Semantics
by telm_393

Summary

Marius isn't exactly sure what to do with himself when he leaves home, but, to be fair, he's not sure what to do with himself most of the time. Meeting Courfeyrac and the Amis is probably the best thing that's ever happened to him. And then he meets Cosette.

(Or: Marius is autistic, Gillenormand didn't know how to raise him, Courfeyrac and Cosette are good people, and apparently you don't have to stick with the family you were born with. You can make one.)

Notes

This is set in the United States. I know.
Marius is four years old. He doesn't talk yet. His mother shrugs and calls him a "late bloomer" when anyone brings it up.

He doesn't talk until he's five, and when he finally does start he's speaking in full sentences in just a few months.

Then his mother dies and his father leaves, and Marius stops speaking for a year, even though his grandfather yells at him for it.

Marius is six years old, and his grandfather and aunt tell him to be still, hold his hands down when he tries to flap them or clap them, hold onto his shoulders when he tries to rock back and forth, grab him when he tries to spin or pace. He cries and cries, and then he stops crying and realizes that if he wants the touching to stop, he has to hide the way he moves, no matter how happy it makes him feel.

He starts playing with his hands all the time, rubbing them together and twisting his fingers. ([Stop fidgeting, grandfather says.])

Sometimes he forgets himself and flaps or rocks in public (don't you know that's inappropriate, Marius?), but he stops as soon as he notices, holds himself as rigidly as possible, barely breathing.

"Be still," he mutters to himself. "Be still, Marius," he says, just like his grandfather does.

Marius is nine years old and often talks to himself. It's nice, singing little songs (the ones mama and papa used to sing) and reciting facts and even just saying soothing words over and over again.

He reads poetry and doesn't understand it but he thinks it's beautiful anyway, and he recites lines to anyone who'll listen.

So, to himself.

No one else will listen.

Marius doesn't have friends.

His teacher says his social skills need work, says maybe he should try playing with the other children, but the other children scare him. He doesn't know how to talk to them and besides, they don't like him. They call him a freak.

His grandfather sits him down one day and tells him that to be successful in the future he has to get over this...this shyness. He's going to have to stop chattering away to himself.

"It makes you seem like there's something wrong with you," grandfather says, and for the first time Marius is afraid that there is something wrong with him, there is.

Marius is eleven and every Saturday he writes to his father because his grandfather tells him that's what sons do. Marius writes about whatever he wants, like the Napoleonic Wars and judicial
systems, politics and poetry. Things he doesn't talk about anymore because people tell him they're boring even though Marius knows they're really the most interesting things in the world.

He always ends his letters with *I miss you.*

Father never writes back. Grandfather says it's because he doesn't love Marius, and it makes sense. Marius even figures out why father doesn't love him, after a time: because he is different in a way he can't understand or place.

Because he's defective.

Marius knows.

(He hates his father, a little, and feels guilty about it because he's pretty sure that's not how sons are supposed to feel.)

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Marius is twelve and he's screaming like he's wanted to scream all day, hands pressed over his ears, rocking back and forth, desperately trying to block out the sound of construction one house over.

Tears spill over his cheeks and he stops screaming and starts humming one of the songs his mother used to sing.

His grandfather grabs his shoulders, shakes him, and the touch hurts so much it takes Marius's already hitching breath away. He wants to say *don't touch me* but he can't. He can't say anything.

The world blurs away and Marius closes his eyes and hums.

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Marius is fourteen and he's decided that the most interesting thing in the world is linguistics, now. He loves the very idea—the study of language, there's nothing cooler, even though he's still interested in the Battle of Waterloo and Napoleon and the few other things he's found that are, quite honestly, more enchanting than just about everything else.

He tells his grandfather's friends all about linguistics during a dinner party, gives an impromptu lecture on semantics because one of them asks him what it is he likes and he just blurts it all out, even though he knows that the things he likes are boring to everyone else, but he's so excited and doesn't know how somebody couldn't find at least *this* interesting.

His grandfather says, "Marius, honestly," which is what he says when he wants Marius to shut up but doesn't want to actually say *shut up,* and Marius stops talking immediately. His aunt hisses *be still,* because he hadn't realized he was starting to flap his hands in the way he does when he's happy.

Marius is still.

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At some point that he cannot place, breathing becomes difficult. In the morning, he can barely transition from that place between sleep and awake, and so he's never really fully conscious.

Going to school feels almost impossible, but his grandfather makes him go, and at least schoolwork occupies his mind.
Marius often finds himself running his hands through his hair in distress and hiding in bathroom stalls to cry and rock back and forth when he's at school, as a feeling that defies classification tries to suffocate him, covering him like cling wrap.

He gets straight A's because there's nothing else to do.

The other students push him down in the halls and laugh at him for reasons he can't figure out and he runs home every day after school so they won't catch him and beat him up.

At night, he rocks himself to sleep, singing under his breath, tears on his cheeks and a heaviness in his chest that he cannot place.

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Marius is fifteen and babysitting is the easiest thing he's ever done. Children are simpler to understand than adults, their facial expressions more open; their joy, their sadness easier to comprehend. They listen to what he has to say. He helps them with their homework and they want him to teach them things. He loves it. For the first time in a long time he loves doing something.

He wants to be a teacher.

When he says this to his grandfather, he's laughed at.

"Don't be ridiculous," grandfather says. "You'll make much better money as a lawyer."

"So?" Marius asks.

"So you're going to be a lawyer, Marius. Like me, and my father before me. Like your mother."

Marius wants to argue, but he doesn't. The words won't come out.

One of his teachers taught him some sign language when he was a child, and he still remembers every sign he learned. He wishes he could sign now instead of talking, wishes he could say it is my decision not yours with his hands instead of his voice, but he knows his grandfather would only yell, and wouldn't understand anyway.

(Use your words, everyone but that teacher, that one teacher--and God, he wants to be like her--used to tell him. Use your words.)

Marius doesn't think he'll be much of a lawyer.

Maybe he'll be a professor.

Maybe that.

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Marius is sixteen (he skipped a couple of grades, here and there, and it never quite occurred to him that he'd end up in college so early because of it, though it probably should have), studying Pre-Law, still living at home.

He spends his time at college being invisible, and he's fine with that.

He doesn't want to be visible like he was when he was a child.

He is a star student because he spends all his time studying, just like in high school, but he still
struggles when people speak to him, with what to do when they say "hello". When he says "hello" back it sounds strange, delayed. It's an echo. He has full conversations made up purely of sentences he's heard and then practiced in front of the mirror.

He's not so good at pragmatics.

When he's alone in his room, Marius reads and rocks back and forth, talks to himself in ways he only does by accident in public, flaps or claps his hands when he's happy or when he's reading something particularly interesting to feel the happiness surge through his hands, his body, and does all the things he can't do in public because they're inappropriate.

He knows he's a freak, knows he doesn't fit in and never will. He's resigned himself to that.

But then he goes to law school, and everything changes.
Marius gets into law school in the city with minimal fuss, even gets a full scholarship because despite not actually wanting to be a lawyer, he would be a good one in theory.

He continues to live with his grandfather because there's not really anywhere else to go.

He doesn't mind living with his grandfather, even though they don't talk much. Sometimes his grandfather will show Marius off to his friends, brag about what a good student he is. It's so different from how it was when he was a child, when he was made to hide in his room whenever his grandfather's friends came over, and Marius didn't like that, but he doesn't like this either.

He doesn't have anybody, really, but he's gotten so used to it, it barely registers. He manages to make some acquaintances because his grandfather says it's important to do so, but it's not easy, and he's always afraid people will realize he's defective and it'll be like it was in high school.

He's never kissed anyone, never had sex, and he knows he's behind but he also knows he doesn't really care. Some acquaintances have teased him about being afraid of girls, and he's never really sure whether they're being mean or not, but he just smiles the smile he's practiced in front of the mirror too many times to count and shrugs.

Truth is, Marius is not afraid of girls.

He's just afraid of people.

And then things turn around so suddenly that it makes Marius feel sick.

It's because he's looking for a pen in grandfather's study and opens the wrong drawer.

He's about to close it because it's private and he shouldn't be in the office anyway, he can't remember why he decided to look for a pen in here of all places, or where all of his other pens went, but then something scribbled in messy handwriting catches his eye. Georges.

Slowly, Marius takes out a letter, and it doesn't take long to realize that it's a letter written by his father.

Marius stopped writing to father when he was fifteen and started screaming when his grandfather tried to make him write another letter that he thought would never be answered.

My dear Marius, the letter reads. These days, the things that bring me the most happiness are tending my garden and thinking of you, hoping you're happy. I miss you terribly.

Marius, I'm not well, and I believe my time on this world is limited. I know you are angry at me for leaving. I'm angry at myself too. I never should have gone, but it was all so much more complicated than it seemed. I can explain if you'll let me, if you'll come see me just one last time. I would be overjoyed.

I love you dearly.
Your father,

Georges

Georges died a year ago.

Marius didn't even cry at the funeral, though he did have an uncomfortable feeling that something had shifted, changed.

Now he cries without even trying, rocking back and forth slowly, hands tangled in his hair.

When grandfather finds him, he sighs.

"Pull yourself together, Marius," he says, but his voice is soft, and he approaches slowly, as though Marius is planning to attack.

"My father," Marius says, and he's tugging at his hair and sometimes rubbing his palms against it until his scalp burns. "You took him away."

"He was garbage, Marius. Worthless."

Marius lurches to his feet and begins to pace, hands still in his hair. "He was my father!" he screams, turning to face his grandfather, who takes a step back.

"Stop it," grandfather says. "You look crazy."

Marius shakes his head no, no, no, for what seems like a very long time, trying to formulate words. "I'm leaving," he finally chokes out. "I'm tired. It's not just this, it's everything, I don't believe--I don't, I don't believe in the things you say or do. I don't believe in you."

"If you leave you can forget about coming back! You can forget about my paying your way through school!"

"I have scholarships."

"And food? A home?"

"I'll get a job. I'll find an apartment."

"You don't abandon your family. Only family would ever love you and you know it, don't you?"

Marius lets out a sob, and says, strangled, "I'm leaving."

"So leave!" grandfather says, voice rising to a yell and then breaking. The next part comes out soft and choked. "I certainly won't stop you."

Marius leaves.

He takes a suitcase and a backpack, both stuffed with clothes, textbooks, a toothbrush, and the money he has that he never spent from babysitting. He manages to remember to bring his laptop too, so he can do work.

He forgets to put on a jacket, even though it's chilly out.

He doesn't say goodbye to his grandfather.
There's a park Marius likes to visit because it's not busy and it's surrounded by trees, which makes it small and insulated.

Marius has always loved small spaces, and he likes the park because of the colors and the textures. He can spend hours running his fingers over the bark of the trees.

Now he sits down on the lone park bench and doesn't cry. Instead, he just hums to himself, resting his forehead against the backpack on his lap, one of his hands tightly gripping his suitcase.

That's how he falls asleep.

Marius feels someone jostle his shoulder and flinches violently, waking up with a jolt.

"Hey," the man sitting next to him says.

Marius looks at him owlishly. He's seen this man around at school and in class but can't remember his name.

Marius makes eye contact for just a second, takes in the man's wide smile.

Then he presses his forehead against his backpack and starts crying, rocking back and forth as covertly as he can to get himself to just feel okay again.

"Oh, wow, yikes, um...hey! Hey, buddy, it's gonna be okay."

Marius looks up, glaring blearily at the empty space in front of him, tears still running down his cheeks. It would be more effective to glare at the man sitting next to him, but he can't stand to look at another person, not right now. "I don't have a home or a family. Nothing's okay."

"...Yeahhh, uh, that doesn't sound okay at all. But..." the man is silent for a minute and Marius thinks he's going to leave, but then he lets out a little gasp and says, loudly, "But I can help you!"

Marius runs a hand through his messy hair, dark strands getting yanked out of his head when his fingers snag on the knots living in his curls, making little pricks of pain bloom on his scalp. "I don't even know your name." He frowns. "Or your intentions."

The man (he looks about Marius's age) laughs loudly, suddenly, like he's been surprised. "My name's Courfeyrac," he says, holding out a hand and pulling back with a shrug when Marius doesn't take it. "And my intentions, I assure you, are noble."

The man (he looks about Marius's age) laughs loudly, suddenly, like he's been surprised. "My name's Courfeyrac," he says, holding out a hand and pulling back with a shrug when Marius doesn't take it. "And my intentions, I assure you, are noble."

Marius frowns down at his backpack, scrubbing at his tearstained face. "People don't go to this park," he finally says, because it's been bothering him. "Why are you here?"

Courfeyrac shrugs. "I was going on a walk. I always pass by this place but I, like, only just figured out it wasn't just trees, can you believe that? So I figured I'd squeeze my way in and sit down. And it's a good thing I did, because what did I see but a classmate of mine sleeping on the very place I meant to sit!"

Marius shrugs awkwardly. "I had nowhere else to go."

Courfeyrac doesn't ask why. Marius is glad.
Courfeyrac nods and then he shoots Marius a smile as Marius watches him nervously out of the corner of his eye. Then he takes out a small notebook and scribbles something on a page, tears the page out, and hands it to Marius.

It's an address. *If you get tired of being homeless, my door's open. I'm looking for a roommate. No charge.*

Marius blinks at the page. "What?"

"I think it's pretty straightforward."

"No charge?"

"I hate to say it, but my parents actually pay for my apartment. The only reason I want a roommate is 'cause I get ridiculously lonely. But it's a pretty good reason, I think."

"I..." Marius starts, rubbing the palm of his hand against his head, mussing his hair. "Motel," he says in a small voice. "I was gonna..." he trails off.

"Hey, no worries. I'm not gonna force you to do anything. You can stay in a motel if you want. But...mi casa es su casa."

"You don't even know my name."

"That can be remedied. What's your name?"

"Marius Pontmercy."

"There you go."

"I couldn't...couldn't impose."

"You wouldn't be."

"I'm sorry," Marius whispers. "I can't. I can't. It's...it's a terribly nice offer, but...I can't."

Courfeyrac's smile is smaller and Marius can't really read the look on his face. "Well, if you change your mind," he says.

Marius shakes his head no and runs away, out of the park and then into the street. A car honks at him and his breath hitches as he backwards onto the sidewalk. *Don't walk into traffic, Marius,* he tells himself, even though he should know that by now.

He wanders around until night falls and he starts getting nervous as he notices he doesn't know where he is, and it's not a nice part of town, he doesn't think. He's sure he can find a motel, though. He's sure.

But he can't, so he doesn't, he just wanders, jumping at every noise because he's usually not out so late, he's never out so late, and he's scared, suddenly, he's terrified and he has to go--he has to go somewhere safe, somewhere out of the dark--

He rubs the palms of his hands against his hair and he needs to get back to the park, he needs to get back. He takes out the piece of paper Courfeyrac gave him but the words and letters on it don't mean anything to him. He's not good with addresses. He finds a motel, finally, and ducks int, and is told there are no rooms, so then he tries to ask for help from the gray-haired woman behind the counter but can't, can't say anything until she smiles at him and asks, "Can I help you?"
He passes her the piece of paper and she nods slowly and says, "Alright. You know what, I'll print out directions for you. Just stay there, okay, hon?"

He nods frantically and she smiles and goes into a back room, where he can hear something being printed, and she comes back with a warm piece of paper.

"Do you think you'll be able to get where you're going?"

Marius doesn't, but he nods and smiles even though it feels wrong, and he exits the motel as quickly as possible after committing the directions--they don't mean much to him, but they mean enough--to memory.

He starts wandering again, and eventually he somehow gets back to the park, and from there, he stumbles upon the correct apartment complex. He's not sure how he gets so lucky, because he gets lost in the apartment building itself, but it's some kind of miracle that he manages to pound on the front door of what he hopes is Courfeyrac's apartment (it's the correct one, right? Shit, what if it's not…) at two in the morning.

Courfeyrac's in pajamas when he opens the door, and he smiles at Marius.

Marius has thought up something to say, written it out in his mind, something with lots of apologies, but all that comes out is, "I have come to sleep with you."

Courfeyrac laughs out loud at that, which makes Marius's face burn, but he also lets Marius in and says, "Hope you don't mind sleeping on the couch."

Of course Marius doesn't mind sleeping on the couch.

He wakes up and doesn't know where he is, and for a moment the fear is crushing.

Then he remembers.

He remembers being scared and he remembers Courfeyrac and he remembers leaving home and sleeping on a park bench and he's still scared.

No, he's terrified.

He's never been alone like this, never really been away from home, but he has class to get to and he can't mess up his schedule, not now, because enough has changed. He doesn't change out of yesterday's clothes and he forgets a jacket again, but he remembers his textbooks and heads out to school before realizing he doesn't know how to get there.

He manages to stumble upon campus, though, and even finds his way to his first class early. It's weird, but he's been having good luck with directions, he guesses, and getting to class must just be muscle memory by now.

He sits down, and that's when he realizes he didn't brush his teeth. He guiltily scrubs at them with his hand and then wipes it on his jeans, which is gross but it's better than nothing.

He's hungry, he realizes, because he hasn't eaten anything for... he thinks it's been two days. He just ignores it, though. There's nothing he can do about it anyway, because he needs to stretch his money.

He heads back to Courfeyrac's apartment after school, and he feels horribly guilty about it, but he
really doesn't have anywhere else to go and he promises himself he won't get in the way, not any more than he already has, and when he gets a job he'll be able to pay rent, and it'll be okay.

He curls up on the couch self-consciously and takes out his German textbook. He's not taking German, he's just learning by himself. That and French. His father spoke German, and his mother spoke French, and hey, maybe he can do some translation work if that's not completely unrealistic. He's already getting pretty good--he's sure he could have a conversation in both languages, and he's only been learning for a few months.

"Hey," somebody says, and Marius yelps in surprise and then flushes red when he realizes it's Courfeyrac. Of course it's Courfeyrac. It's his apartment.

Marius has a lot of things to say, and most of them seem to be something like, "I can't take your charity, I can't take your kindness, I need to leave, I'll live in a motel and get a job and it'll be fine."

Instead, what comes out is a soft, "I don't know why you're doing this for me."

Courfeyrac smiles. "You seemed like you needed a friend."

Marius doesn't really need anybody. He's never really needed anybody his whole life. Or, at least he's never really had anybody.

He shakes his head.

He says, bluntly, "I've never had friends before."

Courfeyrac nods slowly, and then says, "What are your thoughts on social justice? Or, you know, charity work? Helping the world out, doing good and not being a dick about it?"

"I've…never done anything like that," Marius admits. "But I've always wanted to. Help people, I mean."

"You know, there's a group on campus. It's called Les Amis de l'ABC. Sorry it's pretentious, it means--"

"Friends of the abased."

"Yeah! It's a pun, though, but...moving on. Anyway, we work with groups on and outside of campus to generate interest in social issues, and we do charity work on the weekends sometimes. It's a good time, you should come."

"I wouldn't want to…to impose."

Courfeyrac laughs, and Marius curls in on himself. "You wouldn't be imposing. We can always use more people."

"I don't really get along with…people."

"Oh. Yeah, um, okay. Well…I'm going to a meeting right now. It's at the Musain coffee shop, it's right next to campus."

"I've been there before," Marius says quietly.

"Then you'll have no problem finding it if you change your mind."

Marius isn't going to change his mind, but he shoots Courfeyrac his practiced smile and goes back to
his books. He thinks he did pretty well with the social interaction, all things considered, even though
the idea of having to do this every day makes him anxious, because he knows that if Courfeyrac
doesn't like him he'll get kicked out, and the truth--the unfortunate truth--is that he can't afford to get
kicked out. His pride doesn't matter. He just can't afford it.

Marius finishes his homework quickly and realizes he should probably eat something (but he's not
going to do that, he can't just eat somebody else's food, he'd have to go out to get food and he just
doesn't feel like it), brush his teeth, and shower.

He manages to brush his teeth and shower, doing it as quickly as possible, and then notices that the
kitchen is kind of a mess. Marius likes things to be tidy, and he likes cleaning, and cleaning is a
favor, right? And Courfeyrac did him a favor so he should do a favor back.

Marius spends a couple of hours washing dishes and sweeping floors and polishing countertops until
the kitchen is pristine, and then he stands back and bounces up and down a little, clapping his hands
at the nice sight of clean.

"What happened here?" Courfeyrac asks when he gets back.

Marius is curled up on the couch with a French textbook because he's already finished his homework
and has been able to go on to something he actually likes.

Courfeyrac is staring at the kitchen, a strange look on his face that Marius can't place--it almost looks
like the beginning of a smile, but there's also a furrowed brow.

Marius starts to panic, because he hadn't considered that Courfeyrac might be like him when it comes
to having his things touched. "I'm so sorry," he blurts out. "I forgot about boundaries. I shouldn't
have cleaned without asking."

"Hey, no big deal," Courfeyrac says. "Well, actually, boundaries are important, so you should've
asked, I guess, but I don't mind. Just ask me next time." Courfeyrac shrugs. "Anyway, if this is a
thank you, I say: you're welcome."

Marius nods gravely. "Sorry," he says again.

"I know, I know. You're forgiven. You have permission to clean the apartment anytime, except for
my room. Apartment's a mess anyway. I mean, not right now. But usually."

"Thanks," Marius says, because that seems like the most appropriate response.

Courfeyrac laughs. (He laughs a lot. Marius doesn't know why a lot of the time, but he thinks it's
nice.) "You're an odd duck, Marius Pontmercy. I like you."

Marius smiles awkwardly and buries his head back into his book.

At night, while he's lying on the couch, cold because he kicked off the scratchy blanket Courfeyrac
gave him, he feels very alone again.

Courfeyrac's nice, but he's not really Marius's friend. He's just a good person. Eventually he'll just be
laughing behind Marius's back--or to his face--just like everyone else.

Marius doesn't even notice the tears running down his face before he starts to sob. He covers his
mouth to mute the sound.
By the time he's able to wipe away the tears, he's exhausted.

Sleep comes easily.

Chapter End Notes

I am somewhat sure I got the idea of Gillenormand saving Georges's letters instead of throwing them away from a fic, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was. In any case, thank you for the inspiration, mysterious fic author or authors.
Dust

Marius has been living with Courfeyrac for a month, and he's finally gotten a job. It's at a little used bookstore, and it's nice and quiet and he doesn't even have to interact that much with people past memorized phrases.

Marius feels safe there, among all the books, the warmth.

Courfeyrac—who Marius thinks he can actually call a friend by now—helped him prepare for the interview, and didn't even laugh at him when he got confused or when he couldn't think of what to say.

Marius got nervous during the actual interview, and had a hard time switching topics and thinking of things to say, but for some reason the owner of the store still liked him enough to hire him when nobody else would because of his lack of experience. "You have so much potential," Mr. Mabeuf said, and Marius had been terribly relieved when he got the call that he had the job.

Courfeyrac had been happier than Marius thought he would be and asked to hug him, and Marius had actually consented for once. Courfeyrac gives nice hugs because he hugs hard, and Marius likes the pressure.

There's one other person who works at the shop while Marius is working. His name is Combeferre, and he's one of Courfeyrac's best friends.

They talk about politics, at first. Marius knows a lot about judicial systems and the government, but his political views are kind of confused, and a lot of them were directly taught to him by his grandfather or were his father's, but he still debates them for a while.

Combeferre's blunt criticism makes Marius nervous at first, but he eventually becomes comfortable enough to talk about something other than politics. (Being around people like Courfeyrac and Combeferre makes Marius realize just how sheltered he's been for most of his life.)

Mostly, he talks about the things that really interest him, like linguistics and learning French and German (he's nearly fluent by now and quite excited about it) because Combeferre promises he'll just tell him if he gets bored. Sometimes Marius also talks about Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo, that old interest of his that still hasn't passed, will probably never pass. It's gotten a bit stronger since he found out about who his father really was, because being passionate about something his father was passionate about makes Marius feel somehow closer to him.

Marius is very good at cleaning up shop, arranging books and displays and keeping everything in order. He's not bad with the customers, but Combeferre's better.

They fall into a comfortable rhythm while working, and Marius quite likes it.

Marius keeps the apartment in order too.

He only notices he's started arranging things in specific ways when Courfeyrac puts his mug back in the wrong place and Marius gets upset and has to change it.

Marius honestly hates that he's this way. His aunt always said that he was "rigid", and it's true.

He tries his best to keep the behaviors he knows are weird secret. He hides the schedule he's made up for himself in his bag (because he needs a schedule or he forgets to do things like comb his hair
and take a shower), hides his books, tries not to move in strange ways in front of people (he's got a lot of practice with that), tries not to make his specific preferences for where things should be too obvious.

He never really knows if he's successful.

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Courfeyrac's mentioned that he has another best friend, one more besides Combeferre, and that Marius should meet him. Marius doesn't think he should, so he doesn't.

But one day the bell on the bookstore door that rings whenever somebody comes in chimes loudly, and Marius automatically asks, "Can I help you?" because Combeferre's in the back.

But then he's faced with Courfeyrac and a slight, attractive young man with golden hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Hi," Marius says. "Why are you here? Never mind, it's probably to buy books. What kind of books?"

Combeferre chuckles, coming over to stand next to Marius behind the counter. "Hi Courfeyrac, Enjolras."

Enjolras smiles. It's a lot smaller than Courfeyrac's smiles, just a twitch of the lips. He holds out his hand. "So you're Marius. I was wondering when I'd get the chance to meet you."

Marius stares at the outstretched hand for too long and he's sure it seems strange when he finally takes it. He grips Enjolras's hand firmly and shakes twice before pulling away, feeling his skin crawl. He searches through the notecards in his head and finds one labeled Introductions. "Hello," he says, "It's very nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you." He hasn't necessarily heard that much, but he can stretch the truth a bit.

He smiles his practiced smile and feels relieved when Enjolras smiles back. He has a very pretty smile. Marius wonders if he practices in a mirror too.

Still, he's glad when Enjolras, Combeferre, and Courfeyrac start their own conversation that allows Marius to wander off and look at one of the displays he's made up, rearranging the books and rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet before realizing what he's doing and looking around self-consciously. The others are still talking and not looking his way, so he thinks he's safe. "Be still, Marius," he says under his breath.

Soon, customers start coming in and Marius mans the counter as Combeferre interacts with the customers, helping them find books and recommending some and making small talk. Marius can hold his own when it comes to small talk too, which is good, because customers often want to do at least a little of that with him. He doesn't mind. It's nice being around people, especially in a situation as structured as his job.

Marius has been very lonely for most of his life.

He's only just now realizing that.

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"I'm going to an Amis meeting," Courfeyrac announces. "Wanna come along?"
Marius never agrees to come along, so he doesn't know why Courfeyrac keeps asking. He shakes his head.

No.

He already has Courfeyrac and Combeferre as friends, he doesn't really need anyone else. (The truth: he's afraid the Amis won't like him.)

He was telling Courfeyrac the truth when Courfeyrac mentioned the Amis the first time: he really would like to do social justice and volunteer work—he's always wanted to but never done it because he's afraid of screwing it up—but the idea of all those people that he could potentially offend or inspire hate in makes him anxious.

However, Courfeyrac, Combeferre, and Enjolras (who has been spending a lot of time in the bookshop, browsing and occasionally buying…a lot) have all been inviting him to the meetings, and eventually Marius is going to cave and go, just to show them it was a bad idea to invite him.

But not yet.

He'll go next time.

For now, he takes out his schedule and remembers he has to take a shower, so he does that, and then does his best to tame the giant mess that is his hair. He should probably cut it at some point. He feels embarrassed, looking in the mirror.

He doesn't really like what he sees, never has, but even so he stares at himself for a long time, looking at his mother's eyes in his own face, at his father's hair covering his head. He does have to admit he looks a lot like his mother and father, both of them.

Except they were beautiful.

It takes him a while to leave the bathroom because he's so busy watching the boy in the mirror (and why? Vanity? That doesn't quite make sense), but he eventually goes back to his books, to the paper he has to write.

He falls asleep early and dreams of being a child again, standing in the snow at his mother's funeral, dropping dirt onto a glossy black coffin. Then, suddenly, he is older, in the drizzling rain at another funeral, his father's funeral, hearing his father's voice hissing words more suited to his grandfather: selfish boy, why didn't you love me?

Marius wakes up to his name being said over and over again.

He sits up on the couch and finds he must have started crying in his sleep at some point, because there are tears on his cheeks.

He wipes the wetness away quickly. "Sorry," he mutters.

"You have got to stop apologizing for everything you do."

"Sorry," Marius says, wincing once he realizes he's done exactly what he wasn't supposed to. "Sorry," he says again, and then he groans, giving up.

Courfeyrac laughs. "Never mind." The smile disappears from his face. "You okay?"

Marius shrugs because his words have all escaped him. His dreams aren't usually that vivid, don't
usually so closely resemble memories.

He feels a strange kind of detachment, the same kind he felt at his mother's funeral, at his father's. The same kind he's felt many other times.

There's something like white noise in his ears and a heaviness in his chest that hasn't been so bad since he was a teenager. He still wants to cry, but he won't, not now, not in front of Courfeyrac, who has already seen him weak.

Marius is retreating into himself. He can feel it happening, but he can't stop it.

His mind feels blank, lost, and when he comes back to himself he's rocking back and forth, the TV's on, Courfeyrac is sitting next to him, and hot chocolate is cooling on the coffee table right in front of him.

Courfeyrac has his own hot chocolate in his hands, and he's sipping it as he snorts in laughter at some sitcom.

Sitcoms, movies, books--those are easier than real life. Simpler to understand, with a steady undercurrent of plot and characterization that can surprise you but never hurt you.

Marius remembers pulling faces in the mirror when he was a little boy, the faces he saw on the television, and not necessarily understanding what they actually meant but knowing for the first time that he could learn. He's learned a lot from movies and television.

He holds himself still as he watches the television with Courfeyrac, who shoots him a small smile when Marius reaches for his cup of hot chocolate.

"Feeling okay?" Courfeyrac asks.

"Not really," Marius responds, too tired to think that maybe he's being too honest.

Courfeyrac nods slowly, asks, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Stay here?" Marius suggests.

"No problem. Also, now's as good a time as any to break the news I'm pretty sure you already know: there's another bedroom. I know I use it as storage, but let's be real, I have like three things in there. I can move them."

"I know. I just didn't want to…"

"…be a bother? You're not, Marius. You're my roommate. Stop acting like you're just couch-surfing."

"…I'll buy a comforter. And a futon." For a moment Marius is terrified that Courfeyrac's going to offer to pay, but he doesn't. Marius is relieved. He hates saying no.

Courfeyrac just beams at him, and Marius smiles back effortlessly.

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Marius goes out over the weekend and buys a futon and a heavy comforter that he loves. It sets him back when it comes to food money, but he doesn't mind that much. He's happy eating the same thing every day, even prefers it. Right now, everything but soup makes him gag, anyway.
(He remembers being little and having to stay at the table eating things with icky textures until he cleaned his plate. He shudders at the thought.)

"Marius, do you have anything else to eat?" Combeferre asks, frowning, as he looks in the cupboard that Marius keeps his food in after opening it by accident.

"No," Marius says, shrugging, even though he's getting the uncomfortable feeling that Combeferre's not approving of his diet. He is a medical student, after all, and even Marius can tell that eating tomato or chicken noodle soup every day isn't exactly healthy.

Combeferre presses his lips together in an interesting way, and then shrugs.

Marius goes back to his book.

Courfeyrac comes into the living room from his kitchen and says, "Mariuuuuuuus," drawing his name out for an unnecessarily long time.

"Yes?"

"What would you say if we had a movie night with all of the Amis? Would that be okay? I know you're not huge on people."

"I'm okay with them," Marius says defensively, even though he's not. It's not exactly okay, but this isn't his home, so he shrugs. "I don't mind. I'll just stay in my room."

Courfeyrac shakes his head slowly. "I don't know what his problem is with our friends," he tells Combeferre.

"I'm right here," Marius points out, vaguely annoyed. (People used to talk about him like he wasn't there all the time when he didn't talk, and even once he did. He hated it.)

"You get along with Enjolras, don't you?" Courfeyrac asks.

"I barely know Enjolras."  

"But you could get to know him better! And the Amis would love to meet you. They keep bothering me about meeting my roommate. When my friends are curious, they're curious."

"Well I'm not very interesting, so I don't know what their problem is," Marius says shortly.

Courfeyrac scoffs. "If there's one thing you're not, buddy, it's uninteresting."

Marius shakes his head and goes to his room so Courfeyrac will stop bothering him.

The movie night falls on a Saturday, and Marius makes sure to eat early and shut himself in his room with one of his German textbooks.

The movie is, surprisingly, a Disney movie Marius watched when he was younger. He can hear the songs through the door, and he hums along. He can hear laughter, too. It makes him feel calm.

He practices verb conjugations until he can hear the movie end, and he figures he has to meet Courfeyrac's friends other than Enjolras and Combeferre sometime, so he carefully steps out of his room and into the living room.
When he gets there, he nearly turns around again because it turns out that Courfeyrac has a lot of friends. Of course, since they make up a whole group, he shouldn't be surprised, and he isn't, not really. He's just a little intimidated.

But Courfeyrac notices him standing in front of the kitchen island before he can leave for his room, and smiles brilliantly, eyes wide and surprised. "Marius!" he says loudly, and Marius flinches a little because suddenly there are a lot of people looking at him.

He studies the floor.

"Hey," Courfeyrac says, softer now, "It's really nice to see you. I wasn't sure you'd join us."

"So you're the mysterious roommate," a man with wild dark hair says. "I'm Grantaire. Sometimes people call me R. I don't care either way."

"R…" Marius mutters. "I get it. That's funny."

"See, he gets the joke!"

Marius smiles tentatively, oddly proud of himself. He usually doesn't get jokes.

The others introduce themselves and Marius nods and says pleased to meet you a lot, hands twisting together behind his back.

They seem nice, but Marius retreats after introductions despite Courfeyrac's brief whining pleas for him to stay, not wanting to say anything wrong, because he thinks he's made a good impression and really, that's all he wants to do.

The Musain is a nice place with a big back room, which is where the Amis meetings are. Marius feels bad about going to a coffee shop and not buying anything, so he gets the smallest hot chocolate possible from the dark-haired woman (her nametag says she's called Eponine, which is pretty and he tells her that. It makes her smile, so he guesses he did something right) behind the counter.

It's really good hot chocolate, and it goes down easily.

He sinks into a seat next to Courfeyrac, who smiles and moves to clap him on the shoulder but aborts the movement when Marius shies away.

"Hello," someone says as he slides into the seat next to Marius. The person is a young man (probably Courfeyrac's age, so two years older) with messy braids in his strawberry blond hair and a bright orange sweater that hurts Marius's eyes. He remembers this person--Jehan.

"Hello," he echoes politely, forcing himself to make eye contact. (His grandfather was obsessed with eye contact. Marius has never seen the big deal, and has always wondered why it's not more uncomfortable for other people.) He manages it briefly, and then just looks at Jehan's mouth.

Jehan's eyes are gray.

"How are you?" Marius asks pleasantly, his pitch and intonation exactly the same as Courfeyrac's when he asks that question.

"I'm doing quite well, thanks."

Marius nods his head and turns away from Jehan because he's pretty sure he's looked at his face long
enough. "It's snowing outside," he tells the tabletop, because he just noticed it and it seems like something to mention. He hadn't even realized it was winter.

"Do you like the snow?"

"I hate the snow."

(It reminds him of being at his mother's funeral, watching the flurries of snow as they swirled around him, flakes melting in his hair and wetting his cheeks in place of the tears he should have been crying.)

Jehan gasps theatrically and tips his chair back to look out the window to the outside. "How could you! I think it's beautiful. At least, it is at first, before it's marred by the dirt and grime of city life."

Courfeyrac rolls his eyes. "Ignore him," he stage-whispers. "He's a poet."

Marius smiles. "I like poetry," he offers. "When I was little and couldn't think of what to say, I'd just say lines from poems that I thought reflected how I felt." He laughs a little. "My grandfather hated it."

Jehan's smiling. "That's pretty adorable."

Marius shrugs. "I honestly don't think I really understood half of what I was saying. It was just strings of pretty words that made me feel things, but I couldn't quite tell why."

"Sometimes that's enough."

Marius usually isn't this open with people, but there's something about Jehan, about this room and the people he's just noticed milling around, that makes him feel safe.

Enjolras calls for the meeting to start and Marius listens attentively. There's a rally being planned about rising tuition rates. Marius hopes he won't have to go. He doesn't want to be around a lot of loud people--he's feeling a little overwhelmed even now, he can't imagine how he'd do at a rally. He signs up to help with fliers, though, and he's happy to volunteer at a homeless shelter over the weekend.

After the meeting, the others stick around, and so does Marius because he's too nervous to walk home in the dark (or let Courfeyrac walk home in the dark). He manages to have a few conversations, sometimes even without resorting to the borrowed phrases in his mind, mostly with Jehan, Joly, and Bossuet, all of whom are very nice and quite cheerful.

Marius didn't bring a heavy jacket when he left the apartment--he honestly didn't realize it was going to be cold--so when they go out into the snow he's left wearing a windbreaker. He lets Courfeyrac wrap an arm around him for the warmth, and finds himself shivering convulsively when he gets back to the apartment.

Courfeyrac looks at him, concerned, and says, "You have to get a better coat."

"I know," Marius responds. "I'll find a thrift shop tomorrow and get one then."

"Good deal," Courfeyrac says. "Anyway, how'd you like the meeting?"

"I...I liked it a lot."

"Told you!" Courfeyrac crows, and Marius smiles.
For once, he thinks maybe he's found a place where he can belong.

He's always wanted that.
Hello! This story is officially off hiatus! I'm sorry for making you guys wait, and I hope you like the chapter!

After Marius joins the Amis, he gets a little bit more adventurous, starts going out sometimes.

He gets a heavy black overcoat that Courfeyrac says wears him, but Marius likes it a lot, even if it is threadbare and too big.

Pizza stops feeling so slimy and is added to his diet, as are baby carrots, which have a satisfying crunch to them that non-solid food sorely lacks. He still gets nervous in crowds and doesn't think he'll ever work up the guts to go to a club--just for the experience, Jehan says--but he's been feeling a bit more…confident lately.

"That's what having friends does," Courfeyrac says. "It's a group of people who've got your back, of course you're gonna feel more confident."

But most of them aren't really his friends, are they? They're just friendly people. Marius thinks that of all of them, he can maybe call Jehan his friend, even though Jehan's nice to everybody, but other than him…the others are friendly acquaintances, and that's okay. It's still nice to know them. Marius works on putting Grantaire's (and he likes Grantaire, he's straightforward and he's not mean even though he's cynical and likes teasing a lot) flyers for the rally up around campus and volunteers often (he's surprisingly not awful at it. He practices his kind smile in the mirror a lot, though) and on occasion goes to laid-back sort-of parties at Eponine's place with the rest of the Amis.

(Actually, Eponine is probably his friend too. She's very sarcastic but she's not awful when he doesn't get it, and she seems to like him. Besides, Courfeyrac adores her little brother and sometimes Gavroche comes over to the apartment, leaving Eponine and Marius to hang out.)

Marius still spends most of his time working, though, on his schoolwork and at the bookstore. He's gotten better at interacting with customers. He's especially good with the kids.

He's always been good with kids, though, so what really surprises him is that he's good with their parents.

"Give yourself more credit," Combeferre says when Marius voices this.

Marius just shrugs.

Sometimes when Marius is with the others he starts flapping or clapping his hands when he's particularly happy or excited, but he usually catches himself almost immediately and shoves the sleeve of his overcoat into his mouth instead and chews, because he knows moving like that is inappropriate in a way he can't place and isn't entirely sure he believes.

Besides, he remembers people laughing at him for doing things like that, or telling him to stop, and
he doesn't think he could take that from the Amis.

He still wonders what's wrong with him, sometimes, when he completely misses the point of a joke (and everyone laughs) or answers a rhetorical question like it's a real one (and everyone laughs) or sees that the others don't move like he does or stop talking when they get stressed. But he doesn't wonder that often anymore.

The laughter doesn't even feel so bad to him, because he knows the others aren't trying to be mean.

So lately he has been feeling better, but what makes him start feeling a lot better is going to help kids at the rec center with their homework. Marius hasn't been babysitting, not with his job, so he's really glad to work with kids again, so glad that he thinks he's definitely going to continue doing this.

He immediately starts helping the kids with their homework like he's supposed to, and they seem to like him. Kids have always liked him, and Marius feels a strange ache in his chest when he realizes that this is the closest he's ever going to get to being a teacher. Being a professor will work for him, he's sure, but sometimes he wishes things could have gone another way.

"Let's play a game," the kid Marius is helping with math--Lee--begs.

"Once we finish this problem," Marius promises, and sure enough after finishing up they end up on the run-down playground where Enjolras is looking very confused and out of place among a group of girls who are having a tea party.

Marius watches nervously as Lee climbs on dubious looking structures (all play structures look dubious to him) and then runs off to grab some other kids to play with. Marius spends a lot of time after that missing balls that get tossed to him (to the raucous laughter of the children, of course), trying to learn clapping games, getting tangled up in jump ropes, and on occasion actually helping the kids with their homework.

Of course, he ends up getting sidetracked at the mention of Napoleon in one girl's history textbook, and he gives a twenty minute impromptu lecture on the Napoleonic Wars to a group who are listening in rapt silence.

"Do you know everything?" one of the boys asks, eyes wide, when Marius pauses to breathe and to sit on his hands to stop them from flapping. Marius laughs because nothing could be further from the truth, but he winks at the kid and whispers, "Don't tell."

"Time to go, Marius," Courfeyrac says eventually, and Marius says goodbye to the kids as they whine for him not to go and, practically on a whim, promises to be back next Sunday. He knows he's going to keep that promise.

When Marius is in the car with Courfeyrac, Combeferre, and Enjolras, Courfeyrac lets out a low whistle. "Damn, Marius, I had no idea you were so good with kids."

Marius grins. "I did a lot of babysitting as a teenager. I really wanted to be a teacher."

"What made you change your mind?" Enjolras asks.

Marius shrugs before realizing Enjolras is riding shotgun and can't see him. "My grandfather wanted me to be a lawyer like him and my mother. If I'd gone into education he would have disowned me."

"Really," Enjolras says, and Marius can detect a tightness in his voice that makes him nervous.
"That's what he said."

"Where is he now?"

"I left home months ago, so I don't really know. We don't talk anymore."

Enjolras nods slowly. "Oh."

He doesn't say anything after that, so Marius just watches the lights of the city go by because at some point it started getting dark and he didn't notice. He follows the streaming lights along the car window with his fingers.

He falls asleep immediately after getting back to his apartment and dreams of his mother and father, of watching them dance, neither of them wearing their shoes. There's no music, and it's all in black and white.

Marius wishes he would stop waking up crying.

He wanders over to the living room, knowing he won't be able to get back to sleep, and turns the television on and the volume completely off, leaning his head against the arm of the old couch he slept on what seems to have been a long time ago but was really just a month ago.

"Hey," Courfeyrac says, and Marius looks at him in surprise because he really hadn't noticed him at all.

Courfeyrac is leaning against the countertop in the kitchen island. There are bags under his eyes. He's tired. Marius is tired too.

"Hey," he says back.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Dreaming," Marius says, and hopes that that's enough. It seems to be, because Courfeyrac nods.

"I don't even know what's going on with me," he says. "My sleep's so bad lately. It hasn't been like this since I was a teenager."

Marius doesn't know what to say to that, so he just nods. "Want to watch TV with me?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Courfeyrac turns the volume up, but other than that they just sit together, and Courfeyrac doesn't make Marius talk, and it's good. They stay that way until Marius has to change to get to his first class. He's halfway there when he realizes he remembered to brush his teeth but forgot to take a shower or comb his hair. He nearly panics and goes back, because now his entire schedule for the day is thrown off, but he manages to calm himself down and get to class instead, where he spends most of his time playing with his fingers and trying not to rock back and forth.

Classes seem to take a very long time, and he has an exam that he doesn't think he does too well on, because he hasn't studied enough and he's feeling a little out of sorts.

The idea of not doing well on a test upsets him, and he finds himself humming almost under his breath by the time he gets to the Amis meeting. He takes out one of his textbooks and starts to read through one of the chapters he's been assigned--it's slow going, he can't concentrate today, every little sound distracts him--humming, rocking back and forth, finally.
"Marius!" somebody says loudly, and Marius jumps.

Bahorel, who's with Grantaire and Feuilly, holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender, grinning. "Sorry. Tell me, why do you always get here either twenty minutes early or five minutes late?"

Marius shrugs. "I don't... know? I just forget things a lot."

He doesn't think it's much of an answer, but Bahorel nods and drops into the seat next to Marius as the others sit in equally relaxed positions around the table. Marius stiffens. He's still not sure if these people are his friends. Of all of them, the only one he's actually spoken to is Grantaire. He rubs his hands against his pant legs briefly and looks back down at his textbook, self-consciously making sure not to rock back and forth, which makes reading impossible, but he can still fake it. He starts chewing on the sleeve of his coat absentmindedly. He isn't humming anymore. He's twenty years old, and twenty year olds don't do that.

They don't do a lot of the things that Marius does. Sometimes it surprises him, how different the others are.

He scrubs a hand against his head and Feuilly frowns at him. "You okay?"

Marius looks at him, eyes wide. "Of course," he says, trying to sound flippant.

Instead he just sounds confused, but at least it comes off as confused as to why such an irrelevant question was asked.

Feuilly just shrugs.

A phone starts ringing and Marius jumps and looks around before realizing that it's his little flip phone, the one that Courfeyrac jokingly calls a dinosaur. He looks down at the line of numbers streaming across the screen. Marius has memorized those numbers. It's his grandfather.

Courfeyrac slides into a seat next to him and Enjolras walks into the room, talking to Combeferre, and Marius flips open his phone and presses the button to hang up. He feels guilty about it, but he doesn't want to talk to his grandfather right now.

There's a part of him that's still angry at him for keeping his father away, and a part of him that's still maybe just a little terrified of talking to the man who was always the most important person in his life until a few months ago. He cares for his grandfather, but he doesn't know if he can stand to talk to him anymore, it always takes everything he has.

Marius shakes himself out of his thoughts and wonders exactly how he's going to get out of the rally Enjolras is talking about, the one in two days.

He figures he'll just pretend to be sick because he knows that if he ends up having to be around a bunch of loud people, he'll lose control, and he can't afford that, not in front of everyone.

So the day of the rally comes and goes and Marius says he's "not feeling well" and to "go on without him", and if Courfeyrac's suspicious, he doesn't say anything. Marius feels like the guilt is going to eat him alive all day, though, but he guesses he deserves that.

A week after the rally, he's at the Musain with Courfeyrac when he sees her. She's wearing a green dress and gold earrings, her hair is long and looks very soft, and she looks at him.
He immediately looks away, feeling his cheeks burn, and then he looks back up because he can't help himself.

She's still looking at him, and now he can't stop looking at her.

She smiles.

Marius feels like he's been hit in the solar plexus, but kind of in a good way. He doesn't understand what it means, but she is beautiful and she has a kind smile and her lips are really pink and pretty and he smiles back without meaning to.

Marius feels buoyed by some strange feeling, feels light and happy and unselfconscious. The woman—she's Marius's age, probably—tucks a strand of long hair behind her ear and raises a hand, giving him a tiny wave.

Marius waves back.

And then she starts walking towards him, and Marius's excitement ratchets up to impossible levels even as he starts to panic. He grabs Courfeyrac's sleeve. “Courfeyrac, she’s coming over here, oh my God, what do I do, what do I—”

And then she's there, smiling nervously, and Courfeyrac is detaching himself from Marius and loudly announcing that there's somewhere he has to be and he'll be back in a few minutes, okay? and Marius knows his face is frozen in panic, but suddenly he manages to smile again, and just like that, her own smile becomes easier.

Marius feels a swelling in his chest and he kind of can't breathe but it's okay, really.

“Hi,” the woman says. “I've seen you around.”

“I haven't seen you around,” Marius blurts out, and then he blushes. “I mean, I mean, I mean, I would've remembered. If I had.”

The woman lets out a soft laugh, and Marius doesn't think he's ever heard anything prettier in his life.

He’s gripping the table hard to keep from moving in any weird ways, but his feet are tapping against the floor anyway.

She says, “My name’s Cosette Fauchelevent.”

Marius says, “Okay,” and then remembers what he’s supposed to say. “Right. My name’s Marius Pontmercy. Marius Pontmercy.”

“I’m glad to meet you,” she says. “I kind of wanted to talk, but you always seemed busy. I decided this time around to just, you know. Screw it and talk to you for once.”

“Why would you want to talk to me?” Marius asks, genuinely curious.

Cosette blushes, a light splash of pink spreading over her skin like make-up. “I like getting to know people?” she says, but her voice goes up at the end like it’s a question.

Marius doesn’t know what kind of question she’d be asking, though, so he just nods and looks down at his hands, which are gripping the table so hard his knuckles are turning white. “Okay,” he says. “Does that mean…” he clears his throat, embarrassed. “Does that mean you might want to get to
know me?"

Cosette lets out a sudden laugh. “I’d love that.”

“Okay,” Marius says, but he can’t think of anything else, so he just says “okay” again.

“How about we meet up Friday? At seven? We could go see a movie, have dinner.”

"Like a date?" Marius asks, shocked.

"Yeah. Yeah, a date."

Marius's mouth opens and closes a few times before he manages to make sounds again. “Okay, um, yeah, that would be—um, as long as you give me directions to the theater…”

“I could pick you up, I have a car. If you just give me your e-mail we could work out all the kink—I mean, all that stuff out later.”

Marius nods, not trusting himself to speak without letting out a high-pitched noise of excitement, and tears a piece of paper out of his notebook, scrawling down his e-mail address in his shaky handwriting.

“Awesome!” Cosette says. “I’ll e-mail you tonight. Promise!”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Marius says, something he's heard people on television say.

Cosette grins at him and then leaves the coffee shop without buying anything.

Courfeyrac slides into the seat next to Marius and Marius finally detaches himself from the table and flaps his hands so hard his wrists hurt. “I have a date,” he says. Courfeyrac does something that’s probably a fist pump of victory.

Then Marius feels his eyes widen and the smile drop from his face as it finally dawns on him. “I have a date.”
"I don't know how to do this," Marius says for probably the sixteenth time since he and Courfeyrac have stepped into the back room of the Musain for the Amis meeting.

"You said that," Courfeyrac responds absentmindedly, but Marius is stuck on those seven words and he can't stop saying them.

"I don't know how to do this."

"You're fixating. She sounds nice, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"How do you go on dates?" Marius asks desperately, because he knows Courfeyrac goes out with people pretty often even though he's not "looking for a serious relationship".

"I just act like me, Marius."

"Yes, but you're…you're…"

"I'm what?" Courfeyrac asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Better at being…better at being!" Marius says a little hysterically, wringing his hands and pacing around the room.

Courfeyrac's eyes widen and he waves his hands like he's trying to wave Marius's words away. "Woah, woah, better at being…Marius, you're just as good at, uh, being, as everybody else is."

"No, I'm not, and she's going to figure it out and…I think I could really like her. I think I already really like her. It's not easy for me to talk to other people, but it wasn't as hard with her."

"Maybe she feels the same way."

"Maybe," Marius mumbles almost inaudibly, sitting down heavily.

"And even if you don't know how to do this, you can learn, right?"

"Learn what?" Bahorel asks, dropping into the chair next to the one Marius just sat in. Feuilly and Grantaire follow him, and Bossuet and Joly trail into the room as well.

"How to go on a date," Courfeyrac fills in.

"You have a date?" Bahorel asks Marius. He sounds surprised.

Marius is vaguely offended.

"Dude," Courfeyrac says, and apparently he's vaguely offended too because he shoves Bahorel's shoulder.

"Sorry, sorry," Bahorel mutters. "I just didn't think you were…you know what, never mind."

Marius wonders what he was going to say and decides he doesn't want to know. He shrugs. "I don't know how to go on a date," he announces.

"You have a date?" Jehan asks, gasping, and Marius jumps because he has no idea when the others
"Why is everyone so surprised?" he asks even though he kind of knows the answer. "Never mind," he mumbles. "I get it."


"Courfeyrac's right," Enjolras chimes in. "But I feel like we should save the conversation about Marius's romantic life until after the meeting."

Marius can feel his face burning because he might have gotten a bit carried away. "Sorry," he mutters.

After the meeting, though, the others haven't gotten off the topic of the date, and neither has Marius.

"Look, I feel like Bossuet and I have the right to give advice on this thing," Joly says.

"Why?" Marius asks, genuinely curious.

"Because we're together. Us and Musichetta, you know her, she owns this place. Did you not know that? Wait, I don't want to know. Anyway, our first date--this was when it was just me and Bossuet--was a disaster. The tablecloth got lit on fire and we didn't have anything to talk about kind of disaster. But what actually helped was when we stopped being so self-conscious and just actually got to know each other. In the end you can't pretend to be someone completely different. I mean, definitely be your best self, but don't act like you think you're supposed to act. I'll bet she liked you because you were you, not because you were acting like someone different."

Marius winces, because he's already gone through this with Courfeyrac. "But she's really nice and she's really pretty and she's really nice and she talked to me and said she actually wanted to talk to me and I like her and I don't know if being myself will work."

Grantaire rolls his eyes and takes a swig of his beer. "Being somebody else won't work either, 'cause eventually you'll just burn out and you won't be able to keep up the charade anymore."

"Oh. That actually makes sense."


Grantaire's smile mirrors Bahorel's and he drinks some more beer. "It's possible, no matter how strange it seems."

Marius sighs and puts his head in his hands.

"It's going to be fine," Courfeyrac soothes.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure it will be," Marius lies. He sighs again. "Cosette's just really nice." His words aren't really cooperating today, and 'nice' is the only word he can seem to think of to attach to her when he talks to the others, even though there's so much more he wants to say.

He's afraid to, though, because he knows if he starts really talking he won't be able to stop, and he hates the idea of these people telling him to shut up.

+ 

At night, Marius searches through his things and finds an old photo album, the one he shoved into
his backpack without really thinking when he left home.

He sits on his futon, legs crossed, and carefully balances the album on his legs.

His grandfather was very handsome when he was young, he reflects as he looks at the photographs of his grandfather and his mother when his mother was just a child.

His mother made this photo album, arranged it all. One of Marius's earliest memories is of watching her carefully write strings of letters he didn't understand on the back of photographs and then slip them into the plastic holders of the album.

He takes a photograph out of the album and turns it over. Seeing her handwriting reminds him of watching her write, the way she wrote so easily, every word flowing from her pen with purpose, so different from his shaky chicken scratch. It hurts a little, seeing her words in red pen, makes him miss her with a ferocity he thought he didn't possess anymore (it's been years, after all, years and years).

_Papa and I at the fair._

Marius carefully slips the photo back into the album and keeps flicking through the pages of his mother's childhood until he pauses on another picture.

_Georges and I at prom._

His mother is wearing a dress that's long and looks uncomfortable and shiny. His father's wearing a suit that's too small in the arms and too long in the legs. They're both grinning, not at the camera but at each other. They look so happy that Marius has to swallow a lump in his throat, because it seems unfair that their happiness was cut short, because they look like two people who could have lived together for decades and never fallen out of love.

Of course, it's hard to tell from one picture. Hard for Marius especially. Maybe he's only seeing what he wants to see, the fairy tale romance he's always wanted his parents to have. Even when he hated his father, he wanted that for his mother's sake.

Marius looks through the other pictures carefully, finds ones of his mother and father dancing, ones of his father singing or gardening, ones of his mother cooking or sitting out in the park. Some of them look like they're not staged at all, some of them look like someone told his mother or father or both to smile at the camera.

It's nearer to the end of the huge album than the beginning, when Marius starts to show up.

His mother lying in a hospital bed, holding him, a wrinkled little alien creature, and smiling one of the widest smiles Marius has ever seen even as her eyelids droop. His father holding him on the day he was taken home from the hospital. Him at one year old, balanced on his mother's hip. Two years old and inspecting a shiny pen of his father's. Three years old and smiling while petting a cat. Four years old and swinging in a playground. Five years old and sitting in between his mother and father while they smile at the camera. Well, his mother and father smile at the camera. He's looking to the side like there's something much more interesting there.

The back of the photograph reads, _Georges, Marius, and I. Marius is five._

That photo is the last one in the album.

The picture gives him pause for other reasons too, because he sees himself with his parents and can't help but imagine how other photographs of the sort might have looked if it hadn't become impossible to take those family portraits every year.
Marius finds, at the back of the album, pictures that were clearly sized for a wallet. One of them is the one he's been studying for such a long time, the last one in the album. He takes it and slips it into his wallet and wonders if at one point his father or mother had that same photo in their own wallet.

Marius closes the album and hugs it to his chest and tries his best to fight the sadness growing there.

He can hear his father singing.

When he closes his eyes, he can see his mother's face.

He wants a love story like the one he's imagined for them.

+  

Cosette e-mails him, he e-mails back, and Friday comes quickly, or maybe slowly, depending on the day or the hour or the minute, depending on how Marius is feeling.

"She's going to be here," he says, pacing around the living room and wringing his hands. "She's going to be here soon. I'm going to go downstairs and I'm going to go outside and I'm going to get in her car and we are going to go to the movies and then we are going to eat." He's been reciting the same thing for what might be an hour.

Courfeyrac is half looking at him warily and half watching a sitcom on television that Marius must be periodically blocking with his pacing.

He feels bad about that, but he can't stop, or he doesn't want to stop, or something.

He should stop, should be still, but he prefers to be in perpetual motion so he won't get too nervous.

His phone rings and he rushes over to the window and sees an unfamiliar car parked near a fire hydrant.

He opens up his phone even though he hates talking on the phone, and says, "Marius Pontmercy speaking," just like he was taught to.

"Hi! It's Cosette. I'm outside your apartment building."

"Oh. Okay." Marius hangs up the phone and starts heading down the stairs and ends up at the door of the building.

Cosette's waiting outside like she said she would be. She's wearing a dark blue dress and silver earrings and her hair is pulled back and Marius looks away, blushing.

He heads outside and stands in front of her. He notices that he's flapping his hands and shoves them in his pockets instead. He rocks back onto the balls of his feet, then forward onto his toes. "Hi," he says.

"Hi."

They stand in awkward silence for a moment before Cosette breaks it with a laugh that has Marius smiling tentatively. "Sorry, I haven't had a date in such a long time," Cosette says.

"I've never had a date," Marius responds before wondering if that was the right thing to say or if she'll like him less now that she knows he has no experience.

"Never?" Cosette asks.
"No."

"Well, I guess we'll fix that today."

Marius finally looks up at Cosette again and smiles easily. "I guess so."

He gets into her car, which smells like vanilla, like her, and he says, "I heard traffic was going to be bad today."

Cosette laughs. He doesn't think he'll ever get used to the sound, but in a good way. (He's thought of something else to call her, something besides nice: enchanting.) "Traffic's bad every day."

Cosette doesn't seem to mind that Marius covers his ears when people press on their horns, or when motorcycles rush past, even though it makes conversation virtually impossible.

The movie theater is small and doesn't cost much money because it runs old movies. Classics, Cosette says. Marius isn't exactly a movie buff, but he likes the movie they see well enough. He's never had a problem with subtitles, and he likes how subdued the film is, how it's not too loud. Sometimes it seems like everything is too loud for him.

They try to go to several restaurants, but most of them are full and the ones that aren't make Marius rock back and forth on the balls of his feet to try to alleviate the stress of the noise. He doesn't want to cover his ears in public, but he can feel himself getting closer to doing that every time.

On one of those occasions, he feels a smaller hand slip into his.

He looks at his hand interlocked with Cosette's in shock for a moment, and then looks at her. She smiles up at him crookedly, and he smiles back, feeling more grounded than he did before as she leads him out of the restaurant.

"That place is expensive anyway," she says, and he wants to say it doesn't matter, but it kind of does because he doesn't have much money and Cosette already bought the movie tickets so he kind of wants to buy dinner for both of them.

They end up at a McDonald's.

Marius wants to apologize for it, but Cosette waves it away. "I like McDonald's. I used to come here with my dad all the time when I was little."

Marius gets the same thing that Cosette does--a burger and fries--and mostly picks and nibbles at it as they talk, on occasion eating a fry.

Marius tries to be someone a bit more suave for a while, but it doesn't really work--Grantaire's right, it's easy to burn out when being another person--and most of the notecards in his head veer wildly off-script within the first few minutes of starting them, because he never planned social interactions for dates until just a couple of days ago, and it hasn't been long enough to really get comfortable.

But it turns out that it's still easy to talk to Cosette, and that she doesn't even seem to notice when he starts to rock back and forth or flap or clap his hands, so he must be stopping himself in time. Besides, she actually has a tendency to bounce her leg up and down.

Cosette's studying to be a social worker, and Marius thinks it's fascinating. He thinks everything about her is fascinating. She talks about the kind of work she wants to do and it seems like she's happy with it.
She asks him what he's interested in and he's very careful when he talks about linguistics and history because he doesn't want to talk too much, doesn't want another person who just wishes he would shut up.

She seems interested, though, and she asks him questions and admits to having taken a linguistics class she never really understood.

They talk a bit about their childhoods, but he prefers not to and it seems like she's the same kind of person when it comes to that. "My childhood was…confusing," is all Cosette says about it, smiling a little, and Marius nods.

Confusing is probably the best way to describe his childhood too--he never knows exactly how to feel about it.

After a while, Cosette whispers, "The manager's giving us dirty looks, we've been here such a long time."

Marius hadn't noticed but he gets up with her anyway and they head out to the movie theater parking lot where Cosette's car is parked. Cosette's holding his hand, and Marius feels dizzy.

They face each other and Marius studies the way Cosette's hair glows under the moonlight and smiles.

"Is it okay…" Cosette starts, and then she stops and laughs a little high-pitched laugh. "Sorry, sorry. Is it okay if I kiss you?"

Marius's eyes widen and he can feel his mouth drop open. "Oh," he says finally. "Um…yeah. Yeah, it's definitely…yeah."

Cosette grins.

Marius has never kissed anyone before in his life, which is probably why it takes a fair amount of time for him and Cosette to position themselves correctly to do so, and probably also why they end up bumping noses somewhat painfully and barely touching lips.

He and Cosette disconnect and break into high-pitched, nervous giggles that become full-blown, warm laughter.

"Wanna…" He finally asks after they calm down, looking at her shoes. They're red. "...wanna try again?"

"Yeah," she says, and she sounds breathless, and then they're kissing.

Marius can feel himself shaking like he's going to fall apart, but Cosette's arms wrapped tightly around him keep him together. One of her hands is tangled in his hair, a pleasant pressure. He is more careful with her.

She deepens the kiss.

Objectively, he doesn't know if it's any good. He always thought kisses were with tongue, but this one doesn't involve any of that, and their teeth clash together briefly. But subjectively, he can't imagine another kiss as good.

Eventually, they pull away. Cosette looks like she's been out in the cold wind, cheeks rosy. Marius imagines he probably doesn't look any better, his attempt at gelling his messy hair back ruined yet
again. He doesn't mind.

"Wow," he says.

"Wow," Cosette agrees.

They untangle and briefly stand in awkward silence.

Marius frowns. "Are you...supposed to do that on the first date?" He asks tentatively, staring at the ground.

Cosette touches one of his hands and he takes her hand in turn, running his fingers over her knuckles. "I never have," she says. "But...I think this is pretty different. You're pretty different from the guys I've gone out with before."

Marius isn't jealous that she's been out with other guys, not really--she's nineteen and Courfeyrac says jealousy is a turn off--but he does immediately feel oddly inadequate. "Is that a good thing?" He ventures.

Cosette laughs. "Yeah. It is."

Marius asks, "Does this...does this mean we're gonna see each other again?"

"I really, really hope so."

He briefly looks into Cosette's dark eyes and then back down at the hem of her soft blue dress. "Yeah."

After the kiss, they head back to his apartment, but instead of him leaving the car right away they sit in the car and talk for at least two more hours. About the movie, about other movies they like, about books and school and what they should do next time because there's actually going to be a next time.

Before he leaves her car at one in the morning because she knows her father will start to worry if she's not home soon, she kisses him again, briefly, sweetly. She tastes faintly of the after dinner mints she's been popping this whole time.

When he gets to the apartment, his hand is shaking so hard he has a hard time opening the door. Courfeyrac is half asleep on the couch when he gets in, but he immediately straightens up when he sees him, and then stares. "Marius Pontmercy, look at you."

Marius grins. "Hi," he says, because he can't think of anything else.

"What happened? You've been out forever."

"I..." Marius struggles to find words, feeling too excited to say anything. Finally, he shrugs and says nothing, but he can't stop smiling.

Courfeyrac grins back at him. "I don't think I've seen you smile this much..." He pauses. "Ever. I don't think I've seen you smile this much ever."

Marius shrugs. "I'm really, really happy," he says, because that's an easy feeling, a feeling he knows, and there's also this swell in his chest like the ocean is making a big wave but it's not crashing, and he guesses that's happiness too.
The next day, Marius meets up with Cosette for coffee and it’s amazing not just because she actually wants to meet up with him so soon after their first date, but because it’s barely even awkward at all. He was afraid they’d run out of things to talk about after the first time they really saw each other, but they didn’t. She’s so easy to talk to, and Marius is drunk on it because it’s not easy to talk to anybody, especially people he hasn’t known long. He struggles with his words—they all seem to come out wrong.

Sometimes they come out wrong with Cosette too, but she just laughs it off or doesn’t even seem to notice.

“You’re really nice to me,” Marius says softly, like it’s some kind of secret, before leaving for an Amis meeting. “Thank you for that.”

Cosette grins. “You’re nice to me too. Why would I be mean?”

Marius shrugs. “People are mean most of the time.”

Cosette smiles just a little, but it looks different from a normal smile in a way Marius can’t quite place. “I guess you and I have some different opinions about them.” She sighs a little and her smile gets wider. “You’re a good guy, Marius.”

His face burns and he says, “You’re a good person,” and not just because he’s supposed to compliment back when somebody compliments him. He knows it’s not exactly inspired because she just told him almost the same thing, but it’s so true.

She kisses his lips gently and his face is still burning but he feels good. He’s rarely ever able to discern exactly what all the feelings that war in his stomach and chest are, but these are fantastic.

“Bye,” he mumbles, and he has to step into a bathroom stall to flap his hands and let his heartbeat get back to normal.

He doesn’t know if his emotions are supposed to be so extreme so soon, but they are. He’s not sure if that means there’s something wrong with him, but if there is he doesn’t really mind, not right now. He probably will later, will probably obsess about it later because he knows that losing her is just going to be harder if he feels like this so early on, but right now he can still taste Cosette’s bitter chapstick on his lips.

Marius feels like he’s going to be late to the Amis meeting, so he practically runs, but he actually gets there early.

He slips into the seat next to Courfeyrac and across from Jehan, and meets Jehan’s eyes briefly.
before looking away. He can feel himself blushing again.

“How’d it go?” Jehan asks, sounding practically breathless with excitement.

Courfeyrac snorts. “Hopeless romantic,” he mutters, but it’s with fondness.

Marius can feel the others looking at him, and he smiles broadly. “It went so well, she’s incredible.” He doesn’t say I think I’m in love because Courfeyrac has assured him that love at first sight is a pretty ridiculous thing, even though he’s pretty sure that’s what happened with him.

Jehan squeals. “I’m so happy for you!”

Marius’s grin is so wide it’s starting to hurt, but he doesn’t mind. He claps his hands happily in that way he does—so that they barely touch, so that they barely make a sound. “It was really, really fun and we could actually talk and it wasn’t awkward and…” He notices he’s rocking back and forth and flapping his hands, and the others are smiling but he blushes profusely anyway and sits on his hands, muttering, “Be still,” to himself.

Jehan was smiling broadly, but suddenly the smile goes away and he looks much more serious. “You can be happy, you know.”

Marius is taken aback. “What? I am…” He clears his throat and feels almost embarrassed saying it, but eventually he does, “I am happy.”

“I mean, you don’t have to stop…” Jehan waves one of his hands in a vague motion. “You don’t have to stop moving like that if you don’t want to, none of us mind.”

Marius’s smile is gone and his eyes are wide. He’s staring straight at Jehan and he doesn’t usually do that, but he’s surprised. The room has gotten very quiet.

“It’s true,” Enjolras says as he runs a hand through his hair and breaks the silence. “You don’t have to be still.”

“You…” Marius swallows. “You hear that.”

Enjolras tilts his head uncomfortably in a yes kind of motion.

“Just…leave me be,” Marius mutters. “It…I’m used to it, when I was little they held me down if I…just…I’m used to it.”

“That’s fine,” Combeferre says even as he touches Enjolras’s shoulder lightly to keep him from saying anything. “We just want you to know that nobody respects you any less if you move—”

“It’s socially unacceptable,” Marius blurts out. “It is, that’s why everybody stared when I was little and why all the other kids made fun of me.”

“Marius,” Enjolras says. “Do you really think we’re particularly preoccupied with what’s socially acceptable and what isn’t?”

Marius actually laughs a little at that. “No. I’m just really used to…I’m just.” He keeps saying the same thing, but the same thing keeps being true. “I’m used to it.”

“We want you to be comfortable, that’s all,” Combeferre says. “So keep doing what you’ve been doing or don’t, we’re not going to say anything after this. You should be comfortable.”

Marius smiles a little. “Just don’t mention it.”
“Done.”

And if Marius rocks back and forth a little more than he normally does, it’s true: nobody mentions it.

+ 

After the Amis meeting, during which they decide they’re going to work with some LGBTQIA+ groups on campus (Marius is going to have to do some research because he’s honestly not sure what all those letters mean), Marius is able to “sigh over romance”, as Courfeyrac puts it, with Jehan for a while longer.

He notices Grantaire talking to Eponine in the corner, and she suddenly looks over at him with wide eyes. He’s smiles at her, slightly puzzled, and she smiles back, but it’s strained.

Jehan looks over to where he’s looking, and when he looks back his smile is slightly strained too.

“What is it?” Marius asks. “Is there something wrong?”

“No,” Jehan says. “No, everything’s fine.”

+ 

It’s a slow morning at the bookstore. Slow mornings are honestly Marius’s favorites, because sometimes he gets a little overwhelmed when there are a lot of people at once. At least there rarely are, and usually when there are they’re all regulars.

“Morning, Marius,” someone says, and Marius looks up from where he’s been playing with the old cash register, opening and closing it methodically, delighting in the clicking sounds it makes.

“Morning, Mrs. Williams,” he says, copying Combeferre’s pleasant tone of voice when he says those words.

Mrs. Williams shoots him a raised-eyebrow look and says, “For Heaven’s sake, call me Rhonda. How many times have I told you that?”

“Many,” Marius says sheepishly. “I guess I just forget.” He smiles at the little boy standing next to… Rhonda. “Who’s this?”

The boy hides behind her.

“This is my grandson Jamie. Hey, Jamie, say hi to Marius. He works here and he’s really nice,” Rhonda says.

“I can vouch for that,” Combeferre says, walking out of the basement with a stack of books in his hands. A couple of regulars just brought in a lot of books. “I’m gonna put these away.”

“Not take care of the customers?” Marius asks, surprised.

“No, you do it, you’re better with the kids than me.”

Marius rocks back and forth on his heels briefly and then smiles one of his best smiles and asks, “So, are you looking for anything specific?”

Rhonda usually likes looking at the mass-market paperbacks, but she’s never brought her grandson and it’s usually Combeferre who gives her recommendations, so Marius has been thrown for a loop.
“Well, I’m looking for something good for a second grader who reads like a fifth grader.”

Marius steps out from behind the counter. “Well,” he says, looking down at Jamie and smiling warmly. “I’m sure we can find something for you. If it is you we’re talking about.”

Jamie doesn’t look at him, instead gripping his grandmother’s hand tighter and nodding.

“Great. Fifth grade level, that’s really cool,” Marius says, and Jamie finally smiles.

Marius grins and leads them into the kids section, where he puts all the time he spent reading as a kid and not interacting with the other children like his teachers said that he should to good use and finds a few books for Jamie, who eventually starts talking to him about the things he likes (things he likes: marine life).

“You know a lot of facts about dolphins,” Marius observes when Jamie pauses to take a breath. He notices that the little boy is flapping his hands with abandon, and he remembers when he did that. Rhonda doesn’t tell Jamie to be still, and Marius is almost surprised, but she’s nicer than his grandfather, so maybe he shouldn’t be.

“I love dolphins!” Jamie squeals. “Also whales and fish and all the other things that live in the ocean. I like learning everything I can about them, and the other kids think I’m weird but grandma says I’m just passionate.”

“You grandma’s a smart lady,” Marius says as he bags Island of the Blue Dolphins and a couple of nonfiction books about marine biology. “When I was your age I used to talk about the things I loved all the time too.”

“What kinda things did you like?”

“History, mostly. Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo.”

“Cool!”

Rhonda chuckles. “He took to you,” she says quietly as she passes over some money.

Marius counts it out carefully and shrugs uncomfortably. “Okay.”

“Do you do any babysitting?”

He looks up in surprise. “Not anymore, I’m afraid,” he says. “I work with kids down at the rec center near here on Sundays, though.”

“I’ll have to bring Jamie over sometime. He should have more role models that are like him.”

Marius slowly rubs his hands together and blinks. “We’d be happy to have him.”

They say their goodbyes and thank each other and Marius frowns at the wall after they leave. “I wonder what she meant by that,” he says to Combeferre.

“What?”

“That he should have more role models that are like him.”

Combeferre looks pensive for a bit and then he shrugs slowly. “She must have been talking personality-wise. You both seem pretty quiet ‘til something gets you going.”
Marius nods.

That makes sense.

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Marius is walking in circles. It’s not a metaphor.

He’s walking in circles around the coffee table. “Maybe this was a mistake,” he says.

“What?” Courfeyrac mutters from his place on the couch where he’s reading a law textbook. “Oh, you mean the meeting Cosette’s dad thing?”

“Yes!” Marius says. “That is exactly the thing I mean!”

“It’s happening pretty fast, isn’t it? You’ve been dating for, what, two months?”

“I know it’s happening fast, but we decided on it and I can’t back out now and she’s going to pick me up and he’s gonna hate me.”

“Why’s he gonna hate you?”

*Because he’ll know I’m not good enough for Cosette,* Marius doesn’t say. Instead, he just shakes his head miserably as his phone rings from his pocket.

He flips it open and says, “Yeah, hi, yeah, I’m, hi, yeah.”

Cosette giggles over the phone. “I’m here. Come down.”

Marius sighs. “Yeah.”

When he’s in the car, he feels too wired to actually say anything to Cosette. Instead he plays with his hands and looks down at his lap and tries not to think about anything, which is a losing battle from the beginning.

Marius is still afraid that Cosette’s father (Jean Valjean, but he goes by Valjean, according to Cosette, and Marius doesn’t even ask why they don’t have the same last name because at this point he’s well aware that Cosette’s adopted) is going to hate him. He’s also afraid that he won’t be able to tell.

When they’re finally at Cosette’s big, isolated house, Marius shakes his head and says, “Maybe I should just stay in here.”

Cosette sighs. “Marius, if you’re *really* not ready I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do, but you have to meet him sometime.”

That part’s true, since Cosette’s dad is so important to her, and the part about her not making him do anything he doesn’t want to makes him feel better, because he knows he actually does have a choice. He opens the car door, takes a deep breath, and smiles at Cosette. It’s not quite genuine, instead it’s one of those smiles he’s practiced in a mirror, but it seems to make her feel better.

They’re holding hands on the porch when Valjean opens the door. Marius immediately looks at the ground, because Valjean is taller than him and looks strong and this was definitely a mistake. “Sorry,” he blurts out to the world at large, and then he covers his mouth with his hand just to make sure he doesn’t say anything else stupid.

“Sorry for what?” Valjean asks.
Marius shrugs, taking his hand off of his mouth. “I just can’t think of anything to say.”

“It’s fine,” Cosette murmurs from next to him. “Let’s go inside!” she says brightly, louder this time.

Marius just nods, feeling a little dazed.

The inside of the house is very nice, with flowers everywhere that Marius can’t stop staring at. He’s always liked flowers, and these are so bright that he can barely pay attention to anything else.

Cosette still pulls him into the dining room, though, and Valjean serves tomato soup.

“I told him it was your favorite,” Cosette explains.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” Marius says. “But…thanks.”

Cosette grins at him, and Valjean smiles at him very slightly.

Marius makes sure to eat everything in his bowl, even when he starts feeling a little sick—he was already a bit nauseous from anxiety—and compliment the food, which isn’t hard because it’s really good, much better than the soup he usually warms in the microwave.

“You’re a good cook,” he tells Valjean.

Valjean chuckles. “It’s not very hard to make soup. Besides, I don’t have much to do but cook and garden.”

“Does that mean all these flowers are yours?”

“I suppose they are.”

“They’re very pretty.”

The conversation is a bit stilted, and there is a strange moment where Valjean asks if Marius has been treating Cosette well—“papa”, Cosette hisses, and Marius can’t do anything but shrug and then say, “I…think I am”, but after that Cosette rolls her eyes and says “yes”—but with Cosette’s help it actually goes pretty well.

After meeting Cosette’s dad, Marius is still slightly shaken, especially since he hasn’t been around parent-types for ages, but Cosette kisses him and says, “You did great. He definitely got along better with you than with any of my boyfriends before.”

“You think?” Marius asks nervously.

“Definitely.”

The sun is setting and they head over to the car and watch it through the plexiglass windshield.

“I love you,” Cosette says suddenly, and then her eyes widen and she looks over at Marius, who thinks he must look ridiculous with the way his mouth's dropped open.

He was going to say something, but now he has no idea what.

“I’m so sorry,” Cosette says. “It’s too soon, right? It’s…that was weird. I’m—”

“I love you too,” Marius says, because when it comes to Cosette that’s the only answer he can even think of giving.
Cosette stares at him until he’s pretty sure he’s done something wrong, and then she flings her arms around his shoulders and kisses his cheek. She chuckles against him, and he can feel her warm breath on his skin. “This is all happening so fast.”

“I know,” he whispers. “But…it feels…”

“Right?”

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, exactly.”

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Marius spends the rest of the day in a happy haze that Courfeyrac doesn’t even try to penetrate.

At night, his phone rings. He figures it’s Cosette, so he flips open the phone without even thinking about it and says, “Hey.”

“Marius,” his aunt says.

“What?” he responds, not out of rudeness but out of surprise. He figured his aunt would never talk to him again—she never liked him.

“Your grandfather wants to see you,” she says shortly.

My grandfather hurt me, Marius thinks. “Why should I see him?” he asks, and it comes out callous through his confusion.

“Have a heart, Marius,” his aunt snaps. “He’s dying.”

“What?” Marius gasps. He feels like all the oxygen has been sucked out of his body.

“Pancreatic cancer, stage four. He’s in hospice and he has days at most.” His aunt’s voice is tight, and Marius thinks he can detect tears.

“Why…why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never picked up the phone.”

Marius feels sick. It’s true. The Gillenormand estate called him once a month. He always assumed it was his grandfather, and he always assumed his grandfather was well because…because his grandfather was always well. Marius had never considered that he might get sick.

Marius breathes in.

Breathes out.

“He doesn’t have much time,” his aunt stresses. “He’s been asking for you, God knows why.”

Marius can’t think of any reason his grandfather would want to see him. He’s always been disappointed in him.

But he has to go. He has to go see the man who raised him. “I’ll come over tomorrow,” he says quietly.

The next day, he skips the Amis meeting, hails a taxi, and goes over to the Gillenormand estate.
Marius has never seen a person on their deathbed, but when he walks into his grandfather’s room he knows this is going to be the first time. His grandfather’s gaze is clouded by drugs. He looks half asleep.

Marius sits in the chair next to his bed, wonders if he should take his grandfather’s hand.

His grandfather’s the one who takes his hand instead. Marius has studied his grandfather’s hands, and they have always looked big and strong and elegant. Now they look and feel brittle, breakable.

“Adrienne,” he says very quietly. “Adrienne, you’re here.”

“No. I’m Marius. I’m her son.”

“Of course, of course. Marius, my boy, you look just like her.”

It’s true. Even when all he did was yell, grandfather would have periods of gentleness where he smoothed back Marius’s hair and said, “You look so much like her. My dear boy, my dear, dear child.”

“I love you, Marius,” his grandfather says, words tripping over each other. “I know you don’t think so, but I do. I always have. I just wanted you to have a good life…”

Marius blinks back tears. He doesn’t understand.

“You were never like the other children,” his grandfather continues. “I always thought I could fix you, but I see now, I can’t.”

His grandfather untangles his hand from Marius’s and reaches up to stroke Marius’s cheek instead. Marius tries not to shrink from the contact, which feels wrong on his face, because the man’s dying after all.

He’s dying. That phrase won’t get out of his mind. He’s dying, he’s dying, he’s dying. He can’t believe it.

“I love you dearly,” his grandfather says tenderly, and Marius starts out of his thoughts and then stares, uncomprehending. “I wanted you to hate your father because I never felt he was good enough, not for my daughter, not for you. I made a mistake. I forgot to show my love in ways that you would understand.”

And then grandfather’s asleep, and then the machines around him are beeping erratically and Marius is herded out of the room.

His aunt is clutching a rosary and her face is tacky with tears. She doesn’t look at him. When he was a child, he would reach out to her. She never held him.

Marius hears one long beeping sound, and it’s so loud it’s like he’s inside the room. He knows what it means, and he doesn’t know why, he doesn’t know—

how

—because grandfather seemed fine, a minute ago he seemed weak but not so weak.

He lets out a sob and then claps his hand over his mouth because he does not deserve to cry over this.
He’s the one who left.

One of the nurses looks at him and says, “This is how it is with patients, sometimes. They hang on just long enough.”

He feels broken, or maybe torn in two.

His grandfather has said so much, and Marius has understood so little.
This is a really short chapter, but it ended best where it ends and I hope it works.

Marius wipes away the tear or two that’s fallen and shakes his head, trying to clear it, but it doesn’t work.

He can’t stop remembering.

He’s six years old and he can hear his grandfather crying through his half-open office door, which is strange because his grandfather never cries, because he is a strong man. He says Marius has to be strong too, says he cries too much. Marius does cry too much.

Marius misses his mother, misses his father. Sometimes he even misses his grandfather even though that makes no sense, even though much of the time his grandfather is right there in the room. Marius doesn’t understand his emotions, he just knows that they slosh around inside him and confuse him until all he can do is rock back and forth slowly in the way his grandfather hates and *cry*.

And grandfather says not to cry, but now he’s in his study and the door’s half open and Marius can hear him, he can hear him crying very hard so there must be something very wrong. Sometimes there isn’t anything really wrong when Marius cries, he thinks, but if it’s his grandfather…

If it’s his grandfather, it must be something terrible.

Maybe somebody else is dead, but Marius has to wonder who it could be because other than Marius’s father and grandfather, everyone important is dead, and Marius doesn’t think his grandfather would cry over his father.

His grandfather is sobbing.

Marius pushes the door open just a little bit more and looks at his grandfather, at his bowed head, at his shaking shoulders. Sadness is something he understands. Marius is sad all the time, he can see it in the mirror, can see it in the downturn of his mouth and the shininess in his eyes.

He *misses*. There are these spaces where others are supposed to be that are filled up by their not-being, now, and he writes to his father and sometimes even writes to his mother wherever she is in Heaven even though he doesn’t think she’ll ever get the letters. He is quiet and he does not smile much because there is nothing and nobody to smile at but the teachers say that he’s dealing with his grief well, that he doesn’t get into any trouble at all because of it, though sometimes it looks like he’s not feeling it at all.

Marius doesn’t really know what grief is. He doesn’t know if he feels it or not. He just knows he lives between all of these spaces of people who are no longer here.

He walks into the study and says nothing because his words have escaped him.

His grandfather looks up suddenly and his reddened eyes snap towards Marius and he says, “Come here.”
Marius feels a little afraid at that, but he walks over to his grandfather anyway, slowly, slowly, and he doesn’t make a sound. He hates making sounds in this big, quiet house, because they echo and it frightens him.

Marius’s grandfather places a hand on Marius’s head, on his messy dark hair, and says in a soft voice, “She left.”

Marius doesn’t know who she is until he realizes: mama.

But the truth is that his mama didn’t leave, she died, and dying is like leaving but forever. Dying means never coming back.

“I’ve lost everybody,” his grandfather says, and it’s like he doesn’t even notice Marius, but that makes sense. So many people don’t notice him.

Marius wants to say, you haven’t lost me, but the words don’t fit right in his mouth, they stay stuck in his throat.

Besides, his grandfather says it: “Except you. I haven’t lost you.”

And then he looks at Marius for a while until eventually he pushes Marius away. “Go play,” he says, and doesn’t look at him anymore.

Except you. I haven’t lost you.

Marius doesn’t know if his grandfather wishes he had.

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Home isn’t a mansion with doors that are too big and rooms that harbor too many memories that make Marius flinch, not anymore.

Home is a small, well-kept apartment. It’s warm in the way that means nice and also in a more literal manner.

Marius spends a long time trying to open the door. He can hear voices inside and remembers that the Amis meeting was at his and Courfeyrac’s apartment. He needs to look okay. He needs to steel himself for people. He needs to…

He needs to be okay.

His grandfather is gone, and Marius doesn’t know what it changes because his grandfather’s been gone for years, maybe he’s always been gone, but it changes everything at the same time because his grandfather’s always been a constant presence anyway, physically there at least, a presence that chokes him but at least exists.

He’s dead now.

Marius can’t get the key into the lock, he keeps trying but he can’t manage it and, frustrated, he slams his hand against the door.

Dying means never coming back.

Somebody opens the door. Golden hair. Enjolras.

Enjolras frowns. “You’re late,” he says.
Marius must have gotten something wrong, because he thought the Amis meeting would actually be over by now. It must have started later than expected.

Marius opens his mouth, but his words leave him.


Marius walks in.

Everybody looks at him.

“You’re shivering,” Joly says. “You forgot to wear a jacket again.”

He did. “I…I couldn’t open the door. The key, the door wouldn’t open.”

He’s studying the floor. The key is clutched in his hand. It’s cutting into his palm. He thinks it's making him bleed.

“Marius, is something wrong?” Courfeyrac asks.

Marius scrubs a hand against his head and rocks back on his heels. He needs to be okay. He blinks back tears. “I cry too much,” he chokes out. “He always says I cry too much.”

The idea of referring to his grandfather in past tense horrifies him, because that…that’s losing everybody. That really is losing everybody, because Marius has never even considered his aunt part of his family, just as she’s never considered him part of hers.

He looks up. Through his tears, everything is pleasantly blurred. He twists his hands together, then wrings them. “I didn’t even know he was sick, I didn’t answer the phone so I didn’t know he was sick. It happened…it happened really fast.”

“Who’s sick?” Combeferre asks. “Come on, sit down.”

Marius is led over to the couch. He’s shaking. “My grandfather. But he’s not sick anymore, because he…”

“Oh my God,” Courfeyrac says.


“I’m so sorry,” Jehan says, and Marius shrugs.

He doesn’t know what else to do.

He rocks back and forth, tries to get back to some stable place, but finds that he can’t. He feels strange. Maybe this is feeling the absence of an absence. Maybe this is feeling that he shouldn’t be feeling anything at all. But there’s that sadness too.

Marius didn’t like his grandfather.

But he loved him.

“Marius?” Courfeyrac asks tentatively. “Do you want me to call your girlfriend?”

It’s strange that Courfeyrac and Cosette don’t really know each other, that Cosette’s just Marius’s girlfriend to Courfeyrac.
And it’s strange that Marius’s grandfather’s dead.

Marius nods yes to the question and hands Courfeyrac his phone. Courfeyrac quickly finds the correct contact and has a rushed conversation after making sure he can tell Cosette what’s going on. Of course he can.

Marius doesn’t mind.

His grandfather’s dead.

Cosette knocks politely on the door but she doesn’t say hello to anyone, she just makes a beeline for Marius and sits down next to him, taking his hand. He embraces her tightly.

“Cosette, he’s gone,” he says, and his voice is bewildered. He is a child again, and he could swear his grandfather’s going to live forever.

But he didn’t, and it feels like a betrayal.

“I know,” she murmurs, rubbing his back, a comforting motion.

He breaks away from her and they face each other, knees touching and hands tangled together.

Cosette presses her forehead against his. Her breath smells like mint when she speaks, just like it always does. The familiarity is soothing. “I’m so sorry.”

She is an orphan too.

“I hate being alone,” he says.

And Cosette answers, “You aren’t. You'll never be.”
Chapter Notes

I'm back! I'm so sorry I've been gone for such a long time but I went through a rough patch and then I got into a new fandom and a new special interest, so I've been...distracted. But this story is going to be finished, don't worry! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Also I just want to say that I really, really, really appreciate the support this story has gotten. Thank you all!

The funeral is quiet, full of his grandfather's old friends and business associates. Marius knows many of them, used to hide from most of them as a child when his grandfather didn't want him to be seen. They shake his hand and their condolences wash over him like rain.

He feels confused. It's like everything around him is numbed by white noise. He can barely speak, all his words are coming out wrong and he spends most of his energy moving in ways his grandfather would approve of because it is the man's funeral, after all.

Marius hasn't been to many funerals, but he knows he's meant to be quiet and respectful and normal, so that's what he is.

When he leaves the funeral, he finds that the words that were said in there keep echoing in his head: *ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. He's heard the words before, and many times, but now they truly stick in his mind like certain lines from poems or songs do. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

His grandfather is gone. Soon, his body will be part of the earth.

Marius doesn't know where his apartment is. The family plot is close to the mansion he lived in for so many years, the one he's sure will be given to his aunt, and he finds that he knows the way there, but that's not his home anymore.

He can't find home, his real home, has forgotten the address and doesn't have it written down because he's an adult and he should be able to get home, so there's not even a way to ask for directions, not that he could. He rubs his palms against his head and ends up on campus.

He knows he looks strange, dressed in his black suit. He looked at himself in the mirror earlier and saw a ghost.

The suit is constricting, and now his breath is speeding up though he still feels like he's looking at the world through fog, though it's a very clear day. He doesn't like this suit, doesn't like the tie hanging around his neck like a noose, but Courfeyrac helped him tie it and he doesn't know if he'd even be able to take it off without help, the knot's so tight.

Marius passes by a group of people and walks into the middle of the street. A car honks its horn at him and he claps his hands over his ears.

He keeps walking.
"Hey," someone says through the fog. "Hey, you okay?"

Marius can't answer, he just nods. It's not true. He knows he's not okay, but he doesn't know what to do about it.

"Marius?" Somebody says. "Marius?"

"Should I call 911?" The person who asked him if he was okay asks.

"Absolutely not," the other voice says sharply, "I can take care of this from here. Come on, Marius."

"Eponine?" He mumbles, finally recognizing her voice.

"Yeah, c'mon."

He lets her steer him into the Musain.

"Hey, can I use the break room?" He hears Eponine ask someone.

"Of course. What happened? Should we call--"

"No. They'll just think he's on drugs or something."

"Okay, take him back."

The rest of the conversation just becomes white noise like everything else, and Marius is steered to a room that smells overpoweringly like coffee, like the Musain, and he's able to breathe again but the feeling of malfunctioning, of shutting down slowly like a bad computer, doesn't go away.

"Marius? Marius, are you...are you listening?"

Not really. The words Eponine is speaking don't really mean anything, they're just happening.

Marius suddenly has a strange underwater feeling, or maybe it's like he's in a thunderstorm with no sound and he can't even see a foot in front of him.

He should have picked up the phone.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

He should have been a better grandson, tried harder to be normal.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

He's such a disappointment.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

He didn't pick up the phone, didn't want to pick up the phone even though his aunt and grandfather took care of him for so many years. His grandfather said he loved him, at the end. Did Marius love his grandfather? He thinks he did, in a kind of desperate way because his grandfather was everything for so many years. He wanted to make him happy, he did.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
When Marius comes back to himself, Eponine is sitting near him, chewing on her nails. Marius used to do that, but then his aunt painted his nails with a clear polish that tasted so bad he cried, and he never did it again.

Eponine's dark hair is very shiny and very long and it makes a curtain that covers half of her face.

Marius tries to talk. He opens his mouth, but no words come out, like he's been numbed by a dentist.

Finally, he manages, "How long?"

Eponine looks up, surprised, and smiles as she lets out a relieved exhale. Then she gets serious again. "Two hours."

Marius blinks. It's been a while since he lost time like that, but then he remembers leaning his forehead against a tree in his favorite park a while after Cosette first asked him out, and coming to hours later. It scares him, that these things happen, that he doesn't know what they are. Google isn't much help either, there are so many links he just ends up getting overwhelmed.

He can feel his tie uncomfortably through his shirt, and he tries to undo it, but he was right: he can't. His hands are shaking too hard.

"Do you..." Eponine says slowly, and then she cuts herself off like she's embarrassed before finally just saying what she wants to say. "Do you want me to do it?"

He just wants the tie off, so he nods.

Eponine unties it quickly and he pulls it off and throws it to the side, rubbing at his neck. His shirt is buttoned all the way up and it's stiff and itchy and he finally can't take it anymore, so he undoes the first three buttons.

Eponine looks away. She's still kneeling in front of him, but she stumbles to her feet and goes back to the armchair she was sitting in earlier, takes out a cigarette and holds it between two fingers, searching her pocket for a light.

"Are you..." Marius asks tentatively, voice still shaky, "...are you allowed to smoke in here?"

"Shit," Eponine mutters, and she puts away the light and slides the cigarette back into its pack. "You're right, can't believe I forgot." She runs a hand over her face. "It's just been a long day."

Marius's stomach twists with guilt. She had a long day and then she had to deal with him. "Sorry," he whispers. That word comes out more easily than the others, he says it so often. He's got a lot to be sorry for.

"No!" Eponine says loudly, and Marius looks up in surprise. "It's not you. It's okay, you're my...you're my friend, I don't mind helping you. I care about you," she says very quietly, looking at the floor.

Marius wants to say sorry again, but he just keeps quiet.

After a while, Eponine says, "What were you thinking? You were in the middle of the street. People were talking about calling the police."

"I didn't...I don't know. It was like I was...like I was...I don't know how to describe it. But I didn't mean to do that. I was just confused, I couldn't...couldn't remember where home was."
“Can you remember now?”

Marius tries, he really does, but he ends up just shrugging because he knows the apartment’s close but the street goes two ways and that’s really no help.

Eponine smiles a little, but it doesn’t really seem like a happy smile, just like she’s twisting her lips just for the sake of twisting her lips, and she says, “C’mon, I’ll take you home.”

Marius nods and whispers, “Thank you.” He doesn’t say, *It’s silly that you can remember where I live and I can’t*, but he finds that he can’t really get out the words. They’ve all gotten stuck in his throat or they’re jumbles around in his mouth and it’s not worth it to try.

He walks to the apartment with Eponine and he doesn’t know what she says to Courfeyrac when he opens the door because she has to knock since Marius can’t figure out the key today either because he’s not really paying attention, but he just smiles at him and leads him inside.

Marius shakes Courfeyrac’s hand off of his arm and immediately goes to his room, kicks off his shoes and socks, and gets into bed.

He doesn’t really get out to go anywhere but the bathroom for three days, too busy staring at the wall and trying to reconcile his life now from his life just a little while ago, when his grandfather was alive. It doesn’t feel all that different even though it should. His grandfather loved him. He loved his grandfather.

His grandfather loved him.

Why did he never say?

Marius doesn’t understand why people don’t just say.

People keep calling him, but Marius just stares at the phone as it vibrates on his nightstand and can’t get up the energy to pick up.

He’s never been very good at change, and all of the changes that he’s gone through this year have hit him really hard very suddenly. It’s not like he hasn’t been struggling with them, but now they seem impossible to overcome. He can’t move. He can’t really think. He counts to one hundred in English, then French, then German, and then he does it again until he goes to sleep.

His dreams are troubled and don’t really mean anything, and he doesn’t remember them when he wakes up.

Every time he wakes up he just wants to go back to sleep. Sometimes he wants to blend into the ground and become something inanimate, something without the feelings that he doesn’t understand. He thinks he’s broken. He’s always been broken.

There’s something wrong with him just like his grandfather always said, Marius knows there’s something wrong with him but he can’t figure out what it is.

Courfeyrac knocks on his door and asks, “Marius, are you okay?”

The answer is no, but Marius thinks Courfeyrac already knows that, so it’s a silly question.

He doesn’t answer.

Making words is a chore and he doesn’t feel like it right now.
He should be over this now, but this doesn’t just feel like trying to get used to this new absence in his life. This feels like he can’t deal with anything anymore and his brain is blank or rolling with confusion and there’s this heaviness that won’t let him sit up. It’s like that year of high school all over again and Marius doesn’t want to deal with this again.

He’s breathing and his heart is beating and he guesses that that’s okay but he doesn’t feel so good.

He just doesn’t feel so good.

“I’m coming in,” Courfeyrac warns him on the second day, and Marius doesn’t really want him to but he doesn’t even move so Courfeyrac comes in anyway.

Marius feels the bed dip as Courfeyrac sits down. “You feeling any better? Like, at all?”

Marius tries to shrug. It doesn’t really work, since he’s lying down and all.

“You sick?”

He feels sick but he’s not, so he shakes his head just a little.

Courfeyrac skims his dark hand over Marius’s hair. It feels kind of nice, but he doesn’t keep doing it. Marius doesn’t care that much.

“You gonna get up any time soon?”

Marius manages to shake his head a little.

“Want something to eat?”

Marius shakes his head again.

“Okay. I’m gonna get you some cereal anyway. Don’t worry, no milk, I know you don’t like it. Try and eat a little, okay?”

Marius nods.

“Cool.”

Courfeyrac eventually comes back with the cereal, setting it down on the nightstand with a little clinking sound. He pushes Marius’s hair out of his face a bit and says, “It’s gonna be okay.”

Marius doesn’t believe him, but it’s a nice thought.

He even eats about half of the cereal before his stomach starts hurting, even though he’s not hungry at all.

Marius Pontmercy is defective.

He knows.

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After a few days Marius is able to summon the energy to roll out of bed. He spends a while with his face against the uncomfortable hardwood floor, and he can’t get his legs to help him stand up, so instead he maneuvers himself to his knees and grabs some random clothes from the floor that probably aren’t even clean, stuffs them under his arms and crawls out the door and to the bathroom,
which is blessedly close to his room. Courfeyrac doesn’t catch him, which is something. Marius is glad his best friend isn’t going to see him crawling around because this is truly pathetic but he has to move sometime, even if he doesn’t feel like it, and he doesn’t feel as…gone…today, so it’s something.

He strips himself of his rumpled suit, which takes him a while and he ends up popping off a few buttons of the dress shirt by accident, though he doesn’t really care, and he gets into the shower and manages to wash himself and shampoo his hair in less than fifty minutes, which is…

Something, he guesses.

It takes him a while to change into his actual clothes, but by that point he’s actually able to stand up again, so he does that and wills himself to walk out of the bathroom—one foot in front of the other, that’s it, that’s all—and he actually feels kind of good when he finds himself in the living room.

He moved.

He’s here.

He exists.

He’s okay, sort of.

He gets back to his room and fights the urge to flop back onto his bed. Instead he grabs his phone and looks through all of the texts. He smiles a little when he sees that all of the Amis have sent him something, most of them sent him more than one. He hates that he worried his friends but he does feel a kind of guilty pleasure that he has friends to be worried about.

He looks at Cosette’s texts again and then all he feels is guilt.

He carefully types out a text to her, writing, sorry i didn’t text back, i was in bed. It’s a stupid excuse but it’s his only excuse. Then he sends a mass text to the Amis. It just says i’m ok.

Briefly, he closes his eyes. He takes deep breaths.

Cosette texts back. She says, Don’t worry about it :) I really really hope you’re feeling better and I want to see you soon.

Miraculously, Marius smiles and he texts back, sure.

Maybe he can face the day again, face life again. The ache in his chest has abated for a while, and he doesn’t feel so heavy.

He’s still not hungry, but he manages to force down some soup.

It’s something.

Courfeyrac smiles at him like he’s actually accomplished something when he gets home and sees Marius up and about, and Marius tries to smile back because Courfeyrac shouldn’t have had to deal with him and his bullshit.

“Feeling better?” Courfeyrac asks.

Yeah, he kind of is.

He nods.
The next day he actually goes to the Amis meetings. The others actually seem sort of excited to see him, and that makes him feel good. He’s spent a lot of time around people who weren’t excited to see him, having friends is something amazing and he should remember that. He should always remember that.

He still feels like his world has tilted and he’s still trying to find his footing, but he’s got people, and that’s good. That’s a good thing.

Some changes aren’t bad.

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After the meeting—Marius can’t concentrate very well lately, so he doesn’t really know what they talked about—he goes outside for some fresh air, sitting on the bench just outside of the Musain. It’s nice out, and not even too loud. There are people walking around but they’re just background noise.

The seasons changed again at some point.

Marius didn’t notice, but he’s never been especially observant.

Somebody sits next to him and he looks over at them in surprise. He didn’t think anyone would really want to spend time with him, not when he’s like this. Then again, he’s still amazed that people want to spend time with him at all.

It’s Feuilly. He smiles at Marius. His smile is crooked and nice and Marius likes it.

“How old are you?” Feuilly asks, and Marius isn’t very good at conversations but that seems like an odd opener even to him.

“Twenty-one.”

“I thought you were twenty.”

“I was when I first met you, but that was…that was a…while. A while ago. I turned twenty-one three months ago.”

“Huh. Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t think you’d care,” Marius says, and then he tries very hard to keep himself from covering his mouth with his hand, because that was too honest and he tries very hard not to be too honest.

“Of course we care. You’re our friend.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Don’t guess. You are.”

Marius nods, rubbing his hands together slowly. He’s rocking back and forth a little, but he doesn’t make himself be still. He doesn’t feel like it. He likes moving like he does and he knows there’s something wrong with it but he doesn’t feel like it’s wrong so he’s just going to keep doing it, at least for right now.

“Twenty-one’s pretty young to lose what’s left of your family.”

Marius jerks his head over to Feuilly, eyes wide in surprise. They’ve never really had a very serious conversation. They don’t have many conversations at all. Marius opens his mouth but nothing comes
out. His words are gone again. He hopes they come back soon, he likes having them.

“Sorry,” Feuilly says, shrugging. “But it’s true.”

Marius nods.

“Look, I don’t know what it’s like to lose a grandfather. I mean, I never had one, they died before I was born. But…look, Marius, I do know what it’s like to lose a family.”

Feuilly’s an orphan and he has been one for a long time. Marius knows that. He nods. He wants Feuilly to keep going.

“It’s fucking painful. I know. I mean, losing one person is bad enough. But everybody…that’s something else. It feels like you’re completely alone because the people that, you know, that took care of you are just gone forever. The people who are supposed to love you unconditionally…they’re not there anymore. I’m really sorry, Marius. But there are other people who love you, and I just…I really want you to know that. We all do.”

Marius blinks very quickly because he hates crying in front of other people, and he nods again. He can’t really bring himself to do much but nod, because he can’t really find a way to tell Feuilly exactly how much this means to him.

“You never…” Marius starts, and then he pauses. “I never…I never got used to it. I mean, I did, kind of, I guess, but…not really. They’re not there and they’re not there and it’s been a while for most of them but I still…sometimes I still notice it. It’s not as…it’s not everything anymore but sometimes I still notice it. Do you?”

Feuilly looks at him for a while, his mouth twitching into a smile. His eyes are shining, and he says, “Yeah.”
It’s absolutely amazing that Marius gets to keep his job after days of not going. It’s called “sympathy leave” and he’s so glad it exists. He really likes his job.

Combeferre asks him if he’s okay and if he’s doing well more than usual, and Marius forces a smile and nods even though he knows Combeferre is perfectly aware that he’s lying.

He looks through the new boxes of used books they’ve gotten and writes down prices for them and shelves them and it’s nice.

He’s calm, which isn’t quite happy, but it’s something.

Today he’s going to the community center. He feels terrible that he’s missed at least two weeks because of what happened, but Cosette says that she’s been going for him and explained that there was something going on, and he loves her even more for doing something like that for him, something she didn’t have to do.

Marius has been abandoned so many times that he hates the idea that he abandoned the kids, especially since from what he’s heard from them, a lot of them have been abandoned an awful lot too.

He walks to the community center as fast as he can after work and bursts into the big gym where the kids congregate to work on their homework and play the games that are kept inside when they’re not outside on the playground.

When he walks in he looks around and counts all the kids, relieved that everybody’s there. He sees Jamie putting together a puzzle and smiles.

“Marius!” Lee shrieks. “Marius is here!”

Marius laughs as the children swarm him and pull at his shirt and chatter excitedly.

One of the little girls, Amanda, looks up at him with worry clear on her face and says, “‘Sette said you had a family ‘mergeency.”

Marius smiles, but it feels like a grimace. “Um, yeah. I…” He’s not sure what to say. Is he allowed to mention death to children? He knows that many of them have experienced death already. By the time he was their age his mother had already died. Lee once told him about his brother getting shot, and Amanda herself has shared that she doesn’t even remember her mother. “My grandfather died. He, um. Because my parents left so early on, he was the one who raised me. So it’s been very hard.”

“I’m sorry,” Amanda says. “My grandpa and grandma take care of me too.”

“My grandma takes care of me,” Jamie, who has wandered over to the group of children surrounding Marius, says.

Marius smiles. “Yeah. And it’s always hard to lose someone you love, so that’s why I wasn’t here last week.”

Amanda nods solemnly and Lee smiles at Marius and says, “We drew pictures for you! When you weren’t here, ’cause Cosette said things were hard so Jenny thought it’d cheer you up.”
Marius grins. “Really? That’s nice of all of you.”

“Come look!” Cameron says as she beams.

Marius goes over to one of the tables and the children give him several different pictures. Marius laughs, surprised, when he sees that more than one of them have drawn battle scenes or Napoleon (at least, he’s pretty sure it’s Napoleon) on a horse. Some of them have drawn him, some of them have drawn themselves, some of them have drawn flowers or hearts or smiley faces.

Marius can feel a lump forming in his throat. “You guys,” he chokes out, and then he takes a deep breath, trying to get himself under control. “This is very, very nice.” He inhales shakily and smiles. “This is…thank you.”

“You’re crying,” Jamie says, alarmed, and Marius wipes away the tear that’s fallen and laughs.

“It’s funny,” he says. “It’s always confused me too, but sometimes when people are really happy, they cry. It’s not always just a sad thing. So I’m happy. You guys made me happy.”

Amanda squeals, thrilled, and Jamie smiles.

“Okay, who needs help with their homework?” Marius asks once he’s finally got himself under control. The kids groan and he says, “C’mon, guys, it’s fun!”

“No, it’s not,” Lee says loudly, and Marius laughs.

Marius spends time with the children for a couple of hours until their guardians come to pick them up, and he waves at them as they walk away and he feels like he’s finally calm, like he can breathe easily again.

His feet take him home and he doesn’t even have to think about it.

He’s tired, but he manages to get his key to open the door for the first time in days, and when he walks into the apartment he stops cold, because the living room is not as it usually is.

For one, the living room is full of his friends.

Secondly, Cosette is there too.

Thirdly, Courfeyrac is grinning and saying, “Surprise!”

Marius blinks. “Is this…a birthday party? My birthday was months ago.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell us about it,” Courfeyrac points out. “And, I mean, come on, Marius. It’s your twenty-first! It’s important.”

“Not…really,” Marius says, but there’s a smile playing at his lips and it becomes bigger as Cosette walks over to him and takes his hand.

“Come on,” she says. “My dad made a cake.”

“Oh, he didn’t have to do that,” Marius says automatically. It looks like a good cake, too, just vanilla. Marius doesn’t understand it when cakes have lots of different flavors in them. They just make them distracting.

There are candles lopsidedly stuck in the cake, and Combeferre lights them and Marius can’t help but flap his hands as his friends sing “Happy Birthday”. He blows out the candles and the others cheer.
He’s been at more than one birthday party for other Amis, and he was never really jealous that they had birthdays that people cared about and he didn’t, but he hadn’t realized how much he’d enjoy having an actual party.

“I haven’t celebrated my birthday since I was five,” Marius says once they’ve started eating the cake. (It is good.)

Jehan grins at him and bumps his shoulder against Marius’s. “Well, this is pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Marius says, smiling at Jehan. “Pretty nice.”

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It’s a week after the birthday party that Courfeyrac says, “I’m going to visit my parents this weekend.”

Marius nods absentmindedly from the dining table where he’s typing up the last of an essay on his laptop.

“You’re coming with me!” Courfeyrac announces cheerily.

Marius nods absentmindedly again before realizing what Courfeyrac actually said. “Wait, what?”

“I love my parents but they’re kind of…” Courfeyrac waves his hand around vaguely. “Anyway, I need a buffer.”

“Wait, what?”

“Also, they want to meet my roommate.”

“Wait, what?”

“C’mon, Marius! It’ll be fun! We’ll go on a road trip. I mean, like, a forty minute road trip, but…and you’ll like my parents.”

“How am I supposed to like your parents if you don’t like your parents?”

“I like my parents!”

“I thought the implication was that you didn’t. And you’re always complaining about them.”

Courfeyrac shrugs. “Well, I love my parents, and I like them just fine, and I complain about them ‘cause they’re parents and they’re always telling me how I should live my life because parents, but with someone as a buffer they won’t be able to talk about what I should be doing and anyway, they’re good people and they’d love you.”

“Why?”

“You’re my wholesome roommate, of course they’ll love you. Come on, Marius. It’ll…take your mind off of things.”

Marius bites his lip thoughtfully and then shrugs. “O…kay?”

Courfeyrac gives him a thumbs up and then disappears to his room.

Marius tries very hard not to think about meeting Courfeyrac’s parents. He’s not very good with
people, Courfeyrac should know that by now.

He does some of his work—he’s kind of behind and he honestly doesn’t even want to know how his grades are right now—but his brain still keeps wrapping around the same idea and it swirls around his skull.

Marius doesn’t particularly like meeting new people. He always worries that they won’t like him. But this is a favor to Courfeyrac, and Courfeyrac is his best friend, so Marius is going to do this and he’s going to be extremely socially appropriate.

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Marius sleeps for most of the car ride to Courfeyrac’s house. The movement of the car is soothing enough that his sleep is pleasant and uninterrupted, and he doesn’t dream.

“Marius!” Courfeyrac says loudly, and Marius wakes up, bleary and surprised.

“Already?” he mumbles. He peers outside and sees a couple on the steps of the huge house. It’s almost as big as the house Marius grew up in.

“Yup,” Courfeyrac says. “Let’s go.”

Marius sits up and straightens out his shirt and gets out of the car carefully because he doesn’t want to be stumbling the first time Courfeyrac’s parents ever see him.

He looks at Courfeyrac’s parents and smiles gamely before looking intently at the ground. It’s very smooth. Rich people concrete.

He follows Courfeyrac up to the door and hangs back as Courfeyrac’s parents greet Courfeyrac. They’re loud, and they sound happy. Marius breathes a little more easily. The memories he has of these big houses are people smiling tightly and speaking very cordially.

“You must be Benoit’s roommate!” Courfeyrac’s mother says, and Marius looks up, startled.

“Benoit?” he asks.

Courfeyrac laughs and says, “Benoit’s my real name, remember?”

“No, it’s not,” Marius says automatically.

“Courfeyrac’s my last name.”

“Right. I know. But it’s your name. Your real name.”

“Right, right. Benoit’s my first name, not my real name.”

“Yes,” Marius says solemnly, and then he turns to Courfeyrac’s parents. “Hello,” he says as pleasantly as he can, making eye contact as intently as he can. “I’m very pleased to meet you.” He finally cracks as he shakes Courfeyrac’s parents’ hands and looks at their mouths and hairlines instead of their eyes. Eyes are too distracting. “My name is Marius Pontmercy.”

“I’m Ella de Courfeyrac,” Courfeyrac’s mother, who has Courfeyrac’s dark skin and wide smile, says.

Marius nods.
“I’m Jacques de Courfeyrac,” Courfeyrac’s father, who also has Courfeyrac’s dark skin but a smaller smile, says.

Marius nods again, and then he keeps nodding until he realizes he doesn’t have to and then he holds himself as still as possible, because he’s been rocking back and forth on his feet and he shouldn’t do that, adults don’t like that.

Mr. de Courfeyrac is very tall, Marius notes idly. He guesses that Courfeyrac got his height from his mother.

“Come in, come in,” Mrs. de Courfeyrac says, and Marius is ushered in to the house. It’s almost overwhelming. Marius hasn’t been in a house this big since his grandfather died.

Marius twists his hands together, trying not to be obvious about it, and he tries to be polite and normal as the de Courfeyrac’s sit him down at a table and give him food. The food is very good, Marius is sure, but he isn’t able to finish it completely because the textures don’t quite agree with him. “Sorry,” he mutters, embarrassed. “Sorry, I just…” he clears his throat awkwardly. “I don’t eat a wide variety of food.”

“That’s fine,” Mrs. de Courfeyrac says, and that’s a relief to Marius.

Courfeyrac’s parents ask Marius about what he studies, about his hobbies, about how things have been going for him this year. Marius says what he’s supposed to. He says that he studies law and hopes to become a professor, that his hobbies are linguistics and learning languages (though calling things that are so all-consuming “hobbies” seems laughable), and that this year has been fine. Just fine.

Courfeyrac gives him a funny look when he says that, but Marius just smiles gamely and speaks almost completely in borrowed sentences.

By the time Marius and Courfeyrac leave the table, it’s dark outside and Marius is exhausted. Lately, he feels like he’s always exhausted.

Marius sleeps in the bed in Courfeyrac’s old room, which is full of books in careless piles on the floor and posters that plaster the walls and the ceilings.

He wakes up later than he usually does and mostly spends the morning walking around town with Courfeyrac, going into shops. The bookstore is nice, but he likes the little antique store they step into best, because it’s full of things to fiddle with. Marius’s favorite is a clock that he winds up over and over again for almost half an hour as Courfeyrac looks around.

“I wish I could concentrate like you do,” Courfeyrac says as he and Marius walk into the street. Marius winces. The shop was dimly lit, and the sun is shining so brightly that it’s offensive to the eyes. He laughs. “I’m really good at…fixating, I guess. But it helps sometimes.”

He and Courfeyrac walk back to the house as the day becomes dimmer, and Marius ends up on the back porch, watching the sunset with Courfeyrac and Courfeyrac’s parents.

“You have a rocking chair!” he says, hands flapping of their own accord before he shoves them into the pockets of his overcoat. He sounds a bit too excited about something as silly as a rocking chair, but he really loves them. They never had any rocking chairs when he was younger, and he always thought that it would be so nice to.

“Yes,” Courfeyrac says. “Thought you’d like that.”
Marius beams and sits in the chair, crossing his legs and starting to rock back and forth. “It’s socially acceptable now,” he says, laughing.

Courfeyrac throws his head back and laughs too. “Naturally.”

Marius sighs, “I was so sad when I got too old to go on swings without people giving me odd looks.”

“Nah, man, screw other people’s opinions. Swings are great. I’ll swing with you.”

Marius tilts his head to the side. Screwing other people’s opinions has never really been an option for him, but maybe that would work. Courfeyrac’s a lot more normal than Marius, so if he does an abnormal thing people can write it off. Marius can hide behind that and be written off too. “Okay,” he says.

For the first time in a while, one of Courfeyrac’s parents says something. “It’s so nice that Courfeyrac has you as a friend,” Mrs. de Courfeyrac says.

Marius ducks his head, embarrassed, and shrugs a little. “It’s nice that I have him as a friend.”

“Well, he couldn’t have picked a better roommate,” Mr. de Courfeyrac says.

“Oh, that’s very kind of you,” Marius says, rocking back and forth a little harder on the chair. It’s freeing.

“Let’s have some dinner,” Mrs. de Courfeyrac says. “I made something that I think you’ll like, Marius.”

Marius almost says, *Oh, I don’t like much of anything*, but he manages to hold his tongue, and it’s a good idea that he does, because there’s a bowl of soup on the table. Marius bounces up and down a little, relieved that he won’t have to feel bad for not eating another meal.

“We heard you liked this particular dish,” Mrs. de Courfeyrac says. “And honestly, I couldn’t pass up the chance to feed you some of my delectable tomato soup.”

“Thanks,” Marius says.

It really is good tomato soup, almost as good as Valjean’s, and the de Courfeyrac’s talk amiably about their jobs as doctors while Marius eats and listens and nods mechanically because reciprocity is important.

(The de Courfeyrac’s are very normal. They are nice like normal people and they say normal things, and Marius understands why Courfeyrac doesn’t always get along with them. He's not nearly as normal, he's more emphatic and he spins, he doesn't exist in a straight line like these people.)

He’s staring down at his plate, and he’s holding his spoon funny because the good way to hold it doesn’t feel right, and Marius feels pretty content, at the very least.

At night, the last night they’re going to spend at the house before leaving in the morning, Marius ends up waking up thirsty. He drinks some water, and that quenches the thirst, but he still feels agitated, like he wants to go somewhere.

So he ends up leaving his room and getting lost in Courfeyrac’s maze-like house, trying to shake out all of the uncomfortable feelings that he can’t name but that won’t allow him to sleep.
Marius is down near the kitchen when he hears people talking.

“Your friend’s very sweet,” Courfeyrac’s mother says.

Courfeyrac chuckles. “Yeah, you’ve both mentioned it four or five million times.”

Marius smiles tentatively, but he’s not sure what to do because he thinks that he should go away or make it known that he’s here, because eavesdropping is bad.

But then Courfeyrac’s mother says, “So, is he on the spectrum?”

Marius blinks.

The spectrum?

He racks his brain for spectrums, and he guesses that there are some in lots of fields, but the only one he can really think about is the color spectrum.

He has the feeling that Ella is not talking about the color spectrum.

“Jesus, mom,” Courfeyrac says. “I wouldn’t tell you that even if I knew.”

“Ah. So he doesn’t know?”

“Mom, seriously. He’s my friend, I can’t talk about this with you.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

Marius turns around and goes back to the guest room. He gets under the covers mechanically and curls onto his side, staring at the wall and rubbing the tips of his fingers against his face.

The spectrum.

It sounds like something that might be important. It sounds like something he doesn’t want to know, at least, that’s the impression that Marius got from the conversation he overheard. It sounds like something that he should know about already.

He doesn’t mention it to Courfeyrac the next day. He doesn’t even think he’s going to mention it, but then they’re in the car and they’ve been in the car for thirty minutes and the question is so bitter in his mouth it’s starting to burn, so he does.

“I, um, I’m sorry. I heard you and your mother talking yesterday, though. Last night, I mean.”

Courfeyrac’s eyes widen in surprise.

“And she said…she asked something and now I can’t stop thinking about it.” Marius takes a deep breath. It’s so hard to ask things, but Marius has lived with important things being kept from him for a very long time, and he doesn’t think he can take the doubt anymore. “What’s the spectrum?”
This chapter has blood, broken glass, and a very brief hospital visit in it, and it's where the big warning for "unintentional self-harm" comes in. Please skip down to the end notes if you want a more detailed explanation. If it turns out that you'd rather not read that part of this chapter, the end notes tell you where to stop at.

Courfeyrac’s hands tighten on the steering wheel and he exhales loudly.

“I want to know what it is. What the spectrum is,” Marius says in a small voice. “If it’s about me, I should know.”

He has that right. He does.

“Um,” Courfeyrac says. “Can we…wait? A little while, just until we get home?”

“Okay,” Marius whispers, rubbing his hands together nervously. There’s an uncomfortable feeling tightening around his abdomen, and he’s scared. He’s scared but he can’t take any more not knowing. He thinks that this might be important, and he’s desperate to know important things. Courfeyrac said he didn’t know, Marius reminds himself. He said he didn’t know if Marius was on the spectrum.

Marius doesn’t really want to think right now, so he just closes his eyes and takes deep breaths and rubs his hands together.

Courfeyrac pulls into their parking space and Marius opens his eyes.

They get out of the car and go to the apartment in silence. Marius feels sick, and he can feel his heartbeat pounding between his ears. He wrings his hands and sits on the couch, starting to rock back and forth. He can’t be still right now. He can’t even try.

Courfeyrac sits next to him, and exhales again. “Okay,” he says. “When we were talking about the spectrum, we were talking about the autism spectrum.”

“What?” Marius asks. He’s confused. He’s heard things about autism, bits and pieces, he’s seen PSA’s and things on TV sometimes, but he doesn’t understand. “I thought that was when…people couldn’t…communicate and stuff? Like, when they’re not…responsive?”

“That’s…not really what it is,” Courfeyrac says. “I mean, they call it a spectrum ‘cause there’s a lot of different ways to be autistic. And there are some people who…I don’t know, have different skills than other people, but there are people who are autistic who can talk and stuff, and autistic people can communicate and be responsive, even the ones who don’t talk.”

“Oh,” Marius says. “But…I don’t know, it’s…it’s a…” he looks through his brain for anything he’s read or seen about autism, but all he knows are about the people who everyone says are locked inside of themselves. He’s never been interested in psychology. “A…social thing?”
“Yeah, there’s an element of that. Like, so a lot of autistic people aren’t great at socializing. Like they have trouble with inflection, and facial expressions, and body language, and what’s, y’know,” Courfeyrac puts air quotes around the next two words. “Socially appropriate.”

(“Don’t worry, she wasn’t judging your clothes, she was looking at you ‘cause you’re handsome,” Courfeyrac says, laughing.

“Woah, that’s not a good face, that’s a really fucking angry face, let’s get out of here,” Bahorel says when he looks at the guy he was just talking to, pulling on Marius’s arm.

“It’s socially inappropriate, Marius,” his grandfather says sharply.)

“Oh,” Marius says again.

“And…lots of autistic people are really literal. Answering rhetorical questions because they don’t know they’re rhetorical, finding general, just, social interaction to be very hard. There’s also stuff like…really specific routines that are upsetting if they’re disturbed. Trouble with change.”

(“Rhetorical question, Marius,” Combeferre explains.

“Pro tip, it’s better not to tell people their haircut looks strange,” Joly says, smiling. “I mean, I don’t mind, but someone else might.”

“You’re so rigid, Marius. You have to learn to adapt,” his aunt says.)

“It’s also really common for autistic people to have trouble with eye contact. Sensory issues like not liking certain textures or loud noises. Special interests, which are latching onto an interest or more than one really hard and wanting to talk about it a bunch and learn everything about it. Executive dysfunction, which is having trouble with tasks with steps or organization or remembering to do things. Meltdowns and shutdowns, which is when people get overwhelmed and break down. And then…other than repetitive behaviors, there’s also repetitive movements a lot of the time. They’re called stimming. They’re like rocking back and forth, or flapping your hands.”

“Like me,” Marius says.

“Yeah. Like you.”

(“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” grandfather yells.

“Here, put these on,” Feuilly says, pushing the bright orange noise-canceling headphones that he wears for his construction job toward Marius. “Might be better at blocking out all the yelling than your hands.”

“Christ, you can talk about this shit forever, can’t you?” a classmate in college says, rolling his eyes.

“You forgot your jacket again,” Joly sighs. “For God’s sake, Marius, it’s snowing.”

“You’re too old for tantrums,” his aunt says, shaking him by his shoulders.

“You were gone for a while, man,” Bossuet says. “You gonna be okay?”

“I thought you might be upset, you tend to do that when you’re upset,” Cosette says, rubbing her hand hard against the side of her head in explanation.)

Marius closes his eyes, trying to hold back tears. “Oh,” he says again. It makes sense. He still doesn’t know much about it, but everything that Courfeyrac is saying sounds like him. He’s talking about
Marius. No, he’s talking about other people. “That’s…that’s not good.”

“No,” Courfeyrac says quickly. “Being autistic isn’t a bad thing. It’s more like thinking in a different way, and you—people might need a little more help, but that’s not bad either. It’s a part of people. There’s nothing wrong with having a different kind of brain.”

“I never wanted to be different,” Marius says, choked. “I never wanted to be this way, being this way is…people aren’t supposed to be like this.”

“Marius, there’s a lot of autistic people out there. And it doesn’t make you a freak or anything like that, it’s not bad. It’s the people who are dicks to you about it who are bad. Not you.”

“You knew,” Marius says, and there’s a rising feeling in his chest that might be anger, and his body is tensing painfully. “You knew. You all did.”

“We…we suspected. The Amis have worked with autism rights orgs around the city. And disability rights in general. And I…I went to school with lots of autistic kids, Feuilly has a bunch of autistic foster siblings, I mean. Yeah, we suspected.”

“But you didn’t say,” Marius says, and his voice comes out as a monotone. He has never felt further away from Courfeyrac.

“I know. I know, it’s…I was going to mention it eventually, but I didn’t know how you’d feel about it, I wanted to think of something to say that doesn’t sound…well, like this.”

“People always know things that I don’t,” Marius says.

“I’m sorry. We should’ve. We should’ve mentioned it a long time ago. We just didn’t know if it was our place, y’know?”

Marius shakes his head. “I don’t,” he says, and he gets up and goes to his room.

Courfeyrac calls out to him.

Marius can’t bring himself to care.

He understands, is the thing. He understands that it’s not socially appropriate to talk about things that aren’t right. But Courfeyrac said that autism wasn’t wrong.

Marius still understands, though. They didn’t want to hurt him. They wanted to be careful. They didn’t want it to be a bad kind of surprise, this kind of surprise.

Marius opens his laptop and types in autism. Most of the stuff has to do with kids and is for parents, and that doesn’t really help, but Marius is eventually able to find the diagnostic criteria.

Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Disorder.

Marius looks through the criteria over and over and over again, trying to find something that says no, trying to find something that says impossible, but really, all it says is this is like you in clinical language.

Marius makes a high, distressed noise and rocks back and forth, rubbing his hands against the sides of his head, messing up his hair.
We suspected.

They did.

They’ve always been good about it, though. Marius’s friends, they’re the only people who have ever seemed to accept Marius as he is, who don’t look at him like he’s funny or cute or stupid or talk to him like he’s a kid.

Marius understands that now.

People treat him like he’s not like them, like he’s different in unacceptable ways because he has something.

His brain is different. His brain is different and Courfeyrac says it’s not bad but the entire first page of search results make it sound like a disease when they’re not just talking about it in psychology, make it sound like it’s fundamentally wrong, something to be fixed.

But that doesn’t work. Marius doesn’t know how much of himself is himself and how much is—no, might be, might be—autism, but then he thinks that if he didn’t have all of those things that the Diagnostic Statistical Manual lays out like they’re just words on paper, like they’re not reality, he wouldn’t be himself. He’d be a different person and he doesn’t know if he wants that, he’s always wanted to be different from what he is but the idea scares him, it makes him wonder how much of his personality would be erased, and Marius has never liked himself very much, but he can’t reconcile the idea of a him without…without the things he’s reading.

He doesn’t know how he’d express happiness without flapping his hands, without moving the way he does, he already knows that it’s hard after all the time he’s been still. He doesn’t know how he’d observe people if he just looked at their eyes all the time. He doesn’t know how boring things would be if he didn’t obsess about some things, doesn’t know what he’d talk about to say I like you, I want to share with you.

He doesn’t know how it would be to hear everything muted and eat anything he wanted and not recoil at ugly textures and delight in pleasant ones. He doesn’t know what it would be like without wanting to do the same things over and over again, without getting upset at change, without shutting down or crying and yelling and banging his hands against his head when he gets upset.

He thinks it would be better, easier.

(He thinks it would be boring.)

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He starts talking to Courfeyrac again the next day, and Courfeyrac apologizes again, says that he should’ve said something earlier but that it was such a toss-up, how Marius would take it, that he wanted to be careful and he ended up just being a jerk.

“It’s okay,” Marius says, smiling a little. “You’re my best friend.”

Courfeyrac grins and holds his arms open, a familiar motion, and Marius hugs him.

Grudges and anger, they’re exhausting. Forgiveness is easier, and Marius can’t bring himself to have any more people in his life who he can’t forgive.

After class, Marius goes to the Musain and tries very hard not to think about it because he’s been thinking about it too much and it’s spinning around in his brain and it makes him dizzy and scared.
He should just forget about it. It’ll be better to forget about it.

He’s still him, after all. There’s just a word that might be him too, a word that explains why he’s different, why he’s a—no, no, no, never mind.

Marius reads about semantics and loses himself in a world of words and letters, a world that makes sense.

He spills some of his hot chocolate on his hands and makes a face. He should take care of that before his hands get sticky.

He heads over to the little hallway that leads to the bathroom, but he stops when he hears a voice.

“You know how Marius is,” Grantaire is saying, and Marius makes a face.

Everyone seems to be talking about him lately, and Marius shouldn’t listen in on conversations, should respect other people’s privacy, but he’s curious. There are things people don’t tell him, and suddenly he’s realized that there’s this aching inside of him that means that he wants to know.

“It’s probably better anyway,” the person Grantaire’s talking to says. Marius recognizes Eponine’s voice. “It’d just be fucking embarrassing for everyone.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t help to tell,” Grantaire agrees.

Eponine lets out a short laugh. “I mean, what would I say? ‘Hey, Marius, I have a huge fucking crush on you and somehow you haven’t noticed, peace out’.”

Marius’s breath stutters as Grantaire laughs, and he rubs his hands against his head so hard that his scalp burns.

He didn’t notice.

He never notices.

Huge crush.

Somehow you haven’t noticed.

Grantaire knows. Does everybody else know too? Is it another thing that everybody else knows?

Marius lets out a few panicked breaths and before he can even think it through, he’s standing in front of Grantaire and Eponine, and they’re looking at him, eyes wide and mouths open.

“You like me?” he asks Eponine.

“Marius, it’s not a big deal, it’s cool,” Eponine says.

“It’s not! I didn’t…we’re friends, though. I thought we were friends.”

“No, Marius, it doesn’t mean we’re not friends, we are, you don’t get it—”

Marius lets out another shaky breath. “I don’t get it,” he says, numb. “I don’t get it. Is there anything I get?”

“I don’t mean it like that, it’s just—”
“You didn’t tell me and I didn’t notice,” Marius says, and his voice sounds very soft and his breathing sounds fast and shallow.

“Please calm down, it’s okay,” Eponine says.

“I didn’t notice. I should’ve noticed,” Marius says.

“It’s hard to notice these things, it’s not…”

“Everyone else noticed, didn’t they?” Marius asks, voice shaking. “Or…” he squeezes his eyes shut and opens them again. “They suspected.”

“I don’t know, I don’t…” Eponine wrings her hands. “It’s not a big deal, I just, I didn’t want to embarrass you, or me, or… or freak you out, why are you freaking out?”

“Because I never know. I never know.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I hurt you, right?”

“I…it’s not your fault, it’s just…it’s just feelings, it’s just, I’ll get over it, I’m getting over it, Jesus Christ, I can’t believe I’m the one comforting you, this is fucking weird.”

“I…I can’t believe it either. But I just. I never know. I’m sorry.”

“Marius,” Eponine says, and she reaches out to him.

Marius stumbles back and he’s louder than he wants to be when he says, “Don’t touch me!” He turns away.

He doesn’t run when he leaves Eponine and Grantaire behind. He wants to run, but he’s confused, so he just wrings his hands and rubs them against his head and hits them against his head and he’s talking to himself and this isn’t okay, he hasn’t ever been okay, an okay person would’ve just taken the news and been able to deal with it fine, but he’s not okay.

Everything is happening at the same time, he’s learning too many things about himself that other people knew, he’s terrified and everything feels like it’s tilted fifty degrees.

He manages to unlock the door to his apartment somehow, by some stroke of luck, and he stops cold when he notices that there are people there.

Enjolras, Combeferre, Courfeyrac. Courfeyrac is the only one who lives here, and that’s it, that’s the last bit of change Marius can take today, and then he’s crying and banging his hands against the sides of his head and the noises he’s making are wordless and distressed.

“Marius?” Courfeyrac says, and he sounds scared, Marius knows that this is what he sounds like when he’s scared, he knows by now. “What happened, what’s wrong?”

“Eponine?” Marius choke out, and he notices Combeferre and Enjolras look at each other, wide eyed. “You knew, everyone knew, and I didn’t know, you knew, you suspected. You suspected. I didn’t notice. I never notice. I never notice,” and then Marius lets out a sob that kind of sounds like a laugh too. “Repetitive behavior,” he whispers to himself.

“Marius,” Courfeyrac says. “Please calm down, take deep breaths, okay? Let’s go to your room.”
Marius shakes his head violently and then he does go to his room, he *runs* there, and he locks the door. He’s never locked it before, but now he’s sobbing and his head hurts and he’s twisting his body around, half-spinning.

He stumbles forward and then he’s standing in front of the mirror, and he’s looking at himself, at his chest heaving and his tears running down his cheeks and his hands pulling at his hair. “Why are you like this?” he asks himself, begging, like he’s going to get an answer, like there’s any kind of answer to be given. “What’s wrong with you?” Because there is something fundamentally wrong with him, something that *doesn’t* have a name, it’s not autism or anything like that, it’s just that he’s *wrong* and has always been. “What’s—wrong—with—you?” he finally screams, his pointless anger directed at the face in the mirror. He bangs his hands against the mirror, punctuating every word. At the second word the mirror cracks. On the third it breaks.

And Marius sinks to his knees and bangs his palms against his head and he wants to scream but he manages to contain it to shorter, softer noises of distress.  

*Control yourself,* his grandfather’s voice says in his head.

He can’t, he can’t, he can’t, he never could.

The door swings open and Courfeyrac says, “Fuck, what’d you *do*?”

But Marius just folds himself over so that he’s just looking at his jeans, and eventually he’s not crying anymore and his breathing is shaky but it’s not as bad, and the distressed sounds have gotten softer.

Combeferre kneels in front of him and Marius tries to move away but Combeferre says, gently, “Marius, can you let me look at your hands? You’re bleeding.”

He’s bleeding. That’s why his hands hurt, that’s why they burn and throb. They’re bleeding.

“Please,” Combeferre says, and Marius manages to lower his hands and show them to Combeferre.

They’re not bleeding that much anymore. It’s not that bad, Marius tells himself desperately. Not that bad at all.

“You have to go to the hospital,” Combeferre says. “There’s glass embedded in your hands, you’ll probably need a few stitches. We’re taking you to the ER.”

Marius shakes his head stubbornly. “No, they…they’ll think…”

“We won’t tell them what happened,” Combeferre says. “Come on.”

Marius stands up, wobbly and unsure, and Courfeyrac grabs onto his arm and says. “It’ll be fine,” but his voice is trembling.

“He’s right,” Enjolras says, and his voice doesn’t tremble at all.

Marius doesn’t remember being in the hospital too well. He stares into space and doesn’t respond when the doctor asks him what happened.

Courfeyrac says something about an accident.

The doctor says, “Fair enough,” and Marius’s hands are numbed up and the stitches don’t really disturb him at all. There’s not too many.
It’s not too bad.

Marius’s hands are bandaged up—not too much, really, he can still move his fingers pretty well, the cuts on his fingers only needed antiseptic and band-aids.

The doctor says something, not to Marius, though. Never to Marius.

Marius doesn’t remember getting home, but he must have fallen asleep, because he wakes up on the couch.

He sits up.

His hands hurt. They hurt a lot, more than they did before.

“Ow,” he mutters, rocking back and forth anxiously, staring at his hands. “Ow,” he says. And then he says, “This is bad.”

“No kidding,” Courfeyrac says, and Marius looks up in surprise. Courfeyrac is leaning against the wall, and then Courfeyrac smiles. It’s strained. The smile is replaced by a more serious face, and then Courfeyrac says, “We should probably talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Marius smashes in a mirror during a meltdown and ends up cutting up his hands pretty badly and having to go to the hospital.

Stop at, "Marius," Courfeyrac says. "Please calm down, take deep breaths, okay? Let's go to your room."

And just so you’re caught up, the last line of the chapter is, "Courfeyrac is leaning against the wall, and he smiles. It’s strained. The smile is replaced by a more serious face, and then Courfeyrac says, 'We should probably talk.’"
Talk

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK

I just...wrote this. In a few hours. I hope it's good enough to cap off this fic, but I so wanted to finish this. You guys deserved an ending.

Also, I realized that I didn't need two more chapters, I thought that ending on chapter 11, on this note, was good. I was planning to end a lot differently but then I was walking home tonight and I got these scenes in my head and I just wrote them out and BAM the end.

:) 

And an edit here because I didn't realize it was her birthday but then I thought this was so appropriate: this chapter is dedicated to my friend within_a_dream, who is quite a good writer, I suggest reading her fics, especially if you like canon era for her birthday. I met her through Les Mis, and I'm really happy that I did. Happy birthday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We should probably talk.

The words fall into Marius’s brain like big rocks, one crashing in after the other.

We—

Should—

Probably—

Talk.

Marius opens his mouth but can’t think of anything to say, so he closes it again. He’s not sure how his words are going to come out now, not when he feels so cloudy and confused. So he tries, “Courfeyrac.”

That works.

“Yeah,” Courfeyrac says.

“I didn’t know what...” Marius starts, and then he stops and takes a deep breath. “I was...not right. I did that. I wasn’t right.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Courfeyrac says. “Marius, that was super...that was...a lot.”

Marius is comforted by the idea that Courfeyrac’s words don’t seem to be cooperating very well with him either. “I was a lot,” he says. “I mean, there was a lot. I was...” he pauses, before he’s finally able to get the words all together right. “There was a lot going on.”
Courfeyrac nods, running a hand down his face. “You don’t have to tell me that twice.”

“Then I won’t,” Marius says.

Courfeyrac looks at him and grins. “Yeah.” The grin fades and Courfeyrac is left looking tired and worried. Marius knows Courfeyrac’s worried face by now. “You hurt yourself pretty badly.”

“I know.”

“Marius, I think you should talk to someone.”

“I’m talking to you.”

“A professional.”

Marius looks at Courfeyrac, rocking back and forth in jerky, anxious motions. “I’m not crazy!”

“No, you’re not. But you’re going through a really hard time, and you hurt yourself, and I’m really worried about you, Marius,” Courfeyrac says, and, to Marius’s horror, his voice breaks on the last word.

Courfeyrac’s eyes well over with tears, and Marius says, “Don’t cry! It’s okay!”

“No, no,” Courfeyrac says, “it’s fine. It’s fine. I’m sorry. Just…look, I think you should go see a therapist, maybe get some…get some testing done.”

“For the autism?”

Courfeyrac wipes his tears away. “For the autism. And then I think that you should really just…see a therapist, Marius. They can help. If they’re good, they can help, and my mom works in that, she can give me references. We’ll find you someone good.”

“I don’t want to be a person who…” Marius says, and then he lets out a frustrated breath when he doesn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Goes to therapy?” Courfeyrac suggests.

Marius nods.

“Look, buddy, I’ve been to therapy. Most of your friends have been to therapy. I won’t let you get a shitty one, okay? I’ll get you the best.”

“I can’t afford the best, Courfeyrac. I can’t afford anyone.”

“I’ll pay. Consider it a birthday present since I never got you one.”

“You threw me a party! And medical professionals don’t count as birthday presents! They’re people!”

“But sessions with them cost money, and Marius, it’s my parents’s money. If I’m gonna be a spoiled rich kid, I’m gonna be one who helps people.”

Marius is stubbornly silent. Maybe it would be easier to have a real diagnosis of this autism thing, the thing that makes so much sense and makes this sick mixture of hope and fear rise in his chest, so that he can have it on paper. If he has it at all. Marius isn’t sure why he doesn’t really want to not have it. He doesn’t think about it.
There are things that are better not to think about.

And psychologists, good ones, they’re supposed to be people to talk to. People who help. People who literally went to school to help.

Marius runs a hand through his hair, agitated, and then yelps when a jolt of searing pain runs through his hand because a while ago he put it through a mirror and then had to go to the hospital.

Marius is a grown-up, and he’s going to make a grown-up decision because he has a life. He has a life, and it’s his, and he’s going to do everything possible to make it good because he’s tired of not knowing and tired of being lied to and he’s going to learn about himself for once.

“I’ll go,” Marius says, and then he hesitates as he realizes that he doesn’t know how to make appointments, even after Courfeyrac gets him the number of a psychologist.

“Do you need my help with the setting stuff up? Other than finding the number?” Courfeyrac asks.

Marius is a grown-up, which means he shouldn’t need help with something so simple, but Marius will still be a grown-up if he needs help with a simple thing because he’s twenty-one years old, and everyone’s always telling him it’s okay to need help and he’s going to throw caution to the wind and say, “Yes.”

As Marius sits outside of the psychologist’s office the day after having the important conversation about seeing a professional with Courfeyrac (which is too soon, but Courfeyrac and his parents have connections), rocking back and forth and chewing on his sleeve before his testing starts, his phone buzzes.

It’s Cosette, he assumes, because they’ve been texting over the past couple of days. She hasn’t offered to come over—Marius doesn’t know why, Courfeyrac says she probably wants to give him a little space to recover and Marius hopes it’s that and that she’s not embarrassed, but she sends texts that read I love you so he hopes that means she’s not too embarrassed—and Marius hasn’t had the courage to ask.

Even though his hands hurt when he texts on his tiny phone.

how are you? Cosette asks.

fine, Marius responds, because that’s the right answer.

“Marius Pontmercy?” someone asks, and Marius's eyes widen with panic as he looks over at a gray-haired lady with a nice smile. “Come in. I’m Dr. Hewitt.”

Marius just stares for a while, and she stands patiently.

“Oh,” he says. “Okay.”

His phone buzzes again.

Cosette.

:) It’s a smiley face, so of course it makes him smile.
He carefully punches in, *see you monday*? as he slowly walks over to Dr. Hewitt’s office, because the test results should be back by Monday.

He runs into the door.


“It’s all good, Marius.”

*Sure!* Cosette responds, and Marius turns his phone off and puts it away.

He looks at Dr. Hewitt and then looks away, trying not to rock back and forth and tapping his feet instead and rubbing the heels of his hands together, not sure what to do or how to react to this place, this office with its comfortable leather couch and pretty framed pictures of mountains hanging on the walls.

“Are you ready to start, Marius?” Dr. Hewitt asks.

“No,” Marius blurts out, and then he shakes his head rapidly in embarrassment before taking a deep breath. He says, “Let’s start anyway.”

+  
Marius Pontmercy.  
21 yrs, 3 months  
Autism  
Spectrum  
Disorder.  
Marius cries into Courfeyrac’s chest for nearly an hour even though he’s not sad.

He has no idea what he is.

+  
He sleeps.

+  
It’s Monday.

It must be, because Cosette is here.

Cosette is here and Marius hasn’t left his bed for a while, though he's not lying down anymore, he's sitting on the edge, and the door’s slightly open and Cosette’s knocked on it.

It could be Courfeyrac, but then Cosette speaks and the likelihood of that becomes negligible.

“Marius?” Cosette says through the half-open door. “Can I come in?”

*Always.* “Okay.”
Cosette sits down next to Marius, running her fingers along his comforter and then letting her fingers brush against his. He doesn’t pull away.

“I love you,” Cosette says.

Marius has heard this from her before, but every single time it makes his heart inflate in a giddy way and he didn’t expect it now, for whichever reason.

He looks at her, at her shiny hair and her beautiful eyes and—she’s everything.

Right now, she’s everything. All of the parts of her that Marius loves take up this whole room, and he doesn’t deserve her.

“Why?” he asks miserably, wringing one of his hands. “Why? Why me? Why love me?”

Cosette tilts her head to the side. “Why not?”

“I’m not…I’m not that…I’m not like you, Cosette. I’m wrong. I’m autistic and I’m bad at being and…Cosette. Cosette.”

He doesn’t know what to say anymore, but her name is familiar, comforting. She’s comforting.

He doesn’t want her to leave him, and he thinks—he thinks she doesn’t want to leave him either.

Marius trusts Cosette, and when she says she loves him, he believes her and that’s one of the best things in the world.

But he still doesn’t know why she loves him like he loves her, can’t imagine someone having those kinds of feelings for him even though he is shown the evidence of their existence every time he’s with Cosette.

“Marius, why me?”

“What?”

“Why me?”

“Cosette, you’re you,” Marius responds, stating the obvious without a second thought.

“That’s my answer too. You’re you.”

“I’m not very much.”

“You’re everything.”

Marius feels like the breath has been knocked out of him and it doesn’t hurt at all.

“Really?” he asks.

“Marius, the first time I told you I loved you—remember? When we were in the car?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, I thought I’d made a huge faux pas. I thought I’d embarrassed us both and freaked you out because I said it too soon.”

“You didn’t.”
“I know that now. And I knew that then, just a little while later when you told me you loved me back, and in those seconds before I hugged you, I saw…I saw your smile, the most beautiful smile ever, and the way you looked at me was so full of wonder and joy and I thought, oh God, I’m looking at the rest of my life.”

This time Marius is the one who throws his arms around Cosette, and she’s the one who hugs back twice as tightly.

+ 

When Marius wakes up, Cosette is half on top of him, face pressed into his neck. Her hair is in his mouth and he makes a face at that as he carefully detaches himself from her and then looks around, frowning. He does not remember falling asleep, but it’s one in the morning, so they did.

He feels like he's slept a lot in the past few days, but he also feels like he needed some sleep.

He looks down at Cosette and smiles gently, briefly stroking her hair before he stumbles out of the room just in time to hear someone knock on the door.

It’s still one in the morning.

Marius can’t think of anyone who would be at the door at this time unless they were wounded or something, and his eyes widen and he opens the door as quickly as he can and—

“Eponine,” he squeaks out.

She doesn't look wounded. Physically.

She’s smiling a little, but it looks sad.

Marius really never wanted to make her sad.

She looks down at his hands and the smile disappears.

Just sad now.

“They don’t hurt,” Marius mumbles, looking down at Eponine’s shoes. They’re boots. Very shiny. Nice. They’re nice.

Is he allowed to tell her that?

“Marius,” Eponine says, and then she trails off.

“Would you like to come in?” Marius says because he’s supposed to as he rocks back and forth on his heels, rubbing his hands together.

“No, I have work in like ten minutes. My other job.”

“Right.”

“Marius, look, I don’t want this for us.”

Marius makes a face. “Huh?”

“I don’t want you to be all confused and hurt and uncomfortable around me! That’s why I never told you how I felt. It would be embarrassing for both of us and just…I didn’t think you’d react like that.”
“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! Fuck. Marius, don’t be sorry, there’s nothing to be sorry about. We were both freaked out and you’ve been having a rough time and it came at the wrong time and I never thought I’d do that to you.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“I’ve never wanted to hurt you. Not at any moment.”

“Me neither.”

“And you haven’t. You’ve never hurt me, not you. Maybe my stupid feelings have hurt me, but you’ve never hurt my feelings. Do you get it?”

Marius rocks from side to side and then goes back to rocking back and forth. “…Not really.”

Eponine laughs. “Oh, fuck, me neither.”

Marius laughs too, mostly because Eponine did first and he likes hearing her laugh.

“Marius, I want you to know you’re my friend and I’m your friend. I will get over this crush, and I don’t want it to make things awkward. I want our friendship to just be ours. What it is. What it’s been.”

“Can it be?”

“Yes. Just because you know something new about me doesn’t mean you don’t know me, ’cause you do. You do know me.”

“I never wanted to hurt you.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Sometimes shit happens. I never wanted to hurt you either.”

Marius shrugs. “Sometimes shit happens,” he echoes.

Eponine smiles. “I’ll have to go in a sec, but…anything new?”

Marius shakes his head. “No. Not really. It’s just—”

+  

“I have autism. I’m autistic.” Marius says, voice cutting through the comfortable noise in the back room of The Musain before he can think it through, and then his brain catches up to his words and he closes his mouth—his teeth click together and it hurts—in horror when he realizes what he’s done. He spoke too loudly and all the Amis heard, or at least he thinks they did because they’re all looking at him. Wide eyes, growing smiles, little frowns, furrowed brows, too many facial expressions to try and parse out, and Marius looks down at the table, rocking back and forth almost violently, his fingers twisting together painfully.

That was awkward. That was a socially inappropriate thing to do.

_Do you really think we’re particularly concerned with being socially appropriate?_

But these are his friends.
They’re the ones who help him and who have been good to him and who seem to like his company and he loves them.

These are his friends, and Marius isn’t sure how afraid he should be, because he doesn’t want to lose them but he also can’t think of any reason why he would.

He is theirs as much as they are his.

“Hey,” someone says loudly, and Marius starts and looks up, half-terrified and half-confused, at where the voice came from.

Bahorel.

Bahorel, on the other side of the table, with his fist up, looking like he wants to—

Fist bump?

Marius can’t think of any reason to fist bump in this situation, and the half-terror half-confusion mostly just turns into full confusion.

“Um,” he says. “Um?” he tries again.

People are mysteries, and Marius’s frustration at that constant realization fizzles out into exasperation and then into bemusement.

Bahorel says, “Dude. Fist bump.”

Marius looks around the room, trying to take a cue from what everyone else is doing, how they’re reacting, but nobody seems perturbed. Everyone’s mostly smiling, actually.

Marius looks at Combeferre in desperation because Combeferre might not know everything but he knows most things, but Combeferre just shrugs and smiles gently.

Marius looks back at Bahorel, whose arm should be tired by now.

“Why?” Marius manages.

“It seemed like something fist bump worthy,” Bahorel says.

“Why? It’s a brain thing. It’s not good.”

“It’s not bad either,” Bahorel points out. “And hey, it’s a thing you know now. It’ll help you understand things. It’s good to know things, yeah?”

“I like knowing things,” Marius agrees. Bahorel’s making sense, which Marius did not expect with the way this had begun.

Understanding.

There are things Marius understands now that he didn’t before.

Things about himself.

Things he knows. There are things that Marius can do for himself now that he couldn’t before, when he didn’t know. There are things Marius can understand about himself that he never could before. It’s started to feel easier to exist.
“Come on,” Bahorel says, “or my arm’ll fall off.”

Marius smiles tentatively. “No it won’t.”

But he bumps his fist against Bahorel’s anyway.

When Bahorel pulls away he opens up his hand and makes a sound like an explosion—pssht—and Marius giggles and does the same.

He looks around the room and sees his friends smiling and things don’t feel very different. The only person who feels different here is Marius, and it might not be such a bad feeling anymore. Something’s changed, nothing earth-shattering, but Marius has a word that he’s never had before, a word that makes a lot of things make sense.

There’s plenty that still doesn’t make sense to Marius, but not as much as before, and everything seems a little more hopeful, a little more manageable, because the part of Marius that thinks that knowing about this autism thing isn’t that bad is winning out over the part that’s freaking out about it. He’s still freaking out, but this isn’t the end of the world. It’s not the end of anything.

It’s a beginning, in some way, because it’s new. The word autism is new. The diagnosis is new.

But Marius is twenty-one years old.

So he guesses the autism itself, well, it’s not that new at all.

It’s just a relief. A word that simplifies something that has been so amorphous for Marius’s whole life, a knowledge that makes the feeling of being stranded in an unfamiliar place easier to deal with.

“I feel,” Grantaire says grandly, “like making a toast!”

Marius stares at him. Everyone’s acting very weird.

Joly laughs. “A toast to what?”

“It’s an important point in time for Marius! We should commemorate it!”

“By making a toast?” Enjolras asks.

“Yes,” Grantaire says, grinning.

Enjolras rolls his eyes but he’s too slow to cover up his smile with his hand, and Marius sees.

“No one has anything alcoholic,” Marius says. “You don’t even have anything alcoholic!”

“Don’t remind me,” Grantaire mutters, and then, “I never said anything about alcohol. We have drinks. They might be coffee and hot chocolate, but they’re drinks, and they’re in cups, and we’re going to have a toast because it’s the principle of the thing, Marius?”

Marius nods, curious, and stands up when Grantaire does, and everyone else follows.

“Alright,” Grantaire says. “To knowledge!”

Marius raises his cardboard take-away cup of hot chocolate and repeats the words: to knowledge.

It’s warm in here, and his friends are all next to him, and Marius is smiling.
He drinks just as everybody else does—or tries to, because Bossuet spills his coffee—and his hot chocolate is more lukewarm than anything now but it’s still sweet and good.

When he places his cup on the table in front of him, he hears a quiet, “Hey, Marius.”

He looks up and it's Grantaire again, and Grantaire smiles crookedly and says, “May the truth set you free.”

Marius grins.

He likes this.

He likes this moment in time.

At this moment in time, he is among all of his friends.

At this moment in time, his life is stretching out in front of him and the thought of that doesn’t feel like a threat.

At this moment in time Marius feels very happy.

Chapter End Notes

I know it's a little choppy and abrupt but I hope it's good enough, I'm happy with it and I'm happy this fic is done and I hope I haven't disappointed you.

I am so, so, so grateful for my readers. I cannot tell you how much the support for this story has meant to me. You're all amazing and I'm so happy you read this, and if you liked it, I am so happy you liked it.

Thank you.

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