renewed upset when he realizes they're all pictures of Eddie throughout the years, labeled neatly across the bottom with a black felt tip marker.

*Eddie, 1977 - 6.1 lbs, 18.4 inches*

*Eddie, 1980 - 29 lbs, 35.2 inches*

*Eddie, 1985 - 53.8 lbs, 46.6 inches*

*Eddie, 1989 - 80.2 lbs, 64 inches*

And so on.

In all of them, Eddie is small and miserable, faced illuminated by flash, big-eyed and trusting of the woman behind the camera keeping records of his existence like he's a lab experiment instead of a child, and Richie is overcome by a wave of nausea, hatred for someone he's hardly ever spoken to. He doesn't need to. Richie knows monsters when he sees them, but somehow he'd missed this one. He thinks of Eddie in the dark while he and Bill lounged in Sonia Kaspbrak's front yard, shoves the photos back between the pages, slams the book shut and throws it across the room; he hears it hit the closet door with a sharp thwack.

In the dark behind his eyelids all he sees — flitting from infant to child to the boy he knows now — is Eddie's face. Richie pulls his pillow over his face, stomach aching, and screams himself hoarse.

By Wednesday both Bill and Stan have returned from their respective Spring Break excursions, and it's unanimously decided amongst the Losers that they need to all get together to celebrate. Richie scrapes together a pocketful of change from the bottom of his sock drawer and heads over to Mike's — the only thing Mike's ever *not* provided for him during their group sleepovers at his place — and two dented boxes of orange creamsicles. He eats one on the way, and has just started on another when he steps onto the property and is immediately assaulted from behind. His attacker's elbow catches him between the ribs.

"Eddie," Richie greets with held-back warmth, which is pretty hard when Eddie is *literally* hanging off him like a koala bear. A little easier when he notices his half-eaten creamicle now resting in the grass, easier still when his knees buckle. Eddie might be small, but he's no lightweight. "You made me drop my ice cream." He cranes his neck to try to get a look at the boy on his back. "You're also fucking heavy."

"Hi." Eddie answers the latter two of Richie's complaints by sticking out his tongue.

The rest of the Losers trickle onto the property one by one. Bill has returned from California with an uneven, ridicule-worthy tan and a Mickey Mouse pin; Stan, on the other hand, looks incredibly grateful to be back and among friends as opposed to being in the company of his cheek-pinching, road-raging great aunt.
When all is said and done the seven of them lie back in the grass under the willow trees, knocking knees and elbows as they catch up. Their ice cream melts in streams down their forearms. When they were younger they'd all go chasing after the ice cream truck like a pack of dogs, laughing and shrieking and wild in the summertime.

At some point during Bill's story about how he nearly puked after riding Space Mountain six times in a row with Georgie, Richie realizes Eddie's voice is missing from the conversation. When he turns his head away from Bill, he finds Eddie curled up loosely in the grass next to them, dozing, and the sight makes Richie's breath catch. His dark hair is starting to curl at the nape of his neck, little corkscrew coils around his ears. There's a smattering of freckles on the bridge of his nose.

When Richie was younger, he was always under the impression that pretty was reserved for sunsets or flowers or girls like Beverly, but he's smarter now. He knows that's not true. Eddie can be pretty, too, and he is, and that doesn't necessarily even have to mean anything —

He looks at Eddie, now, eyes closed with melted ice cream on his chin and the breeze ruffling his hair. Richie's heart leaps to his throat.

This is not nothing.

Eddie's nose twitches a little in his sleep, and Richie literally has to roll over or else he thinks his fucking heart is going to explode. He presses a palm against the ground, plucking and twisting blades of grass between his fingertips. If he could, he'd shove through his own rib cage and squeeze his heart like a hand just to get it to calm down.

By the time Eddie blinks awake, Richie has gone through three cycles of trying to convince himself that he was never staring at all.

Someone else has just started a long-winded story when, without a word of warning, Eddie stands unceremoniously and walks away. He doesn't look back, and though the rest of them stare after him with vaguely bemused expressions, they don't say anything about it. The only thing about Eddie that makes sense to them is that he doesn't — Eddie does plenty of things without rhyme or reason. Conversation seems to overwhelm him, sometimes, especially when it's all of them together. Which makes sense, Richie thinks, considering that up until now he and Bev were the pinnacle of Eddie's interaction with anyone who wasn't his mother.

"Well?" Mike murmurs, leaning in close with a knowing smile once Eddie is a ways down. "Aren't you gonna go with him?"

"Huh?" Richie stares at him, blinks oblivious and stupid behind his glasses like maybe he can fool them. He never can, not really, but it's never kept him from trying before.

Beverly huffs an exasperated sigh. "Go after him, idiot!"

"Why would I?" Richie's effort to play dumb slips to halfhearted at best.

"Because you love him!" Ben blurts, wide-eyed. His face turns pink almost immediately, as if he's just disclosed some great secret that he was never supposed to say aloud.

Richie clears his throat awkwardly, feeling a flush creep to his own cheeks. "Your brain must still be half-frozen, Haystack, 'cause I don't know what you're talking about."

"You definitely do," Stan insists. "Don't worry, though. It's only obvious to anyone with eyes."

Richie sinks back into the grass miserably and throws his arms over his face.
"It's l-like you're dreaming w-w-with your eyes open," Bill agrees smugly.

Just as abruptly as Eddie had, Richie stands and starts to follow. He can hear the rest of the Losers giggling behind him, and he'd turn around to flip them off but he's got his sights set firmly on the boy with his back turned. "Eddie!" he calls, one word tinged with uncertainty like maybe Eddie's going to turn around and tell him to fuck off.

Except he doesn't tell him to fuck off, and he doesn't really even turn around, either; he only stops briefly and glances at Richie over his shoulder. Something playful and knowing touches the corner of his mouth. Up until now, so much of this has felt entirely one-sided — Richie's never even considered that Eddie might feel anywhere near the same way that Richie feels about him. And how could he possibly? He still has so much to see, so much to learn.

But he's a little bit selfish and a lot eager with five pairs of eyes on his back, so he follows Eddie. Through the grass and trees, down a dirt path near the back of the house leading down to the old barn. It's around the rust-red side of the barn that Richie finally catches up to him; Eddie has planted himself like a tree there, waiting expectantly. This is it, Richie thinks. It has to be. He's suddenly so nervous he could puke.

The sweater Eddie's wearing is familiar — Stan's, Richie realizes, and that doesn't upset him so much as it does startle him, seeing Eddie in something other than his own old faded t-shirts and worn jackets. The overalls must be Mike's, because even rolled up what must be half a dozen times they still nearly come down to Eddie's ankles.

His eyes flick up to Eddie's face. He's not surprised to see Eddie staring back, but it still makes his palms clammy. It's a very deer-in-headlights look that Eddie's giving him, except when he's caught in it Richie feels like he's the one on the spot, being picked apart by Eddie's eyes. He swallows hard.

"Do I have something on my fa-"

Eddie kisses him.

It's close-mouthed, chaste, and Eddie doesn't really taste like anything, though his mouth and chin are still a little sticky with orange sugar. Which is a little disappointing, honestly, because Richie totally could've worked that into a poem that he's definitely gonna have to have Ben help him write.

"I thought about it," Eddie whispers when he pulls away a second later. "Is that okay?"

Richie nods, dazed, pressing his fingers against his own mouth curiously. They're surrounded by nothing but acres of tall grass that the springtime has turned impossibly green, the sounds of animals stirring in the main barn somewhere in the distance. The trees rustle in the breeze. The barn to one side of them. Inside of it, just over a week ago, Richie had held Eddie and feared for his life, let him sink his teeth into his soft flesh just to keep him alive. He'd do it again in an instant if Eddie asked.

After what feels like ages, Richie finally nods in agreement, turning his soft gaze back to Eddie and then to his lips, the way the sun hits the points of his teeth and makes them gleam like stars in the daytime.

"This is crazy," Richie says.

Eddie frowns. "It is?"

"Yeah," Richie laughs. Their foreheads brush. "It's really crazy."

"Why?"
"Because you're you, and I'm...me."

"What's wrong with being you?"

"I don't know," Richie admits. It isn't entirely a lie. "Nothing. Everything."

"There's nothing wrong with you," Eddie says, face flickering with shadows of confusion, of sadness. He's shorter than Richie by an inch or two but in the fading daylight he looks so tall, eyes burning with something bigger than thirst, both of his hands on Richie's shoulders.

Richie offers up a wan smile, though the look in Eddie's eyes is doing something strange to the rhythm of his heart. "Whatever you say, Eds."

"Nothing is wrong with you," Eddie repeats, determined, like if he says it forcefully enough it'll be true. "I think we're good together, me and you." Eddie might have saved him that first night but it feels like ever since then Richie's the one who's been desperately trying to make it up to him, offering up his clothes, his bed, himself like a sacrificial lamb. And yet. Here Eddie is, his grip on Richie kind but firm, like he's holding him together. Like maybe Richie is worth that much.

Then Richie's the one closing the gap between them.

There's a myriad of great things about the second kiss, but the best is that when Eddie reaches up to press his palm against Richie's cheek, it doesn't feel dirty. More specifically, Richie doesn't feel dirty — not like he's destroying something. Like this, he thinks maybe he could be something good. A friend, a protector. Somewhere in the world, dead or alive Richie isn't sure, there is a woman who brought Eddie into the world who tried to keep him in the dark under the guise of love, but she won't ever have him again. Somewhere a few miles from here there are boys with grisy faces and sweat-stained t-shirts tearing through the woods with their guns and their knives looking for retribution, but they won't find it. They won't find it, because what they're looking for is right here, safe and warm and sharp and real in Richie's embrace, and Richie will die before he lets anything happen to him.

What he'd really like, though, is for Eddie to get his hands under his skin, sift through his insides to find what good things are left and peel away the bad like the flesh of an apple. He can be good, he thinks. He can be good. He can. He just needs a little help to do it. With Eddie, he thinks maybe he can be the good he's always wanted to be.

From the movies, Richie knows you're supposed to keep your foreheads together after a kiss. It's more romantic that way. But trying to look at Eddie so close is making him dizzy and cross-eyed, so he pulls away with a quiet, longing sigh, suddenly aware of something he's been wanting to do. He fishes around in his pocket and closes his fingers around the plastic ring he's been carrying around since Saturday. "Here, I..." He holds it out to Eddie like he's offering up his entire heart in this one shitty cereal box toy, and he wants to cry with laughter when he thinks about that first night in the woods, the blood and the fear and how it's all led up to this, losing his shit over a schoolgirl crush. "For you. If you want. That one's Michelangelo. He's, uh...he's kind of my favorite." He laughs nervously, stupid and tongue-tied.

Eddie looks delighted, like Richie really has just offered up his heart to him. He slides the ring onto his index finger, almost mystified by the simple gesture, and Richie is so glad, so fucking relieved that Eddie also seems to think this means so much more than what it is.

"I really, really like you," Richie whispers, hesitant in a way he typically isn't. The the smile he gets from Eddie in return is fucking everything — breathless and delighted and Richie wants to take the words back so he can fill the space with better ones instead, but that feel too big, too solid, too real
for this reverie of an afternoon, so he locks the heavier words away in the back of his mind for now. He hopes there will be time for them later.

They return to the group just before sundown. The Losers are still lazing under the tree where they left them last. They're doing that thing where they try really hard to make it seem like they're not staring, even though they totally are. Bev lets out a low wolf-whistle, and Stan mutters something that sounds suspiciously like, fucking finally. Richie sticks his tongue out at him; it's all he can manage. He feels so light. Light-headed, light-bodied, like he could float away, everything warm and soft at the edges like the faded photographs on Mike's bedroom wall.

"Do you think they know we kissed?" Eddie whispers to him, except he does it loud enough that anyone paying attention can hear plain as day, and of course they all do, dissolving into laughter like a group of giddy schoolgirls. Richie can't help but laugh along; he imagines opening his mouth to let a kaleidoscope of yellow butterflies come fluttering out.

"W-w-we were placing bets on who would f-finally do it first," Bill says.

"Wait, what? We were?" Stan looks genuinely surprised, and that sends Richie off into another fit of laughter.

"That means you and Ben owe me two bucks," Mike boasts to Bill, tapping Ben's knee with his fingers.

They talk and laugh until the sky is dark and full of stars and the sound of crickets is deafening, Eddie with his head on Richie's shoulder. Richie knows there's something inside of both of them that matches, something small and aching stretching its sleeping limbs, that wants so desperately to be touched and held. We're good together, Eddie had said, and Richie runs those words over and over in his mind, brushes them over the front of his teeth with his tongue. We're good together.

That night they all camp out under the stars, stretched out in their sleeping bags and whispering among themselves as their eyes droop. Richie, for once, is quiet, floored by happiness as he peers up at the sky. Everything feels okay. For the first time in so long, everything in his life feels so...okay.

Richie feels okay. Like the wind and the rain have ceased entirely, and maybe it's just because he's in the eye of the storm, but that's okay too because for now it means he doesn't have to try to be strong or this or that. He just is.

He falls asleep last, or at least that's what he assumes by the way everyone's voice have gone quiet and their breathing noisy. He's curled slightly towards Eddie, who is next to him, so close that their arms brush.

Just before sleep pulls him under, Richie feels Eddie's hand come up squeeze his arm lightly, just over the spot he bit. Then, so softly Richie swears it must be part of his oncoming dream, Eddie murmurs, "I really like you, too."

And that does it, Richie thinks. Whatever's waiting for them beyond this moment, whatever's waiting for them down the line — today, tomorrow, next week, fuck it, he doesn't care. For Eddie he'll be brave. With Eddie, he'll be fearless.

Chapter End Notes
yes, the second live action tmnt movie does have a vanilla ice cameo and it is glorious

End Notes

i have this image in my head of tiny little freckled vampire eddie claiming richie as Strange Loud Human I Must Protect and i can't get it out of my head so i plotted an entire fic around it, hello

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