S Seventh-Day Soiree
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Seventh-Day Soiree
by Marauder_the_Slash_Nymph

Summary

When the president of Bellenger College discovers that his air conditioning is broken, newlyweds Oliver and Elio end up hosting Seventh-Day Soiree, the school's most important faculty party. Things are complicated by some unexpected guests...and Elio's plan to sneak off for some quick sex with Oliver partway through the party. Movie-verse. Sequel to Hyphenating and Carrying the Bull.
From Bellenger College’s Wikipedia entry:

Bellenger College is a private, independent liberal arts women’s college founded in 1920 by Eliza Bellenger (later Eliza Bellenger Hart) and located in Alfriston, New York. Long known by the nickname “the eighth sister” because of its proximity and similarity to the more long-standing Seven Sisters colleges, Bellenger was ranked by U. S. News & World Report as 15th among the best National Liberal Arts Colleges.

... 

Among Bellenger’s oldest traditions is Seventh-Day Soiree, a lavish faculty party dating back to 1923. Though locations have varied, it is typically held at the president of the college’s on-campus residence. Custom dictates that guests arrive in formal evening wear and that wine from the Bellenger family’s Napa Valley vineyard be served.
September 2004

To: Bellenger Faculty  
From: John Argosse  
Subject: We have a problem

This morning, Emma and I woke up to discover that our air conditioner wasn’t working. We called a technician right away, hoping it could be fixed in time for Seventh-Day Soiree tomorrow, only to be told by the technician that our system is too old to be fixed and needs to be replaced.

(Emma would like me to add that she’s been telling me for the last five years that we needed to get a new air conditioner, and I, foolishly, did not listen to her.)

Tomorrow’s weather is expected to be around eighty degrees by the evening, with no wind. I’m sure the math department will agree that eighty degrees, plus one hundred and fifty-six faculty members, plus one hundred and fifty-six guests, plus one house with zero air conditioning, equals a miserable party. In past years, we would have had the option to hold SDS outside, but as you know, the field which was traditionally used for an outside option is now the site of the new campus fitness center.

As luck would have it, all the other large spaces on campus are booked. Therefore, we have two choices. We can hold Seventh-Day Soiree in the President’s House, as is traditionally done, and suffer through the heat; or we can hold it at any other venue we can secure within the next several hours. I’m not willing to entertain the possibility of being the first Bellenger president to cancel SDS. Please give me any ideas you may have ASAP.

*****

To: Bellenger Faculty  
From: John Argosse  
Subject: We are saved!

Within two hours of sending my e-mail this morning, I heard from Genevieve March and Oliver Weiss-Perlman. Genevieve and Oliver recently became neighbors when Oliver moved to Densworth, MA. They have adjacent back yards that are not separated by a fence and they are willing to allow us all to use those yards, and their respective homes, for Seventh-Day Soiree.

Seeing as Densworth is about fifteen minutes from Bellenger and there will be limited parking, I managed to rent some buses to transport us from campus to SDS. I’ll be sending you all details about that within the next hour.

My undying thanks goes out to Genevieve and Oliver – and, of course, their spouses, Stephen and Elio – for their generous offer.
The house was old, a gray Victorian with two stories plus an attic and way too much gingerbread trim. Alex had nicknamed it the Gothic Horror. Built back when people had more children and middle-class families had a few servants, it had enough rooms for Oliver to have a study, Elio to have a music room, all their books to have a library, and Johanna to have a bedroom, with Aaron and Alex sharing the attic. The back yard was dominated by two enormous trees, and when Oliver got home, the caterers were setting up tables in their shade. The back of the yard touched the back of Genevieve’s yard, and Elio was hauling folded lawn chairs from a pile next to Genevieve’s patio.

The house might have looked like a Halloween decoration, but the weather was pure summer, and Elio’s forehead was glistening with sweat. “Give me some of those,” Oliver said, taking two chairs from him as he crossed into their yard.

Elio smiled. “You’re home,” he said softly, as if Oliver coming home to him was still a delightful surprise.

They arranged the chairs in clusters, on the wraparound porch and by the trees. “So,” Oliver said, tilting a red chair at an angle under the elm, “I got presented with a petition during class today.”

Elio unfolded its twin. “Which class?”

“Greco-Roman Fucking.”

Elio smiled – that sly, close-lipped Elio smile. “How many of the girls in that class signed up for it so they could stare at you twice a week?”

“Considering I’m old enough to be their father, not as many as you might think.” The pile in Genevieve’s yard was gone; Stephen, her husband, had taken the rest of the chairs. “Aren’t you going to ask me what the petition was about?”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me.”

“It was a petition requesting I stop lecturing ten minutes early and show them our wedding pictures. The whole class signed it.”

“So what did you do?”

“I stopped lecturing ten minutes early, went to my laptop, and put up a slideshow of our wedding pictures.”

Sex and Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome – or, as Elio insisted on calling it, Greco-Roman Fucking – consisted mostly of non-majors who wanted to talk about sex and get college credit for it. Considering the subject of the class, Oliver hadn’t been surprised they were interested in a same-sex wedding, but he was surprised – and more than a little touched – by how genuinely, enthusiastically happy they had all been for him. They’d squealed and exclaimed over each picture. They’d declared that his sons were handsome, Johanna was adorable, the cake was gorgeous, and he and Elio looked like the sweetest couple ever. And oh, God, had he loved showing off those pictures.

They had been married for two weeks and were clearly in the thick of their newly-wedded bliss, but if Oliver spent the rest of their marriage being even half this happy, that would be fine with him. He loved everything about being married to Elio. He loved wearing the ring Elio had given him and he loved seeing his ring on Elio’s hand, on that long, pale musician’s finger. He loved introducing
himself to each new class as Professor Oliver Weiss-Perlman. He loved their new house and Elio’s insistence that they have sex in every single one of its rooms. (“We’ll do it in the east bedroom and the attic, but once the kids move into those rooms they’re off-limits,” he’d told Elio, a split second before Elio had dragged him up to the attic, pushed him against the wall, and grabbed his cock.) He loved coming home to the sound of Elio’s piano – something he was going to miss, starting tomorrow when Elio began his new job.

The violin was Elio’s third instrument and Elio’s third-favorite instrument; despite his talent with it, he regarded playing the violin as something he did primarily to pay bills. He’d been a professional musician for twelve years, since finishing graduate school, and he was tired of it. It took time away from composing, and practicing with the rest of the orchestra tested his patience. He did it for Johanna. He did it to make his child support payments, and to send her to art camp and private school.

Oliver had been a husband three times, but this was his first time as a stepfather. He loved that too. Elio had Johanna most weekends, and on Sunday mornings Oliver would take Johanna to pick up bagels or donuts while Elio slept in. Johanna was fascinated by Oliver’s knowledge of etymology. She was a big fan of the Harry Potter books, which Oliver had never read, and in the car to get bagels she would give him a character’s name and listen to him ramble about the origins of dumbledore and mundungus.

At age forty-five, Oliver was almost out of secrets, but there was one that he intended to take to his grave. Both times Julie had been pregnant, he had wished that their children would be girls.

He loved his sons and would never trade them for anything, but being the father of infant boys had terrified him; the knowledge that he was their primary role model had weighed heavily on his mind. Daughters would have given him less anxiety. Daughters would have had Julie to look up to. Sons could grow up to be like him, or grow up to be like his father, and he didn’t know which one would be worse.

We’re Jews, his father had told him so many times when he was a child. Jews need to be twice, three times as good as the goyim just so the goyim will think we’re nearly as good as they are.

What does he need kindergarten for? He’s smart, he’s tall. He doesn’t need to waste his time fingerpainting and playing games. Put him in the first grade.

Don’t eat that, Oliver. You want people to look at you eating that and think, I knew it, the Jews are greedy? Besides, you’re getting fat.

Aaron had been five and Alex had been three before Oliver had started to really enjoy his sons. By then, their personalities were clear and set, and they were neither Oliver nor his father. He could relax as a parent, and he had relaxed up until his first divorce, and his second divorce, and telling them about Elio. By the time he told them about Elio, there was no more relaxing.

“You used to be this guy named Oliver Weiss,” Aaron had told him last week. “This guy named Oliver Weiss, who, I don’t know, sort of breezed through life and made women blush just by smiling at them and taught all my friends to play poker. Now I don’t know who you are. You’re some guy named Oliver Weiss-Perlman who has a therapist and talks about feelings and got married to your weird, pretentious boyfriend who you’ve been obsessed with since he was my age. Like – I don’t know. Do you even like playing poker, or did you just do it because you thought it was something a straight guy would do?”

Caroline, Oliver’s therapist, had short gray hair and glasses on a chain. Hector, Aaron’s therapist, was young and had college football trophies on a shelf next to his diploma and specialized in
teenagers with divorce and blended family issues. Both of them thought Oliver was doing very well with Aaron under the circumstances (although Hector thought expecting Aaron to spend two weeks with the Perlmans had been excessive). Oliver wasn’t sure. For the second time in his life, he was afraid he’d messed up a teenage boy.

Back in the house, he and Elio headed upstairs to the master suite to shower and get dressed. “So this party is why you own your own tuxedo,” Elio said, pulling back the shower curtain. Though the outside of their house was covered in peeling paint, the inside had been completely remodeled about five years ago. “I thought it was because you’ve been married so many times.”

“Oh, you’re funny.”

“Want to shower together?”

“I don’t know,” Oliver said, teasingly. “Are you going to be frisky?”

They washed each other under the spray, Elio’s hands lingering on Oliver’s cock and balls. “As nice as this is,” Oliver said, sliding the tips of his fingers down Elio’s hips, “we should get dressed and go see if Genevieve needs help with anything. People will be here in less than half an hour.”

“You still have time to come,” Elio said, not moving his hands. “You’re not that old.”

Gently, Oliver took Elio’s wrists and moved his hands for him. Elio rolled his eyes. “God. The more things change...”

“We’ll do it later.”

“Later,” Elio echoed, imitating Oliver’s voice. “What time does this party usually end?”

“John has the last bus scheduled to come at twelve-thirty. SDS typically doesn’t go too late because most people have class tomorrow.”

Elio smiled, slowly. “Meet me in our bedroom at eleven,” he said, “and I’ll suck your cock.”

Back in 1979, Oliver’s Great-Uncle Liev had died in an airplane bathroom, where he’d been having sex with his forty-year-old second wife. Since marrying Elio, it had crossed Oliver’s mind that someday he might go in a similar way.

“Elio – ” Elio had a mischievous, almost devilish look in his eye. The water was pounding down and plastering his hair to his forehead. “Look, I definitely see the appeal, but – ”

“You’re turning me down?”

“We’re not having sex with my colleagues in our house.” He’d been at Bellenger for most of his career, built a reputation. He was probably going to be chair of the department when Alice Dyson retired. He didn’t need a colleague to go looking for the bathroom and hear suspicious noises behind a locked door.

“No?”

“No. When they’ve all gone home – ”

Elio leaned back to look him in the eye. “You know it never lasts when you say no to me.”

Oliver was still for a moment, then picked up the shampoo bottle and started to wash Elio’s hair.
“I’m going to be in our room at eleven,” Elio said as Oliver’s fingers ran through his curls. “I’m going to wait for you until eleven-fifteen.”

“Have fun waiting.”

“Oh, I will.”

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Oliver was the gambler, but if Elio had to place a bet, he’d put money on Oliver showing up at eleven-fourteen.
“Are you sure it’s not in your backpack?” Julie asked Aaron.

“It’s not in my backpack!” Aaron grabbed his backpack, held it upside down over the living room floor, and shook it. Nothing fell out. “Ask me anything else, but don’t ask me if it’s in my backpack.”

“Well, we’ve torn apart the whole house looking for it.” Julie sat down on the couch and exhaled. “Either you left it at school or you left it at your dad’s house.”

A thumping noise echoed through the room; Alex was coming down the stairs. “It’s not with my stuff,” he said. “Call Dad.”

“I’m not calling Dad.”

“You can’t take your test without your graphing calculator,” Julie said, picking up the TV remote. She’d spent the better part of an hour ransacking the house for the calculator and considered her duty discharged. “Call your father and ask him if he’s seen it.”

“I’m not calling Dad.”

“You could always call Elio,” Alex suggested sweetly, but Julie shot him a look.

She’d seen Aaron’s therapist with Oliver and Elio a couple of weeks ago. “How long do you think it’ll be before Oliver obviously feels guilty about something?” Elio had asked her in the waiting room while Oliver was parking their car. It had been surreal, spending fifty minutes sitting across from Elio – Oliver’s Ghost of Summer Past, now a grown man in middle age. At one point, he’d moved to take Oliver’s hand, shot a sidelong glance at Julie, and thought better of it. They looked like a couple. Julie couldn’t say how, but they did. There was some kind of intangible energy between them that she couldn’t quite describe. After the appointment, she’d asked Elio a couple questions about last-minute wedding planning and he’d looked both grateful and relieved.

In a strange way, she was grateful to Elio – the grown man, not the memory – because reuniting with Elio had been what finally propelled Oliver out of the closet. The two worst things about their divorce had been that Oliver hadn’t wanted it, and that once it was over he hadn’t even done her the courtesy of coming out. He’d turned her from his wife into his co-conspirator, someone to keep his secrets.

“Julie, honey, I’m so sorry to hear about you and Oliver.”

Yes. I’m sorry to hear about me and Oliver too.

“Barbara told me and I just couldn’t believe it!”

I guess that makes two of us.

“How are you doing?”

How am I doing? I went to go give blood and when I read the forms, I realized I was ineligible because of him. The dog doesn’t want me to take him for a walk because I’m not Oliver. I had a tubal ligation after my second C-section because Oliver and I decided we were done having kids. Now there’s no more Oliver and I. Alex overheard some fifth-graders on the playground and now he
wants to know what a faggot is. Aaron has to do a state report on Hawaii for school and wanted to
know if he could use some of my vacation pictures. Oliver’s in half of them. I married a man who
started dating me again three weeks after he slept with a seventeen-year-old Italian boy. The only
people who know why we’re divorcing are my parents and Cheryl. He’s brilliant, handsome,
renowned in his field, and makes good money, so people probably wonder if the problem is with me.
I didn’t sleep with a seventeen-year-old Italian boy. I didn’t sleep with Oliver until we’d been dating
for six months. He knew Elio Perlman for six weeks. I could have dated Danny Rosenbaum from
shul. I could have slept with Joe Conley from organic chemistry. I could have married Charlie
Kaminsky, who took me out dancing while Oliver was in Italy. I married Oliver Weiss and he slept
in the bed where we conceived our children and dreamed about a seventeen-year-old Italian boy.
My twenties are gone, half my thirties are gone, my life before children is gone, and yesterday I
found a bristly hair growing out of my chin.

“I’m doing okay, Auntie Miriam. How are you?”

While the boys were in Italy, she’d gone on a date. Ed was funny, balding, and had good taste in
wines. “Cheryl mentioned your ex is getting married again,” he’d said to Julie as the server brought
their main courses.

She nodded. “It’s going to be his third marriage to his first husband.”

Ed smiled – not mockingly or pityingly, but sympathetically. Julie decided he was cute. “That must
be quite a story.”

“It is,” Julie agreed. “But right now I’d rather move on and not tell it.”

They’d finished their meal, had dessert, and kissed in his car before she went inside. Next weekend
he was taking her to a play.

As Julie flipped through channels, Aaron picked up the phone.
Annoying as Fuck

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

One October morning, when he was eleven years old, Aaron had woken up thirsty.

It was a Saturday, and his mom and Alex were still in bed, so he snuck out to the garage where they kept all the cold drinks in an extra refrigerator and chugged down three cans of Coke. By noon he’d had to pee seven times; by dinner he’d polished off an entire six-pack of root beer that he hid in his room while his mom was deadheading the marigolds. Just before bedtime he passed out in the living room, not that he could remember that.

When he woke up the next morning, he was in a hospital bed with a needle stuck in his arm. His mom and dad were sitting right next to him, holding hands. Aaron squinted and rubbed his eyes. “Are you guys back together?” he managed to croak out.

His parents exchanged looks and let go. “No, buddy, we’re not back together,” his dad said softly. “But there’s something else we have to tell you.”

It was three weeks before Halloween, and he’d been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. He didn’t know whether to cry or punch something.

His dad decided he should have a Halloween party.

“It’ll be lame,” Aaron protested as he trailed after his dad down the aisles of Party City. “I’m not having some lame party with health food, and even if I did, no one would come to it. They’ll all be out trick-or-treating.”

“Of course you’re not having a lame party with health food.” His dad took a life-sized plastic skeleton down from a rack and slung it across their cart. “We’re going to go all-out decorating my house, and then you can have a bunch of friends over and watch movies and eat popcorn.” Popcorn was one of the only junk foods that Aaron was still allowed to have. That, and diet soda. “And it’s going to be the night before Halloween. On Halloween you’re going trick-or-treating with everyone else.”

“Why, so I can watch everyone stuff their faces with candy and be miserable?”

“No. You’re going trick-or-treating so you can get a whole bunch of candy and sell it to me.”

“You don’t even eat candy.”

His dad shrugged. “So I’ll give it out as a reward to whichever students ace the midterms. Do you want one of these screaming doorbells?”

To Aaron’s surprise, the party had actually been fun. He and his friends had watched both *Ghostbusters* movies and then messed around with Tyler Bronson’s Ouija board, trying to contact Kurt Cobain. Trick-or-treating had been okay, too. His mom let him keep everything that was heavy on nuts or peanut butter and eat a little bit every day; he sold the rest of it to his dad for a dollar apiece and ended up with enough money to buy Nintendo 64. The next year, Aaron and his friends decided they were too old to go trick-or-treating, but Aaron had the party at his dad’s house again. Every year since, he and Alex had held a Halloween party at their dad’s house, inviting all their friends and trying to outdo last year’s decorations. Last year they’d even gotten hold of an old door
and hacked through the middle of it with an ax so people could put their faces through and pretend to
be Jack Nicholson in The Shining.

This year they had the best decoration ever. They had a house that looked like it could have
belonged to the Addams Family. The minute Aaron saw it, he’d started imagining how to decorate it
for the party. The front yard could have styrofoam gravestones and the porch railing could be lined
with jack-o-lanterns. Alex could hang a Shelob-sized web from the trees and they could put the
witch mannequin from last year on the roof.

It was the perfect house, except for one thing. It had Elio in it.

“Is he, like, flaming?” Tyler had asked Aaron. “Like, is your dad the man and he’s the woman, or –”


“I’m not trying to be offensive or anything,” Tyler protested. “I don’t care if he’s flaming.”

“He’s not flaming.” Aaron flopped back on the old couch in Tyler’s garage and threw a dart at the
board on the ceiling. “He’s just annoying as fuck.”

It wasn’t that Aaron thought anything all that bad would happen if his friends met Elio. Elio was
weird, but he wasn’t any weirder than some of their parents – definitely not weirder than Dylan’s
mom, who worked as a “beer wench” at a Renaissance fair every summer. It wasn’t like his friends
hated gay people, either. Josh’s older sister was a lesbian. Aaron just didn’t want Elio around
because this would be the last Halloween party of his high school career, and he wanted to have one
fun night at his dad’s house without having to remember that Elio had turned his dad into a different
person.

Plus, there was the PDA.

Elio was always touching Aaron’s dad – holding his hand, sitting right next to him on the couch,
putting his feet in his lap. Sometimes he’d randomly rest his forehead against Aaron’s dad’s chest.
Aaron could remember his parents holding hands and kissing sometimes, but he’d never seen his dad
like this with anyone – not even Heather, who he had obviously been hot for. It wasn’t like Aaron
could ask them to tone it down when his friends came over. It would be like telling his dad to go
back in the closet or something.

Aaron’s parents had taken away his car after he snuck out for the second time, so he had to borrow
his mom’s car to drive to his dad’s house. Just as he was backing out of the driveway, Alex came
running out the door.

“I want to go with,” he said as Aaron rolled down the window. “To help you look for your
calculator.”

Aaron wasn’t buying it for a minute. “Did Mom tell you I said they were hosting Seventh-Day
Soiree?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want to meet Henry Quinn.” Henry Quinn taught English literature at Bellenger, but, more
importantly to Alex, he’d gone to Oxford and had Tolkien as a professor.

Alex’s face turned red. “Maybe. Okay. Yeah.”
“Get in the car,” Aaron said.

The sun was just starting to set as they drove off.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the hits and comments so far! This fic is going to continue for several more chapters, though some (most?) of them will be short.
For whatever reason, Elio’s point of view sounds more like Elio to me when it’s written in the present tense, even though the rest of this fic is in the past tense. I don’t know why.

The lanterns in the yard are lit, the air smells of roses and barbecued chicken, and as the streams of people move from the porch to the yard, Elio is drunk on three words: my husband, Elio.

“This is Robert Bernstadt, from the poli-sci department,” Oliver is saying, gesturing to a sticklike old man who’s wearing a crimson vest under his dinner jacket. “And this is his wife, Claire – Robert and Claire, this is my husband, Elio Perlman-Weiss – “

*Say it again, Oliver. My husband. Elio. Perlman. Weiss.*

The sight of Oliver in a tuxedo is doing dangerous things to Elio. Maybe it’s because he wants to violate the formality it represents, to yank off the shirt studs and stick his hand down the creased trousers and debauch Oliver’s sense of propriety. Maybe it’s because the last time he saw Oliver in a tuxedo was at their wedding, and after their wedding they came back to this very house and fucked each other senseless. It’s only fifteen, twenty minutes after seven. He’ll never make it to eleven, the same way that all those years ago he couldn’t make it until midnight and ended up going down on Marzia in the attic. But he has to make it.

“Nice to meet you,” Elio says, shaking hands with the Bernstadts. Oliver has already warned him that the poli-sci department is notorious for talking shop at parties and they’re even worse during an election year. Elio’s hoping to get through Seventh-Day Soiree without being pulled into a conversation about the political implications of his marriage, hoping to be just another faculty spouse and not a statement. Oliver has to show up at eleven. If Oliver doesn’t show up at eleven, Elio will be compelled to do something forbidden – exactly what, he doesn’t know – and hope that Oliver decides to enforce discipline later. Or sooner.

*Please, Oliver. Please spank me like you did that night in Bergamo, that night when you said my parents let me do everything and had probably never punished me in my life. Spank me hard the way you did that night, after I begged you to do it, even though you wanted to be good. I remember that night. You said that after you were gone, I could never grab anyone’s crotch again if they’d turned me down. You said that was what you were punishing me for, because you wanted me to remember that I couldn’t do that again. I could get beat up or arrested and you wanted to keep me safe. My cock jerked against your thighs and I came all over them, all over your muscular, hairy thighs. Then I fell to my knees, licked you clean, and sucked your cock as far as I could go, feeling the grit of the floor dig into my knees as your fingers dug into my scalp. I wanted you to come down my throat. I wanted you to come down my throat so our seed would mix together and maybe something would grow.*

“Excuse me for a minute,” Elio says, and leaves Oliver standing confused on the lawn.

He’ll never make it. If he doesn’t come soon he’s going to spend every minute until eleven walking around like a living statue of Priapus. He weaves his way through the guests that have packed
themselves inside the house and finds his way to their bedroom, where he shuts and locks the door and then goes to the master bath, takes his cock out, and jerks off until he spurs his come all over the tile on the wall of the shower. He had to do it. He had to do it so he could think again.

Elio sees his wedding ring glint in the light. Suddenly, a thought occurs to him – a forbidden thing he can be spanked for later.

When they were packing boxes at Oliver’s old house, they’d found a Polaroid camera. They’ve been using up the film over the past few days; a box under the bed is filled with pictures of Oliver sucking Elio’s cock, Elio fingering himself, Elio fingering Oliver. Elio gets the camera from the nightstand, takes his wedding ring off, and, lying back on the bed, balances it on the tip of his cock.

The picture develops quickly.

With a pen, he writes one word on the white space at the bottom, and leaves the picture on Oliver’s pillow before rearranging himself and heading back outside.

*Minerals.*
"Families Like Mine" by Abigail Garner is a real book that was published in 2004.

The house was packed, and Aaron couldn’t find the fucking calculator.

“– away game against Mount Holyoke,” a lady in a shimmery blue dress was saying as Aaron ducked down to look on the shelf under the end table. “We beat them last year and we’re probably going to beat them this year – “

*Time* magazine, *The Economist*, some book called *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. God, now they were reading gay parenting books? Aaron didn’t want to have a family like – he glanced at the author’s name – Abigail Garner or anyone else.

Out on the porch, Henry Quinn was talking to Alex about pipeweed or Rohan or some hobbit thing. Elio’s blank sheet music was under the book. Where was Elio, anyway? Lurking somewhere and waiting to pop out when Aaron least expected it, like a horror movie monster, probably. No calculator. Fuck.

“– denied tenure at Yale, which was their loss and our gain – “

“– dessert is in Genevieve’s yard, you have to try the little cupcakes – “

The living room was pretty big, with dark blue couches and a hardwood floor. There was a poster-sized wedding photograph over the fireplace. Aaron’s dad was across the room, towering above everybody else and looking for the calculator in places that didn’t make any sense, like on top of Elio’s piano. Elio had two pianos – one in the living room, one in his music room – because the Perlmans had given him a baby grand for a wedding present. God, he was spoiled. He was thirty-eight years old and still totally spoiled. And Johanna was spoiled, because she was a mini-Elio and Elio let her get away with murder. At least she wasn’t here. Johanna was one of those annoying, know-it-all kids who didn’t know how to have a normal conversation without saying stuff like, *it would be weird if you shot your brother in a duel, because you’re Aaron like Aaron Burr and he’s Alex like Alexander Hamilton*. Aaron didn’t know which he disliked more, Johanna and her weirdness or the fact that he had to be nice about it because she was a seventh-grade girl and he was a senior in high school. If Johanna was a guy around his own age, at least Aaron could tell her to shut up.

Where in the hell was that calculator? Where had he been the last time he was here? Living room, kitchen, bathrooms, the attic, the porch, the yard –

The garage. Aaron’s dad, like Aaron’s mom, had a refrigerator with extra drinks in his garage, and Aaron had gone out to get a can of diet Coke while he was working on his homework. Had that been just after he’d finished the math homework? Probably. Yeah. Maybe he’d still had the calculator in his hand and he’d set it down someplace. He’d already looked all over his bedroom in the attic, and he wasn’t having any luck with the kitchen or the living room. Time to try the garage.

The Gothic Horror had been built before cars, so the garage was a converted stable that wasn’t
attached to the house. Aaron pushed past four guys in tuxes who were arguing about the presidential election – “Edwards isn’t going to do a damn thing to help Kerry in the south,” one was saying – and headed out a side door.

It was a dark, clear night, with stars; there was an ice bucket on the porch filled with wine bottles, and Aaron picked one up. If he was any other guy, he’d steal this bottle and drink it later with his buddies. Diabetes sucked. He was never going to be able to get smashed in college like everyone else. He probably shouldn’t even try one of the little cupcakes in Genevieve’s yard. He had Type 1 diabetes, no car, no girlfriend, no graphing calculator, a little brother four inches taller than he was, and a dad who was married not only to a guy but to Elio Perlman. Elio Perlman-Weiss, who may not have been totally responsible for Aaron’s parents’ divorce but who was still the main reason for it anyway.

God, the whole thing was just – confusing. Sometimes he knew he loved his dad and sometimes he felt like he hated him. Sometimes he wanted to pretend Elio didn’t exist and sometimes he wanted to yell at his dad about Elio. Sometimes he even felt that maybe Elio wasn’t so bad. He was weird, freaky, pretentious, and annoying, but it wasn’t like he was evil.

Then Aaron would remember that if his dad had done what he really wanted to do, he would have picked Elio instead of Aaron’s mom and Aaron wouldn’t exist. And the confusing thoughts would start again.

The night was finally starting to cool off, but the porch was crowded and hot.

“– asked John if we could finally ditch the dress code, but of course he gave me the line about how if the Bellenger faculty could have formal wear during the Depression, we could certainly still wear it now – “

“– eleven more international students this year than last year – “

“I always knew Oliver Weiss was a big closet case.”

Aaron’s whole body tensed, like a deer who’d just heard a hunter step on a branch.

“No, you didn’t,” a second voice said, a man’s voice this time. They were right behind him, whoever they were, a woman with a Boston accent and a man who sounded like he was from India or maybe the Middle East.

“No, I did. You know how? He was way too uncomfortable around gay men for someone who teaches classics. Then there was that blonde girl he was married to – “

“Valerie.” The man’s voice was low and urgent. “I think you’ve had a few too many drinks.”

Valerie was laughing. “I looked at that girl and I was like, ‘Oh, honey, you’re a beard and you don’t even know it.’”

Aaron’s fist clenched around the neck of the wine bottle. He had to get out of here. He had to get out of here before he smashed the bottle over Valerie’s head. Without looking back, he jumped down over the porch steps and sprinted off to the garage.

His dad was a joke now. His dad was somebody people talked about behind his back, somebody stupid bitches named Valerie snickered about at parties. Fuck Valerie. She didn’t know the first goddamn thing about his dad, or Heather. Fuck Valerie, and fuck Elio for turning his dad into this. Fuck them all.
The knob on the side door to the garage turned easily in his hand. Aaron flung it open and then slammed it shut behind him. “Goddamn it!” he yelled, his voice echoing off the walls and his dad’s 1964 Barracuda. That car was such a midlife crisis. “Fuck!”

His hands were shaking. His heart was beating so fast that it felt like it was trying to jump out of his chest. He couldn’t remember ever being this angry, not even when Jason Andrews got drunk at Shannon Pembrook’s party and asked him why Jews were so interested in cutting up babies’ dicks. He was never going to get away from Elio. Elio was going to be at his Halloween party, and his high school graduation and his college graduation and his wedding. Even someday when Elio died, it would say in the obituary, survived by daughter Johanna and stepsons Aaron and Alex…

Why was the light already on in the garage?

There was a slight noise, and Aaron jumped.

Elio was sitting on an upside down bucket in the corner, wearing a navy blue tuxedo and smoking a cigarette.
Elio took a long drag on his cigarette. “You know, Aaron,” he said, smoke coming out of his mouth as he spoke, “if I were you, I probably wouldn’t like me either.”

It was all Aaron could do not to throttle him. “You know what, Elio?” he spat out. “I really don’t care what you’d do if you were me, so you can take the understanding stepfather routine and shove it.”

There. He’d been rude to Elio to his face, and now there was no going back.

Throughout everything – that Italian dinner over a year ago, and Thanksgiving at Aunt Kimberley’s, and two weeks in Italy with the Perlmans and Johanna up in his face – through the wedding rehearsal, and the rehearsal dinner, and the wedding itself and the reception, where Elio had played a song he composed for Aaron’s dad on the piano and Aaron had wanted to die of embarrassment – he’d always been polite to Elio. He’d ranted to his mom, and let loose a few choice comments to his dad. But he’d always been polite to Elio, because he wanted Elio to see that he wasn’t the bad guy here. He wasn’t the guy who seduced a twenty-four-year-old doctoral student – because Aaron knew his dad, and he knew Elio must have started it – and infected him with memories strong enough to ruin two marriages and the rest of his life. No, he was the guy who had never asked to have anything to do with this whole fucked-up situation.

Now he’d finally snapped. Good. Maybe it was time. His dad and Elio were interested in children of gay parents telling it like it was? Here you go.

“My dad didn’t even want to get divorced from my mom, you know that? He only told her about you because he wanted to go to counseling and get over you. And once they were divorced, did he call you up? No. He dated a few women and then he married Heather. So you might think you guys are this great epic love story, but when it comes down to it, he didn’t pick you for twenty years. You’re his third choice. You’re like a bad habit he can’t kick. And I don’t know why he would pick you even as his third choice, because you think you’re some kind of genius but all you are is a wannabe composer no one’s ever heard of, whose parents fucking spoil him like he’s five and thinks he gets to just show up and ruin my life and everybody’s supposed to be happy about it because oh, Oliver can finally be who he is, and isn’t that so fucking wonderful. Guess what? It’s not fucking wonderful, because I don’t know who my dad is. I don’t know how much of the guy I thought he was is real and how much is fake.”

“You know what’s real?” Elio said quietly. Ash was falling off the end of his cigarette. “What’s real is that your dad picked you.”

It seemed so beside the point that Aaron snorted. “Whatever.”

“He picked you,” Elio insisted. “He picked you when he married your mom – “

“That’s funny, I thought he was picking to be a fucking coward and take the easy way out.” If Aaron’s dad had stayed with Elio, Grandpa Ira would have never spoken to him again. He hadn’t spoken to Aunt Kimberley for ten years after she got pregnant in high school and dropped out to marry Uncle Brad.
“There isn’t just one thing that’s true here, Aaron.” Elio picked up an ashtray from the floor and put out his cigarette – calmly, as if people insulted him in his own garage every day. “Your dad has always picked you. He picked to create you, and he picked to try to give you two parents living together. He picked to build his career around being near you. That’s who your father is. He’s the man who picked you and who will always pick you.”

To Aaron’s utter horror, he could feel tears building in his eyes. Outside, the crickets were chirping and someone was laughing from the porch. He was not going to cry in front of Elio. He could not cry in front of Elio. Oh, fuck.

Elio glanced at the bottle of wine. “You’re not planning to drink that, are you?”

Aaron bit back a laugh – a hard, bitter laugh. “Yeah, Elio. I’m planning to drink this and go into a diabetic coma and die, because I’m just stupid that way.” He could hear how childish he sounded and he hated it. Why couldn’t Elio just yell at him and storm out?

“No one’s going to care who my dad is now,” he said. He wanted Elio to understand, to grasp the enormity of what he had done by reappearing in Aaron’s dad’s life. “Nobody’s going to care that he’s a great professor, or so smart that he skipped two grades when he was a kid, or any of that. All anybody’s going to see is some gay guy who’s a big joke – the tall, handsome guy women used to be crazy about, but then, surprise! Turns out he was hiding a big secret all along, because nobody’s that perfect without hiding a big secret, and if you thought they could be, well, you must be stupid. That’s what people think about him now.”

Elio took a pack of cigarettes out from the inside of his tuxedo jacket. “What people?”

Aaron shrugged. He didn’t want to sound like he was tattling on his dad’s colleagues – that, and he didn’t want to repeat what Valerie had said. Fucking Valerie, with her smug laugh and her Boston accent.

“A few minutes before you got here, Alice Dyson was talking to your dad,” Elio said, lighting another cigarette. “She’s planning to retire at the end of the school year and she’s going to recommend him as her replacement for chair of the department. I understand why you’re afraid, Aaron, but I don’t think you have to be.”

“I’m not afraid,” Aaron said at once.

Elio brought the cigarette to his lips and inhaled. “Aren’t you?”

They stared at each other in silence for a few moments, Aaron still clutching the wine bottle and smoke curling from Elio’s mouth. In the distance, Aaron could hear the sound of music coming from one of Elio’s pianos.

“If I were you,” Aaron said, “I wouldn’t bother being nice to me.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s a waste of time.”

Elio tapped his cigarette against the side of the ashtray. “I don’t think you hate me, Aaron. I don’t think you like me very much, but I don’t think you hate me, either.” He turned his head toward the music and pressed his lips together. “I told your father someone would start playing the baby grand if we didn’t put a sign on it.”

“You can tell which piano that is?” Aaron asked. In his head, the words had sounded cynical, but
when they came out he was surprised to discover they had an air of genuine curiosity.

Elio nodded. “That’s definitely the baby grand.”

Not just sounds like the baby grand, but definitely the baby grand. Just once, he’d love to hear Elio be unsure about something.

The garage reeked of smoke. “I’m hiding out in here,” Elio said, picking a speck of something off the middle of his lower lip. Probably tobacco. Aaron had heard his dad and Elio argue about only two things – whether South Park was funny, and Elio’s gross, unfiltered cigarettes. “The poli-sci department keeps trying to interrogate me about supreme courts and marriage amendments. Apparently I’m supposed to have some kind of superior perspective.”

Now he was trying to start a conversation – about the Bellenger poli-sci department, of all things. “I spent all day cleaning for this party,” Elio continued, leaning back against the wall. “I never appreciated my parents’ old housekeeper so much. I don’t think she ever had to get ready for over three hundred people, though. At least everything’s catered and I didn’t have to cook.”

God, was he going to keep babbling like this? “Why don’t you just tell the poli-sci department you don’t want to talk about it?”

Elio shrugged. “Trying to make a good impression on your dad’s colleagues.”

“Why wouldn’t you make a good impression?” Elio’s weirdness was the kind of weirdness that a bunch of college professors would like.

“I don’t know.” Elio took another drag on his cigarette. “I just want Oliver to be proud of me.”

Aaron couldn’t say why. Maybe it was the tone of Elio’s voice, or the way he suddenly looked younger as he bit his lip, but for the first time, Aaron realized that it must have really hurt Elio when Aaron’s dad left.

He’d always envisioned the teenage Elio as a sort of bisexual Casanova type, probably because Elio’s dating history was a big joke between Elio and Aaron’s dad. Reading between the lines, Elio had gone to college in France and screwed half of Paris. Then he’d gone to graduate school in Boston to screw half of Massachusetts before getting Johanna’s mom pregnant, becoming a dad, and having slightly less time to screw the remaining half of the Commonwealth. It wasn’t that Aaron had thought Elio hadn’t loved Aaron’s dad, but he figured his dad had been just another lover in a long line. The Perlman’s struck Aaron as the type of parents whose sex rules were probably limited to, Don’t leave used condoms on the floor for the maid to pick up. But Elio had been seventeen. He couldn’t have been that experienced, and even if he had been, the guy was still human. An irritating, know-it-all human, but human.

“My dad is proud of you,” Aaron said. “I figured that out the first time he told us about you and he said the violin was your third instrument.”

The second the words left his mouth, he wished he hadn’t said them. Now Elio was going to think he’d won, that Aaron was going to come around to liking him and they were going to be great buddies, like Elio and Alex or like Aaron’s dad and Johanna. Aaron didn’t think that was ever going to happen. The annoying parts of Elio were so essential to who he was that Aaron figured Elio was always going to bug him on some level. He wasn’t going to apologize to Elio, either. Every single thing he’d said had been true and he wasn’t going to apologize and pretend he was sorry.

But maybe – maybe – Elio was right, and there wasn’t just one thing that was true here. Maybe it
was true that Elio was annoying, pretentious, spoiled, and the main reason for Aaron’s parents’ divorce – but Aaron didn’t have to hate him for it.

A tiny smile played around the corners of Elio’s mouth. “Thanks, Aaron.”

Aaron looked at the wine bottle, trying to look anywhere but at Elio. *1997 Merlot, Bellenger Estates, Napa Valley, California.* “Yeah.”

“Elio?”

The voice was Aaron’s dad’s, coming from outside the door. “Oh *fuck,*” Elio whispered, squashing his cigarette in the ashtray like he was trying to destroy its very existence. “I told him I quit – ”

Aaron stared at him. “What, you think he’s an idiot?”

“Elio?”

“In here!” Elio called, stashing the ashtray behind the bucket. Aaron smirked. He was so busted.

Aaron’s dad came through the door, ducking his head. “Okay,” he began, not noticing Aaron. “I know I said I wasn’t going to ask you to play the piano at this party – ”

“Here it comes,” Elio said to Aaron.

His dad turned. “Oh, you’re out here.” He looked back and forth between Aaron and Elio, as if he was trying to figure out what had been going on before he showed up and if he needed to diffuse the situation. “Did you find your calculator?”

Suddenly, Aaron saw it. “Right next to you on top of the refrigerator,” he said.

His dad picked it up and handed it to him. “I know I said I wasn’t going to ask you to play the piano at this party,” he said to Elio, “but I may have mentioned to Frank Dooley that you know how to play ‘Star of the County Down’ on the violin...”

Elio rolled his eyes. “This is the one and only time I play *any* instrument at *any* of your faculty parties.”

“The one and only time,” Aaron’s dad agreed. “Aaron, you ate dinner, right?”

“It’s after eight, Dad.”

“Right.” His dad took a deep breath; Aaron could tell he was registering the amount of smoke in the air. “You and Alex should start heading back. I’m not sure what the traffic’s like.”

Alex was in Genevieve’s yard, eating ice cream from a tiny bowl the size of a juice glass. “Henry Quinn is awesome,” he informed Aaron, spooning up some mint chocolate chip. “He told me this story about this one time that Tolkien – hey, you found your calculator.”

Aaron nodded. “Right where I left it.”

The air was fresh and the stars were bright.

*Chapter End Notes*
That's not the end of the unexpected guests...
Thank you for all the comments! This fic is proving a little harder to write than the first two parts of this series, but it's coming along. When this series is done, I have an idea for a one-shot I want to write that's in a slightly different universe from this one.

The last incoming bus arrives at nine, and on that bus is Shane Lundquist.

Shane Lundquist is thin, wiry, thirty-five at most. He has blond curls, high cheekbones, and the affable air of a neighborhood bartender. He wears sneakers with his tuxedo and came to Seventh-Day Soiree as the date of Mark Wilson from the history department.

Elio would not care very much about any of this, and does not care very much about any of this, until Shane Lundquist approaches them in the back yard, claps Oliver on the back, then turns to Elio and says, “You must be Elio. I’m Shane Lundquist. Your husband and I used to date a couple of years ago.”

Oliver is blushing – looking at Elio out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge a reaction, and Elio’s first thought is that Shane Lundquist is clearly exaggerating. He can believe that Oliver and Shane have had sex. Physically, Shane is like a younger, more muscular, more Scandinavian version of Elio. Elio can imagine Oliver pulling a pair of jeans over those slender hips, can imagine Shane’s whitish lips wrapped around Oliver’s cock. The thought is not altogether repulsive, because a couple of years ago means Oliver had yet to write to Elio, much less come to his apartment for the fateful night when they started out eating lasagna and ended up in bed devouring each other. A couple years ago, Elio had just broken up with Jennifer Number Three and was debating whether to get involved with Cole. Oliver is allowed to have slept with Shane a couple of years ago.

But they cannot possibly have dated.

To state the obvious, Shane is a man, and in the story that Elio tells himself – the story he understands to be true – he is the only man Oliver has ever been in an actual relationship with, much less loved. The only one who wasn’t a drunken college fumbling, or an anonymous encounter from a bar, or a very discreet one-night stand while out of town at a conference. There is no character named Shane Lundquist in the story. Shane Lundquist cannot have dated Oliver. Not only is he a man, but he isn’t even Jewish.

“Nice to meet you,” Elio tells the fantasist.

Then Oliver asks Shane, “How’s your mom doing?” and Elio realizes Shane might be telling the truth.

“Well, she’s pretty thrilled at the moment,” Shane says, smiling at Oliver. He has dimples so deep they could have been made by the olive pick in his martini glass. Shane Lundquist’s olive pick; Shane Lundquist, Oliver’s pick. The usurper. “Mark and I just got engaged,” Shane continues, holding up a hand with a diamond engagement ring on one finger. The gesture somehow makes him seem even more masculine, as if he’s aware of the absurdity and doesn’t care.
Oliver smiles and pulls Elio close to him, something Elio would appreciate at any other time but now. It feels conciliatory, and Elio doesn’t want to have to be conciliated. “We’re not supposed to have some of those, are we?” he asks lightly.

Shane laughs before Elio can even think of an answer. “This is Mark’s grandmother’s ring. She gave it to him in her will with instructions to give it to his fiancee someday. But, yeah, my mom’s doing great. Her cancer is still in remission.”

“Oh, good.” Oliver squeezes Elio’s waist. “Shane used to manage the campus bookstore.”

“Oliver used to harass me for ordering wrong editions,” Shane tells Elio, but there’s a playfulness in his voice that’s directed at Oliver. Where is Mark Wilson, and when is he going to move Shane elsewhere? Elio looks around and spies him by the porch, talking to the Argosses.

Oliver laughs. “I didn’t harass you, I just wanted to make sure – “

“I wasn’t going to order the wrong Symposium again after you’d got on my case the year before.” Shane rolls his eyes. “Anyway, I quit that job when I finished my special ed degree. What do you do, Elio?”

According to my stepson, I’m a wannabe composer no one’s ever heard of. “I’m a professional violinist,” Elio replies, mentally kicking himself as the words leave his mouth. Professional was an unnecessary adjective.

“He’s starting a new job tomorrow,” Oliver adds. “Albany Symphony Orchestra.”

“Wow.” Shane sounds genuinely impressed, and that genuineness makes Elio resent him all the more. “Mark and I went to see them once. New job, new husband – congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Elio forces himself to say. And then, to hide his churlishness, “Congratulations to you too. Have you set a date yet?”

Shane begins to ramble about dates and venues and photographers, Oliver interrupting on occasion to offer advice. They could not have been serious, not if they’re both able to be this laid-back about each other’s new relationships. Not if they dated before Oliver came out to his family. The discovery of Shane wouldn’t hurt so much if it didn’t remind Elio of being seventeen on Hanukkah, listening to Oliver spring the news of a fiancee.

Your husband and I used to date a couple of years ago. It’s been on and off for the last three years. Are there any more secret people in Oliver’s life, and if so, when will they suddenly surface and throw Elio off-balance?

I told you my threesome story, Oliver – which, by the way, was not as sexy as I made it sound. I told you about the time I had to break into Jean-Pierre’s apartment through the fire escape to get my sex tape back. I told you about getting two cases of gonorrhea from two different Jennifers. You could have taken one moment to mention the existence of Shane Lundquist.

“We’re just about to head in,” Oliver tells Shane, who’s setting down his empty glass. “Did you get anything to eat yet? The caterers are going to put dinner away in half an hour, but dessert stays out until after midnight.”

“Mark and I grabbed dinner before we got here,” Shane replies, “but I saved room for dessert. I’ll come find you later and we can catch up some more, okay?”

“Sounds good.” Oliver’s arm is still around Elio’s waist, and Elio wants him to let go. “See you in a little bit.”
“Actually,” Elio says suddenly, “I want some more dessert too.”

The crowd in Elio and Oliver’s yard has largely migrated to Genevieve’s yard, and the line at the dessert table is long. “I’ve never been to SDS before,” Shane says, leaning to one side to peer at the cupcakes and tarts. “It’s always been just faculty, not staff. Formal parties aren’t really my thing. Hey, do me a favor – do I have any paint in my hair?”

Elio gives his hair a cursory glance. “No.”

“I paint houses as a second job.” Shane turns to look Elio in the eye. “Congratulations, Elio, I mean it. Oliver’s a great guy. How’d you meet?”

Elio’s glad Oliver stayed in their yard, because this question always puts him on edge. Elio, raised in Italy and raised by his parents, would have no problem saying, *He was my father’s intern the summer I was seventeen,* but for the sake of Oliver’s nerves he’s learned to omit the age detail. “It was legal in Italy and it would be legal in New York and Massachusetts, too,” Elio’s insisted, but Oliver has held firm. The difference in their ages is negligible by this point in their lives, but Elio still loves thinking of himself as Oliver’s younger husband. It’s particularly fun in bed. “He interned for my father back in the eighties,” Elio tells Shane. The eighties – a whole decade, very vague. “We reconnected a little over a year ago.”

Shane smiles. “It’s still totally surreal to me that gay couples can get married. I mean, I never even imagined being able to marry somebody I loved, did you?”

Elio’s stomach lurches. This is old, painful territory for him, the inference that any man with a male partner is exclusively gay. He’s lost partners over it, both women who couldn’t handle his past history and men who insisted he was lying to himself. “Not a man, anyway,” he says, and braces himself for a confused or negative reaction.

But Shane seems to take it in stride, moving with the line and picking up a piece of cake without missing a beat. “Not a man,” he agrees. “Were you ever married to a woman?”

Elio shakes his head. “Just had a kid with one.”

“Yeah?” Shane takes a cherry tart as well. In the parallel line on the other side of the table, three professors from the English department are debating the merits of the blueberry pie. “Oliver’s a stepdad, huh? How old is your kid?”

“She’s twelve. Almost thirteen.”

“Oh, geez, welcome to the teenage years. I teach special ed history and English at Franklin Junior High in Grathing.” Grathing is the town next to Alfriston. “Can you do me a favor and pick up a piece of blueberry pie for Mark? I’m out of hands here.”

They walk back to Elio and Oliver’s yard, the lanterns shining over their heads and casting a halo-like glow on Shane’s hair.
Minuet

Chapter Notes

This is a little micro-chapter to finish up Elio's POV for a little bit. It still took me a stupidly long time to write. Thank you for your patience...it might be another couple chapters, but we will have smut.

With the pie delivered, Elio makes his excuses, goes to his empty music room, and vows not to come out until he can stop feeling like Oliver’s younger husband. Not the playful, sexy younger husband he is in bed, but an insecure, jealous, emotionally adolescent younger husband, stupidly envious of a casual ex-boyfriend. Feeling undermined by a relationship entered into by two single adults, even though he himself wasn’t at a loss for sex and companionship at the time, and even though he now has the marriage license, the house, the ring, the name. It feels petty and petulant and irritating, and Elio hates it.

Grow up. He’s pushing forty and he’s someone’s father. I’ll see you at – Will Oliver show up at eleven, and if so, why?

If Oliver shows up at eleven, Elio wants it to be because he’s overcome with desire, because he realized he could not wait another moment for Elio to suck his cock, visiting colleagues be damned. He doesn’t want Oliver to be there to placate him. He wants it to be passionate and dangerous and exciting, not overshadowed by serious conversations, spoken or unspoken. And that is why he has to make himself grow up and move past the existence of Shane Lundquist.

He thought he knew everything about the men Oliver has slept with. (First time: age eighteen, Harvard dorm room, sixty-nine position.) How is it that Oliver can reveal his greatest shame – the adulterous, whiskey-fueled, late-night hand job from Roland Braithwaite – and not mention a normal, healthy relationship with a man? Because he’s Oliver, that’s why. When Oliver lets them, his guilt and shame grow and spread like kudzu vines.

Elio sits down at the aged upright and begins to play the minuet in G minor he learned when he was nine – Petzold, incorrectly attributed to Bach. $D, G A B C D, G, G$. It’s probably a sign of emotional health that Oliver was able to have a relationship with another man, that he was willing to try to move on from Elio with someone else. Elio may have been the knight choosing whether to speak or to die, but Oliver shouldn’t be a princess needing to be rescued. $E, C D E F sharp$ – he does know Oliver never bottomed with Shane, because Oliver’s first time bottoming with Elio after their reunion was his first time bottoming since 1983. The risk of HIV had scared him off. Who ended the relationship, Elio wonders, Oliver or Shane? Does it matter? It needs to not matter, because Shane Lundquist needs to not matter, because Elio is not going to let him ruin what Elio has planned.

Maybe it really, truly doesn’t matter. I hope you’ve found the happiness that I haven’t, Oliver had written to him. Despite everything, I still miss you very much. As long as Oliver still missed him, does it matter what “everything” was?
Elio didn’t return for an hour, and Oliver worried.

The subject of past partners had arisen about two months into their reunion, when Elio had wanted them to have full STD panels so they could quit using condoms. It was quickly clear to Oliver that Elio’s experience surpassed his. There were things Elio had done in bed that Oliver hadn’t even thought of, and Elio recounted them with relish. _Is this bothering you?_ he’d asked midway through the third story. He was spread out on his stomach on Oliver’s bed, his legs wide open and his most intimate opening exposed. _I can stop._ Oliver shook his head.

The thought of Elio debauching himself with dozens of lovers on two continents had the strange effect of being both arousing and disheartening. Oliver couldn’t shake the feeling that his own sexual life had been a half-life, a shadow of the physical and emotional pleasures Elio had experienced. Elio had pursued taxi drivers in Milan, gotten engaged on a bridge in Paris, and kissed cellists in Boston’s Public Garden. He’d knelt on a darkened balcony with his face buried between a woman’s legs, and he’d stood against the wall of a theater dressing room with his cock in an actor’s mouth. Oliver had confessed some of his own experiences, but before the chronology reached Shane Lundquist, he’d stopped. His stories were dreary, and he didn’t want to spend another moment thinking of them so long as Elio was in his arms. They had been apart for twenty years and there were no more days to be wasted.

Mark Wilson was the only person at Bellenger who could look Oliver in the eye without having to tilt his head. He’d arrived on campus in the mid-nineties, a young tenure-track professor with a black ponytail, a blunt manner of speaking, and a string of fine-boned, slender boyfriends, none of whom appeared to be any older than twenty-two. Oliver had spent years regarding him from a safe distance with a mixture of fascination and envy. Even without the element of sexuality, he would have envied him; having spent most of his life living with some type of subterfuge, Oliver had a deep respect for bluntness. By the turn of the millennium, Mark had cut his hair and the boyfriends were older, but there was still a new one at every campus function. Oliver had seen him with Shane at last year’s faculty holiday party and had not expected to see them together again.

Elio, with his dark hair, looked like winter but had loved Oliver in the summer. Shane looked like a burst of sunlight but had dated Oliver in the winter. When Oliver thought of Shane, he thought of icy sidewalks in Albany, nestling under heavy quilts, and snow that covered the bedroom windows.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned, hoping to find Elio – but it was Sarah Wu from the art department, come to tell him that the downstairs bathroom was out of toilet paper. He headed upstairs for the extra toilet paper that they kept in the master bathroom.

The smell of semen hit him the moment he opened the door, sending a jolt straight to his groin. Elio. There were the dried rivulets on the slate tile wall of the shower. Surely he was meant to find this, sooner or later. It was a provocation, a challenge. _Look what I did, Oliver. What are you going to do about it?_

He closed the door and leaned against it, trying to steady his breathing. Halfway through his forties, his libido was strong but less urgent than it had been in his younger days. If he was working hard and had no time to himself, he could go a week without an orgasm. Elio had yet to experience this. Elio not only wanted it every day, but seemed to need it every day, his desire still fueled by an
insatiable hunger. How long would that last? How many more years would Oliver have with a husband who needed his body like he needed oxygen? Elio’s thirty-ninth birthday was in January. One day sex between them would lose its giddy exhilaration and become something familiar, something they would have to work to invigorate.

That day was not this day. This day, Oliver was going to force himself to be quiet and thrust into Elio’s mouth until his hot release spilled down Elio’s throat.

Chapter End Notes

I am such a perfectionist with this fic. You have no idea. There are probably twenty thousand words that I've written and discarded. I was planning for this chapter to be longer, but I figured I'd post the part I'm happy with.
Their music room, with its original fireplace and stamped tin ceiling from the early twentieth century, is the least renovated room in the house. The windows creak when they open and the panes are made of warped old glass. Elio’s battered upright, made circa 1950, looks like a jarring anachronism, but he refuses to get rid of it. There are bite marks on the right leg from when Johanna was teething, and it was against this piano that he’d pressed Oliver, kissing him fiercely on their way to the bedroom, when they saw each other for the first time in twenty years.

He hears the doorknob turn and knows without looking that Oliver is behind him.

The clock on the piano claims that it’s six minutes after ten. He should have left this room at least half an hour ago. He should have gone back to the party and met another round of colleagues and maybe helped the caterers put away dinner. But he couldn’t bring himself to rise from the bench, because he didn’t trust himself to act as though Shane Lundquist hasn’t rattled him. He tends to need breaks from parties, anyway. He grew up as an introverted only child and he’s never gotten used to hour after hour of chatter and noise.

“I found the mess you left in the shower.”

Elio’s breath catches and his fingers pause over the keys. He can hear it. He can hear the raw hunger in Oliver’s voice and he has never been so relieved to be so desired.

“You don’t know how to clean up after yourself?”

Elio swallows and begins to play again. The lamp next to the piano flickers, like a skipped beat on a heart monitor. “Maybe I forgot.”

“Give me your hand, Elio.”

Oliver is right behind him, and Elio still hasn’t turned around. He can smell cologne and secondhand smoke and the barest trace of sweat. His pulse is racing and his mouth feels dry. “Which one?”

“The right.”

Slowly, Elio raises his hand from the keyboard and Oliver takes it. He’s anticipating a slap across the palm, a kiss on the wrist, Oliver’s mouth around his fingers –

No. It’s Oliver’s cock, still clothed, pressed into his grasp. “I had to wait a full ten minutes before I could go downstairs, because of what your little mess did to me.” Oliver releases his hand and bends down to kiss his neck; Elio moans, tilting his head to bare it to him. “Is that what you were doing after you walked away from the Bernstadts?”

“Yes.”

“Two weeks into the marriage and my husband is already jerking off alone.” Oliver gives his throat one last kiss, then retreats to sit on the chaise lounge. “Will you play my song for me?”

“Yes,” Elio says again, and begins.
He’s most of the way through when Oliver says, “You’ve been brooding.”

“No.” Arpeggio in A minor, chord, chord. Why didn’t Oliver lock the door? If he’d locked the door, Elio could seduce him right here, right now, and put an end to this conversation before it starts.

“I dated him for four months until we agreed it wasn’t going to work.”

“I said I’m not brooding.” Please, Oliver. Please want me so much that nothing else matters.

“He kissed me in the back room of the bookstore. I don’t know how he knew about me.”

In spite of himself, Elio feels his lips jerk into a small smile. “Maybe because you went alone with him to the back room of the bookstore.”

“Maybe.” Oliver runs one hand through his hair. “I’d just finalized my second divorce and – ”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me.”

“What if I want you to know?”

_I don’t want to know_, Elio wants to say. What could he possibly want to know about Oliver and Shane Lundquist – Shane Lundquist, who is handsome and smart and educated and has the casual, friendly manner that Elio has never been able to cultivate. Shane Lundquist, who is younger and sweeter and has intimate knowledge of Oliver’s body. Who even knows something about teenagers – who both Oliver’s sons might have liked. Who thinks Oliver is a great guy and has an undeniable chemistry with him even when they’re both committed to other people. Shane Lundquist, who Elio will have to see at least once or twice a year until someone either breaks up, changes jobs, or retires.

What could he possibly want to know about Oliver and Shane? If he’s honest with himself, everything.

He finishes the last notes of the song, closes the piano, and sits down next to Oliver. “Then I guess you’d better tell me.”

“I tried – ” Oliver takes his hand but doesn’t look at him. “God. I tried so hard to stop wanting you. I told myself I’d made my decision and I had to honor that. Then after I got divorced from Julie, I thought, you didn’t just pick Julie, Oliver. You picked women. What are you going to do, start dating a man and give your sons a father they’re ashamed of?” He snorts softly. “Which sounds exactly like what my mother would say. My father would have said worse.”

Naomi, to her credit, had been perfectly polite through the wedding and the reception. She’d let Aaron escort her to her seat, made conversation with Elio’s mother at dinner, and sat through the toasts without her inscrutable expression wavering once. She’d even given them an ornate silver mezuzah case as a gift. Before leaving the reception, she’d come to say goodbye, letting Oliver embrace her and shaking Elio’s hand with the dignified air of a surrendering general.

“But then Shane kissed me, and I realized how much I missed the – the intimacy of just kissing a man, I guess. It wasn’t sex in a hotel room with a stranger I’d picked up. It felt good in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.”

“It made you happy,” Elio says.

“Very happy.” Oliver finally looks at him, blue eyes searching Elio’s face. “I’m not saying this to hurt you.”
“I know.”

“Anyway – “ Oliver clears his throat and continues. “Finally I pulled back and I told him that I wasn’t out of the closet. He said he knew that, but he wanted to kiss me again anyway. I asked if he wanted to come back to my place and he said no, he had a rule of not sleeping with guys until he’d dated them for at least two months. I didn’t expect that. It was so different from everything I was used to and it just made me even more interested in him. So I said, how about I take you out to dinner on Saturday, and he accepted.

“You know when you’re in junior high – or whatever junior high is in Italy – “

“Scuola secondaria di primo grado.”

“ – and there’s going to be a school dance where you have to ask a girl, and then you ask one and she says yes? And you’re exhilarated and you’re elated and you feel like all of a sudden you can do anything.”

Elio shakes his head. “I asked a girl to a dance when I was thirteen and she laughed in my face.”

Oliver smiles and nudges him. “Must have been before you’d blossomed into your full beauty.”

“Must have been,” Elio agrees, and pulls his legs up on the lounge so he can curl up with his head in Oliver’s lap. So far, this story is bearable.

“It felt like that.” Elio feels the tip of Oliver’s finger trace the curve of his ear. “Suddenly I felt like I was ten or fifteen years younger.

“We went to dinner in Albany because I figured it was far enough and big enough that we wouldn’t run into anyone we knew. I told him about my boys and he told me about growing up in Wisconsin. He’d taken a while to get through college because of his mother’s cancer and he was due to get his master’s in May.” Oliver pauses, and when he speaks again, Elio can hear the smile in his voice. “He even convinced me to eat dessert.”

“Someone should give him a medal.”

“All right, that’s enough from you,” Oliver says, and grabs for Elio’s ribs. Elio shrieks with laughter and squirms away, nearly falling on the floor. They’re getting through this. Of course they’re getting through this. After everything they’ve been through, what is one blond Wisconsinite who got to sleep with Oliver for two months two years ago?

“I couldn’t remember the last time I’d just had fun dating someone,” Oliver says when Elio’s composed himself. “Every relationship since I was twenty-one had been serious in one way or another. With Shane, I could go over to his place to order Chinese, watch TV, and make out during the commercials. We’d go out to dinner about once a week and get into these ridiculous arguments over some trivial historical detail and be laughing about it by the time the check came. I think we both knew that we weren’t going to be the loves of each other’s lives. But I felt free with him, and I loved that. And it felt so natural. Even with women I really liked, dating women always felt like a little bit of a performance.

“After a couple of months, we decided we were going to sleep together.”

“Tell me about it,” Elio says. Maybe they can manage to turn this to their advantage, like the time Oliver got off hearing about Elio and Tommaso on the beach.

Oliver shakes his head. “He’s going to be my colleague’s husband, Elio. Let’s just say he and I both
enjoyed ourselves.”

“Can’t I know anything?”

Oliver thinks for a moment. Elio can almost hear him weighing his personal and professional loyalties. “All right. You can ask three questions, and I reserve the right to decline to answer any one of them.”

Three questions. Fairy tales always have things that come in threes. Elio thinks for a moment, turning his head so that his cheek rubs against Oliver’s thigh. “Did you fuck him?”

“Eventually. Not the first time. Next question.”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.” How is he supposed to narrow down a thousand thoughts to two questions? If he could, he’d ask for every detail, right down to the color of the sheets and the brand of lube. “Okay. What were all the places you had sex?” He needs a setting for the play that’s enacting itself in his head.

“My bedroom, my upstairs bathroom, his bedroom, his living room, his kitchen. Last question.”

His kitchen. There might be an interesting story there, but Elio isn’t going to spend his final question on it. “If you rated every sexual partner you’ve ever had, would he be in the top five?”

“Yes.”

No need to think about that one, it seemed. “Okay. Keep going.”

“The first several times were great.” There’s a note of tension in Oliver’s voice, and Elio wonders where this is heading. “Then I asked him about some things I wanted to try with him, and he wasn’t interested. It turned out we had some different tastes.”

Elio wants to laugh with relief. Shane Lundquist may be all sorts of wonderful things, but he could never be as attuned to Oliver’s taste as Elio is. Elio is Oliver’s taste. “You mean he wasn’t as sick as me.”

“Definitely not as sick as you.”

Elio sits up, turning towards Oliver. “He didn’t suck you off while you were on the phone with your publisher?” he asks, caressing one of Oliver’s shirt studs.

Oliver closes his eyes and groans softly. “You’re out of questions,” he warns, but the warning is futile.

Elio’s fingers reach inside to unfasten the stud. “He wouldn’t let you masturbate in his shorts so he could wear them unwashed the next day?”

“You know, I didn’t even suggest that one.”

The stud slides out easily, and Elio reaches into Oliver’s shirt, his fingers running through the hair on his chest. “He didn’t want to spread himself on a serving tray between your egg and orange juice so you could eat him for breakfast?”

Oliver’s breath is ragged. “You’re really asking for it, you know that?”

Elio leans in to kiss him and catches sight of the clock on the piano. There are forty minutes until eleven o’clock.
Chapter End Notes

Smut in the next chapter!

Right now, I'm planning for this fic to end on the morning after the party.
Fathers and Mothers

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be the big smut scene, but Oliver's past history wanted to talk. Still some smut, though.

Because this is a movie-verse fic, I don't generally incorporate material from the book that wasn't in the movie, though I did keep the idea of Oliver having two sons. Here I also kept Harvard as his undergrad school.

That first night in Elio’s apartment, Elio had offered Oliver a glass of wine and he had refused.

“I knew it,” Elio said, pouring himself a few ounces of pinot noir. “I read your letter and I figured you had to be in either Gamblers Anonymous or AA.”

Oliver shook his head. “Neither.”

“Narcotics Anonymous?”

“I’m not in recovery, Elio.” He took a sip of water, watching Elio watch him. “I’m just cutting back on my alcohol intake.”

Elio arched his eyebrows and speared a piece of lasagna with his fork. “No one cuts back on their alcohol intake unless their alcohol intake is a problem.”

*****

The summer Oliver was sixteen, just before he left for Harvard, his father would call him into the back yard after dinner.

His father had chain-smoked after every meal, each cigarette another step to the tumor-ridden lungs that would kill him at the age of seventy-nine. Oliver would go out to find him sitting on the cellar door, cigarette in hand and ashtray at the ready. He was a tall, lanky man, with hair that might have curled if he hadn’t kept it in the same buzz cut he’d had since the army. Every night when Oliver went to sleep, his father would be downstairs in the den, listening to opera or political discussions on the radio. Months later, he would still know what he’d listened to on a particular night, and which houses he’d shown earlier that day, and if the weather had been clear or cloudy. Oliver’s father was brilliant. Everyone said so, even Bubbe Essie, who had wanted Oliver’s mother to marry Hyman Stern with his rich cantor’s voice and shiny white teeth. Oliver’s father was brilliant, but he’d quit school after the eighth grade – not only to work and help his family through the Depression, but because he could hardly read. Dyslexia, Oliver’s mother said. He’d gone to school before teachers knew what it was and now he was fifty-seven and too proud to ask for help.

*You watch out for rich kids*, Oliver’s father would say, lighting his next cigarette. *You hang around rich kids and you all get in trouble, their families will get them good lawyers and they’ll leave you twisting in the wind.*

*I busted my ass putting you through Ambrose Preparatory so you’d have a shot at a place like*
Harvard. I call your dormitory and you’re not there, you’d better be studying in the library, not off smoking reefer with a bunch of frat boys.

You want to date a nice Jewish girl, go ahead, but if you knock her up you’d better be ready to leave Harvard and bring her home as your wife.

The week before Oliver was due to leave for Cambridge, his father called him into the back yard one last time.

I’m going to say this once, and then I never want to have this conversation again, you hear me? You’re a good-looking kid. You skipped right over your old man’s scrawny genes and ended up getting the whole junior beefcake look from the Lowensteins. You know all that. You’re a good-looking kid, and you’re going to have to watch out for queers.

Your mother won’t tell you this, because your mother has always been around nice people. She was learning the two-times tables while I was shooting Japs in the Pacific. Your mother thinks queers are all a bunch of harmless fairies who just want to flap their wrists at each other, because your mother never had to knee one in the balls to avoid getting fucked in the ass.

That was a guy I knew in basic training. Sol Blau. Him and I were the only Jews in the platoon – Blau and Weiss, blue and white. Big, beefy guy with a neck as thick as my waist, All-American tackle before he enlisted. The platoon finished basic and got a week’s leave before we deployed, so the two of us went off to New York to see the sights. The third night in the hotel room, I wake up and his hand’s wrapped around my dick. Son of a bitch waited until I got plastered to make a move. They’re crafty bastards. They know you get a young guy away from home, get him three sheets to the wind, he’ll let them do things they’d never get a chance at if he was sober.

I’ve never told your mother that story. I never told anyone that story, but I’m telling you now because you’re going to be around God-knows-what and trust me, it’s not just the girls who’re going to think you’re a tall drink of water.

The first time Oliver slept with a man, he’d had several drinks first, and told himself later that the man never would’ve gotten a chance if he’d been sober. He did the same thing the second time, and the third time, and the fourth.

By the fifth time, he’d admitted to himself that the alcohol had nothing to do with what he wanted, but he still downed four glasses of wine because it was his first time bottoming.

He was sober for the sixth and seventh times, which happened on a Wednesday night and a Thursday morning, but afterwards the guilt ate away at him like acid eating metal. It didn’t help that it was a week before Yom Kippur. The man he’d been with left a phone number, but Oliver didn’t call him.

The eighth time was Elio, and Elio was different – but even then, he’d smoked a joint to relax. In the days that followed, he no longer knew how many times he had slept with a man, because to keep track was to remember that their time together had to end.

*****

Elio’s cell phone rang at ten-thirty, and when Oliver heard him say, “Hi, Veronica,” he reached for his shirt stud and slid it back in.

Like Mark Wilson, Veronica Leary was someone whose bluntness Oliver respected. “I’m glad Elio’s marrying you,” she’d told him at their first meeting, when she’d taken him out to lunch at her favorite
Indian restaurant. “He’s a disaster with women. You know the theory that you’re attracted to what you grew up with, because that’s what feels normal to you? Most of his girlfriends are these maternal types who want to take care of him and let him get away with all kinds of bullshit. Just like his mom and what’s-her-name, Mafalda. And they all think I’m this raving bitch because I don’t want to cater to his feelings. News flash, it’s not part of my job description. I have an actual kid to take care of.”

Veronica was full-figured – polycystic ovary syndrome, she didn’t mind telling Oliver – with henna-red hair and a tattoo of the Virgin Mary on her left forearm. She’d grown up in a working-class Boston neighborhood right in the middle of four brothers and had played bass for a band called The Courtesans since 1998. “The band before that was called Cleveland Jonestown. We were working out a tour when I found out I was pregnant. I told Elio, this tour is the next step in my career and I’m not giving it up because you couldn’t be bothered to check the expiration date on your condom. My friends were all, oh, Veronica, but you and the baby won’t bond! Which is crap. My parents adopted me when I was six months old and I have a better relationship with my parents than most of them do with theirs. You have a good relationship with your kids?” Oliver had nodded, hoping it was true. “Good. I don’t respect guys who can’t get along with their kids.”

If Elio had been solely in charge of Johanna’s upbringing, he would have sent her to a school for the arts and they would have spent every summer in Europe. If Veronica had been solely in charge of Johanna’s upbringing, she would have sent her to Catholic school and Johanna would have spent every summer in a junior lifeguard program or volunteering at a homeless shelter. After some contentious hearings and court-ordered mediation, Elio and Veronica had settled on non-religious private school, art camp, and twice-yearly trips abroad. “We’re like two kids who got assigned to work on a school project together,” Elio had told Oliver. “Two kids who have different sets of friends, different ideas for the project, and are terrified of getting a failing grade.”

As Elio listened to Veronica, Oliver could hear the hum of the party down the hall, and the pipes rattling in the walls as someone flushed the toilet in the downstairs bathroom. Elio covered the bottom half of his phone with his hand. “Richard’s mother broke her hip. They’re driving to Vermont tomorrow to see her and figure out a plan for when she gets out of the hospital. Veronica wants to know if she can drop Johanna over here in the morning and you can let her sit in the back of your classes for the day.”

“Doesn’t she have school?”

“Not until next week. They start late.”

“Sure, I can take her. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“He says it shouldn’t be a problem,” Elio told Veronica. “All right. Seven. See you then.” He closed the phone, slipped it into his pocket, and sighed. “Sorry about that. Where were we?”

Oliver smiled, resting one hand on Elio’s thigh. “I think,” he said, leaning over to kiss Elio’s neck, “I was going to suggest that we go upstairs early so you could learn to behave yourself.”

When he made sexual decisions with Elio now, he made them completely sober, and he was glad of it.

*****

One night during sex, an unprintable thank-you note had begun to write itself in Oliver’s head. Dear Samuel and Annella, thank you for never disciplining your beautiful, brilliant son and leaving the job to me. I’m enjoying it immensely.
The rawness of some of Elio’s requests still surprised him. *Spit on my asshole,* Elio had begged one night, bent over on all fours on their bed. *Then fuck me with your fingers. Don’t bother with lube.*

No, Elio. I’ll hurt you. *You’re not wet enough.* Somehow, in bed with his male fiance, he’d found himself using the terminology he had used with his ex-wives.

*I don’t care.*

*You’ll care if you start bleeding from your ass.*

*I won’t care as long as you’re the one who makes me bleed.*

He’d spat on him but used lube, a lot of lube. Elio had pouted afterwards until he got over it, rolled Oliver over onto his stomach, and buried his face between Oliver’s cheeks – something they’d never done their first summer together, and Oliver had never done with anyone until a few months after Elio became his again. After the first time he’d lain on the bed for several minutes, surprised at the intensity of his orgasm. Elio flopped down next to him and grinned. *I’m really good at things that end with “lingus.”*

Elio simply couldn’t keep his mouth off Oliver, and Oliver loved it.

In two weeks of marriage, he’d woken on three different mornings to find his cock in Elio’s mouth. *I don’t remember telling you that you could wake me up like this,* he murmured the first time, reaching down to stroke Elio’s hair.

Elio pulled back, releasing his cock with a popping sound. *Do I still need to ask?*

*You should at least ask before the first time.*

*All right. Please, Professor Weiss-Perlman, will you grade me on how well I suck you off?*

Oliver gave him an A-, with points off for not asking. *You know,* he called to Elio, as Elio went into their bathroom to rinse his mouth, *all of my students are young women.*

Elio swished with the water and spat in the sink. *Not this one. Don’t go running. Stay here and blow me.*

Oliver had blown him but still gone running afterward.

Miraculously, their path down the hall and up the stairs to the bedroom was clear. Miranda Greeley was in the living room, regaling an audience with the story of the time she was stuck in an elevator with Camille Paglia.

Their bedroom was enormous, with room to spare around two bureaus and a king-size bed. The last renovation had turned the small room adjacent to theirs, probably designed as an infant’s bedroom, into a walk-in closet. The house was barely within their means; in order to make their mortgage payments without dipping into college or retirement funds, they’d sold Elio’s car, Elio’s vintage guitar, and a large fraction of Oliver’s stock portfolio. High-stakes poker, musical instruments, and a honeymoon were all outside their budget for the foreseeable future.

“I’m ready,” Elio whispered, and Oliver locked the door.

Chapter End Notes
I know most of this fandom seems to have decided that Oliver comes from a rich family, but I think he's got "middle-class striver" written all over him.

Camille Paglia is a dissident feminist academic whose works include "Sexual Personae" and "Vamps and Tramps." She's a pretty fiery personality, so being trapped in an elevator with her would be quite a story. I'm dying to know what she thought about CMBYN, because one, she's Italian-American; two, she thinks the age of consent should be around fourteen (!); and three, gay men and gay culture are some of her primary influences.
Tease

Chapter Notes

You guys are going to hate me. This is the first half of the big smut scene, which will be concluded (probably from Oliver's perspective) in the next chapter.

“I’ve heard Miranda’s Paglia story before,” Oliver says, turning towards Elio. “It’s long and it’s entertaining, so I think it’ll be a while before anyone will be looking for us. Come here.”

_We didn’t see each other for twenty years_, Elio thinks as their mouths meld together. _You got married twice and I got engaged once. We both had children. I learned a new instrument, moved to a different continent. You rose in your field and published four books. We didn’t see each other for twenty years, but that night in my apartment, you still knew exactly how I liked my cock sucked, and you sucked it as though you had never stopped._

“Are you going to be good and listen to me?” Oliver murmurs, tilting Elio’s chin back to kiss his neck, and Elio smiles at this definition of being good. “Because you’ve been – ” One of his hands skims over Elio’s cock, and Elio moans. The anticipation of whatever Oliver plans to do to him is making him achingly hard. “An irrepressible little cocktease ever since I got home from work.”

“I offered to get you off in the shower.” It’s a disingenuous protest. Oliver could have fucked him senseless against the shower wall and Elio still would have suggested they meet during the party. He needs Oliver to dominate him tonight, for so many reasons – because Oliver in a tuxedo turns him on, because this party has been an emotional whirlwind, because he’s been trying to make a good impression all night and now he just wants to forget it all and think of nothing but obeying Oliver. And because Oliver is his husband – his _husband_ – and there’s nothing to stop them anymore. _I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine._ Oliver Weiss-Perlman, Elio Perlman-Weiss. _Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine._

“I found the picture you left me, by the way.” Oliver steps back and takes it from the outside pocket of his jacket, looking as though he’s trying not to laugh. His canine teeth and his beard remind Elio of a wolf. “You know, when people talk about cock rings, that’s not what they mean.”

“I tried a cock ring once.” Long weekend with Michael at his uncle’s Adirondack cabin. “It gave me a rash.”

“I take it you don’t want to add one to our collection of marital aids.” They keep two plugs and three dildos – _yours, mine, and ours_ – in a locked drawer in Elio’s nightstand.

Elio shrugs. “I don’t know. I could try again.” He leans forward and rests his forehead on Oliver’s chest, feeling the pump of Oliver’s heart.

_You stopped writing to my parents and I was afraid you were dead. Complications from pneumonia, after a long illness, one of the usual glosses on the truth. Loving father and husband. Shiva to be observed at such-and-such a place. I imagined you in a coffin with your secrets laid bare on your skin. I searched online and found you, but that image still haunted my dreams._

_You walked through my door, healthy and alive and beautiful, and when I looked at you I thought of_
“You have me up here against my better judgment,” Oliver says, his breath warm in Elio’s hair. His hands reach for Elio’s backside as the picture falls to the floor. “You absolutely cannot do this again, do you understand me?” Elio nods. “I want to hear you.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” Oliver squeezes the curves of his ass, then lightly slaps one side. “Get undressed. I’m going to watch you.”

There’s an armless, upholstered chair against their north wall; as Oliver sits down, there’s something arousingly arrogante about his smile, and the way his legs are spread wide. As though, instead of a professor, he’s a closeted frat boy who’s about to fuck a shy undergraduate’s mouth, come on his face, and then toss him a box of tissues before saying, thanks, man, that was great. I’m gonna have to owe you one. Elio takes off his jacket, feeling exposed in a way that’s both nervous and exciting. “Are you going to get undressed too?”

Oliver shakes his head. “I don’t need to. You do.”

Elio’s head feels light as his breath seems to die in his throat.

The air is cool and smells faintly of semen, maybe from his mess in the bathroom, maybe from their unwashed sheets. For a moment he thinks he hears a muted noise from down the hall, as though someone is in the bathroom by the stairs. He knows better than to ask what Oliver is going to do to him. They’ve been doing this on and off all summer and Oliver knows all his hard limits. No pain beyond the sting of a slap, or the tender soreness of being fucked too hard. No slaps above the neck.

Elio’s shoes and socks are beside the bed, and his cummerbund and bow tie have joined his jacket on the quilt. He owns three tuxedos for work, but this is the navy one he wears as a guest at summer weddings. “You started getting dressed while I was still washing my hair,” Oliver says, his eyes falling to Elio’s groin. “I looked in my underwear drawer and my silk boxer briefs were gone. I think I’m about to find them.”

Elio undoes the top of his trousers and pulls down the zipper. “Yes.” Their waist measurements are roughly the same now. He figures wearing Oliver’s underwear is a silver lining in the thirty-five-pound cloud.

“You couldn’t ask?”

“I think this is a community property state.”

“I think you have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

His shirt has buttons instead of studs, and his fingers stumble over each one. God, he needs this so much. The sky blue boxer briefs are the last thing to go and he stands in front of Oliver, naked and waiting.

Oliver rises from his seat. The only crack in his cool, measured demeanor is his cock, which is sticking straight out under his trousers in a way that’s almost comical. “Get on our bed and get on all fours, facing away from me.” Elio obeys, his right hand resting on the quilt patch that’s made from Oliver’s blue shirt.

I kept your shirt for so many years, Oliver. I brought it across borders, across an ocean. I saved it from boyfriends who asked to wear it and girlfriends who wanted to throw it out. I never wore it,
and I barely looked at it. But I kept it.

“Close your eyes.”

Yes.

The first slap to his ass is sharp, hard enough that Elio almost falls forward; the second lands just as he cries out. “Quiet,” Oliver says, and his voice is harsh, so harsh that Elio whimpers in spite of himself. *Punish me, Oliver. I’ve been trying all night to deserve it.* “The whole house doesn’t need to know that you’re a spoiled brat. Now hold still.” His hand cups Elio’s balls, holding them almost gently. Elio braces himself for the sting and grips the quilt; Oliver’s other hand slaps him sharply across the balls and he bites his lip. For a split second, Oliver pulls back and Elio waits on the bed, untouched. *Please, Oliver. Please.*

The fourth slap is a light swat to his inner thigh; the fifth is the same, on the other leg. “Spread your knees a little wider. Good.” Another slap to his balls, then fresh slaps to both sides of his ass. “Are you still clean from the shower?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s see.” Oliver’s tongue probes between Elio’s cheeks and Elio nearly screams, though not from pleasure. It’s the tickle of Oliver’s beard.

His body must have tensed, because Oliver stops for a moment and covers Elio’s hand with his own. “Are you all right?”

“It fucking tickles.”

“Let’s try you on your back. Hold your thighs against your chest – yeah, like that. Relax.”

The bed is oversize, and Oliver is oversize, and Elio, overpowered, feels as small as Alice from his mother’s bookshelf. *Eat me, Oliver, and I’ll drink you.* Oliver’s tongue is licking his skin without penetrating him, and Oliver’s fingers are kneading his ass; Miranda’s story must be over, because someone downstairs is playing the grand piano, again. They can’t spend all night up here.

Each swipe of Oliver’s tongue is quick and deliberate, as if he’s spelling something. Maybe he is. *Elio,* or *Oliver,* or the etymological roots of *fundament.* Elio’s about to ask if there’s a method to the thrilling madness when Oliver stops. His voice is rough with arousal. “That’s enough for you for now. Get on your knees.”

Elio sits up. “On the bed or on the floor?”

“The floor.”

There’s a throw rug by the side of their bed, which they don’t even bother pretending has anything to do with keeping their feet warm. The bed creaks as Oliver sits down, and Elio sinks to his knees, penitent and worshiper, remembering the first time he did this. *We came down from the attic and you asked me if I wanted to shower together before dinner. I could still feel the dried tears on my face and the dried peach juice on my cock. In the shower you washed me and I rested my head on your shoulder. Then I knelt down to do to you what you’d done to me. Is this what you want? you asked me. Of course it was. I had to have as much of you as I could. I had to consume you before you left and left me starving.*

*If I am gluttonous for you now, Oliver – if I suck you in your sleep, stroke your cock during lunch, pull your legs over my shoulders and drive deep into you night after night – it is from the memory of*
that starvation. I found other people to nourish me, and I loved some of them. But my appetite was never fully sated until you came back to me.

Oliver is opening the front of his trousers, and Elio reaches inside, his lips already parted. Their eyes meet for a moment as Elio wraps his fingers around Oliver’s cock and takes it out. The sight of Oliver, formally attired with his thick cock protruding from his perfectly creased trousers, is obscenely beautiful and beautifully obscene. Elio wishes he could stare for several minutes and commit every detail to memory.

Oliver’s voice is barely above a whisper. “Are you going to blow me or are you just going to look?”

Elio smiles and leans forward. With his lips puffed, he breathes a puff of air onto the swollen head, then sits back and smirks. There. Blew you. Your move.

“Damn it, Elio,” Oliver hisses, and Elio, triumphant, slips his cock into his mouth.
Oliver didn’t remember where he’d seen the painting. It could have been one of about a dozen art museums that his mother had taken him to when he was young. He didn’t remember Kimberley there with him, though she must have been; he couldn’t remember exactly how old he had been, either, except that he thought he’d been younger than ten. But he remembered the painting vividly. It showed the Binding of Isaac, and it had taken his breath away.

Abraham stood next to Isaac, holding a knife, but Oliver barely noticed him. Isaac lay on an altar, naked except for a white drape around his hips, and his arms were tied at the wrists above his head. His body was slender and his muscles were taut as he seemed to strain against his bonds. Isaac’s mouth was rosy-lipped and open; his eyes were at half-mast. He could have been in pain, or he could have been overwhelmed by the sight of the angel above him. Oliver couldn’t stop staring at the painting, and for some reason he didn’t understand, his fascination embarrassed him. He was glad his mother had gone ahead to look at sculptures in the next room. The museum was quiet that day and he was alone with the painting, alone before Isaac and the angel.

The angel was dressed in blue and descending from heaven, his hand stretched out to save Isaac from death. He was strong, glorious, bathed in light. He was going to release Isaac, to untie the cords at his wrists and lift him from the altar. He was going to take Isaac into his arms. Oliver’s face felt hot. When his mother called to him from the next room, he was both hesitant and eager to leave.

Later, he’d re-read the passage in the Torah. There was nothing about the angel untying Isaac, much less lifting him off the altar.

The night after the statue was brought up from the water, Oliver dreamed about the painting, Isaac’s bonds transformed into the bracelets on Elio’s wrist.
Almost as quickly as it disappeared, Oliver’s composure returns. “Oh, there you go,” he whispers, resting one hand on Elio’s throat while the other threads itself through Elio’s hair. “I thought for a minute you’d forgotten how to give a blow job.”

Elio shakes his head, moving Oliver’s cock from side to side. “Don’t get me wrong,” Oliver continues, smoothing Elio’s hair off his forehead. “If you needed me to, I’d be happy to teach you again.”

Elio can still hear Oliver’s voice from all those years ago, Oliver taking pity on him in the shower after he’d gagged for the third time. You don’t need to put it all in your mouth, Elio. Here, put your hand right at the base – there, like that – and just do whatever feels comfortable, okay? Yeah. Like that. Yes, yes, yes. Oh...yes. Oliver’s cock in Elio’s mouth is like a key in a keyhole – a satisfying fit at one end, though the keyhole wasn’t made to envelop the entire key.

How did you fuck me the first time without injuring me? You were so big and I was so nervous, and tense, and tight. Our only lubricant was your hand lotion. How did you do that, Oliver?

Oliver tastes like salt and pre-ejaculate. Within seconds he’s moaning softly, that low, masculine groan that Elio loves. He sucks Oliver’s cock with a slow, slack-lipped mouth, the way Oliver likes it when they’re relaxed in bed on a Sunday evening. Maybe they can’t stay up here forever, but Oliver’s been almost preternaturally patient all evening and he deserves some time and attention. Back, forth, up, down, lips massaging the head. “A little bit faster,” Oliver murmurs after about a minute. More tongue against the shaft, lips pursed. Oliver clenches a handful of hair and Elio closes his eyes, breathing deeply as he adjusts to the pain. It hurts a little more than he likes, but he’d rather take it and keep Oliver’s cock in his mouth than break the tension and tell Oliver to stop. Oliver is saying something under his breath, so soft that Elio can barely hear it – oh, or Elio. Someone downstairs is roaring with manic, drunken laughter. The rug is soft under Elio’s knees.

Would you like it if I dominated you one day, Oliver? If you came home after a long, tiring day at work and I shoved you onto our bed and tied your wrists to the headboard? I think you would. I think you’d cry out and beg for me to let you come, feeling the intense thrill of finally, finally giving up every inch of that control you hold so tightly. I’d make you surrender every last bit of it. Give me a few days and I’d let your phone battery die, hide your running shoes, feed you crepes and chocolate. You wouldn’t go to shul and your classes would wait for their graded essays with bated breath.

Footsteps pass outside their door. The bathroom is by the stairs. Nothing happening at this end of the hall, just Oliver Weiss-Perlman fucking his husband’s mouth. Elio’s balls are aching and his shaft is flushed red-violet. He can’t touch himself without permission and he isn’t allowed to ask for permission, because when they’re together Oliver likes Elio’s cock to be for him alone to touch. Back, forth, up, down.

Oliver’s entire hand presses more firmly against his throat, and the faint hint of danger makes Elio’s
blood race. It occurs to him that Oliver has made no promises about how this encounter will end. “I
think you’re going for an A-plus this time,” Oliver whispers, and Elio hears the amusement in his
voice. His own cock twitches, which is probably what Oliver wanted.

Their fantasy nights lately have centered around Oliver’s profession, with Elio as his wanton student. 
_Oh my God, you’re so hung. I’ve fucked professors before and you have the biggest dick of all of them._ Oliver finds this embarrassing, though not so embarrassing that he wants Elio to stop. _I hope we don’t get in trouble for this. Wait, are you married? You are, aren’t you._

Yes.

_What’s your husband’s name?_

_Elio. He’s out of town at the moment._

_Do I suck you off better than Elio?_

_Don’t flatter yourself. You’re average. I’m only letting you blow me because I’m bored._

Oliver’s breath is coming in short gasps now, and Elio reaches for his balls, wishing this wasn’t 
happening so fast. Maybe Oliver needs it to be fast. He thrusts his head as quickly as he can until 
Oliver grabs his shoulder – _yes, give me a sign_ – and his mouth is flooded, each pulse of semen 
shooting so fast that he can’t swallow it all.

Almost before his orgasm is over, Oliver takes out a handkerchief and wipes Elio’s face, and Elio 
thinks that never before in his life has someone cherished him so much.
I spent a lot of time trying to do this chapter from Oliver’s perspective, only to realize that Elio’s thoughts during sex were much more fun to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s after an orgasm, Elio has realized, that Oliver feels his most tender towards him, and the most at peace with the world. It was after an orgasm when he asked Elio to call him by Elio’s name, and after another when he held Elio close and murmured, you want to give me the best present in the world and say you’ll marry me? The Goodridge decision had come down the day after Oliver’s forty-fifth birthday.

Elio is still kneeling at Oliver’s feet, his head resting on Oliver’s thigh as Oliver strokes his hair. His lips feel warm as he struggles not to beg to be allowed to come. You need to learn a little patience, Oliver keeps telling him. Four nights ago he tied Elio to the bed with a necktie and brought him to the brink of orgasm before pulling back, leaving Elio moaning and desperate.

An irrepressible little cocktease, you said. Where do you think I learned it from? You told me to take my trunks off, blew me for five seconds, and shut the door in my face. You teased my cock every time you appeared in nothing but espadrilles and swim trunks that hugged your ass.

If there is a single ounce of mercy in you, Oliver, please let me come. I will be so good. I’ll stop by your office to suck your cock, or let you pick me up from work so we can fuck in the train station bathroom. I’ll wait for you naked in the garage so you can bend me over the hood of your Barracuda and take me from behind. Some night I’ll let you ride me on the living room floor, with the shades up and the lights off, and if you ejaculate on my face I won’t even complain.

Oliver leans over, examining Elio’s scalp. “You’ve got a gray hair.”

Elio lifts his head. “What?”

“Well, white, actually. Right here.” Oliver rests one finger on Elio’s temple, the slight touch feeling almost torturous. “Welcome to the club.”

The tip of Elio’s cock is wet. His balls feel like they’re going to burst. “Oliver?”

“Hmm?”

“I want to come.”

Oliver laughs and taps him on the chin. “And I want a husband who cleans up after himself when he jerks off in the bathroom during my faculty parties.”

Oh God, he’s going to have to plead at Oliver’s feet. “I need to. It’s starting to hurt.”

Oliver looks down at him, taking in the sight of Elio’s aroused body. “Then I suppose we’d better take care of you. Go lie on the bed on your back.”
Elio scrambles onto the bed, lying on top of their quilt; a moment later he sits up and moves, because something is rough against his shoulder blade. It’s the woolen patch made from the front of Oliver’s high school letter jacket: forest green with a white appliqued letter A. The pins for basketball and track are probably somewhere in Naomi’s house. *Class of 1975, because you graduated the spring after you turned sixteen. That means there should be a thirtieth reunion next year. Are we going?*

Oliver sits next to him, taking both of Elio’s hands. His softening cock is still hanging out of his trousers in a way that makes Elio want to suck it all over again. “You were so good,” he whispers, squeezing Elio’s fingers. “Once you got past your little ‘blowing’ stunt, that is. You realize there are going to be some consequences for that.”

The agony of waiting is excruciating. “Fuck, Oliver, I need – “

“Shh.” Oliver leans forward, slowly wrapping his hand around Elio’s cock; Elio squirms, trying not to cry out. “I was planning to give you a blow job, but you lost that privilege. Trust me, I’m suffering more than you are.” Their experiences have broadened and twenty-one years have passed, but sucking cock is still one of Oliver’s favorite things.

_You told me once about the morning after the first time you did it – how you woke up with the taste of a man still on your tongue, and you thought you might throw up. Where you were from, boys snickered about girls who gave head, as though they’d been tricked into something nasty. “Cocksucker” was what your friends muttered about professors they hated, or yelled at members of the Yale football team. You were a different person then. You’d never seen a foreign country, or studied antiquity, or fallen in love. You’d never considered that anyone could enjoy going down on a man. Back then, the people around you didn’t even call you Oliver. They nicknamed you Oz during your first week of Harvard, because someone noticed that your mother had stamped “O. Z. Weiss” on all your wooden clothes hangers. Your roommate drew a cartoon of you as the Wizard of Oz – the giant head, not the man behind the curtain – and hung it on the door. Oliver Zachariah._

_You weren’t Elio, and you didn’t know yourself._

_You wonder when you discovered how much power there was in taking the most vulnerable part of a man’s body into your mouth, between your teeth. I wonder when you learned the way you liked to be fucked, before you put a jar of petroleum jelly in my hand and taught me. Did it hurt your first time? Were you on your back or on your stomach? I hope he tried to kiss you. I hope you let him._

Unlike the stamped tin in the music room, the ceiling in their bedroom is plain white plaster. Some enterprising spider has spun a web across one corner. Oliver stretches out beside Elio, his other hand caressing the same balls he slapped not twenty minutes ago. “Is this good?” he asks softly, and Elio nods. “Okay. Tell me if I need to use lube. I want you to like this.”

_I know. You always have._

Oliver’s hands are gentle but deliberate, and Elio lets himself relax, safe in the knowledge that Oliver is going to take care of him. He just hopes he’s doing a good job taking care of Oliver – emotionally, as well as sexually. After Oliver’s letter arrived he’d read it ten times in one sitting, struck by the naked loneliness in and between the lines. *Everyone’s always liked you, Oliver. How can you be living like this?*

Oliver’s voice is low and husky. The pad of his thumb is on the head of Elio’s cock, circling the edge. “Did I ever tell you when I realized I loved you?”

Elio shakes his head. He knows when Oliver first realized he was attracted to him – the moment his bleary, jetlagged eyes took in the sight of Elio’s mouth. *Then I thought, oh, no. No, no, no. He*
knows, without being told, that Oliver’s feelings were serious by the time they kissed in the grass. But the moment Oliver realized he loved him, truly loved him? No, Oliver has never told him that.

“It was during our first time.” Oliver’s hand quickens and Elio jerks his hips upward. “You were lying on the bed. I took my belt off and nearly whacked you in the face, then pulled my shorts down.”

Elio’s breath is coming in gasps. He can revel in the pure eroticism of that night, now that it’s no longer tinged with the memory of the misery that found him days later. “I was so ready for you to fuck me.”

“Maybe.” Oliver leans closer, his mouth an inch away from Elio’s ear. “But then do you know what you did? You didn’t look down. You didn’t look at my cock. You kept your eyes on my face, and I was – God, I was amazed. No one had ever done that. You kept your eyes on my face.”

His grasp on Elio’s balls tightens; Elio can feel Oliver’s wedding ring, and he knows this can’t last much longer. His body is twisting under Oliver’s touch, sensing the wave of pleasure about to peak.

“Come for me, Elio,” Oliver whispers, and Elio obeys, biting back a strangled cry as his orgasm explodes.

*****

“We should have moved the quilt,” Oliver says, examining the patches as Elio reaches for a box of tissues. “Dry-clean only, right?”

Elio shrugs. “I think that’s what Marzia said.”

“It has to be. Part of it is wool,” Oliver stands up and stretches. “I think you managed to avoid inseminating it. Go rinse yourself off and get dressed.”

“How long have we been here?” Someone must be missing them by now – John, Genevieve, the inquisitors from the poli-sci department. Shane.

“Twenty-three minutes.” Oliver offers his hand to help Elio off the bed. “Let’s try to leave before it’s half an hour.”

In the bathroom, Oliver reaches for the antibacterial mouthwash as Elio turns on the water. “So,” Elio begins, doing his best not to laugh. “Your cock is so magnificent that you went through about ten sex partners before you found one who could keep his eyes off it?”

“That’s not what I – “ Oliver rolls his eyes and gives up, flicking a towel at Elio. “What am I going to do with you, hmm?”

Elio steps into the tub, one foot and then the other. “I have ideas.”

“Oh, I know you do.”

He washes quickly and gets dressed, pausing to let Oliver help him with his cummerbund and tie. “Do I look like I just blew you and then came all over my stomach?”

Oliver hooks the two ends of the cummerbund together. “Not in the slightest.”

“Do I smell like I just blew you and then came all over my stomach?”

“You look gorgeous and you smell excellent,” Oliver assures him. “We’re at twenty-nine minutes.”
He smiles, nudge Elio in the ribs. “Ready to go back to the ball, Cinderelio?”

“Ready.” Alice, Cinderella, and the Wizard of Oz. What a night this has been. Cinderella probably could have used one of Oliver’s foot rubs after running around in her glass slippers.

They leave the room together, not bothering to stagger their departures for the sake of appearances.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Elio really does keep looking at Oliver's face as the shorts come off. I noticed that and I thought it was so sweet.
Final Silence

Chapter Notes

This was meant to be the first part of a longer chapter, but the next part isn't done and I figured I'd post this.

Oliver’s father had spent the final months of his life in a highly-rated, Christian-affiliated hospice, where he hated the food, the staff, and the rules.

*My son Oliver, the college professor. Out of all the goys in the world, he sticks me with the Episcopalians. Branched off from the Church of England – Henry the Eighth, a wife-killer who couldn’t keep his schlong in his pants. What’s next, Church of O. J. Simpson?*

Oliver’s father couldn’t put his mezuzah next to his door, because it was against the rules to bore holes in the walls in the hallway. The food tasted like shit, he told Oliver. He’d gotten better vegetables from a soup kitchen. He had to listen to his TV with headphones, and the damn things always got tangled with the tubes from his oxygen tank. The head nurse kept assigning him this gal named Stephanie who looked barely older than Aaron. And if one more person talked to him like he was deaf, he was going to tell them what they could do with themselves. What did he need a highly-rated hospice for? The pain wasn’t so bad. If Oliver really wanted to be helpful, he could start planning the funeral.

*You take the day off work to come over here? After you leave, I want you to stop by the house and clean the gutters for your mother. Clean the gutters, and when I’m gone, have somebody come clean the carpets before the shiva. I don’t want to give those goddamn Beckers anything to sneer about. I sold them their first house and now they think they can look down on us from their mansion.*

*I had your sister bring over a few photo albums last week. The picture I want with the obituary is over on that table in an envelope. Who’s writing the obituary, you? Good. Your mother or your sister would overdo it with the adjectives. Put in the Bronze Star but skip the service medals. Any idiot who shows up gets a service medal.*

*You’re a grown man, you can live your own life, but just humor me for a second and pretend you still listen to your old man. I’m gonna give you one last piece of advice. If there is anything you can do to make it up with Julie, do it. That’s a good woman there. The day you married her, I thought to myself, that boy knows a good thing when he sees it. I don’t know what happened between you and I’m not gonna ask, but she’s the mother of your children. Anything you can do for the two of you to make things up, you do it.*

One Tuesday evening, Oliver’s father ate a small meal in his room and watched the news before Stephanie came by with his dose of morphine. When she checked him at ten o’clock, he was asleep, and when the night nurse checked him again at midnight he was dead. There were no confrontations or revelations at the end of his life. No one came forth with any secrets, and no one expressed any regrets. Maybe it was better to speak than to die, but with death assured, Oliver had decided to let his father stay in the peace of silence.

That was what he told himself, anyway.
Four months after his first divorce, when Oliver had known it was just a matter of time before he
gave in to temptation, he’d made a strict set of rules for sleeping with men. He didn’t do it less than
twenty-five miles away from Alfriston, which put Albany within range. He only had sex in his own
hotel room, and he only used his own condoms. When he left home, he left his checkbook and his
credit cards behind, which meant he paid for everything in cash. No dark, completely anonymous
cruising spots; he always chose bars, ones he’d checked out in advance. He only approached men
who couldn’t possibly be mistaken for less than eighteen. A couple of times, he’d had one-night
stands with fellow academics at conferences, but only if no one he knew was attending, and only if
he was several states away from home.

The men Oliver was attracted to were lithe, angular, boyish but not boys. When he went to talk to
them, he’d found himself falling back on the smooth, macho persona he’d put on in his younger
years, the one that had grated so much on Elio’s nerves. He’d sit down, buy them a drink, tell them
his first name but not his last. After about ten minutes of vapid conversation, he’d lean in and ask the
question, always the exact same question. So...what do you like to do?

God, he’d hated that part. It just emphasized that he didn’t have much time to find out, because a few
hours from now, they would be gone and he’d be hoping to never see them again.

Most of the men were blunt – mostly blow jobs, but I’d let you fuck me. Or, whatever you want, as
long as your dick is as big as your feet. The sex was impersonal, almost mechanical, and they all
seemed to be working from the same script. Fuck, yes. Give me your cock. Once it had been your
Jewish dick and Oliver, suspecting some kind of predilection he wasn’t comfortable with, had gotten
the guy out of his room almost immediately after they were finished.

When he was seven, he’d had chicken pox and Bubbe Essie had told him not to scratch the spots.
He’d scratched them anyway, feeling overcome by the compulsion, and afterwards they’d felt raw
and even more painful.

*****

“You definitely have a type,” Shane said, pulling an olive off the pick from his martini glass. “Pale,
curly hair, eats two desserts.”

“Yeah, and you definitely have a type,” Oliver retorted, smiling. “Bellenger College professors over
six-foot-three.” Now that he took the time to think about it – now that his mind was interrupted from
its thoughts of Elio, Aaron, Alex, Bellenger, therapy, the busyness of a wedding and new marriage –
he realized how much he’d missed Shane Lundquist.

You don’t have any friends you want to invite to the wedding? Elio had asked, and Oliver had
shaken his head. His friends from Harvard and Columbia were scattered all over the world, and none
of them knew this part of him; he hadn’t seen some for over a decade, or two decades. His friends
during his first marriage were mostly the husbands of Julie’s friends, and none of those connections
had been strong enough to withstand the fallout from the split. Post-divorce, he’d thrown himself into
his third and fourth books, most weekends consumed by packing a week’s worth of fatherhood into
two days.

Elio’s friends were all women, usually former colleagues but never ex-girlfriends. (Yeah, because
none of his ex-girlfriends will to speak to him, Oliver could almost hear Veronica say.) They’d met
him in graduate school, or worked with him recording someone’s demo, or suffered with him in
orchestra pits during a long, dull regional tour of *Phantom of the Opera*. Sometimes Elio forgot about them for several weeks and then hurriedly phoned them, spending hours wedged in an armchair as he caught up on their boyfriends and job woes and latest recreational reading.

“So,” Oliver said, leaning back in his seat on the couch, “let’s hear the story of Shane and Mark.”

Shane sketched it quickly – a chance run-in at a tiny movie theater showing *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, an invitation for coffee afterward, some subtle hints and an exchange of phone numbers before a first official date less than a week later. “We spent months taking it really slow – I mean, *months.*” Shane glanced around the room, then lowered his voice. “Some of his exes were guys with a lot of issues. Anyway, a few weeks before the school year ends, he tells me he’s going back to Savannah for the summer so he can stay in his brother’s guest house and work on his next book, and if he can guarantee me some painting jobs in Savannah, will I come with? I say, yeah, I’d love to, and I’m picturing something right out of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Dead hustlers and voodoo ladies and drag queens crashing debutante balls. So we pack up and go, and of course the most exciting thing I find in Savannah is the place where they filmed the bench scenes in *Forrest Gump*.”

Oliver grinned. “Not even a guy with flies tied to his shirt?”

“Nope. Lots of Civil War stuff and great architecture, though – oh, and the third-oldest synagogue in America. I thought about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” The olive was still between Shane’s fingers; he put it in his glass and set the glass on the coffee table. “And then I *really* thought about you, because you sent out that e-mail and Mark was totally stunned, and he wanted to know why I wasn’t stunned.” Shane pressed his lips together, trying not to smile, a facial tic that Oliver remembered well. When they were together, Oliver had kissed Shane’s mouth when he pressed his lips together. When they were together, Shane would have looked at his martini glass and said *olive for Oliver* before putting it in Oliver’s mouth.

“So I tell him, well, actually, Oliver Weiss and I used to...and his jaw just about hit the floor. The next day, he says we’re going to Charleston for the weekend so I can meet his parents. Later I find out it was so I could meet his parents *and* so he could pick up the ring. Our last night in Savannah, he proposes on the front steps of the guest house. There are actually magnolia blossoms and Spanish moss hanging on the trees.” Oliver laughed. “That was three weeks ago, and now here we are. What’s the story of Oliver and Elio? Elio mentioned you used to intern for his dad.”

Before Oliver could answer, he felt the couch cushion sink as Elio sat down on his other side. “I’m his one that got away,” Elio said, and took a sip from his fresh glass of wine. In the brighter light of the living room, Oliver realized just how much he’d tousled Elio’s hair. “He got me back.”

****

*You wrote “regret” five different times in your letter,* Elio had said, when his glass was empty and the dishes were back in the kitchen. *You told me once you didn’t want me to regret anything.*

His mouth, his *mouth*. The memories of that mouth – touching Elio’s lips in the grass, Elio’s mouth on his skin, Oliver’s cock sliding against Elio’s tongue. Three languages and a plethora of smart-ass comments. The whispers sometime past midnight – *Oliver*, and then *Elio*. Oliver’s heart was pounding. *I never said I regretted us*. And then, because that wasn’t enough: *I couldn’t regret us. I can’t*. If Elio touched him with that mouth, his heart would stop.
It was the fourth anniversary of his father’s death. *I told you to watch out for rich kids,* he could hear his father say. *I told you to watch out for queers.*

Elio’s lips were parted, just the smallest fraction of an inch. *Yeah, Dad,* Oliver thought, *you told me. You told me and told me and told me. But I’m a little like you, Dad. I got a little bit of your gift. When it comes to Elio, I remember everything.*

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