In A Strange Land

by MrsEvadneCake

Summary

Doom comes to Hawkins, Indiana. Population est. 30,000.

It’s cold, that’s all, and the breeze is kicking up. That’s why Steve feels the chill go up his spine like someone dropped an ice-cube down his back.

“Why wouldn’t I be real, El?”

“The Aboleth got you.”
Book One: The Thing On the Doorstep

*I had drifted o’er seas without ending,
Under sinister grey-clouded skies
That the many-fork’d lightning is rending,
That resound with hysterical cries;
With the moans of invisible daemons that out of the green waters rise

-H.P Lovecraft, Nemesis

“Once you get into cosmological shit like this, you got to throw away the instruction manual”
-Stephen King, It

The fishing hole was bigger than it should've been.

It had been augered then cut in an ungainly lopsided square big enough to land a sturgeon- which Scott Clarke happened to know for a fact were a riverine species and geographically very unlikely in a quarry lake. He would usually applaud the optimism but whoever had cut it had also neglected completely to mark it and Greg Wilkes- Sophomore English teacher and fellow occasional ice fishing enthusiast- had spent the first ten minutes of their expedition tracing the shape of the thing with reflective tape and swearing to god that he would track down whoever had done it and give them a piece of his mind all about the sacred trust and bond between fishermen to follow proper safety procedures of fishing holes no bigger than twelve inches.

It was an inauspicious start but Scott never let a bad start convince him that there would be a bad end.

Still, there was something about fishing the quarry after a freeze that wore a little. It was beautiful- the wonder and grandeur of nature and an optical illusion that made a man think he was alone in a great white nothing, three hundred foot white walls meeting white lake and white sky- but it was wonderful in a empty way that a poetic man would say makes the soul a little tired.

Scott- not a poetic man by nature- knows that it’s simply the effect of the brightness, the UV light that would cause photokeratitis-snow blindness- in the unprotected and exhausts the eye even behind his sunglasses.

“Do you know, I caught a *Lepisosteus osseus* here last season?” The code of two men fishing in general, and ice-fishing in particular was that it required a companionable silence at almost all times. Scott figured that by choosing him as a partner Greg was at peace with it only being enforced selectively. “It was very exciting- there’s never been another caught in this quarry. I sent the information to the DNR- thought maybe I’d get the funding to do a study- it must have been here for ages.”
“A gar? Was probably hiding under a decade's worth of beer cans.” Greg grumps into his scarf, obviously still in a foul mood about the hole in the ice.

“I try to instill a love of conservation into my students.” Ice-crystals shake from his mustache as he smiles sheepishly, “But I’m afraid it doesn’t always stick when there’s the option of chucking a beer can three hundred feet down a ravine.”

“Well, I’m sure you tried your best. Kids are natural sh!theads.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Like hell I don’t.” Greg snorts, “Not all of us are lucky enough to have your little AV Club, Clarke. These kids get to high-school and it’s like someone reaches into their head and flips a little ‘total asshole’ switch.”

“I believe that someone would be Nature, Greg. Hormones are a harsh mistress.”

“Nature. No shit. It’s like watching Wild Kingdom. I’m amazed they don’t kill each other. Fraternas acies alternaque regna profanis decertata odiis.”

“Fraternal warfare and alternate reigns... fought for in unnatural hate?”

Greg nods and chucks him on the shoulder with a gloved knuckle.

“Not bad, Clarke. And you better believe the regime changes are getting bloody. Someone must've put the Harrington kid in the goddamn hospital.”

“Steven Harrington? I remember him. Nice kid, if a little people pleasing.”

“You think they’re all nice kids, Scott.”

“They need someone to.”

Wilkes snorts again, obviously not convinced.

“Well, one of those nice kids beat another of those nice kids half-way to a subdural hematoma by the look of him.”

“God. That’s terrible. Are the police involved?”

“Omerta’s in effect. Smart money is on the new kid though, Hargrove,” Wilkes scowls, tests his line. “You ask me he's got a bright prison sentence ahead of him.”

“Hargrove? I have his sister in my class, Maxine Mayfield.” It had been wonderful watching Dustin’s group take her in- the sort of thing he got into teaching for in the first place. Her dedication to science might not be quite as keen as theirs judging by her grades but friendship is always a great gateway to shared interests- and she seems to smile a great deal more now. “I think they have an unhappy home life.”

“Alright Pollyanna. I’ll take the hint. ‘Open up your heart and let the sunshine in’ and all that shit.”

They do the rules of mid-western man-hood proud by spending an hour passing a thermos of spiked coffee back and forth in mostly silence while failing spectacularly to catch anything at all.

“Oofda- It’s going to be a bitch of a winter.” Wilkes finally says, bundling tighter and while Scott was more than happy to suffer for possible scientific discovery- Apsley Cherry Garrard had almost
died in the arctic for penguin eggs, after all- he'd be lying if he said he wasn't secretly hoping that Wilkes had had his fill of the ice. “Hey Scott, what say we let the *Lepisosteus* off the hook this time and go grab a beer?”

Thank. *God.*

“I think the DNR will forgive us, just this once.”

They pack up carefully- ‘*let no one say to your shame ‘twas beauty here until you came*’- as the old rhyme goes and go through the motions of telling each other that they’ll *definitely* get one next time and exactly how groundbreakingly massive it’s likely to be and Scott starts off, chair slung over his shoulder, pole tucked up under his arm.

It takes him a moment to realize that Wilkes is still back at the hole- staring down with a curious expression.

“If you dropped something I think it belongs to the *lepisosteus* now, Greg.”

“I think there’s something down there.” The man’s voice is confused, flat, but unconcerned. “I’m going to go take a look.”

“You’re going to what - wait!”

And Greg takes the step into the frozen lake as casually as if he were stepping off of a high curb.

“*Jesus, Greg! Greg!*” He knows he’s too late even as he skids to the edge on his belly and shoves a blind, questing hand into the freezing water, groping into the darkness while ignoring the logic and the physics of a grown man in a soaked parka swimming back to the surface in sub-zero water and the probability of Greg finding the hole again if he somehow managed it in favor of blind hope.

It couldn’t have been what it looked like. He couldn’t have heard what he thought he heard. It made no *sense*- 

*I think there’s something down there, I’m going to go take a look.*
Chapter Summary

The days right after Steve Harrington helps save the world are pretty much the worst days of his life.

So far.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“‘The basis of all human fears, he thought. A closed door, slightly ajar.”
— Stephen King, ‘Salem’s Lot

Born down in a dead man's town.

- Bruce Springsteen

“The cavern echoes with the cries of the party far below you as the Aboleth rises in front of them from the depths, its tentacles writhe and swing as it projects the knowledge of your doom straight into your mind.”

“We are so screwed.”

“You always say that.”

“It’s always true!”

“Steve’s got initiative, at least?”

“Yeah- except he split the party.”

“Shut up shitheads, I’m trying to listen.”

”- From the top of the cliff you are helpless to come to the party’s aid as it attacks!”

“And this is why you don’t split the party, Steve.”

“Helpless my ass, Wheeler. Look, I can summon a horse right?”

“There’s no path to ride down. It’s a two hundred foot cliff.”

“Yeah, but a horse weighs....what, around a thousand pounds?”

“Wait. What?”

“ I summon my horse over the edge of the cliff and drop it on your dickhead monster.”
“No- wait...”

“Holy shit.”

“You can’t just drop a horse off a cliff onto an Aboleth.”

“That a rule, Wheeler?”

“No but-”

“Horse. Cliff. Roll it, rugrat.”

“...It’s...bloodied.”

“Dude, you smoked it.”

“You asshole. I worked on this session for a week. That was supposed to be the dramatic climax.”

“Pretty dramatic for the horse.”

“Shut up, Dustin.”

The days right after Steve Harrington helps save the world are pretty much uncontestedly the worst days of his life.

So far.

Sure, he hadn’t expected a victory lap- you can’t exactly go around telling everyone ‘hey, assholes, a bunch of nerds and weirdos and one guy with great hair just saved you all from being eaten by gross alien dogs from another dimension, you’re welcome.’ but he had thought that he at least had some idea what happens when you’re a hero.

You save the world, you get the girl and you get some well deserved rest.

Well, they saved the world but the girl was already gotten by someone else while all he got was a severe concussion and an extremely spotty memory of what the hell had happened after getting back to the Byers’ house and what he does remember definitely wasn’t restful -

- back-seat of Hop’s car as it tears out of the Byers’ driveway. Sirens on, burning rubber- because he somehow ended up the last thing to clean up in a day that never seemed to end. He doesn’t know how he got there or why but a licensed adult is driving so he figures that’s good at least. He thinks he’s missing a minute. Maybe two. It’s a really disorienting, kind of unfair feeling. Especially twice in a night. It feels like someone is stealing them.

A blink ago everyone was finally together. Everything was good. The day saved and apparently staying saved this time and Nance is sweaty and gorgeous and looking out the window and the kids are all alive and no longer possessed and also completely uneaten and Joyce Byers, still red eyed and flushed from sobbing over Will is holding a bag of frozen peas to the side of his face as her sons curl up together on her other side because with mind flayers and demodogs and closing holes in the world he’s somehow ended up the only injured one. Which is...good?

At least it’s nice-really nice- to have been temporarily adopted.
“Hey. Remember...Halloween- when I was seven- you helped me find my house?”

“Yeah, Steve,” She says quietly, tilting his head up to ice his jaw, “I remember. Jim, I think we should-”

And then he’s pretty sure he doubles over and throws up on her lap. And the kids are screaming ‘cause yeah, it’s gross and they are just incredibly loud and then goodbye a minute, maybe two.

The flashing lights of the police car hurt like hell and they don’t stop hurting when he closes his eyes.

“Hop...” Nance is here you’re so beautiful oh god I love you I’m sorry I was a shitty boyfriend.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you.”

Did he say all that out loud?

“Just stay awake kid-”

He thinks Hop’s talking. Something about a head injury.

Oh no.

“Don’t let ‘em shave m’ head.”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me, Harrington?...That’s what you’re worried about right now?” -

Then poof. Nothing. Welcome to November 6th and shitty hospital food.

After the initial concern that he had a brain bleed and was going to stroke out and die was dismissed there hadn’t been much else to do except joke that he could officially put himself back in the running for ‘Least Likely to Die of Traumatic Head Injury’ in the senior yearbook, assure everyone that his parents were definitely home to take care of him for the next few days, and go back to his normal life.

So of course he had spent the week after El closed the Gate writing absence notes for himself in his dad’s handwriting and popping pain pills on the couch, working his way through the freezer for makeshift ice packs and watching Ripley’s Believe It or Not (and learning that there’s an evil shadow dimension filled with nazi monsters one hole in the fabric of space and one thirteen year old girl superhero away from killing everyone has made him lean more generally toward believe it side) and the ABC Movie and MTV and listening to the same records, over and over and over-

-Juliet, when we made love you used to cry.

You said I love you like the stars above I’ll love you till I die,

‘There’s A Place For Us’ you know the movie song?

When you gonna realize it was just that the time was wrong, Juliet? -

-until he was doped up and bored enough to finally make himself pass out. Which, besides making sure his sleep was dark and dreamless and guaranteed, had the added benefit that he could tell himself he didn’t leave every light on the first floor on on purpose- he just blacked out before turning them off.

The problems really started when the prescription ran out and suddenly sleep was something he had to work at instead of just sort of tumble gracelessly into. It became a chore that resulted in feeling more exhausted than ever as he woke up over and over in the night with so much sweat soaking
through his sheets that 3 a.m showers became a thing because it turns out that abject fear smells worse than the Hawkin’s locker room after practice.

He had given himself another three days to get over it and man up. Then he gave himself four.

But then the calls had started coming in and he let dad’s new answering machine get them. Nance, who told him that she had his homework for him, when could she drop it off and totally not just check up on him? Joyce, who finished the call asking if she could talk to his mom. Dustin, who begged to come over or have him come over his place or hey, come play D&D because they already made him an NPC, whatever the hell that means, but please come back because he has some really serious questions about his hair ‘cause the Snow Ball is coming up in December and also everyone thinks he might be dead.

Finally Hop called, swore if he didn’t stop ducking them and prove that he was alright he was going to go over there and take him in for truancy.

He was pretty sure by that point that he wasn’t alright, so that was a big ask, but hey, he’s King Steve, he’s practically an expert in faking it.

So he showed up that Sunday at the Byers with a ‘Sorry I Threw Up on You’ bouquet for Joyce, whose eyes were too big and expressive to actually hide the pity and concern when she saw his livid purple bruise collection but who really tried, and Jonathan who gave him a nod from the couch, looking as glad to see him up and around as he ever looked glad about anything.

He did it. Got it out of his system.

...Until fourth period gym class, December 5th. An hour enshrined forever in the oral history of Hawkins High School historians and the storytellers that pass knowledge down to the next generation scratched in the tan paint of bathroom stalls and graffitied in sharpie under bleachers as the official last day of the four-year reign of King Steve Harrington.

“Did you hear?” Nicole’s voice carries- not addressing anyone in particular just any and all interested parties because Nicole never met a piece of gossip she didn’t like, “Mr. Wilkes offed himself.”

“Like, a hundred years of reading those shitty, boring books he assigns?” Carol pops her gum as she lounges back on her elbows on the bleachers beside Tommy and of all the reasons Steve’s glad that he barely has to see the two of them anymore the noises Carol makes with her gum is a solid top-three contender, “I’d kill myself too.”

He wonders, as Reed makes a show of pantomiming hanging himself, tongue lolling in a way he must think is hilarious, what his own contribution to this lovely conversation would have been two years ago. No way would he have made a joke about it- probably- but he isn’t self-deluding enough to think he would have done anything but look mildly disapproving at best.

These might have been worst weeks of his life but he doesn’t miss two years ago either.

“Jesus Christ, he had kids. Shut the fuck up.”

Reed slouches into a confused, embarrassed stop and stares like Steve’s a new species he just found under a rock. Old hat for Tommy though.

“Don’t worry Reed,” Tommy leans in, whispering in an exaggerately secretive stage whisper, “Stevie-boy just does that now. Gotta show everyone how much better he is than us assholes.”

Fact was he hadn’t needed to hear it from Nicole to know that Mr. Wilkes was dead. He had known
because he’d somehow been drafted to be the one to drive the unusually quiet kids to the hospital to see Mr. Clarke, who had given himself a bad case of frostbite getting back to his car after it happened. The man had put on a smile for them and told an obviously concerned Will and a still-obviously-concerned-but-pretending-to-be-sarcastic-hard-asses everyone else that he’d be fine and wasn’t going to lose any of his grading fingers, and had chuckled when Dustin had given him the card he had made (“Did you hear about the man who got cooled to absolute zero? He’s OK now!”) and had recognized him—called him Steven and my goodness, how tall he’d gotten and shook his hand and thanked him for bringing the boys (and Max! He amended immediately) around because it had really made his day.

And when they had all said sorry about Mr. Wilkes he had looked absolutely lost.

“He’s just pissed ‘cause he looks like total shit.” Reed suggests. Pretty unnecessarily to be totally honest, though maybe specifying which of the fifty different ways he looks like total shit would have at least been a conversation starter.

“Yes, he does. Get beat up by your boyfriend again, Harrington?” They want to get a rise out of him but fuck Tommy ‘cause he’s already done with this day. He’s exhausted and he just got through with the giant stack of missed homework Nance had handed him that made him sort of wish he’d been eaten by rabid monster dogs.

Coach’s whistle puts an end to what was undoubtedly going to be a thrilling pissing contest as he gets them lined up for the rope climb and Carol shoots him a casual middle finger goodbye.

The rope dangles from the gym ceiling—bell all the way in the rafters ‘cause Coach White is kind of a sonofabitch and thinks a nice, humbling twenty five foot fall from grace now and then builds character. When he’s up to climb he leans back, gives himself three pull ups, plants a foot, and climbs away from the mat, fast for the top, the rope wrapped around his ankle for leverage and...

*He beats the flailing root tentacles things that try to wrap around his ankles and drag him- oh god drag him and the kids off somewhere for something holy shit holy shit holy shit- to death with the bat.*

*He took the lead - he’s good. He’s got this. Sure, he might be a little fucking concussed but everyone else is like, twelve, so he’s in charge and they’re in a hell tunnel populated by living roots, corpses, and roaming packs of monster dogs all of which want to eat them but he’s good. The bat’s great really-very effective- and he needs to save the kids.*

And he does. They set shit on fire and he manhandled them up the rope, Max first, then Lucas, Mike, and then...

*He knows in his bones that he froze. He had twenty seconds. It would have been enough. It would have been enough. He would have been vulnerable as he handed Dustin up the rope to the others but he could have made sure he saved him.*

*He was eighteen in a week. He didn't want to die.*

So he froze. Readied his bat like a moron and hyperventilated into his bandana.

*He’d hoped it was just one. Two. He could take a couple, give Dustin the chance to climb up.*

*Freezes even worse when it’s two dozen. Doesn’t pull Dustin up off the ground for another ten seconds of pure panic. Practically tosses him up the rope after that while uninterested demo-dog stragglers are still howling past his calves.*
No one dies. But it's not because of him.

“Harrington!”

“What's he doing? Why's he shaking?”

And when it's his turn, he grabs at the rope and knows that this place doesn't want to let him go. His feet stick, suck, like he's stepped in a huge wad of gum or like when a wave goes out and buries your feet in sand and he can hear the kids shouting because they can't tell what's happening, just that he's taking too long and there can always be another, hungrier, less distracted dog as he fights the mud and tries not to think about the roots wrapping around his ankle.

“Harrington!”

He pulls. Nearly loses a sneaker to whatever is pulling him down. Climbs.

And doubt sets in.

“Steve!”

He's left them. He's left them all behind. Climbed the rope. Saved himself and left them all because that's really who he is. A coward, always ready to run away. No matter how much he thought he might be more.

“Harrington!”

He can't breathe, can't move, can't think straight.

The dogs attack from above as he hangs there, helpless, tearing the kids apart as they scream for him to save them.

They're dead they're all dead. He's not going to make it out of the tunnels. He loses his grip on the rope.

Oh fuck.

Shapes form above him as he curls up on his side on the mat and tries to convince himself that he'll breathe again in a minute, his heart isn't going to explode and he isn't about to die.

“Oh my god-”

“-Totally freaking out.”

“Is he crying?”

“Harrington!”

“Omigod, he is crying.”

“Some kind of breakdown.”

“-fucked up-”

“Nurse- now, Harrington.”

“Billy said-”
Nicole is provided with an abundance of riches today and the rumor that Steve Harrington had some kind of mental breakdown spaz attack in gym class circles the school like it’s got wings. General agreement is that Reed does the best general impression of Harrington’s breathless panic but Carol’s got an edge on his expression when he had buried his face in his hands and curled up, gulping air. Billy Hargrove laughs until he can barely stand when the rumor reaches him. Nancy Wheeler skips fifth period searching the school for him. The king is dead. Long live someone else.

He doesn’t go to the nurse. Just finds an empty bathroom stall and spends fifth period math breathing hard into his knees.

But he’s good.

He’s good.

*He’s fine.*

The fact that he’s obviously *not fine* doesn’t have anything to do with why Steve Harrington shows up at the side door of the Wheeler house on D&D night. It also has nothing to do with wanting to be around a bunch of annoying dickheads (and also Will who’s neither) who are loud and weird but also the exact opposite of dead.

He goes because Dustin obviously won’t leave him alone until he comes to play their nerd game. That’s all. Hell, it can’t be worse than the time Nancy recruited him to play Monopoly with the Hollands. Shit, that was a depressing night.

But it’s somewhere around the third knock on the Wheeler’s side door that he starts to wonder if there’s such a thing as pre-regret because this is the most ridiculous thing he’s ever-

The door opens to Dustin Henderson wielding a spray bottle two handed like he’s the Dirty Harry of watering houseplants.

“We warned you not to come around... *Steve* ?” The kid stutters to a stop and Dustin doesn’t have what anyone would call much of a poker face so he can see the obvious lie coming a mile away, “Looking good buddy. Um, what are you *doing* here?”

“You left like, nine messages on my answering machine inviting me?”

“*You’re here to play* ?” Dustin’s confused expression drops into a disbelieving goofy grin, “Seriously?”

“Sort of. What’s with the spray bottle?”

“Oh. I thought it was *Mrs. Pinbacker*.” The kid says venomously before realizing that that explains literally nothing about the spray bottle, “Mrs. Wheeler mentioned that we play Dungeons and Dragons to Mrs. Pinbacker next door and she thinks it’s Satanic so sometimes when we’re playing she’ll come by with these *pamphlets* ?”

“But...the spray bottle?”
Dustin shrugs noncommittally, “Always worked on Mews.”

Oh yeah, he regrets this.

“How everything I learn about you guys is weirder than the last thing, you realize that, right?”

“I mean, it’s not a shock,” Dustin hooks a hand around his elbow, dragging him into the house in his wake, “C’mon, everyone is downstairs.”

For a year he had been a frequent visitor to the Wheeler house- helping out Karen in the kitchen to try to impress her, watching the game with Ted once or twice in the living room before deciding that he and Nance could always elope if they needed his blessing because nothing was worth that. He’d been in Nancy’s room so frequently and stealthily that he could probably climb the drain pipe blindfolded with one arm tied behind his back but no matter how many times he’d been there the basement had always been firmly established as Mike’s territory. Here there be nerds.

It looks pretty much exactly how he would have expected. Definitely smells it.

“Was it Pinbacker? Did you get her?”

“Guy’s you’re not gonna believe-”

He barely gets out a ‘Hey, pipsqueaks’ before he’s swarmed and questioned and informed that wow, he still looks like, super messed-up, and dragged by both arms to the busted old couch as they try to indoctrinate him into the great mysteries of their nerd game.

“We already made a character based on you who shows up sometimes and protects The Party,” Dustin says and he figures that it’s just that he’s demented by lack of sleep that makes him think that’s kinda great instead of super lame, “But there aren’t any baseball bats in Greyhawk so he fights with a mace but you can make your own character if you-”

“No...that sounds... good?” Probably? Who the hell knows because the board is is baffling mix of figures and little slips of paper with stuff drawn onto them and and blank squares and it definitely doesn’t look like Monopoly, “So who’s turn is it?...And uh...How do you know how many spaces you move?”

The nerds exchange a glance.

“Maybe watch for a while?”

Turns out the game is exactly as chaotic and shouty as the kids are and Wheeler is apparently in charge which seems like an absolutely terrible choice by everyone involved since Mike appears to be mad with power and actively trying to kill them all but apparently that’s how it’s supposed to be and the story Mike’s telling is interesting enough that he almost forgets that he’s spending his night watching a bunch of kids playing let’s-pretend in a basement.

“-The leader of the yuan-ti guards approaches. Though he was open to parlay last time you saw him, this time he’s mumbling to himself ‘It dwells in the deep darkness! You cannot wake it- it will destroy us all!’ and you know that there is no reasoning with him anymore as he shouts a battle cry! Roll for initiative.”

“Wait, why doesn’t Will just make this douchebag snake guy explode?” Really complicated let’s-pretend. With math, “He’s magic like El, right?”

“Like Jane.” Lucas mutters as an immediate simultaneous groan of ‘not this again’ goes up at the
“Yeah, whatever you guys know I’m right. It’s her actual name.”

“El. Her name is El.” Mike scowls out from behind his screen, “Why wouldn’t she want to be El? We named her El.”

“Because the lab that kidnapped her named her El even! Why would she want to be called that when she has a real name now?”

“Just because it’s on her birth certificate doesn’t mean-” The argument immediately devolves into three-way bickering as Will fusses idly with his little wizard figurine, ready to wait it out.

“Guys?” Steve tries.

“You didn’t even like her when we met her-”

“Hey, nerds?”

“You just don’t want to call her Jane because you’re still pissed at Hop-”

“Bullshit Lucas- it’s because-”

“Jesus Christ. Just call her Jane-El like she’s from Krypton, dipshits, who cares? Get back to fighting snake people.” The silence is immediate as all four kids stare at him, “What?”

“Like she’s from Krypton?” Lucas deadpans, “Just gonna drop that on us, dude? Krypton?”

“Guys, I think we have an alternate universe Steve,” Dustin says, squinting suspiciously at him, “What’ve you done with the Real Steve, Alternate Steve?”

Mike shrugs, “I say we keep the Steve that knows about Superman.”

“Oh shut up, Wheeler.” Think fast Harrington, “So what? I’ve seen Superman, okay? Christopher Reeve, Margot Kidder...Richard Pryor-”

They groan in abject disgust and write him off again but at least the wheels have come off of the argument about what to call the the actual superhero that lives in the woods of their town. Only Will is still watching him ‘cause that kid is either weirdly observant or fakes it well with those big eyes of his.

Or maybe Byers told him about grade-school Steve’s reading habits and the kid is on to him.

He shoots Will a conspiratorial wink that makes the kid smile a crooked, hidden smile and kicks his feet up onto the couch as Lucas moves his little figurine to fight imaginary snake monsters.

“Okay, Yuan-ti are my favored enemy so I’m going to-”

Apparently the snake guy is tough, but no match for The Party and he’s starting to see why the kids like this game. You can be a brave world-saving hero if you’re a nerd. If you’re already a brave and mildly suicidal world-saving nerd the monsters in this are fake and you can figure out how to beat them with numbers and spells and going invisible instead of praying like hell that a slingshot or nail bat or whatever insane plan you come up with as a normal person will be enough to hurt the wide-awake nightmares that are trying to kill you for real as you try to save the real people you love and the real world you’re all living in.

The couch isn’t exactly comfortable and his feet hang off the armrest but he’s bone-tired with about four hours sleep in two days under his belt and he finds himself nodding-off with Mike’s narration in
his ears.

“You proceed down the catacombs of the Forbidden City, the ceiling drips- drips-drips, foul smelling water onto the Party-”

“I look to see if there’s any secret doors.”

“Roll perception.”

“Modified twenty.”

“You see the outline of a passage and the wall opens. There’s something just ahead of you in the darkness-”

Twisting hungry tentacles coming out of the walls that shriek when you hit them like they’re attached to something massive and unseen squatting somewhere below, ready to pull everyone down. Faceless dogs with so, so many teeth. The rot smell you can chew. Air that’s bad. Not bad like an unopened crawlspace - fucking evil, bones and decay and floating spores. The dark. The kids.

The screaming.

It’s not real. Wake up.

No. Wait. They’re actually screaming.

The kids. Oh god.

“-We’re screwed, we’re screwed- ”

“Do something!”

“It’s gonna kill us.”

“Wait guys - Steve ? Steve!”

He doesn’t get to know what’s going to kill them because the game breaks up long enough for four no longer shrieking kids to descend on him looking terrified, because they immediately expertly diagnose that he’s having a heart attack and he has to headlock Dustin to keep him from calling for Nancy while also figuring out if he is in fact having an actual heart-attack because it certainly feels like he’s dying.

It only takes a minute to pass and earns him a chorus of ‘What the hell, Steve’s’ and he doesn’t actually know what the hell but he’s not telling these little dipshits that he was scared.

“Just a side effect of the meds,” He says, breath still hitching traitorously, “I’m fine.”

They’re kids. They believe him. Probably. Mostly.

God, what the hell is wrong with him.

“I uh...” He manages to steady himself, “Think I got it. Sort of. Mind if I play?”

The kids steer him to the table because apparently Sir Steve is already part of the campaign and all he has to do is jump in as they settle themselves like nothing even happened and Dustin hands him a figurine that’s apparently him.
It’s a little guy with a mace in a shit load of armor.

Sir Steve won’t ever freak out for no reason. Sir Steve won’t have nightmares- no matter what fucking awful thing he faces down. Sir Steve will always sleep a full eight hours, peaceful as a baby, even in an empty bed in an empty house.

“Roll initiative.”

“Okay, nerds, lemme show you how it’s done.”

Dustin’s good.

No. He’s great. It’s going to go great.

He’s not nervous. At all! He is one hundred percent confident because the Party has a plan and when the Party has a plan it works out. Plan to distract the Demodogs? Worked out. Plan to cure Will? Worked out. Plan to stop the Mind Flayer once and for all? Worked out. Plan to get Steve to come to D&D with them- totally worked out. It was basically what they did.

“Okay, so I’m going to say the part about unlikely friendships, saving the world, coming together like the Avengers-” He kicks the kickstand off of Starley and yanks him out of the bike rack, walking him beside Will and his bike that isn’t named Shadowfax for some reason.

“Justice League.” Will says with certainty.

“I thought we went over this. The Avengers have reserve members. Steve is one of our reserve members.”

“Yeah, but he knew what Krypton was.”

“Fine. All of us joining together like the Justice League in spite of our differences.”

Will nods, “- and then we give it to him.”

“Aw, isn’t that sweet Bobby, little fucker is gonna propose.”

The body collides with him from the left- a completely unexpected full check that snaps his teeth down on his tongue and sends him crashing into Will in a tangle of limbs and bikes. His arm scraped the pedal, gets twisted up in the spokes of Will’s back wheel and Will makes a pained sound as two bikes and one Henderson land more or less on top of him in an awkward pile.

“You gonna cry zombie boy? That what you’re gonna do?”

The Zimmerman Brothers. Sonofabitch.

The sad part is that the Zimmerman’s are probably the least shitty people to mess with them. They haven’t threatened them with a switchblade or tried to make them throw themselves off a three hundred foot cliff or attempted to run them over going seventy on a backroad. They just push them around and steal their shit like normal not-psychotic jerks but it’s still so ridiculously unfair because the Zimmerman’s are only even alive because of them. There should be a rule- you save a town from getting overrun by monsters and you get a free pass from being bullied for life.
Unfortunately no one made that rule.

“Leave him alone, assholes.” He scrambles to his feet and positions himself in front of Will- not that he can do anything to really help except get his ass kicked first but maybe beating him up will tire them out? Or they’ll get bored? Or something? This is isn’t a great plan.

“L-leafth him alone, atholes aww.” His lisp isn’t even that bad anymore. He just bit his tongue like thirty seconds ago. God, it would be nice if these people would find more constructive outlets for their aggression because he’s not even in High School yet and this is already old, “You his boyfriend, retard? He your boyfriend, zombie boy?”

“Wow. That was clever. You’re really clever.”

He’s not a hundred percent sure if Bobby is smart enough to get that he’s being facetious but he is strong enough to lift him off his feet by his collar so he has that going for him at least and Charlie Zimmerman is hefting Will off the ground by his knapsack as he struggles to keep hold of it because the Zimmerman’s wouldn’t know a SuperCom walkie from a hole in the ground but they’ll definitely smash or steal whatever they find that looks worthwhile.

Case in point -the fingers on his collar tighten as Bobby shoves a hand into his pocket and it’s gonna be goodbye lunch money and weeks worth of quarters, “Let’s see where they’re keeping the ring.”

“Hey, shitheads!”

Steve is tugging his sunglasses off as he makes a beeline for them and it’s sort of amazing what a little change in inflection can do because the same ‘hey shitheads’ that’s been getting followed by ‘what the hell are you doing in my car’ or ‘if one more person quotes Star Wars I swear to Christ’ ever since D&D night suddenly sounds like it’s going to be followed by a lot of negativity and a nail-bat, “The fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Charlie drops Will first, nearly knocking him off his feet again and Bobby lowers him slowly, making a show of brushing him off as Steve stops in front of them.

“Hey- Harrington-”

“Don’t Hey Harrington me, Zimmerman,” Steve looks annoyed, tired, and definitely ready to punch something because he squares up against Bobby and even though Bobby is like, four years older than them Steve is older and a couple of inches taller, “I know you get easily confused since they left your dumb ass back a half dozen times but just because you’re seventeen and still a freshman doesn’t mean you get to beat up thirteen year olds.”

Bobby smirks, putting his hands up in sarcastic surrender.

“What do you want, Harrington?” Charlie sounds tough but he takes a step back as Steve rounds on him.

“Bobby got dropped on his head one too many times as a baby- what the hell is your excuse, Charlie? Answer better be I’m a cowardly little fuckface or you’re failing this pop quiz.”

“What’s your problem man? You their fucking babysitter or something?”

Steve snorts a humorless little snort at that.

“Yeah, consider me their fucking babysitter, Zimmerman. You want to screw with them, you go through me first,” There’s a moment of consideration as everyone involved weighs the pros and cons
of maybe doing just that and as far as Dustin knows Steve has been in two fights with human beings in two years and he got his ass kicked both times but he still wouldn’t put money on anyone else because Steve is super brave and honestly a little on-edge scary right now.

It’s no surprise that Bobby and Charlie blink first- they don’t start any fight they could lose

“Whatever, man.” Bobby mutters looking proud of himself as he adds a not very creative, “Have fun with your little faggot friends.”

Steve just puts his sunglasses back on and turns to them like Bobby and Charlie aren’t even worth his time.

“I’m giving you a ride home, dipshits, grab your bikes.”

The smart thing would be to book it straight to Steve’s car but there’s absolutely no way Dustin is missing a possible once in a lifetime opportunity and Bobby and Charlie look like they’re gonna choke on their own tongues in frustration as he gleefully flips them the double-bird behind Steve’s back before righting Starley and making a hasty retreat.

“You still think you’re such hot shit, Harrington?” Charlie- suddenly brave again now that they’re half-way across the parking lot- shouts to their backs, “Someone’s gonna grind you out like a cigarette.”

Assholes .

Of all the topics that Dustin knows about- and it’s not braggy to say that’s a lot , just fact- ‘cars’ isn’t really one. All he knows about Steve’s is that Lucas would take it to the Snow Ball if it was a human, Max or no Max, and it’s the first thing of Steve’s that doesn’t look brand new or perfectly coiffed. There’s detritus inside. A Nut Goodie wrapper shoved carelessly between the seat and the console. An obviously much-played tape that had been eaten by the cassette player and optimistically preserved in the cup holder instead of thrown away. A necklace that he’s almost certain was Nancy’s wrapped around the rear view enough times that it doesn’t dangle. An empty bottle of Advil next to a full one and a small pile of balled up note-book pages at his feet on the passenger side that look like they had been an essay once before becoming trash.

The driver’s side door closes so hard that the whole car rocks as Steve practically tosses himself behind the wheel -all sharp edges and brittle concern.

“Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah,” Will says quietly from the back, “They do that sometimes.”

“Not anymore they don’t,” Steve says savagely enough that it’s obvious that a part of him that wishes he could apply the same solution to the Zimmerman’s as he did to those demodogs but he can’t without, you know, jail forever, so he just deflates a little and settles back in his seat. “Those assholes bother you again, you come to me, okay? You guys didn’t deal with... everything just to get hassled by some moron who can’t spell his own name without fucking it up twice and his douchebag brother.”

Some of the tension seems to drain out the older boy when they nod enthusiastically, like he managed to satisfy whatever was eating at him by proxy and he goes to turn the key in the ignition, “Arcade or home, nerds?”

“Wait, we have something we need to say,” He had planned to wait until the party was together and his speech was finished but it seemed thematically appropriate to do it now- also who knows how
much longer the gift in Will’s bag will survive if they wait. “See, Steve. It may seem like we were just thrown together by total coincidence but really, it was fate.”

Steve’s expression goes sideways, “I was trying to give flowers to Nancy and you roped me into looking for your monster dog.”

“Demo dog and it was Fate. Capital F fate! A ragtag bunch of people, forming unlikely friendships, coming together to save the world. We were destined to meet! It was our origin story -”

“Did you just call me ragtag, Henderson?”

“That’s the wrong part of the sentence to be focusing on, Steve. Anyway...the point is...” He extends his hand back between the front seats but Will is still rustling around in his backpack.

“Sorry, it’s at the bottom of my bag-”

“This was supposed to be dramatic, Will.”

Steve looks deeply skeptical and more than mildly concerned, “If whatever is in that bag is from another dimension I’m killing it. I don’t care if you named it.”

“Don’t worry,” Will says way too quickly, “Dustin doesn’t have a new pet,”

“Oh, thank god.”

“D’art was an important scientific discovery. And no, I don’t have any scientific discoveries anymore because someone’s mom made me burn my chance at immortality in the backyard.”

Which really hadn’t been fair at all. Fine, maybe opening your fridge to get some frozen peas for Steve’s messed up face and having a demodog that he had sort-of-maybe-totally-forgotten about in the excitement fall out hadn’t been good for anyone’s nerves that night but he had said sorry-

“Got it!” Will presses the plastic into his hand.

There’s probably not much chance to salvage the dignity due the situation, but he straightens up and gives it a shot.

“Okay, so this was going to be more dramatic a minute ago and there was a whole part about the Justice League but,” He, breathes deep and holds the walkie talkie out to Steve, “Here!”

Steve blinks.

“What’s this?”

Adults sometimes, swear to god.

“It’s a walkie talkie, Steve. You use to it talk to other people when they’re far aw-”

“I know what it is , dipshit, why are you handing it to me?”

This...was not going according to plan. Maybe the plan being that Steve would love it so much that he would join the party and teach him how to be cool and get girls to like him and Dustin would teach Steve about Dune and Lord Of the Rings and Werner Nahm and comics and why Joust is inherently better than Dig Dug and it’s not just because Max doesn’t have the high score in Joust was all slightly optimistic, especially considering Lucas’ (totally bullshit and not even close to proven) theory that Steve only showed up to hang with them because Nancy would think it was
sweet and he wants to date her again, but Steve actually looks sort of upset.

“No seriously man, just tell me what’s happening- is it-”

Oh. Oh!

“No, no- it’s not for like, an *Upside-Down* reason. It’s just a gift. ‘Cause, you know, you’re our friend now, right?’ He’s just going to assume silence means *yes* - silence is a definite *yes* in this case. “So we figured...that you’re- sort of- basically like, an unofficial member of the party. So we thought you could be ...more official... And this way you can talk to us, if you ever want to...“

He trails off because Steve isn't saying anything, just looking down at the thing with an unreadable expression even though he had left him wide open for a sarcastic ‘ *why the hell would I want to talk to you nerds*’.

“Thanks,” Steve says quietly, turning the walkie over in his hands,, “I’ll give you the mon-”

“It’s a gift.” Will says, quickly, quietly, “From everybody.”

Steve still looks like he’s going to protest and he’s sort of tempted to go way off of script and tell him that it’s not even a big deal because the new Radio Shack manager was friends with Bob Newby and gave them his discount but something about the way Steve is looking at it makes him think that if it had cost them a dollar he would still think they would want it back.

He lays a serious, heavy hand on Steve’s shoulder, “Do you know how gifts work, Steve?”

“I know how...” Steve scowls and swats his hand away- obviously done contemplating whatever he was contemplating, “If you guys are planning to use this to make me into your nerd car service-”

“We’re not.” Will says earnestly enough that Steve nods and tucks the walkie into his knapsack with surprising care.

“Speaking of though...”

“*Dustin!*”

“What? It’s an appropriate segue!” He clears his throat, squares his shoulders and breathes deep, “IwaswonderingifIcouldgetaridetotheSnowBall.”

“Sorry-did you just ask me to give you a ride to your middle school dance?” There’s mild disbelief in Steve’s voice but it doesn’t sound like an outright *no*, “Your mom can’t drive you?”

“My mom is great but she can be... *really* enthusiastic sometimes, y’know?” As in there’s no way he’s going to get to the gym doors without being loudly and repeatedly called a *handsome little man* and while he appreciates the support it’s not quite the image he’s going for- not when he’s going to have a suit and great teeth and awesome hair. “So I thought maybe if I could get a ride with *you* some of your cool would kind of rub off. Like through osmosis.”

“My *cool*. ” Steve deadpans.

“Yeah!”

Steve doesn’t really look at him, just adjusts his mirror and turns on the car, tape deck coming to life along with the engine roar.

“Okay, Henderson, no problem.”
“-You don’t understand Steve this is the biggest night of my life and-”

“Dustin - he said okay.”

Steve drives Dustin to the Snowball.

His cool doesn’t rub off.

Or maybe it does and nothing out of nothing is nothing and he just doesn’t have any left unless you’re a thirteen year old dork and don’t know any better.

Of course it’s Nancy that salvaged the situation, because that’s what she does- she slow danced with Dustin and the rumor that some grade schooler pulled a high school chaperone at the Snowball makes it into the halls. Fact that it’s the kid’s best friend’s sister trails far enough behind that for a brief and shining moment Dustin Henderson becomes the talk of the Middle School and a person of future interest in Hawkins High.

When he sees him near the bike rack outside of the school the week after the dance, looking aloof and talking to Derek’s little sister Stacey and her friends half of him wants to tell him good job, buddy ‘cause he definitely looks like he doesn’t care. Other half wants him to run.

He knows he should tell him so.

He doesn’t though.

“Stacey Mancheski, huh?” He grins, shooting the kid a broad wink, “New girlfriend?”

“Nah,” Dustin says with a snort, watching the retreating girls walk away giggling, “They’re just acting like they think I’m cool because other people think it’s cool that Nancy danced with me. That’s like, two layers away from actually thinking I’m cool.”

The kid shrugs, sounding surprisingly cheerful about the whole situation even as a little gaggle of Freshmen girls smile at him- at least until Dustin gives them a quick Grrrrrrrr which does a fantastic job of taking care of that ‘acting like they think he’s cool’ thing, “See?”

He does. He sort of wishes he had when he was thirteen, “You’re a weird kid.”

“Maybe,” Dustin shrugs, apparently unconcerned by his weirdness, “But you think I’m cool,”

“That’s slander, Henderson,” He says sharply, “You can go to prison for that.”

“One, it’s not slander unless it’s a lie. Two you can’t go to prison for slander.”

“Um, I’m pretty sure you can. Otherwise it wouldn't be a crime.” Dustin just looks at him with side-eyed condescension that has Steve Harrington is An Idiot baked right in and that right there is the problem with being friends with a bunch of freakishly intelligent know-it-all grade schoolers- he never knows when they actually know things or when they just just assume that he definitely doesn’t and can get away with it.

“You coming to D&D tomorrow?” Dustin asks cheerfully with absolutely zero effort to keep his voice down. That would be the perfect start to 1985- whole school finds out Steve Harrington started playing some nerdy dice game with thirteen year olds.
“Not in public, dipshit!”

“I’ll take that as a yes!” It wasn’t. It wasn’t a yes. He’ll probably have shit to do, “You might want to watch out- Mike is still pretty pissed that you cheesed his Aboleth fight last week. Pretty sure he’s gunning for you.”

“Tell him to bring it on.” Sore losing little douchebag, “Not that I’m going.”

Dustin grins and gives him a wheedling nudge in the ribs, “C’mon, Steve. I’ll help you make a new character when he kills you again.”

“He’s not going to...look, tell Wheeler that a smart nerd doesn’t bite the hand that can bring his girlfriend his lame love notes.”

Dustin snorts like there’s a zero percent chance that he tells Mike that because Mike’s been particularly thirteen about everything lately, as Dustin put it and Dustin’s no fool, “I still don’t get why Hopper is letting you go up there and we can’t. We’re her friends.”

“Because you guys are trouble magnets and I’m a responsible adult,” Dustin looks at him and okay, that one was a lie you could see from space but still, thanks for the vote of confidence there, champ, “...And he thinks if anyone sees me sneaking off to some rundown cabin in the woods they’ll just figure I’m going to hook up with a girl. Not, you know, deliver groceries to a tiny superhero.”

The rest of the Party—oh god, they’ve got him calling them that now- The rest of the nerds were spilling out of the middle-school doors, waving Dustin back frantically while simultaneously attempting to convey what the issue was with some kind of wild semaphore that Dustin somehow understands.

“Gotta go Steve- emergency AV club meeting.”

The kid hefts his bag and dashes for the others, grinning, and for better or for worse he’s pretty sure he doesn’t really have to worry about Dustin suddenly becoming too cool for...well, literally anything.

“Are you going to D&D?” The voice behind him nearly makes him jump out of his skin in immediate panic as he spins with ‘dumb kid stupid joke absolutely not no idea what he’s talking about’ ready to spill out in a torrent but it’s just Jonathan and Nancy, looking amused at his expense.

“Real funny, Byers,” He scowls, “I’m going to put a bell on you.”

Nancy grins and leans in conspiratorially, “If you are going I should probably warn you, Mike is still pretty pissed about uh... the thing with the horse? Don’t get used to your new character, he’s out for blood.”

“Like I care.” Sore losing little douchebag.

Jonathan has one curious eyebrow raised, still watching his brother and the others retreating toward the middle school, “Was Dustin talking to Stacy Mancheski?”

“Oh yeah,” He smiles, “Sorry to break it to you Nancy, but I think you have competition.”

“Oh no, I’m heartbroken,” She sighs dramatically, lips pursed in a distressed little moue, “Hope he’s not letting it go to his head.”

“The opposite actually, think he’s happier than ever to be a weird little nerd. Are we sure that kid
“wasn’t made in a lab?”

She shakes her head, “I think he was made in Wisconsin."

The warning bell for sixth period starts clanging above the main doors, starting a slow, reluctant river of kids heading for class. In the early days after coming back he would have made up some excuse not to walk into the building side by side with Nancy and Byers even if it meant being late for class because well-

It’s strange, is what it is. But then again he can count the not-strange things left in his life with one hand now and he’s really starting to think that every person he had ever trusted to teach him the Way Things Are Supposed to Be was either extremely misinformed or an asshole.

His father had told him that life has no tied games, no compromises, no apologies and no room to be a sissy about it either. If you want to win someone else has to lose and Harringtons need to win whatever’s on the table.

Tommy and Carol had taught him that loving someone is something selfish and clutching. A delicate balancing act of how much you can do to them and what they can do for you- love as currency. Have a heart, actually care, and she’s bilking a sucker. If you do it right you get what you want and you’re safely apathetic to the possibility of her leaving. Hell, sometimes you don’t even notice when she goes. Somehow this only applied to everyone but the two of them.

Steve Harrington had taught himself he needed to hate Jonathan Byers because you can’t just let someone steal your girl. You call them a disgrace, try to prove that you’re better than them by being worse than anyone.

And everyone had taught him that there was no such thing as monsters.

And it was all wrong.

Tina and Nicole are passing out invitations at the door and it’s sort of fun watching Jonathan try to dodge them like a small forward trying to bypass the offense but Tina just seems to take it as a challenge and manages to press one against his chest.

“You guys get one yet?” She grins, flipping her side ponytail in triumph and passing them to him and Nancy, “It’s gonna be fun.”

After New Years Party at Nicole’s

Make Pour Decisions!

Sunday 1/07  7pm 140 Brinkley and Jackson  house by the lake

“Is there a rule about puns on these things?” Jonathan asks, dumping it in the trash to the surprise of absolutely none of them, “Did someone decide it was a requirement?”

“Yeah, Byers. The secret society of kids who throw all the parties decided last year. Keep up.”

“Who has a party on a Sunday night?” Nancy asks as she screws her flyer up into a ball that follows Jonathan’s into the trash. Well, looks like Jonathan’s not going to get any pure-fuel powered relationship confessions. Lucky bastard.

“Pour decisions, Nancy.” Jonathan deadpans, resting his arm carefully on her shoulders as they walk, expression wry, and he wonders sometimes how he can do it- just barely touch her like that-
because when they were together he couldn’t stop, “It’s a pour decision.”

“You secretly like it, you like the pun,” Nancy says with mock horror, settling easily against Byers’ side and she’s happy so it almost doesn’t make him feel like a hole opened up in his chest, at least until she smiles at him and well...it’s fine. He’s fine. “Are you going?”

“Nah,” He says quickly, shoving the flyer into his pocket, “Fuck it.”

It is 4:37 (Four three seven, El thinks) which means that he is late. By thirty seven minutes.

Thirty seven minutes is not late like Hopper is late sometimes, where it’s already dark (“I’m not that late kid, it just gets darker earlier in the winter”- a fact that she had to check over the walkie talkie with Dustin and was surprised to have confirmed) so that she’s bored and lonely and he has to bluster and apologize and reheat his meatloaf and pretend it tastes just as good that way.

She’s not really lonely, she tells herself. Really lonely is doing something wrong and SECURITY picks you up and puts you in a room alone until you can control yourself. Really lonely is looking forward to seeing Brenner after three days of seeing nobody at all. Really lonely is hugging him and begging him to take you away and being grateful when he takes you back to be lonely in your room. Really lonely is that you barely remember how to talk anymore because it’s been so long since anyone has asked you to say anything besides yes or no. Really lonely is vague memories of sisters that all disappear into the depths of the lab leaving you all by yourself, forever and ever.

When she’s lonely now she knows that Hopper will be home soon, complaining about Callahan and Powell and how much he hates mushy carrots. She knows she has a sister in Chicago. She knows that Mike is somewhere, lonely too. She knows she has friends, and even though they’re far away Hop compromised and let her have a walkie talkie, so they’re never really far and she’s never really lonely.

But Steve is thirty-seven minutes late when he’s not supposed to be late at all and she decides this entire thing is off to a bad start and she was absolutely right when she told Hopper that Mike and Dustin and Lucas and Will should bring groceries instead.

They hadn’t had a fight about it. Hopper still had glass in his windows, after all. But afterward Hopper had looked at her with a knowing expression under the brim of his hat and told her not to give Steve a Hard Time (a Hard Time means scaring someone with your powers or making them watch All My Children and The Young and the Restless for hours) because he was doing them a favor. A favor that Mike or Dustin or Lucas could have been doing.

But she wasn’t going to give him a Hard Time. She wouldn’t even tell him that he was late. It wasn’t Steve’s fault that he wasn’t Mike.

It’s not, for example, giving him a hard time when there’s a tentative version of Hop’s secret knock (at 4:39) and she slams the door open from her place on the couch with a bang that makes the older boy drop the bag of groceries in startled shock.

And she’s helping when she picks up a jar that went rolling away with her mind and puts it back in the bag as he scrambles to gather everything back up.

“Holy....” Steve whispers to himself as the pasta sauce deposits itself on top of a bag of frozen carrots, before giving a surprised, slightly braying laugh, “I knew you could...but...That’s so cool.”
Then he grins at her so openly she feels a little bad because even though she *wasn’t* giving him a *Hard Time* she... might have been intending to a little bit.

“Uh...Sorry I’m late- getting around the booby traps was-” She stares silently as he trails off, “Sooo- I’m Steve...but your d...Hop...definitely told you that already, right?”

“Eggs.” She says and the boy tilts his head in confusion before noticing the spreading wet stain on the grocery bag.

“Ah shit...well, there go omelets.” He sets the bag down on the kitchen counter and starts salvaging whatever he can from the carton, “Great start, huh? Uh...what should I call you? Jane or El or...?”

What *should* he call her? All the adults call her *Jane* and Mike and the party call her *El* but Steve looks too inbetween to be an adult and too much of an adult to be one of Mike and Party so she isn’t sure what the right answer is and the boy is shifting nervously as she watches him- then he just smiles again.

“How about you think it over tell me when you figure it out, okay, Supergirl?”

“Supergirl?”

Something about what she said must be funny because Steve snorts out of his nose, shoving a box of pasta into the cabinet, “Don’t tell me those nerds haven’t made you read comics yet? Didn’t you like, live in Mike’s basement for a month last year? I’m surprised they didn’t make you memorize them.”

“I couldn’t read then.”

He stops halfway to putting a bag of green-beans in the freezer, easy smile flickering away.

“Right,” He says it slowly, before putting on a smile that she’s pretty sure is a lie. “Supergirl is...this chick with kick-ass super powers. Like you. But if you don’t want me to-”

“I like it.”

He smiles a real, genuine smile again and she smiles a little back and decides she’s not going to give him even a little bit of a *Hard Time*, even if he isn’t Mike or Dustin or Lucas especially when he brandishes a white jar with FLUFF written across it in big letters and a box of Eggos, “Hop said you like waffles. I’m about to blow your mind.”

"*Blow my mind?*"

"Yeah like...it's...Okay, so slang isn't your thing right?"

"I have a notebook."

He considers that as she brandishes a pen- ready to add *Blow My Mind.*

"It's like, something is going to be so good it's crazy or so bad or...just crazy. Does that make sense?"

*Blow My Mind-* when *something is crazy in a good way or a bad way or in a crazy way.*

"No."

"Yeah. I can see that." He says sheepishly, before shoving a pair of waffles in the toaster, "Well, it's gonna be awesome."
Steve is different than Hopper because while Hopper is quiet Steve obviously needs to talk—even when there aren't things to say- and he fills the cabin with so many words that she can barely keep up in her notebook, going from topic to topic like silence is something to fight with. He tells her about Super Girl and about what the party is doing and vetoes her putting 'dipshits' into her notebook because Hop will kill him. He gives her a two page letter from Mike and she reads it four times as he tells her about how Dustin is making him play Dungeons and Dragons and that he hates it (which is a lie, but she doesn't know if it means she isn't his friend or if he doesn't know the rules about lying since he could even lie by smiling). He talks about everything in a way that seems to fill space and finally presents her with a FLUFFed waffle.

"So you're alone a lot, huh?" He says around a mouthful of marshmallow.

"Yes."

"Sucks, huh?"

She could tell him that it's alright. That she's been alone more and worse and she isn't really lonely even when the cabin is quiet and she watches hours tick away, sometimes counting them, sometimes just letting them disappear.

"Yes." She says instead because even though she knows that he doesn't understand really lonely, something in his expression makes her think he really does understand that being alone sucks.

"I'll try not to be late next time," He says clearing their plates away, "I mean, I'll also have to try not to like, step in a bear trap too so no promises..."

"Next time?"

"Yeah. If that's okay? Hopper asked-"

"It's okay."

“Well Weird voices? What do you mean ‘heard weird voices?’”

If there’s a sentence that could cause The Party more concern than ‘Will Byers is hearing voices’ Dustin really doesn’t want to know what it is. Maybe, ‘the new English teacher is Dr. Brenner in an unconvincing wig’ or ‘know what’s worse than one Demogorgon? Fifteen. Fifteen demogorgons.’ or ‘It’s a Tarrasque, roll for initiative’.

He should have known that Steve showing up for D&D was an Omen . One of those rain-of-frogs, river turning red, birds flying backwards incredibly improbable end-times Omens that meant everything was about to get strange again because it’s only friggin’ Tuesday and Will is hearing voices.

“Is it your dog telling you to murder ?” Max smirks, obviously not taking it nearly serious enough because she’s still new to the whole Upside Down thing and doesn’t get that the first rule of Hawkins is that everything weird is trying to kill them, always.

Mike knows though- knows that the rule goes double if the one weird stuff is happening to is Will-
so he's already hovering and looking concerned and ready to mobilize the Party to fight the entire Upside Down right now if they have to if Will is in danger again.

The fact that they thought it was over, that it's only been a couple of months since they fought Demodogs and helped El close the gate and at this rate the whole 'constantly fighting monsters from an alien dimension' thing was definitely going to interfere with their schoolwork and eventually their college application process since you can't put 'Saved the World. A lot.' in your essay seems to not be a concern to anyone but him.

“Not in my head.” Will rolls his eyes as he shoves his book-bag under the AV room table, “On the radio.”

Lucas blinks, “That’s sorta... where they’re supposed to be, Will?”

But Will is already firing up the Heathkit -which technically they aren’t supposed to do until Mr. Clarke is in the room ever since the last one caught fire and exploded but it’s not like that was really their fault- and he’s tuning it to-

“What the hell is that?” Mike murmurs as a unintelligible jumble of voices crackles out of the speakers, “Is it on the WARC bands?”

“It’s 14,873 MHz.” Will says seriously, “I found it yesterday.”

“But what is it?”

It sounds...like people, sure... kinda. But pitching wildly- speeding up, slowing down, like a massive cacophony of voices getting distorted by Satan’s own audio-tuning equipment. The way Dustin figures it they’re basically weird experts at this point so it’s a professional opinion that 14,873 sounds really weird.

“It could be a parasitic emission?” He chews a nail, scanning Mr. Clarke’s list of frequencies to try to pin down what it was supposed to be, “Overlapping with the normal signal?”

“Guys,” Lucas says, planting both hands on the desk definitively and leaning in, “We had a secret military installation in town for like, thirty years. It’s a numbers station.”

Mike scowls, “All the military guys are supposed to be gone.”

“Maybe they abandoned it and it’s just looping?” Will suggests, tapping his pencil nervously on the desk.

“Guys?”

“Maybe it’s the Russians,” Lucas grins, “Maybe they’re invading Indiana.”

“Being the Cubs is going to be way less cool than being the Wolverines if we have to fight Russians.” He mutters because there’s less than no question that if Hawkins was getting invaded by Russians they would be the ones that end up fighting them. At least Nancy could use a gun now.

“Guys!” They all freeze because Max is looking at them expectantly and more than a little like they’re all total dickheads, “What’s a numbers station?”

“They’re these secret spy radio stations,” Lucas says quickly, "Anyone can listen to it if you find the right frequency but it’s all in code. Sometimes it’s numbers or morse code or just noises...”
“So you guys don’t think it’s the Upside Down?” She sounds hopeful but she's still looking at the radio like it might open up into something from another dimension with a few hundred teeth.

“What, like, it’s broadcasting?” Lucas grabs the mic and swings it over, grinning at Max as he puts on his suaviest late-night DJ voice, “This is the Mind-Flaya comin’ at you on radio UPSD, bringing you all your favorite tunes, havin’ fun with the Demogorgon only on 14.87.”

It’s almost on cue when the voices drop back and a jingly, high pitched tune comes through—loud and clear.

[So let the sun shine in
Face it with a grin
Smilers never lose
And frowners never win]

“Interval signal, boom, it’s a numbers station just like Lincolnshire Poacher. Who’s king of the AV club? Lucas Sinclair.”

“Your Majesty.” Mr. Clarke’s cheerful voice comes from behind them, “Did I miss the AV club revolution?”

“Will found a creepy numbers station-” Dustin says as he grabs Mr. Clarke by the elbow and steers him to the radio. He could have said that they had found a creepy numbers station but he's nothing if not committed to proper attribution. “One-how do we decode it? Two- how do we know if it’s the Russians?”

“How do you, wait, what-?” Mr. Clarke’s eyebrows go up, suddenly intrigued as the voices on the station rise and ebb away again—too distorted to understand but definitely saying words, “Oh. Oh wow, that is pretty spooky, isn’t it? You found this Will?”

Will nods, “Yesterday.”

“14,873 MHz, hm! I don’t think this is a known number station frequency. Looks like you might have discovered something new!” Mr. Clarke grins widely up at them, “But unfortunately Dustin there’s no way for us to decode it—these things pretty much stay unsolved. The mystery is half the fun of them, though.”

“Seriously?” Unsolvable mysteries are the exact opposite of fun.

“Afraid so, they-” Mr. Clarke stops suddenly, eyes flickering to the radio like something specific caught his attention even though it just sounds like the same crazy babble as before, “Kids, I think I have to start closing up the lab for the day-”

“Can we borrow a tape recorder Mr. Clarke?” Will asks, “So we can get some of it down just in case they stop broadcasting?”

“Of course,” The man says, smoothing his mustache distractedly, “Just sign it out in the book.”

“Wait, guys,” Max says, leaning in close, “It was saying something—like full words.”

Will has his notebook out, pen at the ready.

“There’s... something,” Mike repeats, straining to hear.
“Down... there ,” Max finishes, “What does-?”

[Take a l o o k]

The sudden clarity of it makes all six of them jump, especially Mr. Clarke who lunges to turn off the radio and stands, rubbing his hands together nervously.

“Sorry kids, we’ll listen more another time. I really have to get some grading done- and uh, you know the rules about supervision, ever since what happened to the last Heathkit-”

“Are you okay Mr. Clarke-?” Will says carefully.

“Fine! I’m fine , kids.” And Dustin doesn’t think he’s ever seen Mr. Clarke look less fine , but the teacher ploughs on sheepishly, “Guess it’s just a little too creepy for me.

Mike’s brow furrows, “You love creepy. You said you watched The Thing like, a thousand times.”

“Well, yes but- another day, kids.”

Mr. Clarke’s still just... standing there staring at the radio when they leave. Bringing up the rear Dustin’s pretty sure he’s the only one close enough to hear the whine of the kit firing back up and the click of the microphone. He’s definitely the only one that hears Mr. Clarke’s quiet, plaintive-

“Greg ?”

They come back the next day to an Out of Order sign on the Heathkit printed in a shakier than usual version of Mr. Clarke’s careful handwriting and box of removed transistors half-hidden on a high shelf.

The new year comes and goes.

Steve goes to Nicole’s party.

He goes because, as always, the alternative is an empty house where the lights never fully go off because turned off lights don’t flicker warnings. He goes because the kids are busy with some AV club shit and a bunch of thirteen year olds being busy now impacts his social life.

He goes because Jonathan and Nancy are somewhere together and as if his brain betraying him with visions of monsters and nightmares and dead kids isn’t enough it also decided that staying home and jerking off will occasionally result in a very vivid mental image of that fact if he’s not careful so he really needs to get laid. He goes because if he makes enough attempts to be normal again one of them is bound to stick.

He goes to prove to himself that he might be in exile but he’s not social poison- he can still show up and put the smile on.

There are enough people putting their chips on him bouncing back that he ends up with a gaggle of the hopeful. Hell, Tina’s grabbed his ass twice and he’s pretty sure she wants to fuck him in the guest room, either because there’s only so outcast you can get with Harrington money or she wants to see what the fuss is about and he almost goes for it, because Tina has a heart shaped face and brown hair
and big, pretty eyes and he’s pathetic.

Nancy’s probably laid out on Byer’s bed, listening to Echo and the Bunnymen while he reads her Jack Kerouac and probably enjoying it a hell of a lot more than she would being here because it feels like he’s traveled back in time. Different house. Same party. Same music. Same people. Same shitty high-octane punch constructed from whatever everyone’s dads wouldn’t miss from their liquor cabinets. Same crap that never bothered him before.

Tina and Vicki have started passing a blunt back and forth. Vicki tells him that she, Ashley-something and Linda Baker are planning a trip to a cabin out by Morristown over winter break, says that he should come too and doesn’t mean it. He says that sounds great and doesn’t mean it either. He let’s Tina tilt his head to her and shotgun the smoke lazily into his mouth and he knows that this isn’t going to work, heart-shaped face and big eyes or not. He begs off. Tells them he’ll be right back but needs another drink.

He doesn’t come back but he drinks several.

-So you've had a little trouble in town

Now you're keeping some demons down

Stop dragging my heart around-

He dances with Samantha Edgecomb, ‘cause she wears huge smudges of dark eye shadow and looks kinda like Siouxsie Sioux and is about as far from Nancy as you can get and she humors him and halfway through the song she puts a hand on his elbow and leans in close and whispers ‘are you okay?’ into his ear.

He tells her he’s good. He’s good.

Sees through the backdoor that the party has spilled outside. Idiots stand on the little dock behind Nicole’s house and overhead toss paving stones as hard as they can against the iced-over lake trying to see who can break through it. Rolling cheers as the stones bounce and skitter away.

He thinks hazily that they should get away from the water and he doesn’t know why.

Doesn’t matter. He’s just drunk. Very drunk. Really drunk.

Really very drunk.

Hargrove shows up to much fanfare, courtesy of Tommy. Grins and runs his tongue along his teeth when he spots him but doesn’t approach, even to give him shit- just hooks an arm around Tina and heads for the keg.

One dinner plate and twelve punches to the face. Seventy five stitches. One severe concussion. One Nancy Wheeler screaming his name in the back seat of Hop’s car as he passes out again in her lap because she was convinced he was about to die.

No one cares. No one bats an eye. What’s a little attempted murder between classmates? He’s so dreamy, afterall.

“Bullshit” He tries it out. Rolls it around. Tastes it. Can see why Nancy liked it ’cause it feels damn good to say. “This is all bullshit.”

Must have said it louder than he thought, because some drunk asshole by the punch bowl- some other drunk asshole by the punch bowl- raises a glass and shouts a happy Fuck you too, Harrington!
- People running 'round loose in the world
Ain't got nothing better to do
Than make a meal of some bright eyed kid
You need someone looking after you-

He hates punch. He snags a bottle of tequila that someone left by the sink. Drinks from the neck. Can’t bring himself to care when the kid by the punchbowl cheers him on.

In August of 1984 Billy Hargrove had driven from Santa Carla to Indiana. It had been the best week of his life. Through Vegas in no hurry at all. Though the fucking dead of the desert with the Camaro opened all the way up on straightways that lasted forever. Through shitty towns with nothing but a school, a church, and bar that should have been a premonition and a warning. He blew past them like the devil himself- going a hundred and giving the small town girls something loud and hard to imagine to warm them up for their shitty small town boys.

Hell, even in those shit towns at least there had been no dad, no Susan, no Max. Just him and i-70. He had felt good, for a while.

He should have just kept driving. Past Indiana, past Ohio, straight on 'till morning and screw everything he left in the moving van, Max, Susan, and Neil included. But he didn’t- he stopped like a fucking moron and ended up in Hawkins, Indiana and this town? It sucks.

The cold? Sucks.
The party? Sucks.
The girls? Don’t suck nearly fast enough.
And Harrington? Definitely fucking sucks.

“Had one too many, Princess?”

The other boy tilts unsteadily without acknowledging him; just shoulders the wall for balance and it seems up in the air if he’s gonna manage to right himself or if he’s just gonna slide down and stay there. Looks like he’s trying to escape from the party- and he can’t even blame him because whoever’s in charge of the records needs to dig out some Metallica or something ‘cause the music? Surprise , it sucks.

The bruises are mostly faded but Harrington’s still got his mark on him from that night when he pounded his face in. A mottled, persistent stain of dark blood under his skin just to the right of his eye that he hopes is permanent- a nice daily reminder. Only war wound a rich little shit like him is ever gonna get. Something to show the grandkids.

Fact that Harrington doesn't fight back should mean he’s won. That's what winning fucking is - 'crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentations of their women’ etc. etc. Harrington lets challenges go unanswered. Insults go ignored. Whole school sees him shown up daily. He took his friends, he took his title and he has half a mind to fuck Nancy Wheeler just to prove once and for all that Ol’ King Steve is a tail-tucked little bitch.
Only problem is that Harrington doesn’t fucking care. Acts like he’s got bigger fish to fry as he ferries a bunch of thirteen year olds around town and pals around with his ex-girlfriend and the loser she’s screwing now.

At some point it stops being winning and it starts being jacking off because even when he’s completely wasted Harrington doesn’t give a shit, just shoulders past him into a side room-like he’s not even there—and doesn’t come back out again.

He’s shown ’em all that the emperor’s got no clothes and the emperor just doesn’t give a fuck.

“Asshole.” He’d forgotten Tommy and Carol were still there beside him, for obvious reasons-most obvious being that it’s Tommy and he doesn’t doubt every person on earth that ever met him except his bitch girlfriend would love to forget him. Harrington certainly has and in return the freckled little fucker is determined to pretend he’d never run with Harrington in the first place. “Pathetic, still pussy whipped and he’s not even getting it.”

“Little bitch must have a solid gold snatch.” He agrees and wonders if she’s here and that’s what set off his majesty. Wonders if she’s drunk enough that he could take her for a spin.

“What’s even happening with them? It’s so fucking weird.” Carol’s voice is getting brittle because she doesn’t like talking about Wheeler, “Think him and Byers do her together?”

“Yeah.” He’s distracted, eyes still on the door Harrington went through, “Like those Chinese finger things.”

“Oh my god.” Carol snorts into her drink, going boneless against Tommy, “Little Nancy Fingercuffs. That’s disgusting” Sounds like she’s imagining it though, and that disgusting isn’t quite the word for what she’s picturing. He gives her a suggestive grin that he’s carefully tailored to be just fucking filthy.

Tommy doesn’t do shit about it, ‘cept look a little shame-faced, ‘cause Tommy knows his place.

Least someone does.

[teach him]

Fuck it. Night needs a little entertainment and Harrington’s gonna be fucking hilarious.

“I have an idea. Don't let anyone in.”

“What’s up, man?”

“We’re gonna take his clothes, haul him outside. Show everyone what disappointed Wheeler so bad she started fucking Byers.”

Tommy’s wheezing snicker and Carol’s muffled giggle follows him into the room as he-carefully-closes the door behind him. Didn’t need to have bothered ‘cause Harrington is laid out on his back like he’s-

[an invitation]

dead to the world.

“Looking royally fucked up, your majesty.”

This- he thinks as he sidles up to the side of the bed and kicks the frame to see if he responds- is
what’s so goddamn infuriating about Harrington. Pass out at a party someone grabs a funnel and force feeds you the rest of the bottle you couldn’t handle, or you wake up naked in the backyard-dicks drawn on you in permanent marker and whatever else done to you if people are feeling creative and polaroids of the whole thing going ’round the school the next day. You’ve committed the cardinal sin of not being able to hold your liquor like a pussy and now you’re open season and everyone knows it. Not King Steve though- here he is- passed out like nothing could ever happen to him, eyelids flickering and making noises like a dreaming dog- polite little prick even took his fucking shoes off. Still acting like he’s got the status and people who give a single shit about him and that bad things happen to other people.

He reaches out, gives the universe one last chance to show Harrington it’s fucking preference and pinches his arm hard enough to leave a red mark. Thinks the kid’s brow furrows in vague concern but he sure as hell doesn’t wake up.

Sorry, Stevie-boy, guess the universe has a new favorite son.

When Steve dreams and remembers, he generally dreams of two things. On the good days he dreams of Nancy. Sometimes the dreams follow dream logic, like they have to get to first period in an hour but they’re accidentally in Germany and that’s a minor problem- the kind that get indistinct and disappear like smoke in the morning, leaving only the vaguest impression of her. Sometimes they’re so clear- so absolutely and perfectly familiar that it’s like traveling through time and he’s really sitting cross legged on Nance’s bed, quizzing her about precipitate or has her tucked up in his arms and he wakes up confused, like he was holding a ghost.

On the bad days of course it’s hungry tentacles that drag him down under the ground by his ankles and dead kids and and monsters that break out of the wall the minute he cuts himself shaving.

He never dreams of the two together. No matter how fucked up he is, he’s managed to keep Nancy out of the bad dreams. Figures it’s the least he can do for her.

So when he sees her, sitting on the edge of the bed, so soaked to the skin that her white blouse might as well be invisible, but with a slack expression so alien to Nance’s face that even though he’s eighteen and jesus, it’s been a while, it still manages to be the least erotic thing he’s ever seen in his life- he doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Nance?”

The change in her is immediate, like the time-lapse videos they watched in bio or someone filling in a coloring book in fast-forward. The strange, empty, grayscale Nance he woke up to seems to...self-construct. Wrongness in her is erased as quickly as he notices it, the slackness is gone, her drowned-gray skin blooms warm and soft and when she smiles at him it’s Nancy’s smile.

Her eyes aren’t quite right though. They’re beautiful, sure, but big and empty like a porcelain doll in a way that Nance’s never are and he feels like a fucking heel for letting his subconscious fail her that badly. Putting eyes like that on Nance is like scribbling on a DaVinci.

The room around them is dark and getting darker, like someone spilled ink on it and it’s bleeding into
everything.

“Did you jump in the pool?”

She just smiles at that, pulls her legs up onto the bed and slides into the empty space beside him, damp head resting on the hollow of his neck and-

Jesusfuckingchrist. That smell.

He nearly pushes her away on reflex, because it’s so clearly and so unmistakably the smell of the tunnels that he thinks the dream is going to take them there and he’d rather find a way to toss her out of it rather than drag her down with him.

But then it’s gone and all he can smell is Nance- soap and skin and floral shampoo. Crisis averted.

[Tell me...]

“A bedtime story?” He grins, fussing with the top button on her blouse, “Want me to dream Mr. Bear up for you, too? Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named Nancy-”

[About the monsters.]

“Seriously?” He lets his head hit the- well nothing. Or at least nothing he can see. It’s just him and her and...nothing now. “Can’t I have a normal dream where I’m naked in homeroom? Or I’m flying or where we’re just-”

[What if they’re still h e re-]

“They’re not. Gate closed. Everything died . Hop said that it rained dead demodogs when-”

[When?] She’s smiling, running one hand through his hair but there’s a naked, demanding hunger in her voice that makes him suddenly uncomfortable. [When what?]

“ When the gate closed.” He moves to push her hand away from him, his clammy fingers arresting hers, “Look, actually maybe don’t-”

She rubs against him like a cat, rolls over so one arm is planted on either side of him and those empty, rolling, doll-eyes are impossible to ignore in this position and something in the back of his mind struggles and screams like a rabbit in a snare.

“Nance- I don’t- Everything is fine- she just closed it. Now get off, okay? I just want to-”

[ Fine? Sick sad s c ared Steve]

“What- no-”

[The weak one on the edge of the heard. Y o u can’t keep anyone s a f e. Where is she?] 

“I want to wake up” He tries like hell, but there’s the small matter of way too much tequila and the fact that he didn’t technically decide to sleep in the first place it’s like trying to surface from deep water.

Water. He’s laying in water.

[ You can’t help anyone . Bring her.]
“No- look, why is it so dark?”

[Bring her. If you don’t bring her then the others will. I see them in your head]

Nancy plants a splayed hand on his face as she crawls up his body, shoving him down into the featureless blackness that stretches on and out and up and down.

He wants to wake up. He wants his bat.

[Do it]

“No! Get off of me-”

Nancy straightens up suddenly and the relief he feels to not have those eyes locked on him anymore disappears completely when she grins into the darkness.

It’s just a nightmare. It’s just a nightmare. Just a stupid, shitty nightmare. Just like the the flashes, the panics, just ignore it and it’ll go away.

Wake up. Wake up. Wake the fuck up.

[olly oll y ocean free]

He has no idea where the girl comes from. One minute there’s just the blackness, the next she’s stepping out of it, looking serious and pale and wearing an oversized Creedance concert t-shirt as pajamas.

“El? Christ, what are you-” Above him Nancy... twists like a contortionist to face the girl behind her and thin limbs crack and grind and crunch and make a sound like glass breaking as bone grates bone as easily and thoughtlessly as if she simply didn’t know that her arms and neck and spine don’t go in that direction.

“Monster.” El says, expression steely.

No shit.

[come closer]

“No. Go away. You don’t belong.”

Nance weighs a hundred and ten pounds wet, but his dream limbs are sluggish and heavy and Nan... the thing on top of him is an immovable object as he tries to pry her off. He can’t even shift her hand away as her fingers stroke and knead at his face and eyes with an obscene sort of blind exploration.

[He doesn’t want me to go away. You never want Nancy to go away. You’re so scared to be alone and I’m so very hungry] She smiles a wide smile. And then a wider one. There’s something there-

“Jesus - EL! What the FUCK is happening? Whatthefuckishappening!”

[y ou can stay with m e]
The girl throws a hand out, eyes narrow.

[I'll be e v e r y o n e]

“"Holy shit - get-"

[e v e n t u a l l y]

“- Away from him.”

It retrospect opening his eyes turns out to be a bad idea, because he’s disoriented and terrified and sweating cold and all being awake tells him about where he is is that someone put it on a turntable and set it revolving at max RPM as he feels something soft settle over his legs.

Also Byers is here. So. There’s that.

“-your problem, freak?”

And Billy Hargrove. So. There’s that too.

“My...? What do you think you’re doing?”

“Stealing his clothes...just a joke.”

“Yes, really funny. You need to leave.”

Steve can’t say he really has a good idea of what’s happening. He’s sick, can barely sit up, apparently is no longer wearing pants (quick check under the duvet that Byers just tossed onto him confirms it and he tugs it tighter around his waist) and his sweater is half off of him, dangling from his left arm. Everything seems to be happening elsewhere, swimming, swaying, underwater.

Water? Something about water?

He leans over the side of the bed, wretches what feels like a frankly unfair amount onto the pink carpet- clear, at least, like he’d been drowned, just water and bile and tequila.

Must have forgotten to eat.

“ What did you think I was doing-?”

“- just want you to leave.”

“-supreme being...threefold-”

“What?”

“I said, are you saying I’m a fucking queer-?”

“No. I’m saying leave .”
“Maybe I shouldn’t leave him like this with you, Byers .... just screwing Wheeler ‘cause she has a body like her little brother.”

“I’m not asking.”

“You gonna make me?”

He wants to focus on the fight- tries to promise himself that he’ll remember it in the morning in spite of the fact that he’s probably right on the edge of blacking out again because both of them have handed him catastrophic ass-kickings and it would be like watching Mothra take on Godzilla.

....Which he will never admit to even thinking. Nerd kids are rubbing off.

And he’s got a pretty good idea of which way this is gonna go because Jonathan Byers hits like a freight train when he’s pissed and he’s pretty sure Hargrove was talking shit about Nance, so he’s pissed, and Hargrove doesn’t have any kitchenware to turn the tide with.

He focuses even as the room spins. Focuses until he can’t anymore and he has to put his head down again to try to steady it. He doesn’t know how long he’s out before Byers is hovering over him with a bloody nose looking deeply concerned and Hargrove is gone.

“- Need you to sit up, okay?”

God, his head apparently weighs several hundred pounds.

There’s an arm behind his shoulder blades, keeping him steady, propping him up, tugging the duvet tighter around his waist.

“Yeah, yeah okay.”

He doesn’t know how he got here.

Means that in the literal sense as well as the philosophical. He’s got snippets of it. Jonathan Byers helping him put his pants back on, looking furious enough that he remembers being concerned that it was aimed at him ‘cause last time he saw that expression Byers broke his nose and he remembers being relieved when he realizes it’s not. Throwing up again in Nichole’s azaleas. Trying to walk into the lake. Byers stopping him from trying to walk into the lake. Getting manhandled into his car. Nothing after that until pulling into his driveway and he sobers up enough to tell Byers he can’t go in like this ‘cause his parents are having a dinner party and his father will kill him. Literally kill him over the after-dinner drinks and if he tries to climb in his window he’s gonna break his neck. Rest is a bit of blur- at least until he makes Jonathan pull over ‘cause no matter how drunk he is he’s not vomiting in his BMW.

So now here he is- sitting on a swing in McCarren park, forehead pressed against the cold chain waiting to see if he’s going to throw up for the fourth time and being babysat by his new girlfriend stealing guardian angel.

Figure’s he can plant a flag and get his name in the history books next to Columbus ‘cause he’s discovered Rock Bottom.

“You okay?” Byers twists idly on the swing beside him, letting the chains cross and uncross.
“Yeah. Never better, man.”

Jonathan has never been much of a talker and Steve really isn’t the mood to drag it out of him so only noise is the music filtering out of the open passenger side door of his car.

- times they are a-telling

And the changing isn’t free

you’ve read it in the tea leaves, and the tracks are on TV

Beware the savage jaw of 1984-

Byers must carry a mixtape around with him in case of emergencies, ‘cause this one isn’t his. Figures he can’t exactly complain, though, since Byers has watched him throw up three times and is spending his entire Sunday night making sure he doesn’t pull a Hendrix.

“So...You finally won a fight.” When Byers starts talking he doesn’t so much as lift his head as roll it, suddenly deeply suspicious because 1) Byers is talking and 2) it has a wheedling little sardonic twist in it. “Your liver never even knew what hit it.”

“Such...an asshole Byers.” Jonathan just smiles a little at that and gives him a small incredulous ‘hey!’ when he pushes his swing sideways into him so they click together like a Newton’s Cradle. “The hell were you doing at Nicole’s, anyway? Don’t tell me you went to a party.”

“Samantha called Nancy- said you were in bad shape and needed someone to pick you up.” That he was with Nancy at the time hangs between them but goes mercifully unsaid because he gets to add ‘interrupted Nance and Byer’s date-night’ to the geographical features of Rock-Bottom. “So I went.”

“Sam Edgecomb?” He thinks he danced with her? Hell, ‘Hey, let’s dance’ were probably the first words he ever said to her besides maybe ‘Do you have a pencil?’

“Yeah- that’s the one, uh, she’s... was apparently Kyle’s sister?” His blank, confused expression must invite elaboration, “The guy that got wasted and tried to race a train two years ago after senior prom?”

Are you okay? Now he remembers. Those were probably the first words she ever said to him and he sort of thinks that he should have actually talked to Sam at some point in the last four years. Add that to the list of mistakes and lost opportunities. “Nobody knew where you went but your car was still there...I thought maybe someone drove you home already or maybe your parents-”

Jesus, there’s a nightmare scenario.

“They don’t know about the whole ‘becoming a huge loser disaster’ thing. Side-effect of them not being around for more than a month at a time since like, 1977. Would really like to keep it that way.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re cooler now.” The look he gives him is enough for Byers to fold up like he’s trying to disappear, scowling, into his own shoulder blades, “Right, why would that be worth anything? Forget it.”

Shit.

“No - yeah. I mean.” He scrubs sore eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose before a sharp sudden twinge reminds him it's still tender. “Thanks. I mean thanks. For everything. All of it. And sorry about-”
Byers still has a crust of blood on his nose where Hargrove got him. Still came out a hell of lot better than he had when he tangled with him though. Better than he had come out after either of them.

“It’s alright.”

There’s silence again then. Might be his imagination but it seems a little more comfortable this time. He’s surprised that Byers is the one that breaks it.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” He says slowly, carefully, like he’s feeling him out. The ever cautious Elder Byers. “Tommy H. and Carol were outside laughing but- Jesus. When I walked in and you were fighting him off...I thought he was trying to kill you...again.”

“Didn’t realize it was...I was having a nightmare.”

“What about?”

Oh, you know, the usual kind of thing. My-ex-your-current girlfriend turning into a face eating monster. Oh, and a thirteen year old girl was there. You don’t read any Freud do you, Byers?

“Upside-Down bullshit.” Figures that covers it admirably and Byers nods in a way that manages to be silently sympathetic. Doesn’t doubt the other kid has his share of dreams where monsters bust through his walls and steal his brother away. “It was stupid.”

He wants to stop talking about this night. Forever, preferably. He rocks forward on the swing, plants his feet in the wood chips and stands up with only a slight pitching wobble.

“Where are you going?”

“Flatrock creek. Want to go splash my face. Try to sober up some more.”

“Wait.” Byers trails after him like a mostly silent shadow, hands buried deep in the pockets of his pea-coat looking even more narrow-eyed and concerned than he usually does, like he’s worried about him wandering off into the woods.

The moon is full and bright and he’s made the walk to Flatrock a hundred times before. Of course Jonathan already knows that.

The little creek is iced over, like every other body of water in Northern Indiana. A rock makes short work of if- at least enough to let him get a handful of cold water to splash on his face before he settles back against the bank. He’s started to feel more concerned about how bad his hangover is going to be rather than how bad he feels now and figures that counts as progress, at least.

Byers is idly strolling across the stones that gave the creek its name. Impossible jumps from childhood made trivial by seventeen year old legs as he mutters something under his breath with each step. It’s a shock to realize he still could have said it along with him if had wanted to.

“There's a place on Mars

where the women smoke cigars-

and the men wear bikinis

while the children drink martinis...”

(Two little kids. One on each side of the creek, Steven’s older at seven and has longer legs so they’ve decided that in the spirit of fair play that Jonathan makes the rules and the rules he makes are
indescribably complex- he marks borders and bridges and rocks that are actually crocodiles and not rocks at all and rocks that are portals to another world that freeze you and he decides that you can never be caught on the same rock when the rhyme ends or you push each other into the creek. Steven has joined this incomprehensible game and he has immediately stepped on a crocodile.

Jonathan stops short, considering, like he can’t physically go on before remembering the next line.

“\textit{And when all the kids are dead they put flowers ‘round their head.} Jesus Byers, how do you remember that? We were, what? Seven?”

“You were seven. I was six.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and strolls across the last couple of rocks silently, obviously embarrassed to have been caught, “Guess it just stuck with me.”

“I don’t know, man. Just do I guess.” He levers himself up and knows it’s a bad idea when he steps onto the rock, but he’s still pretty drunk and drunk Steve has decided it’s fine. “Is this one a crocodile?”

“Probably. Also, don’t, you’re going to fall.”

“Probably.” He says agreeably, lopping onto the next one, “\textit{And when the flowers die-} when the flowers die...C’mon Byers.”

Jonathan gives a grudging snort and strolls onto the rock beside him like he wants to be close for the inevitable wipe out. The hell with that. There’s only room for one babysitter here and Byers knows the rules. Never on the same rock when the rhyme ends.

“\textit{They put spiders in their eyes.}”

He twists around him, makes a frankly impressive arm-pinwheeling jump onto the long, slanted rock once and forever dubbed the Sinking Pirate Ship.

“\textit{And when the spiders make a web- you FREEZE- shit!}”

His feet go out from under him as he hits an icy patch with already impaired balance, lands on the frozen creek on his upper-back and elbows and slides to an embarrassed stop.

“Are you okay?”

He’s about to say he’s fine, because he might be sobering up but he’s still got the lucky bonelessness that protects drunk idiots from major bodily harm but not inexplicable next day bruising- \textit{about} to say it until he starts to sit up sees what he’s landed next to.

“What the \textit{fuck is that}?” He knows he should be embarrassed by how high a register his voice hits and how frantically his legs scramble but right now he doesn’t even care. Byers is off the rocks fast enough that he almost wipes out on the ice but recovers gracelessly. Ends up sliding up behind him on his knees and catches him around the shoulders and chest with one arm as their trajectories collide, lighter already out and extended past his head toward- \textit{the thing}. In the moonlight it was disturbing. In the lighter’s glow it’s fucking \textit{evil} looking- parts of it stretch white like an organic version of novelty Halloween spider webbing across cavities underneath as other parts bloat or collapse and it’s shot through with sickly yellow fan-like veining like a slime mold. Looks like it’s growing or \textit{melting}.

It can’t be from there. Everything from there is gone. Hop said. \textit{El} said and El doesn’t lie. It’s like a
thing.

She could be wrong though, right?

“Some kind of fungus or-” Byers’ voice sounds desperately hopeful and optimistic—especially for Byers.

“I’m still drunk and even I know that that isn’t fungus.” The steadying arm is still wrapped around him and he can feel Jonathan’s rapid breathing through his coat, see it in the puffs of condensation next to his face. Makes him feel better somehow that the other boy isn’t as stoic as he seems. “You must’ve been the worst fucking boy scout.”

“Dropped out.” Jonathan sounds vague and distant. A little like it might be his turn to be sick. He ducks out from under his arm, just in case.

“*There’s* a surprise.”

Byers is up on his feet, a little more unsteady than before, grabbing a long thick branch from the creek bank.

“Jesus—what are you doing? Yeah, *no*. No. Do *not* touch that.” Why does he even have to say that? How did he end up spending all his time with people who would even consider touching that? “Stay away from it, Byers, I’m serious, man.” He’s not staying away from it. “At least let me get the bat from the car?”

“I think,” He uses the branch to turn it slightly, “I think it’s a just a body?”

The fact that Steve Harrington now has a life where there’s a palpable sense of relief and a ‘just’ attached to possibly finding a dead body doesn’t slip past him.

“What happened to it being fungus?”

“Yeah. It’s definitely not. Good call.”

“That’s a human body?” He thinks of the hub in the tunnels. The rotting things that cramped underfoot as he sprayed gas around the place. Recognizable bits of animals— an antler here, a sharp toothed jawbone that he figured had once been someone’s dog stuck in a wall there and a scatter of human teeth that he kicked mud on top of so the kids didn’t see. He remembers the glint of a filling.

“It’s uh, really—decomposed—Excuse me.”

Jonathan walks past him and clambers up the bank. He’s so calm about it that Steve isn’t certain what he’s doing until he hears the retching.

He follows him up, sits on the edge, one foot thumping a rock as he swings it. He’s shocked himself more or less sober now, only thing left of the night is a miserable fluish feeling and the dull pulsing beginning of his hangover.

Oh. And a dead body.

“We need to call Hop.” He says when Jonathan finishes up and comes to sit down next to him in resigned silence. “There’s a payphone by the picnic tables.

“Yeah.” Jonathan agrees, but neither of them move.

“Draw straws?”
They use sticks.

He gets the short one.

This night sucks.

It’s two in the morning so he expects the machine to get it or have the pleasure of finding out what the notoriously not a morning person Chief is like when you knock him out of his hibernation at 2 a.m. so it’s a shock when Hop picks up on the second ring, sounding harried and very much awake.

“Go for Hopper.”

“Hi, it’s Steve- sorry that it’s so late but-”

“Jesus, Harrington ? How in the hell- nevermind, doesn’t matter.” The man’s voice is relieved, slightly frantic, “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Uh- no? I’m fine? Mostly fine.” He hears a relieved exhalation on the other side of the phone and a soft thump, like someone resting their head against the wall.

“I was just about to get dressed and head to your place- Jane’s been in a state all night. Got me convinced that something had happened to you.”

He presses the heel of his palm hard against his aching eyes. It was almost a relief that she had actually been there- at least it meant his subconscious hadn’t dreamt up El’s presence while ‘Nancy’ had been straddling him.

Of course it did mean he had somehow called a thirteen year old girl across space to come save him from a scary dream .

“Yeah- that’s my fault. I think I might have accidentally uh- pulled her into a nightmare I was having.”

“You what ?”

“Look, I didn’t know that was even a thing she could do . She just sort of- showed up.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the phone, then an annoyed grunt.

“Are you drunk, Harrington?”

“Kind of. Look, is she still awake? I’ll apologize.”

“Yeah, she’s still awake and I’m lucky I still have glass in my windows. Keep your dreams to yourself next time.”

“There’s something else.”

“What do you mean something else ?”

“I’m with Byers and we’re pretty sure we found a corpse. Actually- hoping it’s a corpse because if it’s not we have...way bigger problems.”

“You found what ? Where ?” And a third contender enters the competition for ‘Who’s had the worst night’ coming up from the rear with a telekinetic adopted daughter throwing a tantrum and having to go to work at 2 a.m.
“In Flatrock Creek by McCarren not far from the outfall pipe.”

“Goddamnit. Two of you couldn’t have waited until morning to find a dead body?” There’s a mild commotion on the other end of the phone, muffled swearing and the obvious sound of someone attempting to put on pants while standing up and not putting the phone down. “Semi-thaw last week must have sent them through the drainage system. What kind of state were they in?”

“Definitely going to be a closed casket.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry you had to see that, kid.” Says it like they haven’t seen monsters with faces that open up into tooth-flowers and tunnels full of rotting carcasses of indeterminate origin- like he didn’t have to smash the thing that probably made the corpse in the non-face with a nail-studded baseball bat, “You two just stay there. Don’t move and don’t touch it. I’ll be there in ten. Here’s Jane- two minutes then off the phone.”

“Two minutes. Steve?”

“Hey! Heya, supergirl. Hop said you were worried.”

“You’re safe?”

“Totally. Absolutely. So safe. Hey, I’m really sorry about that. It was just a stupid nightmare. Not real, right? Like you said.”

“No, Steve.” She sounds insistent and mildly confused, “Nancy wasn’t real.”

He’s never sure what the hell the girl understands and what she doesn’t. Parallel worlds? Check. Psychic powers? Check. Supremacy of Eggo Waffles? Double check. But after that it was really easy to hit weird gaps in basic understanding of things like ‘we can’t all locate everyone else from miles away’ and ‘shoelaces’

“Yeah, that definitely wasn’t- and uh, I’d really appreciate you never mentioning that part to anyone.” Because he’s pretty sure that there’s no apology that covers El seeing evil dream-Nancy on top of him and Hop and Nance will have to roshambo to decide who gets to kill him. “But you get that none of it was real?”

“None of it?”

“Yeah, it was just all in my head and...”

“But you’re real Steve?”

That brings him up short but he figures that he’s just still too drunk for abstracts. Maybe being able to like, astrally project makes ‘reality’ one of those gray areas.

“Yeah obviously I was real. It was all in my head and-”

“No. it wasn’t.” That insistent, frustrated tone again, like he’s the one not following along, “You’re real Steve NOW?”

It’s cold, that’s all, and the breeze is kicking up. That’s why he feels the chill go down his spine like someone dropped an ice-cube down his back.

“Why wouldn’t I be real, El?”

“The Aboleth got you.”
He and Jonathan have exhausted themselves and exhausted their already small supply of topics of conversation by the time they’re on the road back to his house, Jonathan’s tape is the only sound now and it’s not bad, although it’s no wonder Byers always looks like he’s got his own personal rain cloud if this is all he listens to. Steve makes a mental note to make him a tape of things he can dance to instead of just...mope to.

-All men have secrets and here is mine

So let it be known

For we have been through hell and high tide

I think I can rely on you-

Things with El hadn't gone great.

He’d still been on the phone with her and on his second dime when Hop got there, frustration growing as he tried and failed to explain that the Aboleth was just a stupid monster from D&D and it got his character, also named Steve, not him the definitely, totally, unquestionably real Steve, because Mike’s a sore-losing little douchebag.

She didn’t like that last part. Too bad. It’s true.

“-Because I dropped a horse on it.”

“You squished it.”

“Exactly. I squished it.”

There was a long expectant silence on her end.

“Are you shaking your head, supergirl?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, okay. Remember how we went over how I can’t see you doing that on the phone?”

Then Hop had shown up with a half-dozen cops and shot him a not-quite-convincingly annoyed ‘see what I deal with?’ expression and grabbed the phone away to remind El about two minutes before hanging up. He’d escorted both of them to his Chevy, sat them on the bumper and been only slightly begrudging about pouring them styrofoam cups full of coffee out of a thermos that he had clearly meant to have been his and his alone while taking their statement.

In the end it’s just past three when Jonathan finally drops him at home and he manages to convince him to take his car back to Chez Byers and not walk a mile in the cold at 3 a.m, which seems like a very specifically Jonathan sort of convincing to have to do.

He just has to get the bat out of the trunk first.

-And I'm feeling very sick and ill today

But I'm still fond of you-
Byers doesn’t comment on his spiky security blanket, just gives him a thump on the shoulder before getting back in and driving away- a silent, weirdly companionable coda to the night.

He lets himself into his front hall, bat slung over his shoulder, and almost immediately has a heart attack when a rattle and thump announce that something is in the living room.

“Steven?” The voice from the couch is sleepy and distant and he’s pretty sure he’s never been so glad to hear it in his entire life. He’s tired and his mom is here and he doesn’t even care if she smells the booze on him.

“Mom? Hey. I... forgot you guys were home.”

His mother sits up to look at him, wrapping one arm around the back of the couch and blinking owlishly. Her makeup is still on, curly blonde perm fuzzy and flat on one side from laying on it, and her sparkly black velvet dinner dress sags slightly as a wide padded shoulder slips down unnoticed.

“Steven, go back to bed. It’s late.” There’s a tell-tale rattle as she pushes something on the coffee table under a magazine with a bare foot. Right. She hadn’t been waiting up. Dinner must have been a fucking disaster if she was breaking out Mother’s Little Helper at 3 a.m. “Oh...Are you just coming in, darling?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Not feeling well, mom?”

Her smile gets conspiratorial and she lays her chin on her palm.

“Shhh. I won’t tell your father if you don’t.” Her voice is girlish and singsong as she puts a finger to her lips and it’s only then that she actually seems to start taking him in, eyes going narrow in hazy confusion, “Were you playing baseball?”

He slips the bat back behind his legs before surreptitiously stashing it by the banister.

“Earlier. Mom, I’ve had a just... incredibly shitty night. Mind if I sit with you? Just for a while?”

It’s not like he can tell her about any of it. About how he can’t sleep without an invasion of nightmare monsters. About the psychic little girl that lives in the woods with the chief of police. About Billy Hargrove trying to humiliate him and his ex-best friends since grade school hating him, truly hating him, enough to think it was hilarious. About finding a dead person like a last little memento of when Missing posters papered telephone poles from Hawkins to Kosiusko County and he had thought, down in the tunnels, that he was going to end up on one of them.

But he would really like to just sit for a while. Talk about nothing, like they used to when he was small.

He can see the ‘no’ on her face, because dad pissed her off somehow (that somehow undoubtedly being Julie aka ‘That Little Slut From Accounting’) and there’s still untaken Valium waiting for her under that Cosmopolitan.

“No one likes a mother’s boy, Steven. It’s 3 a.m. Go to bed.” Her sigh is quiet as she lays back down onto the couch, crossing her feet on the armrest and fumbling one-handed for the coffee table.

“Everything will be better in the morning. We can talk then.”

He’s halfway to the stairs when her voice rises from the couch, drawling and drawn out like each word takes supreme effort.

“Those children were calling for you earlier. Incessantly. We had to take the phone off the hook.”
Steve Harrington sits in his boxers on the edge of his bed, walkie talkie that Dustin gave him resting on pale, skinny legs.

He considers it silently then tunes to the right frequency, presses the PTT button on the side and whispers.

“Steve to shitheads, shitheads come in, anybody copy?”

There’s silence. Because of course there is it’s 3 a.m. and he’s being a total moron even thinking...

A small chorus of sleepy voices click into the channel, jockeying to tell him they copy. Jesus, had they been sleeping with them under their pillows?

“Read you loud and clear!” Dustin’s voice bursts through, sounding tired but overjoyed, “Steve, holy shit, buddy. El was saying that a freaking Aboleth got you. We’ve been on Code Red since ten! Over.”

He lays down with the walkie talkie next to his ear on the pillow like a transistor radio and listens as they take turns telling him what their increasingly complex and dangerous plans to find and rescue him had been (“Yeah, you guys are never doing any of that.”) and how Lucas had said they should just ride out looking for him as soon as El called in the Code Red but then they found out that Nancy (who had apparently not believed he had been captured by an Aboleth) had already gotten a phone call (which had confirmed that he had not been captured by an Aboleth and Dustin had lost two dollars worth of quarters to Max) and that his problem had been of the regular teenage and not monstrous variety so she had already sent Jonathan instead.

He’s nodding-off listening and they’re taking turns nodding-off while talking. Max must have fallen asleep on her push-to-talk button because the channel’s tied up with quiet, girlish snores coming down it for a good thirty seconds until she rolls off and Mike keeps jolting back awake mid-sentence.

”I’m fine. El got confused. All of you dipshits go back to bed...uh, over.”

There’s a chorus of over-and-outs and one, quiet, whispered stand-by from Will.

“Steve?” It takes him a moment to realize that the female voice that breaks through the static is Joyce, sounding a little wry and a little hesitant.

“Radio etiquette, mom!”

“Right, Steve, you’re home and safe? Over? Was that right?”

“Hi Joyce. Yeah I'm good. Didn’t Jonathan-?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s back. I, ah, just - I guess I still don't like losing track of the kids. Oh...Over.”

Right. Of course, Steve- you asshole. He’s drifting so any hope of an adequate apology for shangahing the older son of the woman whose kids have been in constant danger for two years is...optimistic at best.
“‘M sorry to make you wait up... really saved my ass tonight.”

“I meant you too, Steve. Goodnight, hun.”

He doesn’t remember if he even pushes the button as he mumbles a reflexive “Goodnight mom,” into the plastic.

Chapter End Notes

**Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage:**

While it isn't quite as creepy as what the kid's found 14,873 MHz is a real-life Number Station! But don't take my word for it- [check it out here](#)

For anyone that wants to fight an Aboleth themselves-the gang are playing the AD&D 1st Edition Module *Dwellers of The Forbidden City*. Don't try to drop a horse on it.
The Whisperer in the Darkness

Chapter Summary

Busy means trouble now. Busy means danger. Busy doesn’t mean missing lawn gnomes and angry wildlife and shit he can just shovel over to Powell and Callahan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The ocean is everywhere... If what’s around us is a picture, then this is what it's drawn on. Reverend Mapple had a word for it, the subjectile. Lottie said it was like if you could cut a hole in the air, black water would come pouring out of it.”
— John Langan, The Fisherman

Lonely is the night when you find yourself alone
Your demons come to light and your mind is not your own.

- Billy Squier

There had been a time when Nancy had loved school.

Or at least she thought she had. Everyone certainly told her she should. She was brainy, after all, and well-behaved. Every teacher’s pet from first grade on. She brought home her report cards and her father had paid attention long enough to be proud and her mother had put them front and center on the fridge, cooing about her beautiful brilliant girl. School shaped her, gave her purpose.

And school had been Barb. Eight hours of inseparability from the first time the red-headed girl helped her up after jumping wrong off the swing in second grade. School was swearing that they’d apply to the same colleges when the time came, that they’d be roommates. School was Barb hating it, knowing that there was a life after in a place bigger and better than Hawkins, Indiana.

But there hadn’t been. Not for Barb.

And now school is a ghost laid to rest and something that passes the time where you learn chemistry and calculus and have to pretend that you care even though you know the world almost ended. Twice. And none of your classes teach you anything about how a empty shadow world could exist on the other side of a film of reality as thin as the bark of a tree, which would have really been much more useful things to know.

The best years of their lives. That’s what High School was supposed to be, right? Even putting aside the things that were specific to Hawkins- dead friends and monsters and government conspiracies- she desperately hopes that whoever decided that was just being pessimistic about the rest of the years of their lives because if High School is the high point she should have let the Demogorgon eat her in the Upside Down.
Nancy Fingercuffs

It’s written on her locker in baby pink lipstick and letters big enough that the author had almost needed to continue it onto Ashley Williams’ locker door or hyphenate it.

She considers it critically. Maybe Fingercuffs should be hyphenated anyway? Or- no, it’s supposed to be two words.

It’s as obviously sexual as it is mildly baffling. It definitely sounds filthy but the sum total of her experience is limited to two boys so...

Two boys.

Oh.

There’s a giggle behind her, whispering voices, and the sound of someone smacking their gum.

No surprise that Carol is standing there with Nicole and Tommy H- what’s the point of trying to ruin someone’s reputation unless you’re there to see it after all- expression smug as she tugs a strand of Double Bubble out of her mouth and twists it on her finger before popping it back in as Tommy whispers something in her ear that makes her smirk.

“What are you looking at, Wheeler?”

They’re expecting her to panic and frantically wipe it away. Maybe get a little teary-eyed because people are staring as they pass by, confusion giving way to giggling realization as they work it out for themselves.

She opens her locker, puts her calc textbook inside, retrieves her purse and closes it again.

The giggling from the little group has turned into discontented muttering as she hunts through her bag, finally turns up a tube of red lipstick.

“What is she-”

She steps back, admires her handiwork.

Nancy Finger^#Cuffs

“Try proofreading next time. It’s only three words.”

She’s pretty sure Carol’s stink-eye follows her out into the parking lot.

It was only a matter of time.

Sure, they’re in High School. You don’t have the option to simply never see someone again after a break-up. Everyone learns to tolerate their exes to varying degrees-Roy Drayton watches Annie B. make out with Derek during their shared study period with exquisite teenage agony. Lynette Snell spreads rumors that Ben Schultz has crabs and that new girlfriend Marlanne Hansen is actually his second cousin. You cry in the bathroom and make a production of your break-up and when that’s over you hate or pine quietly and get on with having fifth period together.

But you don’t just...go on as usual, switching who sits next to her and kisses her at her locker like Jonathan’s pinch hitting.

You also don’t exorcise smoke-demons from little boys. You don’t know what burning flesh smells
like.

And you don’t sit in a interrogation room for two hours knowing nothing is stopping you from having a terrible, tragic ‘accident’ on the way back home.

After the first time...god she has to number her ‘Times They’ve had to go Toe to Toe with Hell Creatures’- Steve had just steered them to Jonathan’s table and sat, and people had talked, sure, but it was easy to shrug off, she had never dated Byers, after all, and Jonathan was weird and didn’t care if people talked.

Now though. Well. Talk is cheap when the story is good and they had almost infinite variations for being a good story. She can’t say that Nancy Finger Cuffs was the direction she had expected, however.

Steve's sitting in the parking lot on the trunk of his car, looking almost disheveled and generally downtrodden, sunglasses on against the light, sipping at a root-beer for his stomach and systematically dismantling a sandwich instead of eating it.

“Skipping?”

“Skipping.” He affirms, hungover expression miserable

“What'd the sandwich do to deserve that?”

He shrugs and mangles another piece for emphasis, “If I have to suffer, so does my sandwich.”

“Do you know what finger cuffs means?”

Steve tilts his head curiously and pushes his sunglasses down low on his nose, staring at her over the top of the frames with tired, bloodshot eyes.

“They’re a toy right? Like a prank?” He touches his index fingers together and pretends to try to pull them apart, “This thing. You trick a friend into putting their finger in one side and then you-”

“That’s what I thought.” She nods, watches confusion grow on Steve’s face as she doesn’t elaborate, eyebrows raised.

“Uh... why, Nance? Sort of early for April Fools.”

She shrugs, climbing up beside him on the trunk, one leg swinging slightly, heel thumping against the bumper.

“Carol wrote it in lipstick on my locker.”

Steve chokes on his root beer.

“Figured I’d ask you if it was- you know, a thing , since you have more experience. I assumed that she meant-”

“Yeah. I get it. Thanks Nance.” He’s already tucking his sunglasses into his jacket pocket and sliding off the trunk.

“Where are you going?”

“To tell Carol right where she can stick her fucking lipstick.”
She shrugs.

“Leave it. I don’t care.”

Steve’s expression twists incredulously, like she just told him she was planning on renouncing society and becoming a hermit in the desert.

“I care.” Because of course he does—“Takes three to tango in that lovely little scenario, in case you didn’t notice. It’s not just your reputation if that shit starts going around.”

“And you think the best way to stop that rumor is for my ex-boyfriend to go defend my honor, Steve? Really?”

The frustrated ‘then why the fuck doesn’t Byers do something about it’ is so clear in the twist of his mouth that she can almost hear it, because Steve has it ingrained in him down to the marrow of his bones that the way out of any problem involves movement, if not progress, and just doing nothing isn’t an option.

She gives him credit for not voicing it at least, because the answer is that Jonathan knows what Steve’s never been able to figure out—that she doesn’t need defending, honor or otherwise. Not anymore.

Luckily, as often as she may have said it Steve’s not an idiot. Not really. Because an idiot wouldn’t slouch back up onto the trunk, however grudgingly,

“She’s got some fuckin’ nerve.” He says, ripping a piece off of his sandwich with particular force, “The shit I could tell you about Carol, swear to god.”

“Just ignore them.” She shrugs, “Not the first time I’ve been called a slut.”

She feels his wince. It travels through him like an electric current and he looks a little shame-faced as he quickly changes the subject to Nicole’s terrible party.

It’s absurd that she forgets sometimes. Not Nancy The Slut Wheeler on the Hawk’s Marquee—she remembers that vividly, though she cares about if any or all of Indiana thinks she’s a slut less and less with every conspiracy and incursion of monsters from a nightmare world.

And she doesn’t forget that that was Steve.

She forgets this Steve is that Steve.

That Steve had been the cul-de-sac. The One Time Jock Working Sales. Steve had been two kids and PTA meetings and getting drunk on white wine alone at noon. Steve had been normal, so aggressively normal in the year after the fall of ‘83 that sometimes she could barely talk to him because as far as he was concerned it was over and he had put the Demogorgon away somewhere and Didn’t Think About It. Wouldn’t think about it and when she tried bringing it up something behind his eyes just shut down like she was hurting him.

It had felt like losing her mind and if it hadn’t been for Jonathan she would have started to doubt it ever happened at all.

She had needed it to be real. He had needed it not to be and by Halloween it was increasingly clear that Steve was running and he wasn’t turning back around for her this time.

Or at least that’s what she had thought. Thought his stupid mask was bullshit. Bullshit bullshit
bullshit and she had known that Jonathan was the right thing because her and Steve were hurting each other and she didn’t love him, couldn’t, not anymore. Not like this.

And then he had turned up again somehow, right when things were spiraling out of control of course, like he always seemed to do, with Max and Lucas and Dustin trailing behind and she finds out that he had spent the night saving the kid’s lives, fighting off half a dozen demodogs in a junkyard with the nail-bat he had kept in the trunk of his car for a year.

He tells her that it’s okay. Shitty boyfriend. Damn good babysitter.

She had wanted to cry, to scream, to ask him where he’s been, goddamnit, where was he hiding and why is he back now when she finally thought she knew where they stood.

It still wouldn’t ever work, still wouldn’t be fair- you can’t only love someone when they’re throwing themselves at abominations with a baseball bat. When it’s over she knows he’ll disappear again and turn back into Normal Steve when the danger passes.

But he hasn’t yet. She doesn’t know if the kids just don’t let him or if he’s made peace with it, or the worst possibility, he thought he had been doing it for her and he doesn’t have to now.

“- And I figure I owe Supergirl about a hundred boxes of Eggos. Did you know she could do that? No one tells me anything.”

“Why do you call her Supergirl?”

“Cause she's El and she has superpowers so it's like... Kara Zor-El?” He actually takes a bite of his sandwich but seems to regret it and goes back to mangling it, “Superman’s cousin?” he says it like it's something that’s common knowledge and not adorably lame, “Oh screw you Nance, what kind of nerd are you anyway?”

He flicks a piece of bread in her general direction, but doesn’t make much attempt to actually hit her with it which is his mistake because she has a reputation for accuracy to uphold. She snatches a piece and manages to bounce it off his forehead.

“Less of one than you, apparently.”

“Oh, nice, real nice.” He throws his head back dramatically, “At least I’ve never dressed up as an elf...”

“Oh that’s it, you know too much, I can’t let you live.” They scramble for projectiles and she’s about to start winging bits of crust at him when a shout echoes across the lot.

“Harrington!”

Billy Hargrove.

The boy is a nightmare. A denim wearing, mullet sporting nightmare that announces itself with the stink of Brut from ten feet away. He would be funny, a ridiculous parody of idiot masculinity with a patchy adolescent mustache if it weren’t for the fact that he was also absolutely insane.

And he almost murdered Steve.

She has to remind herself sometimes, when Tina and Pam are talking about his ass in homeroom. When Vicki is telling Annie L. about how tortured and romantic he seems. When Nicole is stressing out about if he shows up to her next party and wondering if she should invite Natalie because
everyone knows that she blew him in the locker room and she doesn’t want the competition. She has to remind herself or she starts to think she’s going crazy.

He almost murdered Steve.

She had been the one to hold him in the back of Hop’s cop car, feeling how his breath rattled in his nose and watching his gaze lose focus. Held him when he muttered that he loved her and she was beautiful and he was sorry that he was shitty boyfriend and she had been so horrifyingly certain that whatever had been barely holding together had come loose and that was goodbye.

He almost murdered Steve and according to the kids he had loved every second of it. He’d **laughed**.

When she was a child her father used to take her to the zoo in Fort Wayne, carried her on his shoulders to see the the grazing animals on the fake savanna. Had held her hand as she cautiously reached out to pet a goat and had sat her on the railing to look at the mountain lion.

That’s what stuck. That mountain lion. Even now, after hiding behind a tree from a monster in The Upside Down, after facing down the Demogorgon knowing one wrong move and they were part of the food chain- that mountain lion still comes to mind when she thinks predator - pacing endlessly, back and forth and back and forth in its enclosure, going crazy with confinement, every move a promise that if it got out, if you turned your back on it for a **moment** you were food.

Hargrove looks like that mountain lion.

“Disappear, bitch. Princess and I have shit to discuss.” Hargrove’s so focused on Steve that he doesn’t even bother to look at her until she doesn’t move, “You deaf Snow White?”

“Sorry, am I the Princess or is he?” She feels a little of the tension go out of Steve as he gives a shrug and a laugh.

“Well, I’m prettier so...”

“Says **who**?”

“Sorry Nance, have to face the hard truths-”

Hargrove doesn’t like his sudden invisibility **at all**. He won’t be anything but the center of attention, certainly won’t be **ignored**.

“Hey, you two want to work on your routine later?” He grins, runs his tongue over his front teeth, “You can practice with Byers if he can still talk when I’m finished with him.”

He had given Jonathan a bloody nose. Jonathan had put a dent in the drywall of Nicole's guest bedroom with Billy Hargrove’s head and something about it scared Billy enough that he had left it at that. Jonathan had curled up beside her and whispered that he could have killed him and he had **meant** it.

“We don’t have anything to discuss, Hargrove.” Steve straightens up a little beside her, “So why don’t you take your own advice and go.”

It’s a mistake - giving Hargrove exactly what he wants. He moves in towards the car to crowd him.

“Didn’t learn your lesson about giving me orders last time, **amigo**?”

“You going to beat me to death in the school parking lot?”
He would. She can see that up close because there’s something else besides that crazed mountain lion pacing.

Hargrove is scared. Cornered. It’s in the barely controlled energy, tightly coiled instead of explosive, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans like it’s all that’s keeping him from lashing out right now.

And the thing he’s scared of is Steve. Which all things considered doesn’t really make sense.

“We’re studying.” She sounds prim, even to herself, “What do you want Billy?”

He looks at her like he had forgotten that she was there again. The fact that she isn’t going anywhere seems to throw him because insults aren’t working and he almost can’t hit her. At least not here.

He seems to come to a decision, fear and self-preservation overcoming pent-up rage.

“Nicole’s.” He sways forward far enough that Steve leans back onto his hands, “What’d your little perv friend tell you?”

“Tell me?” Steve scowls, “I was there, I didn’t exactly need-”

“Freaks like Byers have sick minds, make up sick little stories. Makes them feel normal.” Billy grins, like it’s all really very funny if you think about it, “I just wanted to make sure we all know the score and you’re not spreading any rumors that I’m gonna have to make you regret.”

“I’d have to give a shit about you to spread rumors, Hargrove. Believe me. I don’t.”

Hargrove’s nostrils flare at that and his hands twist in his pockets.

“There’s two ways we do this Harrington-”

“Is one the hard way? I bet one is the hard way.” That brings Billy up short, “Listen. You hate me. I got it, believe me, I got it, loud and clear. Well, it’s your lucky day Hargrove because all I want is to never have to deal with you ever again. The school is yours. You’re king of keg stands and basketball and beating the shit out of me. You win. That’s what you want to hear right, that you win? So we’re done.”

She doesn’t doubt that that’s exactly what Billy wanted to hear, at least until the moment he hears it. Something about him deflates slightly, leaves him looking like someone left him on the wall at senior prom.

“I say when we’re done.” It should sound threatening but his heart just isn’t in it anymore, “This isn’t over, Harrington.”

It could be. If he just lets him walk away it could be over.

“Jesus Christ.” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, every inch of him a picture of tired frustration, “Have you heard a single word I’ve said? It is over. It’s one hundred percent over. I’m taking my ball and I’m going home and you can work out whatever sick obsession you have with me on your own. Rub one out. Take a cold shower. I don’t care. Just go pull on someone else’s pigtails.”

Her heart drops to somewhere around her shoelaces as Hargrove freezes.

She can only chalk it down to hangover induced bad judgement or Steve really is an idiot because if there’s a worse possible thing he could have said she can’t think of it.
“Are you calling me a fag, Harrington? That what you’re saying to me right now?” Billy thumps the side of his own head with the butt of his palm hard enough that the crack is startlingly loud, lips pulling back into a humorless rictus of a grin. The spring is uncoiling and it’s doing it catastrophically. “I can’t be hearing you right ’cause that’s what I thought I heard.”

The two boys are nearly nose to nose now.

“Can’t imagine how I got that impression, what with you taking my pants off at the first opportunity.” Steve’s weight shifts, no doubt getting ready to avoid a punch and throw one back, “Look, I’m really sorry to have to break it to you like this but I just don’t have room on my dance card for a psychopathic, mullet-wearing asshole.”

It seems like it happens between blinks, like a rattlesnake bite. Billy doesn’t step back to take the swing they’re all expecting- just grabs Steve’s dangling legs behind the knees and yanks and suddenly Steve is back-bent almost 90 degrees over the trunk, grabbing at the hands digging into his collar.

“Gonna put your head through your fucking windshield Harrington-”

She wedges between them, putting every ounce of strength into pushing them apart like a human tire-jack before he can try and the anger that floods her is cold like an icicle jammed into her ribcage.

Who does he think he is- they’ve fought monsters.

“Step. Back.”

Steve’s hand scrambles at her back, “Nance-”

Billy’s delighted laugh is a half-howl and her arm is collapsing under his weight as he bears down on both of them.

“Go on, Snow White,” His hot breath is in her face and he’s so thrilled and so close that for a horrible moment she thinks he’s going to try to kiss her, just to make Steve watch him do it, “How are you gonna make me?”

“I have a gun in my bag and I’ll shoot you.”

It obviously wasn’t the answer he was expecting because he draws back slightly, manic expression collapsing in legitimate surprise and his grip on Steve goes mostly slack. When he turns his attention back down to him the rage has given way to baffled confusion.

“Is this little bitch serious?”

“Call her a little bitch again and you’ll probably find out.” Steve’s voice is thick with strain, but there’s a satisfied twist there and she can hear the grin before she turns and sees it.

Hargrove seems to consider his options and finally steps back, hands going up in lazy, unconcerned surrender as he strolls backward and Steve straightens up beside her, rubbing idly at where Billy had twisted his collar around his fist.

“Ever get embarrassed that you need girls and little kids to fight your battles for you, Harrington?”

“Not really.” Steve says mildly, “Means I have people that give a shit about me. Who fights for you, Hargrove?”
They keep their eyes locked on him as he turns and walks away, double-bird held high— a fuck you for each of them and they don’t stop watching until he’s back inside and out of sight.

Steve’s still a little pale when he finally looks at her and she wonders if all the nights listening to his heartbeat have given her some kind of sympathetic connection to it, because she just knows that it’s beating like a jackhammer, even as he clears his throat and tries to look casual.

“Would you really ha—”

“Yes.”

He blinks, “Oh.”

It’s not what he had been hoping to hear. He wants her to say of course not, that’s ridiculous, just bluffing, she’s not concerned about a little rough-housing.

She says, “You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.”

And she means it this time.

His hand goes back to his collar like he can still feel Billy’s hands there and he winces as he realizes that it’s torn away from the shirt on one side.

“Yeah.” He murmurs, “Yeah, I know.”

Jim Hopper doesn’t like to be busy.

It’s not because he’s lazy. He might have a natural inclination in that direction, sure, but it had never affected his work - at least not until after Sara. That’s when he found out that lazy was a natural partner to lonely and miserable and all three were the best damn friends barbiturates ever had.

Been a full year quit of them. Had to keep a clear head for Jane. For all of them.

But he still doesn’t like to be busy.

Because busy means trouble now. Busy means danger. Busy doesn’t mean missing lawn gnomes and angry wildlife and shit he can just shovel over to Powell and Callahan.

And Hopper has been fucking busy. Hell the whole department was run off their feet to the point that Callahan was openly wishing that Eleanor Gillespie would call in some owl related violence but the way this month was going the owl’d would’ve had a switchblade this time.

It happens sometimes, every cop knows- the stars align, the moon is full, mercury is in retrograde or whatever goddamn thing and everyone goes nuts for a little while, simultaneously. Violence and reckless bullshit blows in like the Witches of November and you end up with a week of the craziest shit you’ve ever seen before it all just stops. In New York it was always the summer, like clockwork. Fire hydrants pop open and the murder rate rockets as everyone gets hot and irritable together, start drinking on the stoop and decide that a reasoned argument is all well and good but a .45 ends any dispute in your favor.

Hawkins had had it’s times when the moon-calves started grazing together, sure, but nothing like this. Not without a lab ripping holes in the universe, at least. Seems like the last two years had opened the floodgates and left a shadow of compounding misery behind them because the days of no
disappearances or suicides or murders for forty years are obviously over.

Greg Wilkes had been first. Had to investigate of course- two men go out on the ice and one doesn’t come back? People don’t just throw themselves into freezing water looking for something. Scott Clarke had stuck to his story through four interviews, though, and he’d eat his hat without mustard if that man was faking. Officially marks it down to misadventure. Mentally marks it down to the call of the void. Strange as hell.

Couple of kids from Simpson had gone out on the ice during Nicole White's house party- wandered off drunk and hadn’t come back home again. He’d spent hours riding around asking every kid anyone remembers being there if they’d seen them and got no’s all around and a couple of very concerned no’s from Harrington and Byers ‘cause they remember the last time people started disappearing. Considering the circumstances though this one isn’t exactly a mystery- even if they’re gonna have to wait for a thaw to dredge the lake to say for sure. Still does his due diligence, papers the light posts, realizes that he’s damn tired of tacking up missing posters for children.

There was Ben Judy starting a fight at Mulaney’s up on the interstate. Starting it and ending it ‘cause he glassed his buddy Sal with a pint after accusing him of messing around with his wife- even though everyone quietly knew that Sal was as queer as three dollar bill. Drinking together one minute- killed him stone dead the next and Ben barely remembered why. At least state has that one. One less thing on his plate.

But then Lester Knutson killed himself and his wife. Picked her up from work and drove both of them off the bridge into Lovers Lake in their old Pinto. Left everyone with a a lot of ‘whys’ ‘cause Lester was about as milque-toast as a human being could be. Finding out from Angie’s sister that she had been planning to leave him and move in with their mother in Indianapolis filled in some pieces. Still wouldn’t have expected it from him though. Then again the job would be too easy if it was always the ones you expect.

Then Martha and Fred Sinclair had come into his office and dropped a fucking brick onto his desk that had come in through their living room window along with a note about Lucas- luckily before their kids got home.

Martha had very calmly explained that she and her husband had met on a Freedom Ride when they were seventeen. That they had faced down dogs and police and a mob in Montgomery specifically so their children would never have to deal with anything like this. That they knew that their son is dating a little white girl and some people in a small town might have objections to that fact and that Hopper better find whatever motherfucker has those objections and arrest him or else she’s going to find him first with her husband’s old M1911 and Hopper can find him at his leisure in Lake Jordan.

Fred just gives him a polite nod and a taps his forehead in lazy salute as they leave and Hopper reminds himself to never, ever screw with Martha Sinclair.

Then there was the phantom domestic at the Hargrove residence. Got called in by a panicking Mrs. Davister as ‘They’re killing each other, swear to God, Jim’ and the way the last couple of weeks have been going he fully expects it to be the case- burns rubber the whole way, praying Max Mayfield is with the boys staying late at the arcade or the movies, but doubting he’s that lucky.

So of course when he gets there expecting a murder scene everything is in perfect order and no one wants to talk. Father’s had a few but none of the family have anything to say him about a fight, not the wife, not the boy, not Max- even though she looks like she wants to. Nothing obviously broken, no injuries. Just a quiet night at home Officer, far as Neil Hargrove is concerned, old bitch down the street should mind her business.
Primal roar of the kid’s car tearing ass out of the driveway isn’t far off behind him after he finally leaves.

Bullshit or not no one was dead and he superstitiously hopes that’ll break the back of it.

When there aren’t any suicides or bar fights, or homicides or new missing persons waiting on his desk he almost brings himself to hope that it was true and the day is going to be uneventful. Gives him time to sit and enjoy his coffee and boston cream-

And then Callahan starts to hover, paperwork in hand. He takes a few steps, thinks better of it, tries to find a more suitable angle of approach. Fails.

It’s like watching a dog spinning in circles before sitting down.

“*What*, Callahan?”

“Yeah, so, Chief- remember that John Doe those two kids found over by the creek?”

“No, Callahan, I completely forgot it. John Doe?”

At least Powell rolls his eyes. Whatever’s eating Callahan is obviously old news to Powell ’cause he’s at ease, feet up on his desk playing card-flip.

Callahan blinks, mouth going crooked in legitimate surprise.

“Oh right,” He deadpans, “*That* John Doe. He done? Who can we cross off the missing persons?”

“Uh, well,” Callahan clears his throat, looks preemptively apologetic, “*Greg Wilkes*, Chief.”

He nearly drops his coffee, manages to steady himself and not slosh too much onto his uniform- not too much not to just rub into the fabric, anyway. Ah well, fucking thing is brown anyway.

“Tell him to check again and stop drinking before noon.” Gary was a damn good ME, unusually good for a county as small as Roane, but the man did like his Old Milwaukee.

“He also sent a message along.” Callahan flips pages on the report clears his throat like he’s about to launch into Hamlet’s To Be or Not To Be speech, “*Tell that old coot I already triple checked. Dental and RFLP match. Body is Greg Wilkes.*”

Damnit, Gary.

“That’s impossible. Greg died *two weeks* before the body was found, in a *frozen lake*, in the middle of winter. His body should have looked better than me on a Monday morning.”

“I mean...almost...?” Powell smirks, flipping an ace into the hat on his desk, looking innocent when he turns to glare.

“- *But* that was one of the worst cases of decomp I’ve ever seen.” Hell, he had been as worried as the kids that it was something...infected...with the Upside Down. It wasn’t outside the realms of what a person could end up looking like, but it was close to worst case scenario. “If that was Greg Wilkes what the hell happened to him?”
“Whatever killed that Holland girl, maybe?” Powell suggests. Yeah, that’s what he’s worried about, “Wasn’t that lab dumping some weird shit in the water?”

“Cause of death is still drowning.” Callahan shrugs, handing the folder over, and walking toward the offices with him, “Gary said some kind of bacteria, maybe? That’s the other thing though, Chief- he uh...sent an expert back with the body. They’ve been waiting-”

“An expert? Roane County has an expert in flesh eating bacteria?”

“That’s the thing-”

He closes the door on Callahan because the man he wants to see second least in the world is already sitting totally at his ease across from his desk, wearing a cable knit sweater and a crooked smile.

Doctor Sam Owens stands, extends a friendly hand.

“Hey there, Chief-o. Heard you’ve been busy.”

Fact is, he doesn’t dislike Owens. Man was reasonable, he’d put his life on the line to save Joyce and the kids and he’d helped Jane disappear. Hell, if there had to be a government sponsored secret lab scientist in his office, Sam Owens would have been his first choice.

There doesn’t though. There doesn’t have to be any government sponsored secret lab scientists in his office. Most days there aren’t and he likes it fine that way.

“What are you doing here?”

“Right to the point, huh?” The man deadpans, clearing his throat slightly and lowering the hand, “No talking about old times, no ‘how’s the family’...”

“Sure, doc. Let’s chat. What’s your best hotdish recipe? Or, wait- you could just tell me why you’re here.”

Owens shrugs, settling back down in the chair as he takes his seat on the other side of the desk, “You know how it is. Someone finds something unusual in Hawkins, Indiana and a dozen red phones start ringing off the hook. I just so happen to still technically run the project- thought I’d drop by- put some minds at ease.”

“Can you?”

“Well, what do you want first Chief? Bad news or good news?”

The way this month is going-

“The good news.”

Owens nods, settling back in his chair, “The body is a rapid decomp drowning case. We have our people taking water samples just in case, but as far as we can tell it's not like the pumpkins.”

“The bad?”

“Afraid since I’m already here some people decided it’s a good time for an audit. You know, just to make sure they can put those red phones away for a good long time.”

“Nothing about-” He pauses because while he’s pretty sure his office isn’t bugged but he’s not willing to bet the farm on it “...the kids, right?”
Owens catches on immediately, “I might have to give Will Byers a call at some point but no reason to bother anyone else on a formality, huh?”

*No one knows about Jane. No one has to know about Jane.*

“So how is this bad news?”

The other man’s smile gets crookedly apologetic.

“Well, Chief, I’m gonna have to get elbow deep in your case files,” The man tips his coffee cup toward him in an ironic salute, and possibly a suggestion, “And it’s gonna take a while.”

Something’s wrong with Steve’s car.

All in all it’s a sign of the times that he considers four flats to be the best possible outcome

He’s almost impressed at how thorough Hargrove was about it because there’s popping tires and then there’s slashing them like they owed Pablo Escobar money. Looks like the nerds are going to have to bike themselves home for a while because the Harrington Geek Delivery Service is officially on hiatus. As are the days of not looking like a loser walking home from school on the shoulder of Johnson.

Street’s mostly empty, couple of houses but mostly woods to either side and not a lot of cars- at least he won’t have to deal with half-a-dozen people stopping to ask if he’s broken down somewhere, joking or offering pity rides.

For a little while (that while being about three months in 1977) Steve’s mother had decided that the answer to her ‘nervous disposition’ was that she needed to find herself and an essential part of that had apparently been sending away for crystals and sage sticks and telling them all about chi and the great wheel of karma. His father, good upstanding Protestant that he was and not having any truck with such things had helped her along her spiritual path by introducing her to Dexamyl and Valium instead which seemed to clear whatever issues she was having with her chi right up.

He still remembers the karma bit though- admittedly because it seemed really simple. Spiritual cause and effect. Do good shit, good shit happens to you. Bad shit, better watch your ass because that boomerang is coming back eventually. No waiting on the big guy in the sky to figure it out.

So he gets it. He gets karma. He just really doesn’t think he was ever bad enough to deserve Hargrove.

Part of him wants to ask Byers. Most of him doesn’t want to know.

At least Nance was worked up over nothing. It’s been nearly two weeks since the parking lot and they’re just doing the usual dance. A little rougher, maybe, with a little more hate to prove every time but at least it’s all petty, embarrassing bullshit like this. Of course, when a guy starts with nearly cracking your skull like an egg between his fists and a hardwood floor it takes a lot to manage an impressive encore.

Even if that little bit more hate grows exponentially there wasn’t that much time left, because five more months and he’ll be...
Well. Here. Still here, probably, but it’s not like people keep doing this shit after high school and rumor has it that the minute that last bell rings Hargrove is packing all of his buttonless shirts into the back of his stupid car and belching smoke into the sunset. Off to be California’s problem again.

He stops short because there’s a rapidly closing roar- like he summoned the damn thing by thinking about it.

There’s no mistaking it. Billy’s Camaro sounds like the fucking apocalypse.

A small, traitorously cowardly part of him considers just running- make for the trees and hope for the best- but that sounded like it was right around the bend and even at a dead sprint he won’t be able to make before Billy spots him. He’ll be damned if Billy Fucking Hargrove gets the satisfaction of seeing him run away like he’s scared of him.

He is, of course, ‘cause the guy’s a psycho. But Hargrove doesn’t get to see it because the minute Billy sees him running he’s never going to let him stop.

It’s a mistake. A bad one. He realizes that the second the car rounds the bend, gunning it and burning rubber on the straight away, because there is a very distinct possibility that Billy Hargrove is going to hit him.

That was the thing with Hargrove. Were those slashed tires a prank or a way to get him on foot? Was it going to be vehicular homicide or a stupid game of chicken? Might as well count some crows or look into your crystal ball or read some tea leaves because there’s no way to know which Hargrove you’re going to get. Although all things considered he’d put his money on ‘The one that tries to kill Steve Harrington’

He backpedals onto the shoulder, nearly loses his footing in a ditch but doesn’t even care because that stupid ditch is going to save his life- Hargrove might not have any problem murdering him but he sure as hell isn’t going to bottom out his Camaro on the side of the road.

Sure enough the roaring, belching, irrefutable evidence of Billy Hargrove’s over-compensation skids to a stop a little way up, driver side door opening.

Past evidence aside he thinks he can take Hargrove in a fair fight. Billy gets wild- feral- and now he’s got an idea of-

The passenger door opens and Reed and Tommy pile out.

Fuck.

Three against one. He’s going to get his ass-kicked.

Again.

He reaches down and grabs a thick branch, lets it hang at his side. It’s damp but not rotten, probably sturdy enough to survive a few solid cracks.

It’s not his bat though.

Hargrove’s eyes travel to it and he lights up like Christmas morning. There was no chance that this was going to a good time but he’s pretty sure that expression means it’s going to be worse than anticipated.

“Something happen to your car, princess?”
“Yeah. Some total asshole slashed my tires.”

Hargrove shakes his head, slowly, sadly. What a world, what a world.

“Some people.”

“What do you want, Hargrove?” He knows, of course. They all know but you have to go through the motions, do the whole song and dance.

“Well see, Harrington, here’s the thing—” He takes a step forward, trying to gauge how fast Steve’s going to put that branch into play, “I was just telling Reed and Tommy all about how you’ve been sniffing around my little sister and they were just so, so unsettled that they wanted to come out here and discuss it, in person.”

“How I’ve been what?” He squawks.

“Look amigo, I understand. Get it fresh before someone gets there first. But you just don’t mess around with a man’s sister.”

“Thirteen, man,” Tommy grins, clucks his tongue, equally obvious that he’s loving this and doesn’t actually believe a word of it, “That’s just not right.”

“You’re fucking sick, Hargrove.”

“So what? You’re just supervising?” He jumps from one lie to another fast enough that it’s obvious that having any reason at all is pure formality, “Drive ‘em around, let ‘em hang out at your place, give my sister somewhere to burn coal with Sinclair?”

“Jesus, they’re kids.”

The three of them are closing on him. He brings the branch up, drops into batting stance.

“Back off.”

Hargrove’s mouth forms an exaggerated ‘O’ of sarcastic concern, fingertips pressed lightly to his collarbone as Tommy laughs, gives a little lunge forward so Steve has to aim a warning swing in his direction.

“Hey batterbatterbatter! Swi-ing batter!”

Reed snickers, joins in to the chant as he starts to skirt around him to the side.

“No-o batter He can’t hit, he can’t hit, he can’t hit-”

Billy’s nasty grin is getting tight with annoyance around the edges. Obviously doesn’t want anyone else to think this is their show.

“Hey, assholes, go wait by the car.” There’s a shared glance of blinking confusion, before he snaps his fingers, “ Fucking vamonos.”

Just like that Hargrove’s advantage is gone as the two of them back off to watch, Reed sitting sideways in the passenger seat, Tommy leaning up against the open door.

Billy’s eyes go to the branch again, his eyebrows go up, smile gets crookedly questioning but there’s no way in hell is he going to lower it. Or his guard. Or his expectations for how much this is going to suck.
“You broke a plate over my head last time, asshole. Excuse me if I don’t believe you want to make it a fair fight.”

“We’re not going to fight, Harrington.” The crooked smile gets the manic knife’s edge animal quality that he thinks is the other boy’s real grin when he can’t be bothered to pretend not to be crazy, “We’re going for a drive.”

After last time—only three months ago, a traitorous voice supplies—Hop had been pissed as hell that he wasn’t going to press charges. Told him the kid was a menace—which he already knew—and dangerous—which he also already knew—and when none of it got through because Steve Harrington sure all hell wasn’t going to go down in Hawkins High history as someone that went to the cops after a fist fight, Hop had put a serious hand on his shoulder and told him that the first time someone like that breaks your nose and if they get away with it the second time they break your neck.

He had gone through the month pretending that he hadn’t as good as called Billy Hargrove queer for him in front of Nancy. Let Billy lull him into a false sense of security or hell, maybe he just lulled himself through pure wishful thinking—like one of those soldiers that get blown up by a landmine and just try to get up and go about their business like everything’s normal when they’re the only person who can’t see that they’re already dead.

Nancy had known. Nancy had known right then, as soon as the words were out of his mouth, she had known. Maybe shooting Billy would have been the smart move.

“Thanks but no thanks, Hargrove. I’ll walk.”

Billy nods, like he’s considering.

He should have just hit him the minute he was close enough, before he was expecting it. Fuck a fair fight.

He should have gone home before passing out at Nicole’s. None of this would be happening.

He should have run because now his only option is make them kick his ass right on the shoulder of Johnson and Kiney. Plant his fucking feet and become an immovable object because getting in that car is not an option.

“See, Harrington, I get the impression that you’re not that smart, so let me lay this out. You’re gonna get in the car and you’re going to take your medicine. You don’t want to take it I swing by the arcade and one of those kids takes it for you.”

“Not worried about your little sister castrating you with a bat?”

Hargrove just smiles a weird, unnerving little smile, indulgent, genuine and mildly affectionate.

It’s going to go too far.

Steve would never claim to be what anyone would call a keen observer of human nature. Nancy had slipped away from him over the course of a year without him realizing as he gave her exactly the opposite of what she needed at every turn, thinking he was doing okay. Meek little Jonathan Byers turned out to be a dam holding back a Wabash’s worth of rage and had kicked his ass seven ways ‘till Sunday. For years his friends had spent all their time making sure he was just miserable and isolated enough to always have to rely on them as every girl he genuinely liked became a bitch the minute it got serious and every friend except for them were varying degrees of expendable losers. Billy Hargrove wasn’t just a bullying asshole you can just stand up to like you’re hero of a John Hughes movie— he would have killed him stone dead in Joyce Byers living room if it hadn’t been for
Max.

So he wasn’t good at reading people.

He was, however, getting really good at survival.

The Steve that thought that he was King of the school and that Nancy loved him and who thought he’d kick ass like Snake Plissken- THAT Steve told him that he was safer than last time because Reed and Tommy are with Billy. Witnesses. Legal adults. Not little kids. People who, sure, didn’t like him anymore but had been his friends since grade school and they wouldn’t let Billy just kill him. Hell, Billy was an idiot but he wouldn’t bring witnesses if he was planning to kill him.

The Steve that’s good at survival sees that weird, indulgent little smile and knows that Reed and Tommy are one-upping little shits who were never his friends and they won’t do anything to help him if it means pissing off Billy and that if he gets in that car things are going to go too far.

He’s pretty sure Billy doesn’t even know what too far is going to be. He’s not sure if that makes it better or worse.

“So, what’s it gonna be, your majesty?”

He can’t run across town to the arcade before Billy can drive it. Won’t even get to the payphone on Euclid.

“Shotgun, asshole.”

El is watching people. But not on TV.

She’s not really supposed to because using powers when it’s not an emergency it’s- big surprise-stupid and Hopper told her not to, but there’ve been plenty of things Hopper has told her not to do. Don’t open the windows, don’t wander off, don’t use your powers and she broke a bunch of those rules and found her sister so she thinks those aren’t things that are always stupid. Just half-way stupid.

Anyway, she stops when things are private.

She watches Mike a lot. Eating breakfast with Nancy or chewing a pencil as he works through a new game that he’s writing, or sitting in class. She spreads her perception and listens to his teachers. It’s a good way to learn words that she needs, like delightful (Mike) and prepossessing (Mike) and endearing (Mike). She watches and knows when he’s going to call her on the Walkie Talkie so she never misses a hail.

She learns all the time when she watches Dustin. Class, then AV club, asking Mr. Clarke questions, and then when the Party splits up and there are books that she reads over his shoulder about things no one else is learning about. Just for fun. She learns about Einstein (a theoretical physicist. Theoretical means maybe but probably. Physicist means predicting why things do things) and String theory and Parallel dimensions and she doesn’t understand some of it and she thinks he doesn’t always either because he throws the book across the room a lot. But he also has a cat named Tewes and it is very pretty and she likes watching when he plays with it with string.

She watched Max for a while, even though sometimes when she thinks of Max being around Mike she feels angry and scared, but she watches anyway because Max is a girl and she’s a girl and she thought it would help her figure out the things that Hopper is pushing off telling her about. She learns
that Max is scared and angry but in a different, worse way. She still watches sometimes- just sits next to Max and thinks maybe she can feel that she’s there.

She watches Lucas, because Lucas is in love like her and Mike (not exactly like her and Mike. *No one* is like her and Mike) and also because Lucas is a *badass* (Someone who tells Brenner and the badmen to *eat shit*, see also; Kali) and because he feels everything so fiercely and talks like words are the same as clenched fists and slingshot stones.

She watches Will because they’ve been the same places and bad things have happened to them because stronger things go after weaker things. She knows she isn’t weaker now though because she has *psychokinesis* (the ability to influence a physical object in a non-physical way. Do not break all of Hopper’s windows with it, kid) and friends and she’s pretty sure he isn’t either, even if he doesn’t know it yet. And even though no one is in love like her and Mike they both understand *delightful* (Mike) and *prepossessing* (Mike) and *endearing* (Mike) the same way and he draws pictures that she spends hours watching form. She knows which ones she’s going to ask for when she sees him next.

She watches Nancy because Nancy has pretty clothes and pretty makeup and is learning to pick locks and can shoot a gun and take it apart and put it back together really fast and all of these seem like good skills to have. She also reads a lot for fun, books that have lots of words that flow together in ways that are pretty like Nancy is pretty. Sometimes after she stops watching she writes out whatever she remembers from them in the notebook and pretends that the words are hers.

She watches Jonathan because there’s *always* music around Jonathan. She thinks sometimes that he picks songs for people and listens to them when they aren’t there to be less lonely, just like she watches, and he makes the shape of them through the music. She plays a game where she guesses which song is who. The happy one about crystal days is Nancy. The one about being beaten up and thrown out but not being down is Will, because neither can listen to the staying or going one anymore. The one about the house with the open door and crack in the ceiling is Joyce, she thinks, and she’s pretty sure the one about the charming man who wants to go out without a stitch to wear is Steve.

She doesn’t watch Nancy or Jonathan together much. Because it gets private. A lot. It’s private *a lot*.

She watches Steve because he rides his bike to the cabin to deliver groceries and keep her company even though Mike says that Steve thinks he’s too old to ride a bike and when you get old enough it’s *uncool* (a thing you should not be), but he does it anyway because Hopper says that his car is *conspicuous* (Which means a thing that lots of people notice wherever it goes: Steve’s hair is *also* conspicuous) and they’re trying to be *inconspicuous* (which is the opposite of Steve’s Hair and car).

Lucas and Mike and Dustin and Will are trying to beat *Dragon’s Lair* and she’s certain that there is nothing left to learn from watching Dirk the Daring die, *yet again*, Nancy and Jonathan are *private* and Max is doing science homework that she already knows the answers to because Dustin did it on Monday, so her options are limited.

So she watches Steve, even though last time she watched Steve everyone made fun because she thought an Aboleth got him so this time-

Steve is with a monster.

Again.

Billy Hargrove - Max’s brother even though they don’t have the same name (they aren’t blood related, which means that he’s Max’s brother like Hopper is her father, except terrible) who she hasn’t met but the boys have told her is a *mullet wearing asshole*. 
And he’s not a monster like Not-Real-Nancy was a monster, but there’s something wrong with him. He has water in his head.

At first she thought he was crying because it’s running down from his eyes, but he’s smiling and talking to Steve and he doesn’t seem to even notice the inky dark water spilling out of his mouth every time he opens it, dribbling down his chin.

She circles him curiously, because she’s never seen this before and she’s pretty sure it’s not normal.

At least Steve knows it’s a monster this time, because he’s gonna hit him with a stick and according to Dustin Steve is really good at hitting monsters with sticks (well, bats, but that’s apparently just like a stick but with nails sticking out of it).

But then Billy asks him what’s it going to be and for some reason Steve puts the stick down and goes with him.

She’s starting to think that Mike is right and Steve is not very smart.

She tugs the bandana off of her eyes, blinking as reality reasserts itself and there’s light and Hopper’s comfy couch and the buzz of white-noise from the TV static, and reaches for her walkie-talkie.

“Mike.”

Press.

“Mike.”

Press.

“Mike.”

The frenzied overlapping beeps and bells and music of the arcade blasts from the speaker, followed by Mike’s voice.

“El? (‘Are you shitting me? That was fifty cents down the drain Mike. Down the drain!’, ‘That’s it, it’s official, you don’t deserve Princess Daphne’) What’s up, El? Over.”

“It’s Steve.”

Mike sounds immediately less enthusiastic.

“Steve? (‘You know, El is watching Steve an awful lot. Hey El, do you have a crush on Steve? Is it the hair?’) Shut up, Dustin! Uh- what about Steve? Over.”

“No. Steve’s hair is conspicuous. But also, code red. Over.”

“(Bet the Aboleth got him again, Mike, ask if it was the Aboleth) El- we might need to talk about Code Red’s.”

“He’s with Billy Hargrove.”

There’s silence except the arcade noise before the boys burst into a chorus of words Hopper says she’s not supposed to use in mixed company (which is all the people in the world except the ones she already knows), Mike’s voice finally coming through over the frantic swearing.
“Billy Hargrove? Where?”

“I don’t know. He got into his car.”

There’s the sound of a scuffle, temporary silence as the walkie changes hands.


“Yes. He said something to him. Then he got into his car.”

“That was rhetorical El- look nevermind. You can track them down with your brain, right? (Dustin, We can’t- it’s past four- Hopper’ll be-). This is an emergency, Mike! Maybe if Hopper did his damn job and arrested dangerous psychopaths we wouldn’t have to—”

“I can track them.”

“We’re on our way.”

Billy Hargrove was born in the wrong goddamn decade. He belongs in the sixties.

Not because of all the hippy shit, ’course not, though he wouldn’t have minded trading the frigid bitches of the ’80s for all the dumbass free-love chicks of ’69 that renamed themselves Moonbeam Rainbow and dropped acid and screwed anyone asking- he would’ve been a fox in a hen house in the Haight. Could have made himself a harem- hell, if that ugly little fuck Charlie Manson could do he sure could have. But the 70’s had to roll around and all the Moonbeam Rainbow’s got used up and started turning tricks for smack money at truck stops out by Barstow.

Ass isn’t why, though. He does fine with the Nichole’s and Tina’s of the world.

No, Billy belongs in the sixties because what he really needs is a fucking war.

He knows he would’ve come alive not been one of the pussies who couldn’t hack it. Not like dad.

‘Never the same after what happened in ’68’ His mom had always said, back when she was still making excuses for him instead of packing her shit and leaving them behind. Bastard even has a Bronze Star he won’t talk about in a desk drawer. He had fished it out to look at once when he was ten, made the mistake of asking about it.

Got the buckle of the belt. Slept on his stomach for a week.

Found out later it was for saving kids from some shit-hole village with his aero-scout company. Fucking hilarious but hardly surprising that Neil gave more of a fuck about some little baby black pajamas than his own son.

But he would have known what to do with himself in a war, what to do with the feeling of glass shards running through his veins that means he needs to fuck something or destroy something. It wouldn’t be like here where everyday’s the same day, repeating itself like an endless run-on sentence.

All Work and No Play Makes Billy a Dull Boy all Work and No Play Makes Billy a Dull Boy-

Harrington, is, of course, perfect for 1985. Perfect little Stevie Boy with a future in personal finance
written all over his perfect face, who thought he was hot shit ‘cause no one ever showed him otherwise until Billy Hargrove rolled in. Who didn’t last a minute against him, who wouldn’t last thirty seconds in a real battle with blood in the water and his life on the line. A soft little sissy made special for this shit decade.

Well, if you can’t go to war, you might as well make one.

Harrington’s eyes meet his in the rear-view and there’s a twitch in the boy’s jaw that shows that bravado aside, King Steve knows the score as they pull up on the south end of the quarry.

“Lover’s lane, huh, Hargrove?” Gotta give him credit. Still manages to sound like a smug little shit when he’s scared, “What kind of girl do you think I am?”

“Seem like you’d put out on the first date, Harrington.” Only answer is the steady gaze in the mirror, “All of you get the fuck out of my car.”

The backseat empties. Reed then Harrington then Halloran, who seems pissed that Harrington just slides across and out the door and doesn’t make him drag him out. Nothing’s as impatient as pissed off peasants when the King’s got his head on the block. He wonders, not for the first time, how Stevie-Boy managed to keep ‘em wrapped round his finger long as he did- ‘cause he’s got the swagger but he doesn’t have the teeth to back it, not by a long shot.

He pops the glove compartment, fishes out the gym sock he has stashed there and a half-crushed pack of Newports. Takes his time lipping one out and lighting it, ‘cause the other three are leaned awkwardly against the trunk, and watching them shifting and silent and increasingly uncomfortable as they stand and wait together is a mother-fucking riot.

He drums his fingers against the steering wheel as the sock swings against the leather with quiet jingling thumps.

“You done jerking off in there, Hargrove?” Harrington looks at ease from his posture, arms crossed, head tossed back to shout, “It’s fucking freezing out here.”

He snorts, smoke puffing from his nostrils. Thumbs the play button on the cassette player and blasts the tape loud enough to hear outside the car.

-There is a feeling deep inside

That drives you fucking mad

A feeling of a hammerhead

You need it oh so bad-

Reed and Halloran straighten up as he tosses the driver-side door open, cause it’s showtime.

They expect more conversation, more posturing, more circlejerking shit-talking ‘till someone throws a punch and they finally give Harrington the beat down they all know is coming. Just more of the never-ending cycle of high school bullshit. Harrington obviously thinks he has more time to chat ‘cause he pushes off the trunk with casual resignation. Squares up like they’re gonna engage in fuckin’ fisticuffs.

He’d been like that that day in the kitchen too. Mr. Fairplay. Even announced that sucker punch like an idiot. Would have thought picking bits of ceramic out of his head would have taught him he’s playing with the big boys now.
The sock weighed down with their gym locks hits Harrington in the side with full force and it’s a hell of an opener, if he does say so himself. Knocks the air out of him and sends him sprawling belly-down and gasping on his trunk in shocked surprise.

“Holy shit- Jesus Billy-” Reed and Halloran scramble away in babbling shock, reeling out of swinging range, wide-eyed at the sudden brutality of it.

Sock comes down again before Harrington can push himself up. Thuds once, twice, three times in rapid succession on the kid’s back and shoulders. Another one for good luck and one to grow on and Harrington's trying to curl up like a beaten dog.

How’s that for pulling pigtails, asshole?

- Adrenaline starts to flow

You're thrashing all around

acting like a maniac

Whiplash!

He doesn’t even know how lucky he is. Couple more locks, little more arm and those love taps could have sent him straight to intensive care- knows that from experience - Thanks Dad - but they have a lot of night ahead of them. No need to blow his load in the first five minutes.

He hooks his fingers into the waistband of Harrington’s jeans, grabs a fistful of shirt and yanks him backward as nails scrape desperately for purchase on the trunk, pure instinct telling Harrington to try to go in the opposite direction from him even through the pained daze.

Good instincts.

“Get off my car. You’re gonna fuck up the paint-job.” The other two are still hanging back, Reed’s already in over his head but Halloran’s got light in his eyes and a hyena laugh, ‘cause he’s got a grudge to work out and someone running him that finally goes for the throat when they smell blood instead of demanding he be a pussy along with them.

Harrington throws an elbow back, gets him pretty good in the face for the state he’s in, but sock full of locks has a way of taking some of the fighting spirit out, and he’s already got his back so it’s easy enough to force his arms under Harrington’s and lock his fingers behind the kid’s skinny neck as he struggles.

Jesus Christ, Harrington’s hair smells just like his ex-girlfriend.

“You ladies just come out here to look pretty? Free fuckin’ shots.”

Reed pulls his punches. Still thinks that they’re here to teach a little lesson, get a little back, no hard feelings, boys will be boys, see you at practice.

Tommy’s better but nothing world ending.. Makes him wonder if it’s just the betrayal of Harrington ditching him for a bunch of losers or if King Steve ever exercised primae noctis on Carol before he decided that he was too good for them.

Acts too good for them, even as Halloran is busting his lip open.

Which, well, that’s just fucking annoying , right?
Decides it’s his turn again, ‘cause these assholes are just dancing and he wants his momentum back. Harrington goes down when he kicks his knees out and he goes down with him, a tangle of limbs and frantic blows as they hit the ground and he can see the flash of wide-open fear in his eyes that this is going to be a repeat of last time they danced and he got him on the floor. Harrington doesn’t have the leverage to do anything but hit him with a flurry of punches to the side of his head, trades power for speed, tries to get a lucky shot to his temple.

Not your lucky night, Stevie. Not you lucky night at all .

Of course that’s when one of Harrington’s punches rips his earring straight out of his earlobe. Feels the burst of warm blood down his face before the stinging pain. Fuck, he liked that earring. Enough of this shit.

“Get his arm.”

Tommy does it, catches Harrington’s wrist mid-swing with a ugly buck tooth snicker and wrenches it up and away. Billy wedges the other one tight between Harrington’s body and his knee as he straddles his chest.

The others look confused, even Harrington as he struggles and swears and tries to get his arm back from Tommy. Must have had dads that took their asses to little league and only drank a six-pack on weekends if none of them know what’s next.

Gotta take your medicine, champ.

He fishes the crumpled pack of Newports out of his back pocket, feels the labored rise and fall of the other boy’s chest between his thighs as he tugs one out, let’s it dangle between his lips.

“Light me.” Reed hops to it and then seems to fade away again, standing off to the side. Could have done it himself, sure, but Reed’s been wavering..

“Need a...smoke break?” Harrington’s a little indistinct, a lot sarcastic, “Good work... everybody. Take...five, shitheads.”

He takes a deep drag and laughs, grins a wide grin down at Harrington as the other boy licks blood away ‘cause that was actually pretty funny.

Then he puts his cigarette out on the soft white skin inside Harrington’s wrist.

First the shock, then the pain. Ah, you get used to it, Stevie.

“Fuh-fuck! Fuck!”

Secret is not to press too hard. Let it keep getting a little air to keep it smouldering. Can get a nice deep second-degree if you don’t rush it.

Gold star to Tommy for keeping Harrington’s arm still, even though he’s gone the color of the cigarette paper except for his stupid freckles.

Figures the ember is spent or the nerves are shot when the thrashing and swearing stops. He tugs another Newport from it’s pack.

“You’re... insane .” They finally found something that throws King Steve.
“Light me.” Reed hangs back, looking stunned and stupid.

“Uh...Billy...I think...”

Reed’s an idiot, but he’s starting to get the idea of which way the wind is blowing and that it’s blowing too fast and too hard for him.

“Didn’t tell you to think. I told you to light me.”

“Reed, Tommy...shit, c’mon ... guys. This is crazy. Guys! Stop.”

Adrenaline and pain have got Harrington clear-headed again, at least clear headed enough to see the opening in the defense and try to exploit it. Somehow thinks that his Care Bear stare, power of friendship, bullshit works on anyone but his little baby friends.

The flame of the lighter in Reed’s hand trembles so hard he has to grip the moron’s wrist to keep it steady until the tip of his cigarette catches and glows.

[fe a r]

Fear. Fear works.

He feels Harrington’s exhale underneath him as his muscles tense, trying to prepare for another burn. Gonna take a few more years of practice for that. Gotta start young.

Harrington tries not to scream about it this time, though, even as he leans down to put it out on his collarbone, which hurts like a bitch. Just tosses his head back and bites his lower lip hard to muffle it, nostrils flaring.

Hold it back, Steve, you can do it. Just think about baseball.

Fear. That’s how you get power. How you keep it. How you make sure no one fucks with you.

Fear is how you make sure no one fucks with your family. No one turns your sister against you so the little bitch drugs you and threatens your balls with a nail-bat.

I understand. She made him say it back to her. Like she was teaching him a lesson. Jesus- like she was Dad.

[finally s t a r t e d t o b r e a k]

Just when he had finally started to get cautious respect from her instead of shitty back-talk. When she had finally started to understand that if he hurt her it wasn’t like dad- it was just to toughen her up, make her listen, ‘cause she never-fucking -listens. but now she’s walking around the house like she’s untouchable queen-shit.

Harrington good as called him a fag in front of Nancy Wheeler. Who says that he hasn’t said the same in front of Max? Or that piece of shit kid he can’t keep her away from? Who says that it won’t get back to Susan?

Back to Dad.

It can’t happen. He wouldn’t live through it this time.

[can’t run his mouth it’s survival y o u o r h i m shut him u p]
He’s just gotta scare him. Really scare him. Shut him up.

There’s a moment, even before he puts his forearm across Harrington’s neck when he was honestly just been strongly considering it, where their eyes meet and Harrington knows what he’s about to do before he even fully decides that he’s going to do it. It’s fucking beautiful. Just this unspoken connection, intimate as hell - and animal instinct kicking in as something realizes that it’s trapped and you’re stronger and it’s helpless. He expects the recognition to come with fear -wants to watch the spark light - so it’s just not fucking fair when the realization that he’s got his life in his hands just makes Harrington look determined and pissed off.

[Note no ough]

“Billy...shit...man, wait...”

“Oh fuck. Stop. You’re gonna-”

Tommy Halloran tugs on his arm, trying to pull him off. He shoulders him away, nearly knocks him over. Reed doesn’t touch him, just keeps telling him to back off like he’s gonna take orders from that little pansy.

He knows what he’s fucking doing. Been choked out enough times to feel the difference between goodnight and goodbye.

Harrington’s free hand is beating against his side frantically, like he’s trying to tap out. His feet are scrambling so hard for purchase that one of his sneakers comes off and a socked foot digs it’s heel into the mud. Hair’s a mess. Face is red.

[not enough gotta k i l l the king to be the k i n g]

Halloran’s frozen, ‘cause he knows how this is going to go and that they’re not gonna stop it because both of them are more scared of him right now more than they’re scared of consequences in the future and because part of them knows that it’s just the natural order of things. The pack know the alpha wolf when they see it and they fall in line.

[he k n e w he got into the c a r gave permission he w a n t s i t]

The three of them are just going to ride back to town in the Camaro, listen to some Metallica, get their story straight, and have a night they don’t talk about.

And Harrington takes a trip down the Drop into the lake- cops won’t even be able to tell they roughed him up after he hits the water. Just scare him? Fuck, why’d they even drive all the way out here?

Yeah Sheriff, lost all his friends, his girl, kept freaking out at school, think he might’ve been a perv, too, he was always hanging around with kids. Weird rumors. Must’ve just figured it was better this way, you know? So sad. Too bad.

Who’ll even care?

That pounding on his side has turned to scratching at his forearm, short nails leaving deep bleeding trenches out of sheer desperation until Harrington reaches up to grab a fistful of shirt- trying to push him away and pull him close enough to try to get at his eyes and face at the same time.

He could let him up. Right now. He could let him breathe again, no major harm done, watch the gratitude flood his eyes at the mercy as he pulls air. He could do anything. He’s in control. Not Max.
Not Harrington. Not fuckin’ Dad. HIM.

[the goddamn supreme being of the threefold world that’s what you are billy]

Damn straight. King Billy.

He presses down harder, really cuts off the airway. Only takes a few seconds for the scratching at his arm weaken and the kicking to stop and dark eyes to start to roll back. He finally gets it then- the fear- but the light’s going out, not on and doesn’t last long before it becomes disbelieving resignation. You’re killing me? Oh.

[d o i t d o i t d o i t do it doitdoitdoit]

Jesus...What the fuck is he doing? What the fuck is he doing?

He pulls his arm away and lets Harrington suck a desperate gasp of air just as the stone hits him in the head- cracks against the back of his skull hard enough that he rocks forward, bites his tongue.

“Hey, dickhead!”

Kids. Of course. Well this is a fuckin’ reunion, isn’t it.

There’s Max’s shitty little boyfriend with a slingshot in hand, which explains the stone. The curly haired retarded sounding kid that just called him a dickhead. The kid that everyone says came back from the dead but really just got kidnapped by a pedo or some shit and is carrying a branch tall as he is like a staff, and Nancy Wheeler’s douchebag little brother, still on his bike with some other kid riding bitch behind him.

Spell breaks with their arrival though, ‘cause Reed and Halloran take off running. No use stopping them- they’re too pussy to go snitching to the Sheriff. Enjoy the trip back to town on foot, assholes.

No Max, though. Well.

[w r o n g p l a c e w r o n g t i m e]

“You’re gonna pay for that-”

“No.” Harrington croaks, fingers scrambling hazily at his jacket, trying to pull him back down onto him. Wants him to get back to choking him to death instead of focusing on the kids as he shifts his weight away from him.

The kid behind Wheeler is off the bike.

“Bad man.” The girl says quietly, raising an empty hand. Oh well, now he’s fucking scared.

[olly olly ocean free]

“El- DON’T!” Harrington throws his head back and howls it out, voice as raw with panic as with choking and the kids look confused. He looks back down and-

Harrington’s arm comes round in a wild haymaker and he brains him with a rock he worked out of the mud the size of a fucking baseball.

Follows it up by driving a sharp knee up between his legs and bringing the rock around again, knocking him off.
Almost wants to congratulate him for finally figuring it out, finally fighting dirty- round of applause for King Steve for getting some blood on his teeth and learning to howl- but there’s mud in his mouth as he tries to breathe and laugh around the pain.

Harrington’s kneeling above him now, sucking air and coughing, the rock hanging loosely at his side.

[ do it doitdoitdoit doit ]

“Fucking do it!” He grins a mud and blood stained grin up at him, “Fucking do it, amigo.”

Of course Harrington hasn’t found the stones to beat him to death- just drops the rock in the mud like the utter fucking disappointment he is.

Then he punches him.

-Whiplash-

Reed Archer runs.

He had run with Tommy at the start but lost him. Lost the path. Lost the road. Lost fucking everything. Because Billy Hargrove was going to kill Steve Harrington and they were all gonna get blamed.

Jesus Christ. The way Billy’s eyes looked. The way Steve had looked- He hadn’t come out here to kill anybody. Just teach him a lesson- that’s what Tommy had said, for being such a prissy little bitch about everything. He hadn’t wanted to see him clawing for air, eyes rolling back. He didn’t want him dead.

But now- he had hit him. There were gonna be fingerprints on him, right? When they... found him. And no fucking way Tommy hadn’t bragged to Carol that they were gonna rough up Harrington tonight and Carol would have told Nicole and Nicole tells everyone fucking everything. The whole school would know and when Harrington turns up-

Oh god. HIS MOM’ll find out. He’s in such deep shit.

He had gotten a scholarship for Hanover. They’d take that away, probably. You can’t keep a scholarship after you’re part of killing someone.

Oh god. His life is ruined. Fucking Tommy. Fucking Billy.

[Hey there, buddy]

The voice almost makes him piss his pants. Thought he was imagining it at first, like the book about the guy with the heart under his floor because there’s no way-

[You’re looking like you were the one that just got strangled. Why don’t you take a breather?]

Steve Harrington is sitting- alive- holy shit, thank god almighty- casual as can be on a fallen tree trunk. Looks a little weird, even in the near-dark- his eyes have a glassy look to ‘em but fuck it, dude was just nearly strangled to death.

“Steve? Shit man, you’re alive?” He leans against the trunk of a tree, breathing hard, “Oh shit, you’re alive. I didn’t know what Hargrove was going to do, you gotta believe me.”
Steve grins, a little too twitchy and a little too wide. Pissed off. Gotta be. Still he’s gotten to him first and he didn’t beat him down like Billy or Tommy- Hell, little flattery by Monday he can have him convinced that the whole thing was their idea and he just got swept along. Maybe even get him to tell the cops that- keep his record clear, keep his scholarship- Harrington was always easy to sway.

“I was running... to go get the cops, y’know? I thought they were just messing around. Tommy- hell, you guys have been friends since grade school. I never thought-”

“We’re friends too.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Of course. Since you let me bum smokes under the bleachers back in fifth.” Adds that last part in to prove he remembers- make him nostalgic for when the three of them still ran together, “Seriously man, I’m so happy you’re-”

Steve is standing up, hell- unfolding. Dude’s got long limbs and something about him seems particularly creaky and disjointed now, like he's not used to them.

[I helped you lie to your mom. Told her we saw your dad messing around with his secretary Cheryl so she'd leave him and he wouldn't be able to go into your sister’s room anymore. Your dad threatened to burn my fucking house down after. Remember that?]

The fuck is he getting at? Guilt trip? Blackmail?

"Yeah...man...that was- you were a good friend, y’know?”

[Except you were lying. Your dad never touched Melissa. You were pissed that he grounded you for the Cherry Bombs. Made it all up to get back at hi m.]

Jesus Christ.

He had never told anyone that. Sure as hell never told Steve, because no way would Harrington have understood- ‘cause Steve had wanted to save the day, like he was fucking Superman or something. If he had found out he had played him he would’ve been so pissed- hell, he would have probably fucking told.

“How the fuck did you-? Look man, my old man was an asshole so really-”

Steve’s starts to stroll, hands in pockets, casual as if they had come out here to smoke and he trails after him on instinct.

“So you’re not mad about- Uh- where are we going? Look- fair’s fair but you’re really creeping me out- Steve.”

He could see the faintest shape in the corner of his eye. There’s something over there-

Suddenly Steve’s arm is slung around his shoulder, mouth nearly pressed up against his ear and what’s been bugging him, really bugging him, finally hits him like a freight train.

He should be able to feel the warmth of Steve’s breath this close. See the condensation in the air between them like he can see his own but there’s nothing, just like there are no puffs of air that form the sounds that Steve whispers into his ear.

[take a l o o k]
What had been in corner of Reed’s eye, like a ghost, became an inescapable but incomprehensible fact. His jaw opens as he shudders tremendously, body spasming like the way a dream of falling makes you jump—every muscle trying a dumb, desperate escape without input from a mind that was otherwise occupied.

It’s...

There’s....

Air.

Air is...just great.

And he has about thirty seconds to cough and sputter and enjoy that fact and that his lungs aren’t exploding and he’s not gonna die before a small hoard of kids are surrounding him, all talking at once.

“Holy shit...”

“-Was gonna kill you-”

“Is he dead?”

“Why’d you tell El to stop she could have-”

“-you okay?”

“Jesus, man- you let him drive you out here? Ever hear of stranger danger-”

“You have to stop getting your ass kicked, Steve.” Dustin’s kneeling beside him looking serious and making a well-intentioned, if horrendously painful attempt to get him standing up. “We’re not always gonna be around to protect you.”

He does have to stop getting his ass-kicked. That’s good advice and...wait, what?

“...Always protect me?” He croaks and rubs at his throat to try to work his voice back into it, “Look, you little shithheads-”

“It’s okay. We don’t mind. But like, maybe you can learn karate or something?”

He’s a little...okay, more than a little pain dazed and oxygen starved or else he’d have a really great response to that. As it is...well, it’s not a hug when he puts an arm around the kid and squeezes. He’s just using him to stay upright even though he mostly wants to just lay back down- except now there’s another problem to deal with. Or rather same problem- different form.

“Help me get him into his car before he wakes up.”

“What? Why?."

Good fucking question.

“Because I bashed him in the head with a rock and if we just leave him he’ll freeze to death.”

That’s met with four blank stares and Will looking uncertain. He’ll give El a pass at least, because
she seems to pretty much always look like that.

“And...?” Lucas says slowly.

“Jesus Christ... And we’re not going to do that. We’re going to get him into his shitty car, put the heat on so he doesn’t die and go get Hop to arrest him.” It’s not easy being a role-model sometimes, swear to god, because the kids still don’t look entirely convinced that that’s the best course of action and he can’t really say he blames them.

“C’mon dickheads, if you make me move the dude who just tried to murder me on my own, with broken ribs I’m... never playing D&D with you again.” That was lame but well reasoned arguments with grade-schoolers are for days when his chest doesn't feel like it's on fire and no one's tried to literally kill him.

-Which is something that's going to hit him hard when he finally lets it hit so they have to move Billy now.

It’s no surprise when Will is the first to grab a foot with him because Will is a nicer kid that he ever was, and Will helping means Mike is close behind.

“Alright. But just because this is probably avoiding legal complications.” Dustin says taking the right foot with with Mike, “Not because I like it.”

“Noted, dipshit. Lucas, c’mon man.”

“No way.”

“Lucas .”

“Screw you, that dude is crazy. He would have killed you .”

“I can help.” El says so quietly he almost doesn’t hear her at first but she doesn’t look like she’s going to move and-

“No! No- don’t do anything .”

The kids are looking confused, looking to him for a reason that he’s freaked out twice at the idea of her using her powers and he doesn’t have one. Figured with Hargrove it was just- well, stupid to let him know about her unless they actually were going to kill him.

What's the excuse now? Because something was looking for her in his shitty nightmares?

“Just...Just stay with the bikes. We’ve got him. Not worth the nosebleed.”

“Okay, Steve.”

“See that? At least someone doesn’t argue with me. Pull, shitheads.”

They get him in the car, Steve aims for every bump and rock on the way and doesn’t complain when Dustin ‘accidentally’ maneuvers Billy's head into the car door because he’s not going to let him die out here but he’s not a saint.
Nancy’s feet are cold and she thinks in a vague, distant way that she should have put on shoes. It’s a normal thing to do, isn’t it? Put on shoes? Without them cold mud and leaf rot squishes between her toes and frost chills them.

But the concern—along with the idea itself—floats away like a balloon with a short string as Barb smiles crookedly and pokes her in the shoulder before threading long fingers through hers.

Which reminds her that she can’t be cold—she and Barb had only ever gone out into the wood in the summer as kids. Winter was for blanket forts in their bedrooms, hot chocolate with mini-marshmallows made by Mrs. Holland, Barb humoring her and letting her paint her toe nails a bright red that no one but the two of them would ever see through galoshes and thick woolen socks but they would both know was there, like a secret.

Winter was certainly not walking barefoot through the West Woods.

When they were little kids the woods had been a place where they could go away from everyone. A place to go when Reed Archer said that Barb looked like a dyke or that the football team must have lost a linebacker or when Nancy couldn’t stand Mike’s endless colicy crying anymore at home and going out with the neighborhood kids meant dealing with Davey Arthur who didn’t know what he wanted to do with her but who would grab her and hold her against him until she cried. It was their place to disappear together, alone, their place to jump in and out of mushrooms rings, certain that they were the special ones, like Alice and Dorothy and Betsy Bobbin and if they tried enough times they would end up in another world.

Something about that strikes Nancy as horrible for a moment, but she doesn't remember why.

Sometimes there were intruders. Once they had spied on two little boys playing some silly little boy game in the creek, and watched like reverse Actaeons, giggling and giving themselves away as the tiny boy shoved the bigger boy pinwheeling into the water and they had had to run for it before anyone saw them.

They were forest fairies. No one would ever catch them, especially not boys.

The woods are green and bright and warm around her, Barb’s hand in hers, leading her between trees and over dead-fall, pulling her inexorably forward, through the creek and it's so familiar she’s-

SO COLD

-Half expecting to see those same boys splashing there- all stick arms and sunburns and laughter. But now they were grown and she and Barb wouldn’t just giggle and run away- they’d howl like wolves and shout and beat sticks together like wild things to scare them away.

[Remember how we used to play Terabithia at the stream?] Barb says without turning around, [You were Leslie, I was Jess. We got it all backwards.]

“Is that where we’re going?” She asks because she realizes that she hasn’t asked Barb why they were in the woods.

[Maybe] Barb says, smiling a strange smile over her shoulder, [ We can go swim in the lake and you can tell me about everything that’s happened since I died. You didn’t forget, did you?]

Never she wants to say, but Barb is tugging her forward so hard that she bites her tongue. A little, she thinks because she’s almost certain that she’s dreaming now and she didn’t want to remember.
"[Everyone did, didn’t they?] Barb’s voice gets tight around the edges, [But it’s alright. You can show me all your new friends. I want to meat them all, Nancy. We can all go to the quarry together. Steve’s already there. Bring Jonathan. He’ll want to watch. He’ll want to look.]

"Barb- I don’t-"

Barb looks unimpressed, one eyebrow raised sardonically.

[After killing me it’s the least you could do]

“I...we exposed the lab that was responsible, the people—”

She tries to pull her hand away but Barb’s grip is tight as a vice, crushing her fingers, swinging her arm back and forth childishly before pulling her after her like the tail of a kite.

[Cinderella dressed in yella went upstairs to kiss a fella’. Made a mistake and kissed a snake. How many kisses did it take... How many did it take Nancy?]

“Stop it.” The summer sky is going dark and shadows creep like living things between the flaking, peeling trees. Black leaves drip off of them.

[One, two, three, four...]

The woods are disappearing, melting into inky wet blackness and even though she can’t see past her the end of her nose Barb’s hand is still crushing hers- dragging her into the void like a struggling animal being swallowed whole because she knows that it’s alive and that she’s disappearing, melting into it along with the rest of the world. Somewhere some sort of bird screams and screams and-

“Nancy!”

She screams, a wild hysterical noise, as something reaches out of the dark to restrain her, nearly knocks her off of her feet as she fights the thing off and-

“Nancy! It’s Jonathan- stop, stop! You’re sleepwalking-please-”

She’s barefoot in the woods at night, damp and shivering, wearing nothing but her panties and a t-shirt, mud and mulch spattering her calves.

Where she should be comes back to her like a wave crashing to shore- she lied to her mother about staying over at Ally’s. Will shot a surprisingly knowing expression at Jonathan when he suggested that he spend the night at Mike's and gave him a dollar's worth of quarters and she had sorta wanted to die. They put a sock on the door just in case because Mrs. Byers is both unusually willing to respect her sons' privacy and pathologically incapable of not knowing exactly where they are at any given time and is prone to busting into bedrooms without notice. They curled up sleepily afterward and she got up long enough to steal Jonathan's New York Dolls t-shirt to shield against the Byers' house's many drafts before going back to bed.

“I woke up- the door-” He explains softly, trying to get her to focus on him through the sudden disorientation, skinning off his coat off and wrapping it tightly around her shoulders even though he's only wearing plaid pajama pants underneath, breath puffing from him in frightened starts, “I saw you running into the woods, God Nancy-you’re freezing.”

“I had a nightmare,” She manages, sounding slow and stupid even to herself- but strange recognition flickers on Jonathan’s face before concern chases it away, “Where are-”
“The woods outside my house.” He chafes at her arms, pulls her close, “It's...it'll be fine. We’ll skip first period tomorrow, okay?

She can only nod as her teeth chatter and she huddles against his side. He leads her past the cracked and crumbling winter remains of Will's little branch fort back toward the house, glancing distractedly over his shoulder as though something could be following along behind them.

“Let’s get you warm.”

They barely have time to boil water for tea before the call comes in that Billy Hargrove tried to murder Steve Harrington at Sattler Quarry.

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Wright-Patterson Air Force Base

Dayton, Ohio

February, 1985

Way Sam Owens sees life, it’s about how you approach things.

It’s all too easy in a job like this to find yourself ranking new acquaintances by expendability like you’re taking an inventory. Police Chief (1) reasonably competent. Little girl with telekinesis (1) extremely rare, valuable. Boy with a psychic connection to an Alpha-Class Rafflesia (1) loss would be unfortunate. Town (30,302) existence unnecessary. Start doing that and you end up a bean-counter with vestigial humanity. Do it long enough, you end up a Brenner. Odorless, desireless and undetectable, so consumed by the job that they cease to be a person at all and just start being...a void.

The thing that single-celled organisms that only know how to eat and multiply look into and scream.

Sam Owens likes people. He likes keeping a positive outlook. He likes jokes. They make him feel human even when he’s not feeling like much of one.

A Doctor walks into a Top Secret Air Force Base. He walks up to the vending machine, turns to the fella next to him and goes, ‘Hey, fella. You got any helicopter flavored potato chips?’ fella says, ‘Nah, Doc, we only got plane.’

Goddamnit.

The blue stress ball compresses so hard in his hand that he thinks it might finally burst as his key ensures that the elevator goes farther down than the buttons on the panels indicate that it can.

The long hallway is featureless. A series of baffling, blank doors to anyone that didn’t know where they were going already.

Third on the left.

Squeeze. Squeeze.

The man at the desk looks up in startled surprise, “Doctor Owens. Didn’t know you were on base. How’s the leg?”

“Doin’ great Mac. Might even be my new favorite of the two. How’s the wife?”
The man relaxes and the Minnesota comes out strong “Big as a house and swearin’ it’s gonna be another girl.”

“That’ll make it five?”

The man nods, mouth turned down in exaggerated misery.

“Ahh, jeez, yeah. Five girls. Y’know, I don’t know what I did to deserve it. Is it too much to ask to get one boy? Someone to toss the ball around with?”

He plasters a grin on, “Teach ‘em to play. Four more and you can field a whole team.”

“Oh, yeah. Funny, sir.” The man says, looking stricken like he just laid a curse on him, “Four more and I’ll be filing from inside a padded cell. Speaking of, what can I do for you today?”

“I need the 006SEARCH-BR-PD/SG0-0001 ‘78 and ‘79 files and all the associated records.”

The man blinks, because War and Peace is going to be looking like a light beach read by the time he’s done- and because he’s requesting files with Annata level content, of course. Can’t forget that.

“Yessir. Please present proof of continued Level Five clearance.”

“I’m still director of the project, Mac.”

“I asked for your ID’s, sir. Not your misfortunes.”

“Not bad.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He slides the ID’s across the desk and waits as Mac calls the automated line and enters seemingly endless number strings that have no particular visible connection to what’s on the thing and waits.

“Oh yeah, alright, Doc. Looks good. Room three, please. It’ll just be a few minutes.”

Squeeze .

“Thanks Mac, give my best to Doreen.”

“Will do, sir!”

He waits nearly an hour.

He doesn’t mind.

Squeeze .

The longer the better. Because when they finally hit the table-


Well, that’s when he actually has to start making decisions. Or at least considering options. Of which he has few, none good, if suspicions are correct.

He flips to the initial record. The first contact, so to speak, back before anyone at A-Site knew it wasn’t Russian Counter Intel. Back when B-Site was still a few years away from crashing into Brenner’s lab like a refresher course on what it feels like at the bottom of the food chain and a
fucking eye-opener about their relative importance of humanity in the cosmos in general.

Date: [EXPUNGED], 1979

Location: [EXPUNGED]

Re: Intelligence PD 0-0001 Submersion Test. Record [EXPUNGED]

Report prepared by Drs. R[EXPUNGED] and B[EXPUNGED]

[EXPUNGED] test no. [EXPUNGED] exposure to Intelligence PD0-0001

Subject 6 remains nonverbal after Sensory Deprivation Submersion Test 6b (See attached file [EXPUNGED] interaction with Intelligence PD0-0001

T+0 (exposure) – Mild anxiety reported by Drs A[EXPUNGED] G[EXPUNGED] C[EXPUNGED].


T+4hr – Dr A[EXPUNGED] reports visual hallucinations, intense anxiety. Claims that something is in the room.


T+14hr – [EXPUNGED] Dr. C[EXPUNGED] exhibiting erratic behavior, visual hallucinations.


T+20hr – Dr G[EXPUNGED] began exhibiting violent behavior toward Operations Tech D[EXPUNGED].

T+21hr – Dr G[EXPUNGED] fatally wounded Operations Tech D[EXPUNGED].

T+22hr – Dr G[EXPUNGED] required termination by K-Team (See Report [EXPUNGED]).

T+30hr- Nurse C[EXPUNGED] (not present during initial contact) removed to on-site medical with self-inflicted perforating injury to right and left eyes.

T+30hr- Quarantine expanded to floors C through H


Reminder: Subject contact with Intelligence PD0-0001 must be reported to a Level 5 Administrator immediately. Abort any test that results in contact between Subjects and Intelligence PD0-0001. Please remember to follow standard containment protocols for the Subjects at all times.

Sam Owens was never a sadist, but he might have a masochistic streak because instead of waiting a few hundred pages of medical records and psych profiles and rambling, psychotic interviews to see it again he digs up his own contribution toward the back.

And stares at it for a very, very long time.

Addendum 105.3b
Re: LNOMEGA SCP

While your initial reports of A/B Sites indicate standard containment protocols are sufficient, ACHILLES has recommended LN-OMEGA-ANATTA purge protocol proceed. B-Site spread-radius deeply concerning and Intelligence 0-0001 and Alpha-Class Rafflesia officially designated KTR-Class Threat. Casualties of LN-OMEGA-ANATTA deemed unfortunate but minimal. Please advise.

Gen. D

Re: LNOMEGA SCP

No sign of continued threat from Intelligence 0-0001 or Alpha-Class Rafflesia- only contact Charlie-Class Raffleius. Standard containment sufficient for B-Site spread. Minimum casualties is a town of over 30,000. Officially advise ACHILLES that he’s a trigger happy moron and to go fuck himself.

Be in touch.

“Goddamnit.”

They say that Indiana boys are immune to cold, Harrington seems intent on proving it.

“Why not just put on your shorts, Harrington, get a tan?”

The kid is only wearing a scarf and a windbreaker even though it can’t be topping 20 degrees- parkas must be too uncool (and if anyone remembered a young Jim Hopper wearing his shearling and no gloves in the middle of an Indiana February he would say that they must be mistaken. He was never that stupid. Kids these days.) Good lord, he’s even still wearing sunglasses.

He’d been looking for Harrington after taking his statement nearly two days ago. Then he’d sat across from Billy Hargrove in the interrogation room, the kid looking more smug than any eighteen year old with an attempted murder charge pending against him should look as he described some innocent rough-housing, misinterpreted by a “whack-job” and bunch of dumb kids.

Had started “looking” for Steve rather than looking after that, because this became a conversation he really desperately didn’t want to have.

So of course, just his luck, here he is.
The boy looks up from whatever he’s kicking along the sidewalk and makes his way to the passenger window with a smirk.

“Hey Chief. Am I under arrest?”

“Just get in the car. We need to talk.”

Harrington gets serious immediately— it’s still- well not a surprise, because the kid more than proved himself to be unexpectedly and inexplicably ready to step up and rise to the occasion at a moment’s notice, but it’s still a weird incongruity when you— you know, look at him. He even knows what his first words are going to be before his ass hits the seat.

“Is everyone okay?” Yup. That was them.

“Everyone’s fine. How’re your ribs?”

The boy snorts, tugging his sunglasses off and shoving them in his coat pocket and there’s a hell of a shiner and a hemorrhage in the eye behind them— so not just to look cool. Jesus, of course. He doesn’t miss the wincing, aborted attempt at the seat belt either. Kid’s been more roughed up in the past two years than a fair universe should allow.

“Kind of just floating freely around my chest cavity. But hey, the docs said I was only coughing up blood ’cause of some broken capillaries in my throat and not a punctured lung so A+ bill of health. I practically won this one.” And it’s back to the regularly scheduled Harrington. “Is this about Hargrove? Don’t tell me you do depositions in your Chevy?”

“I don’t.” He clears his throat, ready to launch into it and... he doesn’t. “What the hell are you doing walking home busted up? Where’s your car?” Kid’s got a Beemer that would make the angels weep. Gotta be worth thirty grand if it’s a cent and he’s talking about it because he’s stalling and he’s stalling because this is going to be a piece of shit conversation and Harrington can tell he’s stalling because he might pretend to be sort of an idiot sometimes but he sure as hell isn’t one.

“My car is still on four flats in the Hawkins parking lot. Didn’t really seem important with you know— everything else . What’s going on, Hop?”

“It’s about Hargrove. Off the record.”

Kid nods, looking at some unfixed point past the dashboard because he knows this can’t be good. And it’s not. It’s really not.

“Hargrove and Halloran are claiming it’s just a fight that got out of hand.” Harrington’s expression goes sideways, incredulous.

“Oh yeah, just a normal fight . With cigarette burns and strangulation . What the fu-”

“Relax, Harrington. No one believes them. That’s not the problem.”

“What about Reed? Did Reed say it just got out of hand?” Something in the boy’s tone cracks a little, like a last held out hope. What with Harrington becoming a semi-permanent fixture with their strange little group of misfit toys it was easy to forget that two of the kids involved had been friends of his once. Hell, he can still picture the three of them in the back of his squad car, all of fourteen and functionally invincible, Harrington trying to rally them to act like they didn’t care that he was going to tell all of their dad’s about The Cherry Bomb incident.

“We haven’t been able to track him down yet- look, that’s not-“
“The problem. Right.”

“It’s your word and the kid’s against theirs.”

Mention of the kid’s sends his wheels spinning- looking for a way that this could hurt them, looking for how this could go bad.

“Tommy won’t go after them for Hargrove.” He says after a minute. “He’s an asshole but he won’t go after kids as long as Billy stays in-”

He looks earnest, serious. Jesus, how old is he now? Only eighteen? Is he even?

“That’s not-”

“The problem. Holy shit, Hop, just tell me what the problem is- the suspense is killing me, okay?”

Okay.

“Halloran and Hargrove can say what kids were there and describe them. We press attempted murder charges and they’ll get subpoenaed- even if they testify as John and Jane Does their real information will go into the system. Jane’s, Harrington.”

The sudden understanding is a terrible thing to watch. He’d experienced it himself yesterday afternoon reading through the testimony and realizing just how utterly screwed they were. Watching Steve go through it is goddamn heart wrenching.

“Oh. Fuck.”

“Yeah, kid, fuck.”

The boy’s tall- got a lot of limbs and not a lot of room to put them in as he sort of slouches down, folds up a little, runs a hand through that ridiculous hair of his.

“Hopper, Max lives with him and he’s fucking crazy.”

“Listen to me. Flo is going to lose some paperwork. He’ll have a few days to cool his heels. When we have to release him Callahan is going to be his constant goddamn companion. He won’t be able to take a piss without someone being able to tell me if he washes his hands and he sure as hell won’t get near any of you.”

“Max.”

“I know. We’re going to make sure she’s safe, okay?” Kid’s eyes show that it’s definitely not okay. Not in the slightest and given the circumstances he can’t blame him “He hasn’t hurt her yet and this isn’t some alternate dimension alien bullshit- we can deal with a prick like Hargrove. Look, I can’t tell you what to say Harrington- I understand...”

“Fine.” Steve murmurs to his reflection in the window, ”It was a fight. It got out of hand.”

“Yeah?”

”We can't let anyone find out about El,” The kid sighs, leans on his hand, elbow propped up on the passenger door. “So it was a stupid fight. It got out of hand.”

He feels a flood of guilt and relief in equal measure, then guilt about that relief because Jane’s out of danger but only because it’s been spread around thinner and Harrington looks like having to make
the choice reached into his chest and twisted something.

“Thanks, Steve.”

Kid startles slightly when he lays a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, then shoots him that carefully perfected star-jock all-american-boy smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“We’ll figure it out.”

He wonders, not for the first time, how this kid ended up a persistent part of the ‘we’ who has to figure this shit out instead of just playing basketball and going to class and getting laid. Because even with all the crazy shit that had been happening around them James Harrington’s kid showing up out of nowhere with a bunch of Will Byer’s friends and a nail-studded baseball bat to help fight monsters would have been high on the list of the unexpected. Don’t even ask him how he became second runner up to Joyce in pathological determination to keep the kids out of harm’s way.

“If we’re good, I’m going to bail-” The kid shifts, reaches for the door handle but an idea that’s been percolating finally makes its way to the surface he reaches over the boy’s lap and pulls the door closed.

“Steve, did you know what Hargrove was going to do when you got in that car?”

Harrington settles back into the seat, seems to work his way through an answer.

“I knew it was going to be bad.”

“And you went because-”

“I’m an idiot? I figured I could take them?” He suggests, equal parts cheerfully helpful and unconvincing, letting his head thump against the head-rest.

“-because he threatened the kids, right? Harrington- don’t ever pull shit like this again. ”

“Yeah, sorry, no. No promises.” The kid crosses his arms and looks surly. Ah, there’s the teenager, “He knew they were at the arcade and I wasn’t going to get to a payphone in time to call you with no car. What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“Not commit goddamn suicide .”

“It wasn’t... Look, tell me you wouldn’t have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, well I’m-” A cop. A dad. Not an eighteen year old kid with his entire life ahead of him that already could have already died horribly a half dozen times. “Look, it’s my responsibility.”

Harrington is staring him down, heels well and truly dug in now. God, he looks just like his father at that age, except that James Harrington’s stare-down had usually been sometime after calling him a worthless no-hope pinko and before trying and failing to kick his ass. It’s a constant surprise that the spoiled piece of shit that had gotten pushy with Joyce-then-Horowitz under the bleachers after junior prom until she kneed him in the balls and weaseled his way out of ‘Nam with daddy’s money had somehow managed to produce Steve Harrington.

“Yeah, Hop? Well now it’s mine too, so don’t insult me by-what? What? Why are you smiling ? I’m serious, man, c’mon-”

“No- I was just wondering if your parents know what a damn good kid they’ve got.”
That brings him up short, the tense defensiveness seems to melt out of him replaced by an unguarded look of surprise that makes him seem even younger than he is. Kid takes praise like a thirsty plant takes water.

“Maybe when they remember that they have one?” He gives a crooked smile when he says it, like it’s a joke but it only manages to be half of one, “Hey, uh, Hop?”

“Hey, yes, Harrington?”

“Think, uh,” Steve doesn’t look at him—’cause that way it’s casual, off the cuff, unimportant whim. Just thought about it right now, ya’ know, “Think you could teach me to fight?”

“No.”

Thirsty plant withers like he poured lye into it.

But the kid smiles, “Oh. Okay. Yeah, I mean—”

“I could teach you to throw a punch, but according to the kids you aren’t half-bad on that front. They said you held your own at Joyce’s until Hargrove hit you in the head with a plate.”

“Yeah but—”

“And this time was three against one and started with a weighted sock.”

The kids just shrugs like he doesn’t even want to think about this time. Can’t blame him.

“Know what your problem is, Harrington?”

Steve scowls, “Yeah, Hop. My problem is people keep kicking my ass, that’s why—”

“Would you have hit Hargrove with that plate? Would you have beat him half to death?”

Harrington looks offended that he would even suggest it, “What? No. Jesus.”

“You gonna bring two of your friends to lay someone out?”

“Well my friends are like, thirteen now and Nancy so...I’d just bring Nan—” He can obviously can see that the joke is falling flat and sinks deep into the passenger seat, “No.

“ You going to decide to kill them once they can’t fight back?”

“Hop—”

“I can teach you to throw a punch a little better, work on your technique,” Harrington starts to nod, “I can’t teach you to want blood, kid, I don’t want to teach you that either, ‘cause it’s good that you don’t,” Harrington’s got big confused eyes on him now, framed by that bastard of a shiner looking young to the point he almost wishes he would put those stupid sunglasses back on and look cool again, “A jail-yard rush beats technique everyday of the week, ‘cause they want you dead. No matter how good you are you’re going to fight fair and they’re not and you’re going to stop and they won’t.”

The kid looks exactly as indignant as any eighteen year old boy being told he can’t do something, “I beat the shit out of a monster with a bat.”

“Could you do it to a person?”
That stops him dead.

“No.”

“Good.”

The boy swipes at his mouth with the back of his hand, tries to transition the nervous gesture into brushing his hair back.

“Look I should get-”

“I’ll drive you home. Cold air’s gotta be making it a bitch to breathe with broken ribs.” It’s a misstep-he realizes that immediately, because the kid would rather walk the two miles to Loch Nora in agony than admit he needs help and is already starting to protest, “Actually- you know what, how about a cup of coffee? My treat.”

The absurdity of treating a kid with a brand new BMW to a seventy five cent cup of coffee isn’t lost on him but Harrington looks surprisingly pleased.

“Uh, yeah, that sound good? Thanks, man.”

One cup of coffee turns into two. Two turns into three and a burger and a fourth cup to take away with them along with a bag of donuts (“Way to live up to the cliche, Hop.”) and a quick break turns into most of the afternoon as they shoot the shit in the front of the Chevy as he makes his rounds.

Harrington’s surprisingly good company. It’s easy to forget what normal conversation is when you share the knowledge of a secret government conspiracy and a hellish world inhabited by flesh eating monsters-it tends to eventually become the main topic on everyone’s mind.

“-Goosage should have listened to Williams and walked him- dickhead didn’t know his limits. Got too confident with a lefty slugger.” Harrington swigs coffee and plucks a maple glazed from the bag, waving it expansively, “Gibson had like- a vision or something. He knew he was going to send it into space.”

“Sparky Anderson’s going to die happy-’ He don’t wanna walk ya’ That was the biggest smile I’ve ever seen. Jesus, Goosage must have been turning the air blue.”

“Wait, could Gibson have really have had a vision? I mean, since people have psychic powers now?”

“I have a feeling Kirk Gibson doesn’t have actual psychic powers, Harrington.”

The kid nods like that would makes sense and folds himself into an artfully careless slouch, propping his feet up against the glove-box.

“Hey, hey - no shoes on the dashboard!” Harrington unfolds less artfully, foot slipping off the dash in surprise and he has to clear his throat and turn away to hide a smile so as not to embarrass the kid.

“Sorry. You gonna finish your coffee?”
He passes it over with what must be a skeptical expression, because Harrington tilts it to him in ironic salute.

“You planning on running on anything besides caffeine?”

“Not unless you have any confiscated bennies lying around?”

“Hmm. Soliciting drugs from a police officer while in his car, eating his donuts. Bold move.”

“You never know until you try.”

“Can’t sleep?”

“Look, Hop. Can we just not?” Kid’s got a familiar, mildly desperate, prickly way about him now “Because I’m beating a personal record of longest mostly normal conversation with someone out of middle school and if we go into it—”

He’d never really known Harrington before the Upside Down came to Hawkins. Hell he would barely claim to know him now except through what he hears second hand from the kids and Jane and if he was going by that Steve Harrington is either the world’s biggest idiot or the most perfect boy ever born in the state of Indiana depending on the day.

But he’s increasingly certain that he’s known kids like Steve. Hell, that he had been one.

*Post Vietnam Stress Syndrome*, is what they had called it when he came home and every night ended with a whiskey and Tuinal cocktail or a screaming nightmare. *Battle fatigue*, is what they called it when his father got back from Japan. They called it *shell shock* before that and *soldier’s heart* before that and something else before *that* and before *that* and as long as there’ve been boys that walk back in through their front doors that aren’t quite the same as the one that walked out of ‘em. They’ve got a new name to call it now, but that doesn’t change what it looks like. The boy’s not sleeping, getting reckless, jumpy. Carries that bat around like a damn teddy bear.

He should talk to him about it ‘cept he barely knows what to say besides ‘Sorry, kid, you don’t deserve this’—but then, none of them had.

“Fair enough.” Harrington wants normal, he’ll get it. “So. How’s school? You get any acceptance letters yet?”

“No yet but it’s fine, it’s good.” It’s the autopilot answer that goes along with that star-jock all-american-boy smile from earlier, perfected for his parents to lead to the least elaboration and to let them off the hook for not giving a shit as he blows past them or they blow past him. See, honey, it’s fine, it’s good. He’s about to threaten him with an interrogation room with a spotlight but the kid rolls his eyes at himself and sits back, “I have my applications in a folder under my bed. I haven’t actually... *sent* them.”

Interesting. Didn’t think the kid would be the path of least resistance type.

“Hell, I’d be a hypocrite to say you should or shouldn’t go to school but—gotta say, can’t picture you in sales, kid.”

“Oh, *Jesus* no. I’m not working for *dad*. I just— with everything— it just seems like... *bullshit*.” The kid sighs looking at something in the middle distance, and he hears him whisper a falsetto *‘bullshit bullshit bullshit bullshit’* under his breath, “Nance always was one step ahead of me.”

“Can I give you some advice Harrington?”
“Can I stop you?”

“I’m the one with a gun so…”

“I love advice. Sir.”

“You can’t live for the bad days, son. You can’t put everything on hold and make the moments that you get to pull out that bat or get your ass beat to protect those kids your only reason to be. ‘Cause if you do that someday- if you’re successful- they’re going to have their own lives and you’re going to end up an old soldier with no war and not a soul around you that can tell your stories to- if you’re lucky enough to get old. ” He expects the kid to protest, instead he just runs a hand through his hair, adam’s apple bobbing under his scarf.

“So what, should I leave and get an MBA? Get mine?” Kid doesn’t sound defensive or sarcastic, sounds like he’s really asking, like it’s fated somehow, “Move to Chicago. Marry a blonde. Have a kid. Ignore my kid. Drink until I can sleep at night knowing someone else is having that bad day and I’m not there?”

“There’s middle ground between ‘running headlong into your own grave’ and ‘becoming an asshole’.”

“Really? Because helping Nance and Byers and those little dipshits is the first time anything I’ve done has mattered. Really mattered. ” And now he just sounds tired, “And if there’s middle ground I haven’t found it.”

He pauses, looks hard at the kid, “How do you feel about khaki?”

He’s done the impossible. Harrington is speechless. For a minute.

“Are you saying you’re not an asshole, Hop?”

“Hardy-fucking-har, Harrington.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah. Can’t say it’s always exciting. Obviously it’s glamorous,” He brushes off his uniform shirt like he’s going to wear it to the Ritz, makes the kid smirk, “But it seems like you got the bug to help and you’re not going to be happy with some ‘great future in plastics’. Might as well take shameless advantage of your uncertainty and try to get a damn good kid on my team.”

“That’s pretty dastardly for a cop.” Harrington looks uncertain, like he’s waiting for him to change his mind, tell him he’s joking, falls back on sarcastic cool to protect himself from getting his hopes up, “ Could I make the bat regulation?”

“You could keep the bat as long as it stays in the trunk.” Would have to be an idiot to separate ‘em at this point. Never know in this town. “Look, it’s just something to think about. Get some summer job and you could blow through the academy in the fall.”

Kid just nods looks out the window as they lapse into contemplative silence.

So he presses play on his cassette player, watches Harrington perk up a little when the opening guitar declares it as something new and something he recognizes instead of whatever dusty oldies (classics, obviously) the kid assumed he’d have and he doesn’t tell him that he just got lucky, ‘cause there was a fifty/fifty chance it was going to be the Allman Brothers. Let the kid think he’s cool for a little while.
I had a friend was a big baseball player

Back in high school-

The silence lapses into a comfortable one as he drives, Harrington half-humming, half-mumbling along with the song under his breath, forehead against the passenger side window as he beats the rhythm against the door with his fingers. Looks surprised and suddenly self-conscious when he joins in with him, drumming his hands on the steering wheel.

“Glory days, well they'll pass you by
Glory days, in the wink of a young girl's eye—”

He knows he can’t sing so he decides to be embarrassingly enthusiastic about it and it makes Harrington roll his eyes and join in understandably scratchy but serviceable tenor to save him from himself.

“- Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture
A little of the glory, yeah
Well time slips away and leaves you with nothing, mister, but
Boring stories of—”

His scanner crackles to life.

“Chief, we’ve got a problem.”

By the time they get to the woods near the Quarry it’s becoming increasingly clear that he’s more or less kidnapped Harrington for the afternoon because there’s no discussion of dropping him off at home.

Kid doesn’t seem to mind.

“What’s a 5150?” Some other teenager on a ride-along would probably be asking out of hope that it’s something good. Harrington’s seen too much shit for that though- asks out of fear that it’s something bad- like they might have scanner codes for ‘Interdimensional Monsters’.

“Mental case.” Because of course it is, “You’re gonna stay in the car, kid. Got me?”

Harrington fires him off a lazy salute before settling back in the seat and turning up the radio.

“Yessir, Hop, sir.”

It’s Winnie Larsson from highway patrol who spots him first and flags him down. Couple of kids in town from Uniondale came up here to- in her words- ‘kanoodle’ had spotted the boy- thought he was dead and flagged her down on the road.

“Don’t know what the fuck, Chief,” She says pleasantly, “Glad you’re here.”
To pawn it off on. Thanks a lot Winnie.

“the hell this whole town gotta smell all the time.” Powell is leaning against a tree, scratching under his hat.

“I bet he’s faking,” Callahan says, “We could hold a mirror up to his mouth?”

Powell blinks, “That’s to see if someone’s dead, Callahan. We know he’s not dead.”

“Whatever, man, I’m not an EMT.”

“Alright. What’s the-” He stops, “The hell?”

The kid is sitting with his back against a tree, eyes open and staring and goddamn, he’s not surprised that the kids that found him thought that Reed Archer was dead, ‘cause he’s never seen a living person that looked the part so thoroughly except that he could see his breath and someone had gone through the trouble to wrap him in a heat reflective blanket.

“Hey, Chief,” Callahan says, “We uh, can close out that APB on Archer.”

No shit.

Powell rubs the back of his neck nervously, “We have medical incoming but no visible wounds, kid’s just off in fucking space. Drugs maybe? Some kinda OD?”

He settles down on his haunches in front of the boy, snaps a few times in front of his face even though he knows it’s futile. OD was a workable theory. Halloran already said the three of ‘em had gotten themselves psyched up to rough up Steve with a couple of bumps of Columbian Courage in the locker room, courtesy of Hargrove. But if had been cut with something all three of them should have been in the same state and Hargrove is healthy as ever in the cells.

“Anything in his pockets?”

“Wallet,” Winnie supplies, voice muffled by her shirt pulled up over her nose to block the smell, “House keys.”

Larson and Powell look at him like he’s crazy as he checks the trees around them, running his fingers over bark, just waiting for the tips to sink into the stringy, rotting sludge that means that the Upside Down is back again, spreading like a stinking, necrotic infection-

Nothing. Everything is solid- trees continue upright, the bark is firm. The leaves smell like damp leaf-rot, not diseased wounds.

Only thing out of place is Reed.

Tommy Halloran had been bawling like a baby when they brought him in, took nearly an hour and swearing that Steve was-no bullshit- still alive to get a word out- and Harrington seemed to have held out the most hope for Reed. Eighteen year old kid, not mentally equipped to think that they contributed to the death of someone, especially not someone who had been a friend once-

“I’m gonna go get Harrington from the car.”

Callahan blinks, “How’d you know to bring Harrington?”

He drags a hand down over his mouth, “Psychic powers.”
Hop had offered him a job.

It was crazy. It was crazy. Officer Harrington? Dad would die just so he could roll over in his grave properly. Not to mention he’d be a small town cop. Sure- Hop had spent the last two years protecting people from monsters and men in black suits but that wasn’t the job all the time. Assuming no scientist assholes opened another tear in the fabric of the universe (which was apparently a big ask for scientist assholes) he’d mostly be the dickhead busting kids for smoking weed behind the High School and breaking up house parties.

But... it made a sort of sense. It couldn’t be easy being the only one the force that knew about what they were actually facing- hell- what actually existed. It’s not like Hop could send Phil Callahan to go fight demodogs and just say that Hawkins had been invaded by rabid, mutant raccoons or something.

And he’d know if they were safe. Hell, maybe he’d even sleep.

And the donuts were pretty good.

The waiting sucks though.

He presses rewind on the tape deck, ready to start his third, loud, bored rendition of Dancing in the Dark when the entire car goes dead.

...Which is fine. He's fine. It's the middle of the afternoon and Hop seems like just the sort of guy that doesn’t fill the tank when he’s got perfectly good fumes to run on. And the Upside Down breaking through might make lights flicker and phones short out but it doesn’t do anything to cars-

Shit, had anyone actually tested that? It seems like the sort of thing that Dustin would not only be able to answer but give him that look for even asking.

Of course The Upside Down can effect cars, Steve. The evil lay lines squiggle-fuck the electrical whatsits grid. How do you not know this? I wrote a paper on it in third grade.

He reaches across to try the keys in the ignition 'cause it’s probably just stalled and he'll get it to turn over, no problem. Prove that it has everything to do with being a shitty Chevy Blazer and absolutely nothing to do with monsters and other dimensions-

And it's because he's reaching across that he sees that there’s a familiar figure standing with its back to him in the tree line just past the road.

“Reed?” The other boy slips away behind an old oak just as he throws the car door wide and slides out across the bench seat because he's pretty sure 'finding a missing person' trumps 'staying in the car' when it comes to earning potential Cop Points and also because Reed shouldn't be out here. When Hop said that Reed hadn't turned up he'd just figured he'd probably run away to crash with that girl he used to date down in Majenica in hopes that everything would blow over- not that he was just hiding out in the woods overnight in the middle of winter like a dumbass Davy Crockett.

“C'mon man. Your mom is probably freaking out.”

There’s no wind. No creak of branches. Even the sound of dead leaves under his feet is muffled by the slush like the strange, watchful silence of the woods is taking his interrupting it personally. Nancy's story about a dying, disemboweled deer, a demogorgon, and a portal to Shit-Narnia in the trees that she barely managed to escape from is suddenly all he can think about.
Hey Reed no hard feelings about the whole letting Billy Hargrove try to murder me thing- just come back so I'm not alone out here.

He should have stayed in the truck.

“Look man, I’m not in the mood to play fucking hide and seek right now-”

There’s movement again- like a fastball whiffing past- hardly a flicker in the corner of his eye and he thinks vaguely that something’s there-

A hand comes down on his shoulder.

He gives a high-pitched yelp that would have undoubtedly been way manlier and less embarrassing if he hand't been strangled yesterday and lacking his bat every single usually-surprisingly-competent nerve in his body apparently decides that the best move for his survival is throw his hands up to try to karate chop whatever it is to death.

“Jesus, Harrington. I told you to stay in the car.”

“Reed,” He breathes, riding out the last of the heart attack, “Reed’s out here- he went this way-”

Hops eyes narrow as his fingers tighten on his shoulder.

“What did you say, kid?”

“Reed just ran past. I don’t know what the fuck he’s still doing out here but-”

“Steve.” Hop says slowly, shaking his head, “We already found Reed.”

Which can’t possibly mean what it sounds like but Hop's face is serious and concerned and there's no way to ask without adding fuel to the Steve Harrington is an Idiot fire because because only an idiot wouldn't know what's happened from the man's expression alone.

We already found Reed.

Everyone dies in this town, he thinks dully as Hop leads him back to the dirt road.

They met in fifth grade, smoking cigarettes under the bleachers after baseball. They traded Topps cards and troubles and shoved a half dozen cherry bombs into the dumpster behind the Hawk and had gotten in deep shit for it after they had to evacuate the theater because Mr. Green thought it was a bomb going off. Reed had come to him about his dad being a perverted shithead and they had fixed it together. Reed drank his beers and cried in his pool after breaking up with Gloria sophomore year and once Reed tried to kiss him when he was wasted and begged him never to tell anyone. He never did.

Like most of his friendships it was never much. But it was something. Reed was an asshole, but he was someone.

They pass the Chevy on the way to where Hopper found Reed, music carrying from the open passenger side door, engine purring happily-

“-son look around

This is your hometown

This is your hometown
This is your hometown—"

You're cracking up, Harrington, a traitorous voice supplies gleefully. Seeing shit, hearing shit. You didn't see Reed. The car never stalled. Take a few too many to the head, there, Amigo? Knock a few screws loose?

“Steve?”

He blinks, snapping himself out of it as Hopper looks at him expectantly.

“You...uh...need me to identify him?”

“No, we need you to try to talk to him.”

There’s silence.

“Wait... What?”

Reed just ran this way

Hopper’s instinct is to bring the kid back to the car, shove the last pink frosted donut in his hand and put the goddamn child lock on. It’s a good instinct, only ignored because when he suggests that Steve might, maybe, possibly have just seen a deer the kid just shrugs like he’s actually stupid enough to not know the difference between a boy he’s known since grade school and an animal.

“Yeah, maybe.” Steve says, looking somewhere into the middle distance.

He finds his way back to the scene easily enough- though less easily than if the EMS had arrived and had lights going. It’s still just Winne and Callahan and Powell, shuffling around the clearing.

And Reed of course.

The kid starts forward then skids to a frozen, gulping stop.

“Can the three of you go up the road and flag down the goddamn EMS- they’re probably lost.”

Callahan and Powell are more than happy to be away, Larson looks uncertain but goes with them.

“Harrington—”

Steve has a hand pressed hard against his mouth, looking like he’s in that place beyond nauseous where the body doesn’t even know to send anything up. He’s pretty sure the noise he hears behind that hand translates to That smell.

Harrington only knows it as the tunnels. He knows it just as well as the the swamps, jungle rot, tropical ulcers-

“I know, kid, I know- I smell it too. He’s catatonic and he’s been out here for almost two days in the cold, it’s a fucking miracle he’s not dead. Frostbite defrosting turns into gangrene.” The kid starts shaking his head in disagreement, because Harrington knows - he thinks he knows- that he’s smelling hell, which is accurate with both of Hopper’s previous experiences of it but not today, “I need you to try to talk to him, show him you aren’t dead.” He can tell by his eyes that the kid is silently horrified
by the idea of coming closer and he’s not sure he’s ever seen Harrington silently *anything* except ‘ready to kill dog monsters or die trying in Joyce Byers living room’.

He comes up even with him and places a hand onto the kid’s shoulder and squeezes, “Look- I doubt you’re feeling well disposed toward him right now but if he’s lucid to talk to the EMTs you could save his life.”

The kid breathes deep. Maybe too deep and too fast and he almost tells him to forget it, head back to the car- but Harrington’s already shrugging him off and moving forward, adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat.

“*Hey Reed*. Hey, man.” Harrington skirts around Archer, settles down in front of him in a nervous crouch, “No hard feelings, right? I know you didn’t want to- are you hurt? Can you talk to me? Your mom is probably worried right? *Reed*?”

Reed Archer doesn’t move. Doesn’t respond. Doesn’t look or stir.

“I know...Look, Billy scares the shit out of everyone right? If you just- “ Harrington turns to look at him over his shoulder expression apologetic, “Hop- I don’t think-”

Reed moves . Lips parting slightly like he’s about to say something and Steve’s eyes widen, momentarily hopeful as he leans in encouragingly.

“*Shit* - Hey man, can you hear me?”

He doesn’t know what clues him in that something’s wrong- a strangeness in the motion, the angle of Reed’s mouth maybe- but he surges forward just in time to get Harrington around the waist and pull the teenager upright and out of the way as gravity makes Reed’s jaw fall open crookedly- rotten and gaping wide off of it’s hinge as a torrent of *water* spills out of his mouth and nose, inky black, and thick like coffee grounds, splattering where the teenager had been kneeling seconds before.

The *smell*.

“*Back to the car!*” Steve is frozen at his side and it’s not fair because none of this is the Steve's fault but he still puts on his best Sonofabitch Sergeant-Hardass Voice because it's becoming increasingly likely that whatever the fuck this is isn’t normal and Harrington needs to snap out of it.

“*You can throw up when you’re back at the goddamn car, Harrington. GO!*”

That shocks Steve out of it and the kid goes haring off as fast as long legs will take him.

Reed doesn’t move again; not when the Med Techs try to talk to him, not when they strap him to the board with IV fluids and carry him off. Technically alive.

He leaves Powell and Callahan bitching about the smell and collecting samples from the scene, signs off mechanically with the EMTs and Larson and heads back to the Chevy.

He half expects the kid to be waiting to give him a not undeserved a piece of his mind for even getting him anywhere *near* Archer but he finds him curled up in the passenger seat instead. He lets him keep his feet on the dash.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Steve mutters into his knees and if there’s ever been a less convincing rendition of the phrase he’s never heard it, “What the *hell*, Hop?”
“Kid,” He mutters, putting the car in drive because it is well past time to bring Harrington home, “I have no fucking clue.”

He gets back to the cabin at nine *dot three five*. ‘Course Jane can tell time properly now, which he knows is good.

Doesn’t mean he doesn’t miss it a little- that and the other little vocal tics that are slowly disappearing as she learns, learns so damn fast it’s incredible- like watching your child grow up on fast forward.

He leaves his boots out on the porch ‘cause he can’t tell if the smell that still seems to be lingering is in his imagination and his nostrils or in the mud in the treads- makes note to spray ‘em with the hose in the morning and throw them in the trash if that doesn’t work.

Rest of the ride to Loch Nora with Harrington had been in dead silence except for the eventual excessively casual “Night Hop” as he gathered up his school bag and slid out of the car like everything was fine and normal and the day had ended singing along to *Glory Days*.

He waited at the curb until Harrington fished out his keys and got into his house safely because there’s no car in the driveway. He sat and watched the lights on the first floor come up, then the second, one after another until the whole place burned like beacon on the dark block.

Poor fucking kids. Every one of them.

He has to reheat the Swanson’s fried chicken diner, much to Jane’s consternation. It makes it better anyway- makes the breading cripsier.

“‘It makes the potatoes dry,’” She says, pushing her peas around with her fork and obviously dreaming of Eggos, “‘They taste like paste.’”

“You’ve never eaten paste,” He narrows his eyes, “Right?”

“...No.”
Well, at least she’s getting the full spectrum of childhood experiences.

He- definitely an adult and a father and a good influence- pushes peas around the tin foil plate, equally without eating them.

“Jane, when you went to help Steve- you didn’t...use your powers on Reed Archer, did you? The kid with the long dark hair?”

She shakes her head.

“I didn’t use them at all, not even on Billy. Steve made me stop.” Good job, Harrington. He knew there was a reason he let the kid over the cabin sometimes.

“Hm.” Back to square one, maybe the kid got hit in the scuffle- broke his jaw and maybe...ended up with some kind of edema? “You gonna eat your mashed potatoes?”

“No.”

“You gonna eat your peas?”
“They’re gross.” She pulls her knees up under her- well his but as good as her’s now- oversized sweater.

“You angling for me to make you waffles?”

The pleased smile she smiles is that one that turns inward and she looks up at him under her hair.

“Eat half your peas and I’ll make you one Eggo.”

“Eat half of your peas and I’ll eat half of my peas. And one Eggo.”

“Fine,” He snorts, and shoves a forkful of peas into his mouth, damn things are mushy as hell and the lingering smell from that afternoon that he can’t seem to shake gives them a vague off flavor, “Half-way happy?”

“Compromise” She agrees.

He makes both of them an Eggo and some popcorn and he pops a beer to settle on the couch with because Moby Dick is the ABC Thursday night movie and the way he figures it Jane needs to start expanding her cultural horizons beyond daytime soaps.

Of course she looks deeply skeptical when he tells her that there’s no kissing in it- obviously doesn’t quite understand what the point is without it.

“Look, kid, it’s a classic. Not everything needs kissing.”

“A classic?”

“Yeah, something that’s old but everyone thinks is still good.” She scrambles over the arm of the couch, sweeping her notebook up off the floor, scribbling away like she always does when she learns a new word or concept, “You got classic movies, classic rock, classic cars-”

She, stops, chews her pen cap, seems to consider this, seriously- very seriously.

“So... you’re a classic?”

He blinks, simultaneously flattered and feeling old as Methuselah and his expression must be hilarious because the girl usually has a poker face you could take to Vegas and beat the House with but she still breaks into a mischievous smile.

He tilts his beer to her in salute and tries to drown the warmth in his chest with a swig.

“Damn straight, kid.”

She settles back into the couch after that, seeming content to watch a bearded Gregory Peck ranting about the White Whale.

“-He is but a mask. Tis the thing behind the mask I chiefly hate; the malignant thing that has plagued mankind since time began; the thing that maws and mutilates our race, not killing us outright but letting us live on-”

The bang of bullet popping off outside ends the speech like punctuation, startles the hell out of both of them.

Wouldn't be the first time an alarm has gone off without the help of government agents creeping through the woods- they need enough weight to trip them that every passing squirrel or rabbit isn’t
going to set ‘em off and have them jumping out of their skin every ten minutes but the occasional wandering deer has had him searching the woods at 2 a.m.

Sure as hell doesn’t mean he *assumes* it’s nothing though, and his holster is slung back around his hips, his coat back on.

“Stay put.”

She’s already shaking her head.

“I can help.”

He wants to order her- tell her when he says *Stay Put* it means sit your butt down and *Stay Put* because she might be brave and tough as nails- tougher than him by orders of magnitude if you want to get right down to it- but she's still a little girl and he’ll be damned if she doesn’t get the chance to be one. Not a psychic weapon or a soldier against the CIA or the Upside down.

Of course that means he can't just bark orders at her either. Saw how well that worked last time. Heart can't take another impromptu trip to Chicago.

“I know you can.” He says, sincerely, “If it’s not just a deer and I *need* help I’ll yell for you and you can come save me, alright?”

She looks at him hard, mouth crooked, before finally giving a serious nod.

“Okay.”

“That’s m’girl.”

Cold comes through the door like a living thing with grabbing fingers and if the compromise wasn’t enough he thinks that getting to bundle down into the couch under the throw instead of chasing most-likely-nothing through the woods is enough to convince her.

“Yell and I’ll save you.” She says, muffled by the blanket, only the top of her head and eyes visible.

He steps onto the cabin’s porch, moving quickly away from the door and away from the shaded windows so he isn’t backlit to anyone watching from the woods. Tries to get his night-eyes, because a flashlight might as well be a target. Keeps a hand hovering over his gun as he skirts the intentionally squeaky boards on the porch and scans the tree line in the moonlight.

There’s a shape. Definitely not a deer. Thinks it’s one of the kids at first, Max, maybe, because it’s certainly kid-sized and looks like a girl and-

“Max?”

He creeps forward down the steps, careful, oh-so-careful.

“Max? That you?” No answer from the shadow and he’s starting to think it might just be his mind playing tricks because it’s too small to be Max Mayfield, “I’m not pissed that you set off the alarm but you have to talk to me.”

[Daddy? Where’s my hair tie?]

Something in his chest jutters to a grinding stop like someone took his heart in their fist and squeezed, air goes out of his lungs like a sucker punch and he’s rushing forward, stupid and half blind toward the dark trees.
First instinct is to shout for her, instinct so strong that the sound feels like it'll tear it's way out if his throat, one way or another. Sara, baby, I'm here. Dad's here. The words feel like a they're pulsing behind his teeth.

Second is for his mind to reject the shape in the woods absolutely. The impossibility of it crashing into him, rationality taking over because he's seen monsters and he's seen a child come back from the dead but she's gone. She's gone. She's gone.

Something out there shifts between blinks, a deeper larger shadow. There's something out there, he should go-

He stops. Fumbles for his flashlight, panicky, freezing fingers making a mess of it until it finally flickers and clicks into a steady beam that sweeps the tree-line.

There's nothing. No Sara, no ambush. No dark shape.

“Hop?”

Jane's voice breaks the silence. The little girl is a silhouette in the doorway. He has to talk to her again about light sources, he thinks distantly.

“Jesus Christ! Go back inside! I didn’t yell!” At least he doesn't think he did.

He doesn't need to see her face to know what her expression is as she disappears and the door slams. Then opens. Then slams again.

He walks the perimeter of the house mechanically.

Walks it again.

Then again.

Then again.

He wipes ice crystals off of his face, knows it's a fool's game- that he'll just make more.

He's not looking for her. She's gone. She's gone.

Daddy? Where's my hair tie ...

He walks it again.

You don't hallucinate after two beers.

He scrubs at his mouth with the back of his hand until his chapped lips bleed.

Guilt he thinks hazily. Guilt will do strange things. Lord knows he and Diane had woken up enough nights- stumbled the way to Sara’s bedroom to give her her medicine, certain she was calling out to them- found each other sobbing and screaming in the hall.

Hadn't been able to stand it after a while. House with the two of them and the ghost voice of their dead daughter.

Now. Now it was him and Jane.

Another little girl. Another daughter. And the ghost returns.
Daddy? Where’s my hair tie ...

He’d given it to Jane. Slipped it on her wrist before the Snowball when she was nervous. Told her it was lucky, just like he had told Sara before her first round of chemo.

Guilt.

There’s still Tuinal in the medicine cabinet. Just a few but enough to knock him out for the night if he takes it with beer. And a few can turn into a bottle come morning- make it real easy to sleep the guilt away. That’s what he had learned with Diane. Take enough and the ghost goes quiet as the grave.

He doesn’t know how many times he walks the outside of the house-only knows that when he gets back inside Jane is asleep on the couch and the Pequod is well on it’s way to its inevitable destruction.

He knows the feeling.

He heads for the bathroom.

“I feel old, Starbuck, and bowed. As though I were Adam. Staggering under the pile of the centuries since Paradise. Stand close to me Starbuck. Let me look into a human eye-”

“Hop?” Jane murmurs sleepily, “Okay?”

He stops. Turns back.

“Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep, Jane.” He pulls the throw blanket up higher around her chin and takes the open notebook carefully out of her hands, scans the page of new definitions for whales and ocean and ships.

And Classic, of course.

Classic- A thing that is old but everyone thinks is good. Like Hopper. Hopper is good.

He settles down on the couch beside her, medicine cabinet forgotten, and feels her fingers intertwine with his before she nods back off.

“Tis better than to gaze into sea or sky.”

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage:

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is a real place - most famous for housing Project Blue Book - a long term UFO study conducted by the US Air-force. Also notable for being the first to discover an evil parallel dimension filled with fear-eating monsters in a beloved cult-classic horror/sci-fi/mystery television show. Obviously nothing nefarious
has ever actually happened there.

The game Steven and Chief Hopper are discussing is the last game of the 1984 World Series- Tigers VS. Padres. Kirk Gibson probably didn't have psychic powers.

For geographic purposes the author has mapped Hawkins directly on top of Markle, Indiana. To anyone from Markle, Indiana, I'm sure she's very sorry about the monsters.
Book Two: From Beyond

Chapter Summary

To be perfectly honest, Steve hadn’t known what to expect. Nothing would have been any normal person’s guess of what they would find after being recruited by a bunch of children to look for a secret spy broadcast but after everything that’s happened in the past two years he was actually expecting anything from ‘secret underground base’ to ‘literal alien invasion’.

So the fact that the whole thing mostly seems to be an excuse to goof off in the woods is a pretty pleasant surprise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And didn't they say that, although curiosity killed the cat, satisfaction brought the beast back?”

— Stephen King, Four Past Midnight

Hawkins, Indiana

February, 1985

If something is going to wake Steve Harrington up at nine am on a Saturday morning it better be a monster. Like an honest to god, face opens up, Hi I'm a demon or alien or alien demon from another dimension here to eat you alive - up and at'em- stylemonster.

But it’s not a monster.

It’s the doorbell.

Two years ago he would have shoved his pillow over his head and ignored it, because nothing and no one in his life was important enough for someone to be ringing his house at nine on a Saturday morning and it would have probably just been that Jehovah Witness family that drive in from Uniondale or one of the neighbors bitching about the beer cans that Carol and Tommy tossed over the fence onto their lawn.

Now he’s scrambling out of bed on the second ring, swearing as his hip hits the corner of his nightstand in his rush, hooking one hand on his door frame to swing into the hallway, pounding full speed down the stairs and skipping the last three.

He’s at the door as the Westminster Chimes resounds through the hall for the third time, yanking it open with just enough presence of mind to remember to stay mostly behind it because ‘putting on real clothes’ hadn’t made the priority list.

Which is a good move because it’s the kids. All five of them, none of them injured or murdered, bikes dumped behind them on the lawn, looking hopeful and expectant with five identical shit-eating
“Hey, bud-”

“No. Absolutely not.”

He almost gets the door closed before Dustin manages to wedge his foot into it, conciliatory approach obviously having failed.

“C’mon man, what else are you even doing right now? It’s nine in the morning.”

“Sleeping, dickhead. It’s nine in the morning. Go away.”

The grins fade into disappointed expressions like that actually worked. Jesus, they even start to go back to pick-up their bikes.

“Okay, sorry to have bothered you, Steve.”

No. Nope. No way.

“Don’t worry guys,” Max says, a little louder than strictly necessary, placing her board down on his front walk, “We don’t need him. We can find the spy by ourselves.”

Fucking goddamnit.

“Get back here right now.” Bikes drop back into the grass and a small but thundering herd of grade-schoolers are back at his door pushing through into his front hall. “I have to get dressed. Stay in the living room. Don’t touch anything, don’t break anything, don’t set anything on fire, you hear me?”

“Why would we do any of that?” Mike grins, strolling into the living room, shoving his hands into his coat pockets with a ‘see not touching’ expression.

“Because you’re all walking disasters that live to make me miserable.” They’ve already scattered to snoop around by the time he gets back to the stairs and none of them seem particularly motivated to argue that characterization.

He digs up a sweater and jeans and is pretty sure if he tries to shower the kids are going to run off alone and toss themselves off a cliff or something like the lemmings in White Wilderness so it’s an emergency rush hair-routine day.

Spy?

Fuck it. Maybe he’ll just wear a hat.

“...So loaded.”

“...D&D here instead of Mike’s basement?”

“...Think we can use the pool in the summer?”

“Guys, quiet, we’re gonna wake up his parents.”

“They’re not back until the evening. But thanks Will. At least one of you wasn’t raised in a barn.”

Most of them are in the living room, at least, and nothing is broken or on fire, although the no touching directive has been thoroughly ignored and Max is pawing through the bookshelves and the
AV nerds are gathered around dad’s Laserdisc collection.

“You have like, a hundred Laserdiscs.” Lucas grins, “How are you this loaded?”

“My dad’s a drug dealer.” Well, CEO for a pharmaceutical contract research firm, but that was basically the same thing. Only meant he wasn’t going to get arrested for it, “Also, rude question dickhead.”

“Oh my god!” Dustin’s voice is a high pitched cracking shriek as he spots something across the hall and takes off, everyone else close behind, nearly knocking him over in the rush to his dad’s office.

“Hey, hey!- I said living room-!”

“That’s a Lisa 2. Steve, you have a fucking Lisa and didn’t tell us, I thought we were friends, man. ” There’s a incomprehensible, all at once babble of nerd-nonsense as Mike and Lucas and Will and Dustin crowd around, jockeying to turn it on and Max strolls over, looking skeptical.

As the two most obvious threats he manages to drag Dustin and Mike away first, Lucas puts his hands up in surrender and Will just looks especially big eyed and sad about it and good luck, mini-Byers, Steve knows when he’s being played.

“It’s my dad’s. Touch it and die, dipshits.” The kids make a mutual, disappointed whine like he just canceled Christmas, “Seriously- even I’m not supposed to be in h-”

“Hey, Disneyland.” Max plucks something off of his dad’s desk, small smile playing across her face as she turns it back around to them, “This is you, right?”

The boy in the picture is a skinny nine-year-old, small for his age, still two years away from the start of a growth spurt that would make it look like someone had stretched him like taffy, wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse Club ears and a goofy, gap toothed grin at his father behind the camera as his mom hugs him from behind, blonde hair feathered like Farrah Fawcett.

It was the last trip he had gone on with them together, before trips meant ‘Dad is leaving’ and then trips meant ‘Dad started screwing around so mom and dad are leaving, be good for the babysitter.’

“You were a cute kid,” Mike says, plucking it out of Max’s hand, “What happened?”

 “Give me that.” He sounds a little strangled and more serious than he means to as he snatches it away from Wheeler and puts it back on the desk approximately where it came from, “Everyone. Out. ”

“Out-”

Yearning mournful eyes linger on his dad’s computer as they file out but they don’t argue and he tries to ignore the weirdly understanding look Max shoots his way as she goes.

They bounce themselves onto the living room couch and look at him expectantly as he joins them, planting his hands on his hips and looking as stern as he can manage before 10 a.m.

“All right. Spy. Go.”

“We found a weird broadcast,” Will has apparently been elected representative on this one, which is a surprise because he had been certain that they were screwing with him and Will is by far the least
likely to be able to pull it off. “On the Walkies and the radio- it’s like some kind of numbers station.”

“Numbers station?”

“Like Lincolnshire Poacher .” Dustin says that like that actually explains anything. Look on his face must say it all because the kid clears his throat like he’s about to start class and continues, “Mr. Clarke told us about them in AV club. They’re these shortwave radio stations that spies use to send coded messages. Usually strings of numbers but this one says stuff.”

“How do you know it’s not just someone dickin’ around on the radio like you guys do?”

“It could be but it’s also really weird. Look just listen, okay, tell us what you think?” Dustin steps away, giving the floor back to Will, who pulls a tape recorder (property of Hawkins A.V. Lab written proudly across it in sharpy) out of his backpack, puts it on the coffee table and presses play.

It’s just the random static of a badly tuned radio at first, white noise and high pitched buzzing whines, it lasts long enough that he’d be back to thinking this was going to be a trick except the kids are leaning forward expectantly looking equal parts concerned and fascinated.

It happens all at once. A voice- or maybe multiple voices- warbling words out but so distorted that it’s hard to make out if it’s even English, let alone what it’s saying. Closest thing he can remember is the time Tommy brought weed to his place and convinced him to listen to Led Zeppelin backwards.

“You shouldn’t be listening to this, it sounds fucking Satanic.”

“Hold on,” Lucas says, putting up a finger like it’s about to get to the good part.

The voices are joined by a a tune.

[ Let the sunshine in

Face it with a grin]

“That’s the interval signal,” Will looks up quickly from his writing, “What the stations use to tell whoever’s listening that what’s next is the important stuff and the broadcast is starting. But the stuff after isn’t always clearer or different. I’ve written down everything I could make out.”

He slides the notebook over to him and the page is filled with a jumble of words and phrases. Most of them seem random- like they could be a code- a few seem like full phrases though. Mundane shit like ‘-rather not spend the rest of this winter-’ and 'Cinderella dressed in-' and ‘-give my goddamn soul for a beer ’ and 'a balloon?' and ‘-my hair tie?-’ and ‘-normal dream where I’m naked in homeroom?-'

He blinks at the paper. Closes the notebook quickly and slides it back to Will.

“Have you tried playing it backwards?” He feels a sudden mildly pathetic pride that he might actually be able to contribute to their nerdy radio shit. Obviously not contributing because Lucas pats him on the arm like he just suggested ‘have you tried pressing the play button’.

“Yeah. Actually worse that way. It’s definitely forward. The signal is just really messed up.”

“So we’re hunting down where it’s coming from.” Mike says sounding equal parts excited about it and like it’s not up for debate, “In case it’s those assholes that were after El.”

“Or the Russians,” Lucas suggests.
“Oh, right okay. Of course. Hunting down a radio signal that sounds like the Devil and might be a bunch of government dickheads with guns. Sounds great. Especially the part where we aren’t doing any of that. We’re bringing this to Hop, he can figure it out. End of story.”

Four sets of unconvinced expressions are focused on him.

“Look, it’s 9 a.m. on a Saturday- broad daylight. We’re just going to look around and see if we can find where the signal gets stronger.” Mike crosses his arms and looks annoyed and it’s like staring down a smaller, male-r version of Nancy’s Scarily Determined Face. “Steve, we can either do that thing where we argue for a bunch about if you’re going to let us and we do it anyway or you can just go get your bat.”

Steve Harrington- This is your life.

“You guys are seriously the fucking worst.” The four of them have broken into crooked grins, even Mike. “I’ll get the bat.”

“We also want you to come along, not just for the bat.” Bless you, tiny Byers and that’s met with general nods from the three others and okay, maybe they’re not the actual worst. Might be one or two things worse than the four of them. But not many.

Wait. Four. He keeps thinking four. He sort of got used to a four count, but with Will back it should be-

“Where’s Dustin?”

The others glance around, legitimately confused but they all seem to come to the same conclusion at the same time and break for the hall, skidding and tripping over each other on the wood floor and shouting, whether out of betrayal that he used them as a distraction or in a friendly attempt to block Steve from murdering him but jokes on them, he’s got the longest legs.

“What did I say, Henderson?”

“Is it on?”

“Without us. Dustin, you douchebag-”

“I just wanted to see if it had Alice on it!” Dustin says plaintively and backs away from the computer, hands up in immediate surrender, “C’mon, Steve, it’s a crime for a beautiful lady like this to be sitting around being ignored. She’s cutting edge technology!”

“No.” He catches Dustin by the shoulder, steering him out of his dad’s office and shutting the door behind them, explaining slowly, “A crime is going to be how my dad murders me if you break that.”

“Break it? Steve, I would marry it-”

They really need to get Dustin a girlfriend, swear to god.

“C’mon nerds, thought we had a Russian spy to catch.”
To be perfectly honest, Steve hadn’t known what to expect. Nothing would have been any normal person’s guess of what they would find after being recruited by a bunch of children to look for a secret spy broadcast but after everything that’s happened in the past two years he was actually expecting anything from ‘secret underground base’ to ‘literal alien invasion’.

So the fact that the whole thing mostly seems to be an excuse to goof off in the woods is a pretty pleasant surprise.

What hadn’t been a pleasant surprise was when Mike had told him to pull over to wait by the big old oak on Kiney and a smiling, innocent looking El had run from the tree line and smushed herself into the back seat with a sweet little ‘Hi, Steve’.

Oh sure, he had protested. Told them she had already been out once when she wasn’t supposed to be and Hop was going to kill him and Mike had reminded him of why she had been out last time and he owed her one and El had said that Hop wouldn’t know.

“What, whoa, lying, Supergirl?”

“No.” She had said like she already thought the whole thing through and come to moral peace with herself about it, “Just not telling.”

He wonders if warning Hop that El has discovered lies of omission will be enough to keep him from shooting him. Probably not.

“C’mon man, we’re hunting spies! El is the only one that actually hunted spies before- that’s what her powers were for.”

He had almost wanted to say no after that just because he didn’t want Dustin to think that shitty argument actually convinced him, but he hadn’t, just put the car back into drive with a promise to rat them out immediately if Hop does find out while they whooped it up in the backseat.

Because he might be looking after them, but he’s still Steve Harrington and he knows he hasn’t quite reached the level of uncool that would get in the way of two kids making googly eyes at each other.

And googly eyes they are making.

Hop’s just lucky that Wheeler is...well, Wheeler. Steve’d already been trying to get to second base with Becky McKenna was he was thirteen, Wheeler looks like he’d die happy just holding El’s hand.

“So an alien stole the Mona Lisa but he has this police box, right, and it’s bigger on the inside than the outside~” Dustin is walking beside him on the right, swinging a stick enthusiastically as he describes some weird British show he caught on PBS, while Will- the only one who seems to actually be taking the ‘chase down a spy signal’ thing even semi-seriously is messing around with the dials on an old pocket radio.

“What the hell is a police box?”

“It’s uh...a blue box and has Police Box written on it,” Hah, something Dustin doesn’t know-amazing, “Anyway, The Doctor and Romana travel around space in it~”

“So it’s a spaceship?” Lucas has spent the last twenty minutes taking Mike and El’s googly eyes as a personal challenge but the promise of a show with a cool spaceship in it is enough to finally drag him away from giving all his attention to Max.
“Sort of, but it also travels in *time*.”

“So it’s a time machine.” Max says, definitively.

“Yeah but it’s basically it’s own dimension.”

“Like the Upside-Down.” Will suggests.

“Definitely *not* like the Upside-Down.”

Will seems relieved at that and his fussing with the radio actually produces a signal, though it’s definitely not the one they’re looking for, unless the spies liked tamborine and upbeat, kicky organ hooks.

- *Cos time is short and life is cruel*

*But it's up to us to change*

*This town called Malice-*

Steve reaches over, plucking the radio out of Will’s hands before he can go back to trying to tune it between stations.

“Hey! Steve- we need that for-”

“Give it a rest, Dustin.” He grins, pumping the radio volume up and he knows he has an ally in Max at least when she starts bopping along to it, a bouncing, swaying mass of red hair “The spy can wait for two minutes.”

El is smiling, swinging Mike’s hand back and forth between them and she doesn’t have what anyone would call rhythm but Mike doesn’t seem to mind... or know... or care because everything she does is obviously the same level of absolutely perfect as far as he’s concerned and Lucas and Max seems to be in a contest to see who can shake their brains out of their ears through sheer force and it apparently even gets the coveted Byers seal of musical approval because Will doesn’t seem to object to the radio being temporarily confiscated, even joins along for the ‘*ba-ba-ba-bada-ba’s*’.

This is what these little assholes should be doing. Enjoying the weekend, dicking around in the woods, listening to music, holding hands with their girlfriends. Not helping close tears in reality, almost getting eaten, and getting possessed by *monsters*.

Not, he thinks for no *particular* reason, constantly trying to show each other up. Not pretending not to feel sick after drinking a six pack of Schlitz in half an hour because your friends dared you to and they’ll laugh at you and leave you behind if you admit that you might throw up. Not desperate to feel up a girl you don’t give a shit about and who doesn’t give a shit about you just because your best friend already started screwing his girlfriend and if he finds out the most action you’ve ever had at thirteen has been with your own right hand he’ll tell *everyone*.

Not thinking that that’s just what *friends* do.

So it’s lame. So it means being up at 9 a.m on a Saturday to haul their ungrateful asses around.

So playing enthusiastic air-drums while walking through the woods with a bunch of nerds hunting for a secret spy radio station is probably the *least* cool thing Steve Harrington has ever done in eighteen years of life. He really can’t bring himself to care because Dustin just hit an imaginary cymbal for him.
Struggle after struggle, year after year

The atmosphere's a fine blend of ice

I'm almost stone cold dead

In a town called Malice-

The screech of static coming from the Walkie-Talkie Will has clipped to his pants drowns out the song and stops all of them short.

[Oh let the sunshine in

Face it with a grin-]

“The broadcast!”

Dustin snatches the pocket radio back, twisting the dials to try to track down the In-between signal to match the Walkie- it’s coming through clearer on both than on Will’s recording, though the actual words are still a messy, unfocused jumble, pitching up and down seemingly at random, distortion torturing the voices into barely human mechanical noise.

The kids are thrilled- little weirdos, Steve would suddenly prefer to be doing literally anything else.

After that it’s basically playing The Hot and Cold game through the West Woods and it actually seems to be working as the kids fan out and swing walkies and the radio around in wide arcs, finding the strongest signal and adjusting, sometimes by inches, sometimes by feet, but unstoppably toward what seems to be a fixed point.

“Hey, Supergirl--” Mike’s finally unstuck himself from El’s side enough that he can stroll beside her, “This signal- you’re not… you know ?”

Dark, serious eyes stare expectantly. She does not know. Obviously. Obviously does not know.

“Look, if you just wanted a reason to leave the house and hang out with Mike, I’d totally get that-“

“I did want to leave and hang out with Mike.” She nods, looking proud of him like that was a very insightful observation.

“So you’re causing it, right? With your brain?”

“No,” She says with a shake of her head that makes her curls bounce, “Using my powers outside is stupid except for emergencies.”

“Right,” he says slowly, trying to figure out if there’s a way she might be applying her newfound ability to sort-of lie, “Right. Guys, we should start turning around, we’re probably half-way to the quarry. What’s your compass say, Dustin?”

“Direction, not distance!” Dustin supplies helpfully, waving his compass above his head, “How does no one know this? Anyway we can’t turn back now, we’re hot on the trail!”

“Look, douchebags, it’s past three, my car’s back on Kiney and if we keep going at this rate we’re going to end up in Simpson looking for your stupid pirate radio station and we need to get El home before five so Hop doesn’t kill me so ten more...“
The words trail off as he draws up even with the Party, sneakers sinking into the swampy morass of wet rotten leaves and squelching mud in front of the storm drain outfall pipe in a way that makes his skin crawl.

Of course the spooky radio signal would bring them to the Gates of Hell. Where else?

As far as he can tell every small town has its own teenager-approved Gates of Hell. Some are defunct train tunnels, some are under crumbling road trestles or abandoned fallout shelters, some, like Hawkins’ are outfall pipes big enough to stand in and explore. They’re the subject of a thousand dares and a thousand urban legends. This one had Red-Eyed Joe who would come get you if you knocked three time on the pipe and said his name, baby murdering Satanic Rituals at midnight obviously (why else would someone paint a pentagram and ‘hail SaTiN on the wall), mysterious ghost lights, and always at least one extremely murderous escaped mental patient living in it.

That’s what you tell your friends, of course, expanding the story each time to try to scare each other into chickening out first and to try to make sure you’re the one that delves the deepest, writes your name the farthest in.

There’s a $S \triangleright S B$ in black paint at the very back before the sump that lasted considerably longer than how long he $\triangleright S$’d Becky.

“You’re kidding me.” Lucas mutters, taking the words right out of his mouth. “The Gates?”

“It’s in that direction.” Dustin says, sounding mildly baffled about it, “Obviously probably not in the Gates.”

“Gate?” El murmurs, brow furrowed in obvious concern, “What gate?”

“Not like that Gate.” Will reassures her, though he’s holding his elbows nervously, “It’s just a dumb storm drain.”

Lucas tugs a flashlight from his bag and hesitates so briefly it’s almost imperceptible before clicking it on and shining it down into the darkness of the pipe, illuminating years worth of graffiti of varying levels of explicit, including huge fresh white letters announcing ‘THERE IS NOTHING HERE’ and showcasing that the writers had partied here recently, at least if the scatter of beer cans, cigarette butts and the odd discarded roach that hadn’t been washed out yet was any indication.

“You guys ever go in?” He asks, already pretty sure of the answer.

“We tried once,” Lucas says, sweeping the light around, “But some older kids were messing around out front and told us to get lost or they’d throw us in the water.”

“No nerds allowed, apparently.” Dustin scowls, then smirks, planting his hands on the pipe, pressing himself up.

“Hey, hey dude, what are you doing? C’mon get out of there.”

“Steve’s actually right this time,” Max says cautiously then scowls at his pleased expression and continues before he can give a happily validated ‘see ’, “Just this one time. I knew a kid back in California that drowned in a flood channel.”

“Totally dry as a bone. And high school kids hang out here all the time.” Dustin says and Lucas and Mike are already pulling themselves in, Mike extending a hand to help El climb in, “C’mon Steve, like you were never in here. I bet you totally brought girls here, right? Right?
Dustin would be elbowing him in the ribs if they were accessible and now Max is climbing up too and damnit.

“No one is bringing girls here. That’s not what you’re doing. Hear me, shitheads? Hands to yourselves.”

He levers himself up and goes to follow Lucas’ light. He’s still not concerned about Mike getting handsy. Hell, he’s not actually concerned about Lucas. Max on the other hand-

He stops.

It’s dank and the smell is mildew damp and natural compost, not the thick unholy, almost sweet decomposition smell of the tunnels but the air still seems to stick in his lungs. The walls are rounded and dark but don’t twist and spiral with living vines, just a hundred different handwritings worth of love declarations and phone numbers and ‘I was here’s’ but he still hates putting a hand flat against them to keep himself upright anyway.

This is fine. It’s not the tunnels. The kids are laughing a little ways off, no one is screaming. It only goes about forty feet before the sump, not in seemingly endless circles. You’ve been in here a dozen times. It’ll be fine.

“Are you okay?”

Nope.

He tries to will his pulse to something between normal and jackhammer as he realizes that Will is still hovering at the pipe mouth.

“Yeah, hey,” He squats down, trying to focus “We’ll be right back if you don’t want too-”

“No, I’ll come too” The kid says, looking resolute enough that he reaches a hand down to help haul him up, “You’ve been in here a bunch, right?”

“Yeah,” He grins as convincingly as he can, “Haven’t seen Red-Eyed Joe once.”

Will snorts because urban legends obviously have less impact when you’ve been possessed by an extra-dimensional smoke monster.

“Well, that’s good.” The kid says dryly, sticking to his side as they follow after the others and he’s not one hundred percent sure if it’s for Will’s benefit or his.

“-can’t believe the signal’s still working.”

“What’s a clown pie? Everyone hates clowns. Why would someone give someone that?”

“Dude.”

“Stop reading the graffiti.” He thinks about the shit Tommy used to do in here, “And don’t touch anything. Like anything.”

Him and Will come up on the other kids faster than he expected because the whole thing is blocked by what looks like two trees worth of deadfall that somehow managed to get lodged in the pipe and they might be tiny and suicidal but none of them are dumb enough to try to climb under it.

Lucas’ light flashes through the bare tree branches. There’s only ten feet or so of pipe past them and after that there’s just the sump and you sure as hell don’t go down there, even when it’s dry.
Which, surprisingly it’s not. Really not.

“Okay, dipshits. Max was right. There’s water. Everybody out.”

There’s some mildly disappointed noises, but general consensus seems to be that as far as rights of passage go the Gates didn’t really have much to offer, which of course they don’t for a bunch of barely-thirteen nerds with no beer, no weed, and and a chaperone.

Oh god. He’s a chaperone.

“What about the signal?” Dustin, of course, is waving the still broadcasting walkie talkie

“It’s probably coming from the quarry. We can check it out tomorrow.”

“Wait.” Dustin perks up, grins a wide goofy grin at him as he realizes he’s casually committed himself to another day of spy hunting. “Really?”

He’s sort of surprised to realize that the answer is, ‘yeah really’.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m bringing a non-spy radio though. And snacks. You guys suck at this.”

[you guys suck at this]

“Steve, your PTT button is stuck.” Wheeler calls from ahead of him, “And no we don’t we’re just professional.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not carrying a walkie-talkie Wheeler.”

[want me to dream mr. bear up for you too once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named nancy -]

All eyes go to the walkie talkies and the radio.

Why is his voice on the radio?

[you don’t want me to go away do you you never want n a n c y to go away you’re so scared to be a l o n e and i m s o h ungry

jesus- el what the fuck is happening whatthefuckishappening]

“Steve?” El whispers, “It was real?”

His first thought when he hits the floor of the pipe belly first is, absurdly, that he just tripped. A stray branch, a tangled piece of discarded plastic rope that he didn’t see in the near dark something, anything.

Panic only hits when he hears the bat tumble out of his backpack on impact and skitter away, when he feels whatever is wrapped around his calf go taut, sees Lucas’ flashlight swing wildly trying to see what the hell is happening.

And it’s right in his eyes when something behind him starts to pull.

It’s shockingly fast, so fast that he barely has time to register that a good cross section of the nightmares he’s had in the last couple of months are coming true and something is dragging him away -
The kids are screaming, a blur of shapes running after him.

It’s too fast.

He’s dead. He’s dead.

He twists onto his back and there’s a single hail-mary that presents itself, more reflex than actual thought as he slams his free foot against the deadfall so hard it sends shockwaves up him. The whole of it shifts forward, an inch, two, and he thinks it’s just going to go, but it’s wedged tight.

Which presents a whole host of other problems, because the thing is going to rip his fucking leg off.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod," The keening is so detached from actual thought that he barely recognizes the horrified wail as his own voice -he can pretend it's some other poor asshole screaming until his air runs out.

Dustin’s wrapped an arm around his chest from the left, Mike from the right and Max is behind him, feet dug in and yanking hard under his arms and all of them are shouting for him and everything has gone a little hazy with pain and panic as his mouth is running through its terrified litany of oh my gods.

Then the pulling stops.

Dustin, Mike and Max nearly fall over backwards.

He stops shouting- takes the first full breath in what feels like an eternity. It’s still there, somewhere past the branches, wrapped around his calf, snaking up to his thigh, it’s just not pulling anymore.

Like a fisherman giving the line slack-

“El! Kill it!” Mike’s voice makes it through the shouting.

but that would make him-

The girl is above him, hand outstretched towards the massive shadow squatting in the sump.

Bait.

“Get it El!” Dustin howls, half terrified, half gleeful that El is going to save the day again, explode a monster.

"WAIT-!"

Then the girl starts to scream.

It’s not a scream of effort or strain. It’s agony. A hitching, hysterical sound like a steam whistle. It’s terrible and it means he’s going to die.

There’s blood on her face. All down her face like a vein burst and she’s stumbling blindly away, shriek filling the pipe and it takes Mike away with it, shouting her name as he grabs for her.

Max and Dustin shout as the sudden lack of an anchor on the right almost buckles his knee and yanks them all another half-foot forward when it starts pulling again.

“The bat -”
It’s going to rip his leg off. It’s going to rip his fucking leg off. He can hear Dustin saying they’ve got him they’re not letting go, they’ve got him-

Lucas is already scrambling for the bat, pressed against the floor of the pipe, flashlight aimed under the deadfall where it must have gone, one arm grasping into the darkness.

“I can’t get it-”

“i can.” Will says, quietly. "i can fit.”

And Will Byers shoves past Lucas and squirms under the tangle of branches and tree trunks toward a fucking monster.

Screams for Will echo in the dark around him, Mike’s undoubtedly trying to split in half somewhere behind him because Will is about to die and El has gone silent which is somehow worse than the shrieks.

Max starts to scream first and Lucas goes from trying to find Will with the light to trying to help them, grabbing onto him with Max, flashlight illuminating what Max sees.

A second tentacle, sliding along the side of the pipe toward Mike and El. A third wrapped around the trunk of the deadfall, tightening so that branches snap and bark flakes away.

It pulls and all of them slide a full foot forward.

Will’s scream is the one he hears above his own as the mass shifts- a foot isn’t much but it’s enough to crush him if he’s under it. Dustin is shouting. Max has handed her position off to Lucas, yanked her board out of her bag and started bashing away at the tentacle on the tree with it. Hits it until the board snaps in half.

It’s going to pull them all into the water. It’ll sweep up Will with the tree and him and Dustin and Lucas all together. Max is wrapping bleeding hands around the trunk like she can just dig her heels in and save them all. It'll take her too if she doesn't let go in time. El might already be dead.

The deadfall shifts another couple of inches. There’s no sound from Will this time.

Pleaseon’tletgodon’tletgodon’tlego.

“Go help Max!” Lucas doesn’t need to be told twice, scrambling to grab the tree, try to hold it back before it can crush Will. Dustin seems to know somehow, his eyes narrow and-

Well, Steve elbows the kid in the stomach hard enough to knock him away, pulls the bracing leg up. Screams follow him.

He goes through what feels like a mile of branches, emerges into the dark and there’s a shape there and he suddenly knows with absolute, horrific clarity what happened to Reed and El because there’s a light like staring into the sun and something forcing it's way into his mind like sick fingers ripping into him and it won't even let him scream-

And then Will Byers hits it with a fucking bat.

The bat. His bat.

Once, twice, three times, silent like Will’s concentrating hard on a chess move. Also terrified, there’s no question there, but he’s planted himself between him and the thing in the dark, bat stuck so hard
in the tentacle that he hears it go straight through and clang against the metal of the pipe.

The thing...retreats.

There’s no other word for it.

It’s scared. And maybe it’s just because the thing has some kind of grip on his mind, not just his leg, that he knows that it’s not actually Will that it’s scared of.

[above!]

The tentacle wrapped around him lets go and he yanks the bat from the ground and Will to his chest, wrapping an arm around the kid’s head as the second and third tentacles whip past them like a taut chain snapping.

The shape is gone again, sinking back into the water and he’s scrambling backward, Will shaking in his arms- or maybe he’s shaking Will, hard to tell, but his back hits the bramble and then breaks through to the other side and everyone is talking and screaming and grabbing at him like they’ve grown extra arms just to pull them clear in case the thing comes back for round two.

Lucas is screaming that they’ve gotta go.

No fucking argument there because if he stops now he’s never going to be able to go again and he needs to help the kids- and he clings to that because if that thought makes him better at coping with this now, with every single fear that crippled him in the safety of his room, or climbing a rope in class or every other time that made him feel paralyzed and pathetic suddenly roaring back into existence like a wide-awake nightmare, he’ll take it.

He’s up and scrambling to get El and it seems like Wheeler is actually going to try to hit him when he goes to grab her out of his arms but Will get’s Mike by the wrist and drags him along with them and he’s slinging the unconscious girl over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry and they’re going.

She’s burning like a furnace and she wretches at the sudden movement, vomits water down his jacket like she’s been drowned.

They have to get her away.

He half expects it to be dark outside because monsters just don’t attack in the late afternoon but they’re bounding out of the outfall into a chilly breeze and cold wintery daylight and they’re not stopping, pounding through the trees in a beeline for the nearest edge of the west woods and the safety of Hill street.

He’s stopped.

Hell, he’s ground to a halt so thoroughly that everything happening around him feels like cycling through still images on a view-finder.

After getting to Hill he broke away from the others, left El with the kids and just prayed she wasn’t dying because there’s only so far and so fast a bunch of nerds can run and the car is still parked on Kiney. He runs so hard he thinks his lungs are going to explode and sweat soaks through his winter jacket. He’s never done a five-minute mile before, but he might have today.

They can’t take her to the hospital since she doesn’t technically exist yet and what the hell are they
going to tell the doctor? She was psychically attacked by a monster from an alternate dimension, is it safe to take an ibuprofen? Hop’s cabin is too far out, his house too empty. They decide on the Byers’ because Nance and Jonathan might be there and they have to call Hop and no one, himself included, is certain what sort of shape he’s in to keep looking after them.

Looking after them, Jesus, what a joke.

At least he can drive this time.

The ride is near silent, Dustin with his knees curled up to his chin in the passenger seat, hat pulled low. Max and Lucas wrapped around each other so tight it’s impossible to know who’s comforting who, if it even matters, Mike whispering El’s name like he’s praying to her, Will staring silently out the window, one hand idly intertwined with El’s, running his thumb over her knuckles.

Him, too hot and too cold, like the times he’s had the flu, trying not to shiver so hard they can hear his teeth click, hands shaking so badly it’s hard to switch gears.

He’s never in his life been so glad to see the Byers house- not that he has a lot of happy memories of the place, to be honest.

Will runs in ahead, shouting for his brother as Steve pulls El from the backseat while trying to ignore that he has to pry Mike’s hands off of her and that the boy is crying because he truly does not have a single thing he can say that doesn’t ring hollow and he thankfully doesn’t have time to give it a shot because Byers and Nance come sprinting out to meet them. Jonathan must see something in his face because he grabs his shoulder and takes El out of his arms and it’s such a relief that someone else is taking over that he just sits down on the lawn with his head in his hands and... stops.

“Steve, Steve?”

The Party splits. Mike and Will and Lucas with Jonathan and El. Max and Dustin and Nancy crouch beside him and Nancy is rubbing his back, telling him to breathe, asking him if he’s hurt.

And- he doesn’t know. When he was ten Mrs. Cambers dog got out of her backyard and bit him. Left him with a crescent moon of divoted scars in his left calf and the memory of the feeling of something digging teeth into him but not managing to tear a piece off. That’s how he feels now- like someone had driven teeth into his head, fangs pushing apart the sutures of his skull to dig at his brain. He feels like walking wounded again but with nothing but a couple of scrapes and scratches to show.

“No,” He says, shaky with pulped exhaustion and lets them all work as a team to unfold all 5’11 of him back into a generally upright, self sustaining standing position again, “I’m good.”

The kids save Mike are hovering nervously in the living room and Jonathan’s commandeered Will’s room for El. He follows along in Nancy’s wake on autopilot- at least until they reach the bedroom and Mike puts his arm across the doorway and slams the door in his face.

Usually he’d call him a little douchebag and go in anyway because of all the people on planet earth that don’t tell him what to do Mike Wheeler tops the list. This time he just corrects course for the bathroom, digging through the medicine cabinet and under the sink until the search produces a box of familiar rainbow bandaids and a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

“El?” Will asks expectantly as he makes his way back into the living room.

“Don’t know. Mike wouldn’t let me in,” He settles down on the floor in front of Max, “Gimme your hands.”
She looks like she’s going to refuse at first, he can see the little hard-ass ‘I’m fine ’ on the horizon, but something in his face or tone must look as brittle as he feels because she puts her skinned palms out for him to swab with alcohol and a paper towel.

“This’ll sting-”

“No shit, Steve. I skateboard .”

He just needs something to focus on.

Something evil from another dimension is trying to kill them. Again .

It had been in his head. It had been in his head. It had seen Nance in there and dug around and-

It had been looking for El and because of him it had found her. Twice .

“Steve- I think I’m good-”

There’s a bang from the back hallway, loud enough to shock them out of their introspection, makes the whole room jump. He scrambles for the bat.

It’s Byers with his hand buried in the drywall up to wrist, shoulders bunched in barely controlled rage under his sweater, chin tucked to his chest.

“Yeah.” Steve settles with his back against the couch as Jonathan pulls his hand free and flexes it to see if the wall won, “Guess it’s not a party until we trash something in your house.”

“It’s only been three months .” Byers hisses, the absolute unfairness of that fact weighing the words down as he wipes the blood from his knuckles, “ Three. Months .”

The other boy makes his way to the couch, sits on the arm and tugs Will fiercely into his side like he needs a physical confirmation that his brother is still alive and here and himself .

“I’m okay, Jonathan.” The kid whispers into his brothers ribs, but doesn’t try to break the hug or the long, unhappy silence that follows it. Steve reaches over distractedly and sticks a rainbow band-aid onto Byers’ hand.

Jonathan blinks at it then looks at him like he’s actually seeing him for the first time since they showed up, his brows furrow like he doesn’t like what he sees.

“Are you al-”

“No. He’s not.” Mike’s standing soldier-straight in the hallway, pale and furious, fists clenched at his side. “It’s his fault.”

“What? Look it’s not-”

“You heard the radio, Dustin. He’s the spy .”

“I’m not a fucking spy , Wheeler.” He wants to sound angry, mostly sounds exhausted.

“Mike, he’s not-”

“ Dustin . He knew .” The kid’s voice cracks like glass and all of them are staring at him- not with the usual mix of hero-worship and mild condescension that places him somewhere between the coolest thing that ever walked the earth and totally- but amusingly-clueless . They’re looking at him like
they’ve never seen him before- like he’s a stranger. “He knew that he had the Aboleth in his head but he told everyone that it was a stupid dream. That's why he was scared for El to use her powers. You knew it was real!”

“There’s nothing in my head, Wheeler, shut up!” He’s on his feet and okay, that came out wrong but not one of them chase it, not even Lucas, not even Dustin.

“You don’t give a shit about actually protecting us- you just wanted something to make you feel important again. El is hurt because of you, you asshole."

“Wheeler, if you don’t shut up, I swear to god."

“What? You’re going to fight me? Bet you can finally win this time, I’m only thirteen.”

“Stop it! This isn’t helping!” Max is on her feet, grabbing at Mike’s arm, trying to get between them, cool them down.

“I told you she shouldn't come but you needed to hang out with your fucking girlfriend!”

“So it’s my fault?”

“Yes! If any of you ever just listened -”

“Wait a minute-” Lucas scowls.

“It’s my fault,” Will says quickly, sitting forward on the couch, grabbing at Mike’s sweater “I wanted to chase the signal. If I hadn’t-”

“No it isn’t,” He and Mike say it at the same time, but Mike just has to keep it going, reaches over Max’s arm to shove at him.

“It’s Steve’s. He’s a liar. El could die. Will could have died.”

“Wheeler, don’t touch me.”

“Stop fighting!” Max howls, though she looks like she might put Mike on his ass on his behalf if he tries that again.

“Wait, Will- what?” Jonathan is looking down at his brother who’s shaking his head rapidly.

Nance is out of the back bedroom making for the phone.

“Listen- I didn’t know, Wheeler. I swear to god- I would have never-”

“Screw you! You knew! You talked to it!”

“I-”

“You betrayed the party just so you didn’t have to worry about anything! You just wanted to pretend again. Pretend everything was back to normal and run away instead of talking to us. This is why my sister hated you.”

Nancy stops, not for long- just a hitch step on her way to call Hop, but her eyes get wide and she’s ducking into the other room, looking shamefaced.

Like it’s true.
This is why my sister hated you.

God. From the mouths of dipshits.

There’s silence, averted gazes as he looks around, tries to meet their eyes so he can explain, tell them that he’ll figure it out, that he’ll make it right - but all of them are looking at something else. Max has faded back from them, hugging her elbows. Lucas is looking at Mike, half impressed, half horrified, even Dustin is looking at his shoes, one hand rubbing the back of his neck.

Only Will Byers and Mike Wheeler are looking at him. Mike with absolute disgust. Will with wide-eyed pity and he honestly doesn’t know which one is worse.

I’ll figure it out. I’ll make it right.

He tries to say it but swallows it instead, feels the words stick in his throat like he’s choking on them.

He’s out the door, snagging the bat on the way, slamming the screen behind him hard enough to rattle the windows, jumps the front steps, and he’s got his car keys in hand, halfway down the dirt drive before he hears the tell-tale squeak of the screen on it’s springs.

“Steve!” Dustin is pounding down the porch steps after him, one hand clamped down on his hat to keep it from flying off, “Wait, I’m…”

“Go back inside, Henderson.”

“Look, yeah, this isn’t good .” Dustin’s got that placating, peacemaking tone he gets sometimes- like when he’s trying to feed a vicious monster Three Musketeers bars “You know it, I know it, but we can fix this. You can’t just run-off alone and do something crazy. Don’t split the party, remember?”

He was supposed to protect them. Didn’t think he’d have to protect them from himself.

“Jesus Christ, would you stop following me!” The driver’s side door crashes open like furious punctuation and Dustin skids to a shocked stop, “I helped you now-what? I’m stuck with you losers for life? I have to just stand there while Mike fucking Wheeler reads me the riot act? Listen up. I’m not part of your stupid Party. I’m not your big brother and it sucks that your dad couldn’t hack it but guess what? I’m not him either and no wonder he couldn’t.” The other kids are pouring out the door onto the porch, looking ready to go after him just in case this is it and he’s really losing it, and he feels a surge of miserable pride that Max has shouldered a snow shovel, ready to swing. “Go. Inside.”

Dustin just gawps at him, expression going sideways, right on the edge of waterworks before he ducks his head, trying to hide it behind the brim of his hat.

He can apologize later. He’ll tell him he didn’t mean any of it the minute he gets back. If he gets back.

He’s turning to get into the car when Dustin’s hat hits him square in the face, a surprising if not terribly effective projectile.

“You’re trying to do that thing where the kid throws rocks at his dog!”

“ What ?” He blinks, he’d been ready to field crying or insults but that brings him up short. “Did you just throw a hat at me?”

Dustin is already schooling his collapsing expression into a wobbly but critical seriousness.
“You don’t mean any of that, asshole.” He’s about to say that he sure as hell does but Dustin’s already marched up to him, jabbed a finger at his sternum with narrowed eyes and he knows he won’t be able to get it out without laughing or crying, “You just want to run off and do something dumb by yourself and you don’t want us to get hurt so you’re trying to make me pissed at you. You’re not that slick, Steve.”

He could have sworn he used to be pretty slick? Known for it, in fact. Still, he’s never been so relieved to hear the ‘Steve’s clueless and we all see through everything he does’ tone and when he sighs and sags and runs a hand through his hair Dustin tackle-hugs him so hard he loses his balance and thumps gracelessly down on the driver’s seat with a fuzzy head buried in his shoulder.

Goddamnit.

“Look- Dustin.” There’s a wet sniffle against his jacket, “Dude, use your sleeve or something, c’mon.”

“I know you didn’t mean it but that was a really shitty thing to say about my dad.”

“Yeah, it was.” There’s another sniffle, pathetic enough that he’s not sure if it’s real or Dustin is playing him for a hug. Figures it doesn’t matter either way after this day so he wraps an arm around him, lays a hand between his shoulders and rubs in circles like his mom used to do to calm him down back when she still held him, “I’m sorry, buddy.”

“It could have killed you. Don’t leave.”

The others are gathering around slowly.

“He’s right though, man” Lucas says, seriously but not unkindly, putting a hand on Dustin’s shoulder as the kid straightens up and wipes his nose, “If he’s the spy we can’t have him around. I mean, even with Will we couldn’t and Will’s...Will. Steve has a baseball bat covered with nails and fights like, everything. If he goes crazy-”

Oh my fucking god. Thanks for that Lucas. He hadn’t even considered going all ‘Here’s Johnny’ on everyone.

“I don’t think he’s the spy.”

There’s dead silence as all of them turn to the voice of authority, because when Will talks about D&D or who his favorite X-man is, or tries to convince them all to read the Silmarillion he’s just one of the Party. But when he talks about the Upside-Down everyone better listen.

“It’s different. Whatever it is. When I- when I was the mindflayer it could barely remember anyone. Even mom. Barely even Mike. It couldn’t even pretend.”

“Steve seems like Steve?” Max concedes and he could hug her even though she still has a shovel at the ready to brain him with. Especially since she still has a shovel at the ready to brain him with.

Lucas sighs and squints suspiciously at him before fishing something out of his backpack. Suddenly there’s a flashlight beam in his eyes.

“Who’s president?” The boy hisses like a hardass cop on Hill Street Blues.

“Regan.” Max snatches the light, aims it back into his face, getting so close that they’re almost nose to nose.
“What’s your middle name? Huh? Huh? What is it, punk?”

“James.” He feels equal parts ridiculous and relieved that this is working, “Wait, how does that prove anything? You don’t know my middle name.”

“Yeah.” She shrugs with a self-satisfied smirk, “I was just hoping it was something stupid ‘cause you’re rich. Like Janford.” She passes the light to Will before he can protest.

“Um. Who’s your favorite superhero?”

“Superman. Seriously if you guys ever-” Will’s already passed the light on to Dustin.

“What’s the formula for Benzene, Steven? We have ways of making you talk!”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve never known that, nerd. And call me Steven again and your ass is grass.”

Dustin drops the Blofeld routine and grins at him.

“See, guys, he’s totally not a spy. It’s not even making him smarter to cover its tracks.”

“Screw you. Look, as fun as this is- none of you are coming with me. Full stop. Now would you please go back inside- it’s fucking freezing out here and-”

The four of them exchange an almost identical wry glance and Lucas gives a satisfied nod.

“Yeah. Alright. He’s still Steve.”

“I mean it, dipshits- unless Max is going to-” He’s about to say ‘knock me out with that shovel’ but stops himself before he gives them any ideas. They’d probably do it and he’s had a lifetime’s worth of head injuries and being railroaded by barely-teenagers while unconscious, “Never mind. Until we know what the hell is happening I need you guys to hang back and look after El.”

“And what are you gonna do, huh?” Lucas asks, supremely unconvinced, “Go fight the Aboleth alone with a baseball bat?”

“One. It’s a nail-bat. Two. No. Because I’m not an idiot.” Looks that gets him makes it clear that that’s still up for debate tonight. Not like he can really argue, given the circumstances.

“Promise you’re not going back to the outfall?” Dustin stares him down, somehow he blinks first.

“I promise.”

They all shoot each other that look - the one that can mean a hundred different things but that they always come to mutual understanding on immediately, like the world’s most mundane psychic powers.

“Or any major municipal water system.” Dustin elaborates slowly, deeply suspicious.

“Okay...”

“Or any subsystem of the aforementioned-”

“Jesus Christ, dude. Are you taking 8th grade law?”

The springs of the screen door squeaking get everyone’s attention.
Mike’s a silent, watchful, silhouette on the porch, arms folded tightly across his chest. Guilt twists like a living thing in his gut and even though he can’t see Wheeler’s eyes he can feel them on him.

“I promise, guys. Just stay here. I am not fucking around this time, okay? El needs you.”

There’s a series of nods and general agreements that look sincere enough that he’s *reasonably* sure that they won’t be following after him and with the ‘make them hate you’ plan out the window ‘reasonably’ is probably about as sure as he’s going to get unless he locks them in the storm cellar. Which actually, knowing them, would probably still only get him to ‘reasonably sure’. Little shits would figure out a way to make dynamite out of garden supplies and blow their way out.

He’s about to pull away when he realizes that Dustin’s hat bounced off his face onto the floor by the passenger side and scoops it up.

“Hey man, your hat?”

Dustin’s already backing away from the window, hands up in refusal.

“Just bring it back, okay?”

Okay.

He can see them in his rear-view, watching him drive away and they don’t make a run for the house until they think he’s out of sight.

He knows what he needs to do. Sort of. *Maybe*.

He has an outline.

At least he wasn’t lying. He has no intention of going back to those pipes.

But if things are coming into Hawkins from the Upside-Down again where he’s going might be *worse*.

Chapter End Notes

**Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage**

Dustin was lucky enough to catch the excellent Dr. Who episode *City Of Death* on WFWA-39 back before the show was well known in the US- which just goes to show the importance of supporting public broadcasting!
The Strange High House In the Mist

Chapter Summary

He’s standing here, by himself, with a baseball bat and this is where all of it comes from.

You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.

“Absolutely nothing visible to the eye provides a reason for or even evidence of those terrifying shifts which can in a matter of moments reconstitute a simple path into an extremely complicated one.”
— Mark Z Danielewski, House of Leaves

“Tough old world, baby. If you're not bolted together tightly, you’re gonna shake, rattle, and roll before you turn thirty.”
— Stephen King, The Shining

The weirdest thing about the National Lab - weirdest if you ignore that it was some illegal government black-site and had had a portal to another dimension leaking out of it which- okay, were not really things to ignore in the ‘weirdest’ category- but the thing that made those things even weirder- like a weird amplifier- was that the building looked so normal.

With the place cleared out and no more army guys around to care he had just gone straight to the front gate, tossed his bat up and over the top and then followed after it, climbing the chain link fence and feeling pretty justified in ignoring the ‘Warning Restricted Area: It is unlawful to enter without the permission of an installation commander’ signs because even if the place hadn’t closed up the Installation Commander had probably been eaten by Demodogs.

He’d only gotten as far as the gate last time before the others peeled up and he was frantically shoving kids into Hop's car, knowing nothing about why except that they were running away and fast.

He would have been pretty happy to keep it that way.

But now here he is, walking through the totally normal parking lot in fading daylight, past a couple of totally normal picnic tables and the little ‘keep off the grass’ plaques on the grass strips that passed as lawn. Hell, someone had even ignored those Restricted Area signs before him and had survived at least long enough to tag the the plywood over the front doors with white spray paint. Which is promising, maybe?

Breaking in is shockingly easy. Obviously as far as the army guys were concerned they shut down the place and it looked like any normal abandoned office building because it was one. For anyone who didn’t know better the main concerns would be tetanus and mold and Hop arresting you for busting open a window with a bat.
Of course he does know better which is why he freezes stock still the minute his feet hit the entrance hall floor. Tells himself he’s just listening out, being cautious, also tells himself he’s a liar because he’s frozen and he knows it, flight response fighting the ‘Go forward’ signal he’s trying to send to his feet, which is ridiculous because he’s faced down a Demogorgon and demodogs head on and all he’s facing now is an empty reception desk so he should be fine. He’s good. He’s fine. He’s...

He’s standing here, by himself, with a baseball bat and this is where all of it comes from.

You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.

No arguments there.

The flashlight beam sweeps the room, illuminates a slice of dark hall as it passes because the two big entryway doors that are meant to separate it are gone.

The first half of the first floor makes him think he’s going to have a heart-attack with every office door he tosses open, bat in hand, ready to face something horrifying on the other side. By the time he gets to the second half he’s resigned himself to the fact that everything looks...normal. Obviously there wasn’t going to be leftover blood stains on the tile and boxes full of folders filled with documents labeled ‘Confidential and Incriminating Evil Experiments: Keep Away from Meddling Teenagers’ but he had at least expected the place to feel sort of evil. Most evil thing about it is fake wood paneling.

It feels like a shitty doctor’s office.

He needs to find something that can point them in the right direction and all the papers he’s picking up are invoices for office supplies and budget documentation that he's almost certain are fabricated since it's all stuff that an actual DOE would need rather than a crazy lab breaking reality, and notices that Susan is doing a Thanksgiving Potluck (Please Cross off What You Can Bring!) which, all things considered probably didn’t go very well. Sorry Susan.

And he has to go through all of it just in case they missed shredding something that can help.

Empty office after empty office, empty filing cabinet after empty filing cabinet. Ugly 1970’s office chair after ugly 1970’s office chair. A reminding everyone to please refill the coffee pot if they finish it. The walls and ceilings are dark and damp, shot through with brown water stains and unhealthy looking mold because Army Guys are clearly good at clearing our top secrets documents but forgetful about ‘What Indiana winters do to pipes if you don’t run them or turn the water off’. He can practically hear his dad bitching about his hard-earned tax dollars going to waste as his light illuminates discolored, collapsing drywall.

Even viewing everything through the thin (but mercifully steady) light of the flashlight the repetition starts to kill the fear, at least until he gets to the stairwell and watches the dark above and below him eat the beam.

He decides to go down to the sublevel Hop talked about first, hell with it, no reason to force himself to go through another dozen soggy invoices for pencils and Susan’s bake-sale fundraiser notices before finally getting killed by a monster. Might as well rip the bandaid off.

That’s the plan at least, because once he gets to where there should be a landing there’s...nothing. Just a concrete slab at the base of the stairs to nowhere. It’s so bizarre that he can’t stop himself from tapping the bat on it like he might be hallucinating it and is rewarded with a solid ‘thunk’.

They filled it in. Paved it over.
‘Thunk’

How far does it go? To the bottom of the stairway? To the bottom of the labs? Through the tunnels all the way to the farms? Miles and miles of blank, featureless concrete running under the town like plaque in an artery?

‘Thunkthunkthunk’

He really hopes that the people with the power to cause all of this aren’t all fucking stupid enough to think that that’s enough to stop anything from there. But then again, they did cause all of this so that’s not a bet he would take.

He’s halfway up the stairs with nothing behind him but a concrete slab and no way to go but up when the handle on the door to the first floor starts to turn.

Time is relative and Steve Harrington knows that better than most. For example, he found out that it takes approximately ten years to run from a car in Jonathan Byers’ driveway back into his living room when you realize a monster without a face is trying to kill Nancy Wheeler and you need to go back to fight it empty handed. Picking up a bat and fighting a Demogorgon is a two second blur, mind blanking in self-defense. You get half a second to escape from a pack of Demodogs and Billy Hargrove beats you for two eternities.

It apparently takes a month or so for someone or something to turn a door handle.

He should be terrified and he is in an abstract sort of way, but Steve’s brain has always been good at telling him to worry about important things later - it just only recently become an asset instead of making him kind-of a feckless asshole. It’s also mercifully good at leaving out the possibility that there won’t be a later in which to worry, at least until that quiet later comes and it crushes him all at once.

He gets the bat ready and decides to do his best not to die because what else can he do?

The door crashes open against the wall, flashlight beams swing and scatter as the ones holding them startle and shout and Jonathan jumps back and Nancy Wheeler screams and does such a great job of not immediately shooting him in the face that he decides to encourage it.

“Don’t shoot! Holy shit!”

“Oh my god, Steve!”

“Jesus.”

Nancy doubles over to breathe, hands gripping her knees, glaring at him from behind a curtain of hair. Byers leans his back on the doorframe, head thrown back.

He sits right down on the stairs.

He’s not sure which of them laughs first-seems like a Jonathan thing to do- but pretty soon the three of them are giggling like grade-schoolers passing notes and Byers’ hand appears beside him to haul him back up to his feet.

“I hope the two of you secretly hate having brothers, because I’m murdering every single one of those little shithoods.”

“They only promised that they wouldn’t follow after you to help. Not that no one would.” Jonathan
deadpans. If he’s supposed to be selling the argument he’s not putting a lot of effort in.

“Cute. Really cute.” He plants one hand on Byers’ shoulder and the other on Nancy’s steering them out of the stairwell, “But they must have forgot to pass along the ‘I’m a danger to myself and others’ memo so you two need to leave.”

“Steve.”

“I’m dead serious. I don’t know what this thing is, just that it talks and it’s crazy and it’s in my head...”

“Steve.”

“And if I had said something earlier El would be fine. So this is my mess. I’m cleaning it up. You two...”

“Steve!” Nancy slaps an arresting hand against his shoulder.

“Jesus, what?”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah? How do you figure, Nance? Mike’s right I...”

“I’ve been sleep walking!” She gives him a hard shake, “I walked half-a-mile with no shoes–because I thought I was with Barb. Two days ago I woke up in dad’s car four blocks from home. It’s like- it realized I couldn’t get where it wanted walking. Like it got smarter.”

“It?”

“The Ableth, whatever the kids are calling it.” She turns, focusing that determined gaze at Byers, “Jonathan tell him.”

The boy rubs the back of his neck, a nervous tick he hasn’t spotted in a while.

“I almost killed Billy Hargrove.” He whispers, distress twisting his features.

“That seems like a pretty natural impulse-”

“No, Steve, shut up.” He’d usually object, call Byers a dick, but his voice is so legitimately horrified that Steve just...shuts up. “It was that night at Nichole’s. I had been breaking down some boxes of photo paper earlier—I forgot the box-cutter in my pocket. I knocked Hargrove’s head into the wall and I remember thinking, ‘Okay, now you take the boxcutter out of your pocket and cut his throat.’ Like it was totally normal. ‘You take the boxcutter out of your pocket and cut his throat. Then you can wash the blood off in the lake and take Steve home.’ Just like that, like it was obvious.” His mouths twists sideways as he squeezes his eyes closed, “I know people think I’m a creep. Crazy Psycho Byers or whatever but I’ve never thought about hurting someone like that.”

He goes quiet and Nancy picks the thread back up and runs with it.

“Mrs. Torrance wrote ‘The supreme being of the threefold world’ on the board fifteen times instead of class notes without realizing it. I found Sam Edgecomb having a breakdown in the girl’s room saying Kyle wouldn’t leave her alone. Mr. Wilkes killed himself for no reason. Billy Hargrove tried to murder you.”

“That’s not exactly out of character.”
“Hop told mom he saw his daughter.” Byers murmurs, “He was crying- I...wasn’t supposed to hear.”

“If you’re dangerous we all are.” It’s a half-whisper and she doesn’t meet his eyes, looking somewhere up past his left ear, “And all of us told ourselves it was nothing and we were just cracking up a little. We all should have said.”

He had thought he was alone. He had thought he was losing his friggin’ mind-

When she drags her gaze down to meet his full on it’s determined and sad and heavy with guilt and a first hand understanding of past mistakes she obviously wishes she didn’t have.

“It’s okay, Nance. It’s okay.”

“So...” He smiles and tries to make it look convincing, “We’re all bullshit?”

She snorts and her forehead thumps against his chest in relief that he understands that she understands and he isn’t pissed and it takes fighting every instinct and impulse he has not to run a hand through her hair.

“We’re bullshit and we’re helping and you can’t stop us.”

There are apparently three reasons they can’t leave the Byers’ house.

El is Number One. Mike won’t leave her, not for a million dollars, and the boys are saying that they can’t split the party and go without him. When Max points out they spent half of last time they fought monsters split up they just shake their heads like she just doesn’t understand and this isn’t some rule they just made up and she hates them all sometimes.

Hopper is Reason Two. He had come in like a force of nature- a human earthquake of rage and fear. Hadn’t said anything but ‘no’ when the kids had started to swarm him and ‘where’ to Nancy and Jonathan and disappeared into Will’s room and didn’t come out.

Reason Three is Steve. Because they had promised not to which for some reason, means that they’re actually not going to. Probably some mix of ‘friends don’t lie’ (apparently friends don’t even lie when it means another friend probably getting eaten by a monster) and Reason One because Mike is halfway between still mad at the guy and feeling guilty..

So they sit there, feeling useless and scared until enough time passes that they start feeling useless and antsy because you can’t just turn the TV on or play ATARI when one of your friends is sick and maybe dying and the other one is probably going to get themselves killed, but that doesn’t stop you from getting bored waiting.

She wishes they could have gone with Nancy and Jonathan.

It had taken about five minute of useless flitting around after Hopper arrived, tracing a listless path between Jonathan, the kitchen table and Will’s closed bedroom door before Nancy had turned, mouth set in a determined line and declared that they were going after him and they needed to know exactly what was happening and where Steve had gone and Dustin had made his best guess, based on the fact that it was both the bravest and the stupidest thing he could be doing, which, yeah, okay,
no one had a real counter-argument on that one.

A small, shameful part of her had been really glad they weren’t going to the labs, but now there’s nothing for the rest of them to do again.

[Oh let the sunshine in

Face it with a grin -]

All eyes turn to the forgotten Walkie Talkie and it’s a mad scramble to get to it and turn the volume up. Mike tosses himself over the arm of the couch and Will skids in his socks, nearly tripping as he grabs the thing off the coffee table and holds it close as the rest of them huddle up, gathered so tightly that their breath mingles, staring at the plastic like it’s likely to bite.

The muffled, messy warped voices start and Max finds herself wanting to smash the thing against the wall. It’s not fun anymore-Steve’s voice had been in there- those are people.

“Is it coming for El?” She whispers, “Should we get Hop?”

Will shakes his head.

“No. The signal’s far away” There’s a collective sigh of relief as the thing spits out a stream of babble.

“We should turn it off.” Lucas says, “It’s friggin’ sick.”

“And miss learning about it? C’mon, man, we-”

“And miss learning about it” Lucas mimics Dustin, scowling, “It’s in people’s heads, dude. This is like- going through someone’s underwear drawer but a million times worse.”

“What we need to know is why it’s broadcasting. And how.” Mike settles down next to Will, curling one leg up to his chest. The ‘so we can figure out what it did to El’ goes unspoken but Will obviously hears it loud and clear, wrapping a comforting arm around the other boy’s shoulders.

"If it's an Aboleth then it collects the consciousness of anyone it eats." Dustin says, "They have this racial memory thing."

“We’re hearing like, a hundred people at once, though. It can’t have eaten a hundred people, right?” Max looks around the circle hopefully, only to be met by crooked expressions and blank stares, “Right?”

There’s uncomfortable silence and she kind of hates Lucas when he breaks it.

“If it’s in the water system it could be following the Wabash- getting people in other towns?”

“No, Max is right.” Dustin says, “We’d probably have heard about a hundred people disappearing, even if it’s in Huntington or something.”

He chews his lip and turns to Will.

“You were closest to it. Could you see if it had eyes?”

“None of them have eyes, man,” Lucas snorts as Will shakes his head, “Just a million teeth and heads that open up.”
"No shit, Lucas, not like I raised a baby demogorgon or anything."

"Don’t remind us."

"It was for science." Dustin says primly, "And D’art was a perfect example of nature versus nurture so."

"He ate your cat and almost ate Steve." Lucas deadpans.

"Okay, almost perfect example of nature versus nurture, and he was a good dog in the end." For a given quantity of good and given quantity of dog. Way Max figures it ‘finds nougat more delicious than kids’ isn’t exactly a high bar to clear. "Anyway, that’s not important right now. The demogorgons and demodogs hunted by smell and sound right, ‘cause no eyes?"

She sits up straight, turns to Dustin so fast her hair whips into her eyes.

"You can’t smell thinking. But maybe it can hear it?"

"Exactly!" Yes! Eat it, science. Mayfield on the case, “And if it only eats sentient things what’s it gonna do to figure out if what it’s chasing is food?” Dustin squinches his eyes shut tightly and swings his arms out in front of him in a wide arc that nearly smacks Lucas in the face and almost knocks the walkie off the table before Will snatches it, “It goes like woosh”

When that gets no immediate cry of eureka he does it again.

"Woosh."

"Dude, stop wooshing."

"But with psionics." Mike says slowly, “It’s not broadcasting on purpose- it’s throwing out a net."

Dustin grins in a way that’s mildly unsettling. It’s the smile of having Science To Do. The sort of smile that means they’re all going on curiosity voyage, whether they like it or not.

“I’m gonna make a call.”

Jen Dean is a lucky woman. She occasionally has to remind herself of this fact. Like when the phone starts ringing at the precise moment that Scott is unbuttoning her blouse.

"Let it ring."

"Jen."

He seems to be strongly considering it and she tells herself that the fact that he’s legitimately torn is one of the reasons she loves him.

"Take it off the hook,” She murmurs because it might be a reason she loves him but that doesn’t mean she can’t influence the decision.

"It could be an emergency- one of the kids-” It’s a lost cause now that he’s said that outloud, like stating it makes it reality. His mouth already has an apologetic twist to it.
“Fine,” She smirks and he’s already scrambling for the phone, “You’re lucky your mustache is so damn cute.”

“I’m very lucky.” He grins back at her, hand over the mouthpiece, “Hello-”

She sits back and prays that the next word isn’t going to be what she thinks it’s going to be because if it is it’s going to be a very, very long call.

“Dustin-” Oh, dammit all. “This is really not a good... Sonar?... Echolocation?... Deep sea fish? What is this about... ‘AV club emergency’ Dustin?... Yes. Yes, okay. It definitely can’t wait- no, right. Of course not.” He’s already making his way to the bookcase, reaching out as far as the cord stretches and mouthing a silent ‘Sorry, two minutes’ at her, though the amount of books he tugs from the shelves seem like this particular ‘curiosity door’ has a whole curiosity hallway full of more doors behind it and is going to last for considerably more than two minutes.

When he dumps the books on the table, phone pressed between shoulder and ear as he starts flipping to indexes she siddles up behind him, wraps her arms around his waist and lays her chin on his shoulder

“Tell Henderson that I will personally fund a NEXIS subscription for him so he can call them for research next time.”

Scott flashes a grin at her and she settles against his back for the long haul, ready to learn about sonar and deep sea fish.

~

Thank god her hair grew out.

It's an absurd thought, but it keeps coming back to him like a wave rolling back to shore.

Thank god her hair grew out.

Because Jane is pale faced and sunken-eyed, clammy with sweat that sticks her curls to her forehead, blood still covering the bib of her overalls, thin fingers clutching at the blankets like sparrow’s claws even as she sleeps- sleeps- a goddamn insane word for what she's doing- and the sick room smell hangs heavy and familiar and Hopper doesn’t think he would have made it past the doorway before breaking, completely and utterly, if she had still been nearly bald. Because he can’t- he's weak and he can’t....not again.

Come quick. Jane won’t wake up. That was all Nancy had said on the phone, because the girl is careful as hell about the possibility of bugs and CIA listening posts and whoever the hell else could be squatting on the phone lines and he had never hated that fact before that moment and that awful quiet, detail-less Come quick, Jane won't wake up.

Usually when he goes up to the cabin he takes a roundabout way, goes in circles and doubles back nonsensically to shake a tail that he has never actually had but it's better safe than sorry- ends up late with a cranky Jane and reheated mash-potatoes because of it. This time it was straight to the Byers’ house, going 80, blowing the last skeletal leaves off the branches of the trees beside the road.

The mattress squeaks when he uses it to steady himself as he kneels on the floor- because he has old knees- not because misery is making his legs boneless and he’s swaying like a drunk. He's down here to do something, anything, constructive even if five hours in the room has proven that there's
nothing to be done. He needs to do something- take her temperature with the back of his hand or use the wet washcloth Nancy had left beside the bed to cool her down or wipe some sweat away, read to her or give her her Cytarabine because Diane...

Oh. Oh god.

A parent with a sick child makes endless pacts offering deals that no one ever answers. With Sara he’d bargained and bullied and begged and shouted defiance and rage at a god that would let him live through Hue but take a seven year old girl. No one had wanted his good behavior, piety or life back then and he doubts there’s been renewed interest in the offer but he tries anyway. The same old litany, the old prayer, begging the universe to balance the books properly even though it never does.

He won’t live through it again. Maybe it’ll be the slow suicide of barbiturates and booze, the feeling of his heart juttering and organs fighting a losing battle in a war that only ends when he’s dead. Or maybe he’ll wander into the Outfall pipe and blaze away at the thing that did this to her until it does the same to him but either way he won’t live through losing another little girl.

There’s a sound outside the door- a soft thunk that doesn’t have the insistence or expectation of a knock and he knows it’s Wheeler out there, standing a miserable sentinel.

A childish part of him thinks that it’s his turn. His turn to rail and scream and howl his rage at the kid for taking Jane away. Congratulations you little shit, you got your way! Rescued the princess from the ogre and the tower for an afternoon and it might have killed her. Are you happy now?

He opens the door to the boy sitting against it and Mike looks up at him wet eyes, hugging his knees to his chest.

"Lock it behind you." Is all he says, walking back into the room without a backward glance because it’s not the kid’s fault. You can’t fight the pull of a black hole once you’re in it’s orbit, after all. If it hadn’t been Mike it would have been something else, inevitable as gravity, "Explain this."

"It was...a thing." Mike says it with a miserable sort of resignation, like there never wouldn’t be a thing waiting for them in every dark corner for the rest of their lives, "It was gonna kill Steve so she tried to fight it with her powers but it did... this..." He blinks owlishly, gaze drifting to Jane like he can't tear his eyes away and doesn't want to look, "Will scared it away."

"Will?" He says and there's only one Will that could possibly be- hell, probably one Will that Mike Wheeler acknowledges the existence of- but the thought is so incongruous that he adds an unnecessary, "Will Byers?"

"He hit it with Steve's bat." Mike, good and loyal friend that he is, makes a decent show of sounding like Will Byers scaring off something that hurt Jane- who had closed a tear in reality the size of a small skyscraper while fighting a smoke monster- this badly with nothing but a baseball bat and a prayer wasn't absolutely absurd and that it explains anything at all except that 'Steve's Bat' has somehow taken on mythical significance somewhere on the level of Excalibur when it comes to killing monsters from the Upside Down, "Aboleths always retreat if they feel threatened because they know they can always come back and finish-"

"Aboleths?" He barks as the kid's eyes go round and wide because the possibility of killing Wheeler is back on the table, "You knew what this thing was and you went-?"

"No! No we didn't- I mean it's-" Ah. Right. Of course.

"It's another monster from your game, isn't it?" It's nominally a question-mostly just snide and a little
nastier than he intends it to be because Jane is laying in Will Byers' bed covered in blood and unconscious and none of this is a game and he doesn't know what he has to do to convince them of that fact. "Listen, kid-"

"It worked last time!" Mike says, voice thick with desperation.

And something needs to hangs silently between them.

Far as he can tell he has exactly one thing in common with Mike Wheeler and she's laying in the bed between them. He could indulge that little, childish voice- tell the kid to get out and that Jane would be home, chewing on a pencil as she made progress on her workbooks if it wasn't for him. How it never had to come to this if anyone took anything seriously and didn't treat it like a stupid fucking game.

Instead he gives Mike a nod because the kids have been right twice more than his prayers have ever been answered, "Alright, Wheeler. What are we dealing with?"

"It's old," Mike says, looking serious and scared, "Beginning of time old, so they're really smart compared to other monsters. They're mostly aquatic so they use tricks to lure adventurers to their..."

The kid trails off, looking stricken before scrubbing violently at his eyes.

"Lair- They use tricks and illusions to lure adventurers to their lair and incapacitate them. Eventually they eat them and assimilate their memories-"

"Eventually?"

"Yeah, Aboleths play with people. They make them see things-"

Daddy, where's my hair tie'

"- they want to scare them or manipulate them into doing things, hurting each other-"

Shit.

The floodgates had opened. That's what he had thought back in January when the strangeness started. Back when Greg Wilkes killed himself on a whim. When bricks started hitting windows thrown by neighbors that had traded recipes for seven layer dip a week before. When people started wandering away into the winter and never coming back and murder started to punctuate disputes and Billy Hargrove casually flipped some mental coin between beating up Steve Harrington and killing him outright. When the town had started to get meaner and crazier than he had ever seen it like hate had blown in on a south wind. The floodgates had opened.

Hadin't realized it was literal.

"Why?"

Mike Wheeler exhales through his nose, "For fun."

The idea of something with the Upside Down's single minded drive to destroy that could look into their heads and dredge out their fears to entertain itself is so fucking terrifying that he almost tells Wheeler to cheat. Flip a page and pick something, anything, else from his monster book and they can pretend that thing is what they're facing.

"What did it do to Jane?"
"It cast psychic drain." Wheeler says like that should mean something but then the boy's hands twist in his shirt, white knuckled, and whatever composure he's been barely managing to maintain starts to fall apart as his voice waverers, "No, it-It's just a stupid game. I don't know what it did. I don't know if she'll wake up-"

He knows he should comfort the kid as he starts to cry silently, face buried in his hands, shoulders shaking. Tell him that she will and it will all be alright.

Can't do that though.

So instead he just looks down to Jane, watches as a sluggish line of blood drips from a nostril and wipes it away with the wash cloth, lays a hand on hers and extends the other to Mike, tugging him down to kneel next to him at her side.

-And everything in the room starts to shake like his first apartment when the IRT went by the window, framed photos rattling against the wall, lamp toppling beside him-

"El-?" Mike murmurs hopefully just as thin fingers intertwine with his and squeeze.

Because if any fucking person on earth can fight a black hole, it's Jane.

"Hopper?" Her voice is small and weak, eyes barely open and unfocused, but alive.

The noise he makes is meant to be her name but doesn't get anywhere near it as he gathers her up and pulls her against him because she's awake and he's got her and she's going to be alright if he has to move heaven, earth, and the Upside Down itself to make sure. Takes nearly a minute to manage a thick, half choking, Welcome back, kid as she buries her head in his chest.

"El-" Mike breathes it like relief just sucker-punched him in the ribs.

She shifts a little in his arms to look at Wheeler.

"Mike."

Which seems to be all that needs to be said between them at the moment because Mike just grasps her hand and gives her that look that they give each other, the one that holds a year's worth of separation- a year of crying and longing and an endless well of hope. The look that says that he better get used to Mike Wheeler 'cause far as the two of them are concerned the world might as well be exactly two people wide.

"Jane, what-"

"It didn't want to let go." She mutters into his chest and she's burning like a brand and blood from her nose smears his shirt but he just holds her and rocks as Mike holds her hand tight. "It bit me and it didn't want to let go- but I knew how to get out."

"Out from where, Jane?"

She's thinking through it, making an exhausted version of that face she makes when she's trying to work out the right word for something before finally deciding on it.

"Inbetween."

"Susan is having a bake-sale.”
Byers crumples the flyer and tosses it behind them sounding like he is **thoroughly** regretting deciding to help.

“Another one?” He snorts, “God, Susan you **maniac** .”

“You know, we thought we were going to be saving you from being eaten by some kind of monster. Not Dr. Harris’ fake budgets and **Susan** .”

“The real monster of Hawkin’s lab,” Nancy mutters, tugging open a desk drawer, “Steve- I know you want to help El but...why are you so convinced that there’s going to be something here? Everything about the project is probably under two floors worth of concrete or burned.”

“Because. Wheelbarrows.” He sighs, shifting a filing cabinet off the wall to look behind, disappointed but not surprised that all that’s back there is a desiccated mouse mummy in a snap trap.

“Wheelbarrows?”

“Wheelbarrows. It’s this shitty story my dad loves to tell at parties. There’s this guy, right? And every day he leaves his job at a factory with this wheelbarrow full of trash to bring to the dump, just you know, as a favor. The boss decides, hey, this guy is definitely stealing but no matter how much they search him or the junk they never find anything. So finally it’s the guy’s retirement party, and the boss says, hey, guy, it’s been driving me nuts for years- what have you been stealing?”

“Wheelbarrows.”

“Dad says employees will always find a way to steal, no matter how tight you think your security is and this was an entire lab full of douchebags conducting illegal experiments on little girls. You really think that none of them are going to be hiding something to screw their co-workers over and be the one to get all the Mad Science grant money? Or was a soviet spy or something?”

He struggles out from behind the cabinets, dusting himself off and his flashlight beam only catches her for a moment but he doesn’t miss Nancy looking away suddenly and becoming absolutely engrossed by the empty drawer, trying to hide a smile.

Hours tick by but it’s faster with three at least. Him and Nance clearing rooms with bat and gun as they check under desks and behind cabinets and rip the stuffing out of office chairs. They go as quickly as they can barring splitting up -a suggestion that Jonathan had actually **voiced** and Nancy had actually **considered** until he had put his foot down which just goes to show that you can get straight A’s in everything or read Ginsberg for fun but some situations are just better served by the guy with a background in watching **Scooby Doo, Where Are You?** on Saturday mornings.

They find empty binders. Empty desks. A chipped, lopsided handmade ceramic mug that rolled under a couch with **#1 Dad** carved into in childish scrawl that none of them quite know how to feel about. They leave it on a window sill.

Next office is as unremarkable as the last forty- hell, less remarkable, because they didn’t even leave the office furniture in this one. Byers’ light plays over the walls and ceiling, illuminating the crappy, waterlogged plaster before stopping suddenly in a corner.

“Guys?”

Steve follows the direction of the light up to the ceiling.

“They’re not drop.” He says, because he had thought of that earlier and spent the entire first floor testing it. “Can’t make it too easy.”
“No, look.” Byers is squinting, head cocked like what he’s seeing is so obvious that them not noticing is giving him second thoughts if it’s anything at all. His light jiggles, circles an area above them. “There. Where I’m pointing.”

Nancy’s slides in between them, her light joining theirs, brows furrowed like someone trying to find the image they know is there in a Magic Eye picture but just can’t get to come together.


Wait. Not everywhere. Not, for example, in a almost completely pristine rectangle where Jonathan is pointing his light.

“There’s something up there blocking the water.” Nancy whispers.

“There’s something up there blocking the water.” Byers agrees with a rare, satisfied smile and Steve could kiss him, her, and whatever dumb-ass soldier guy forgot to turn the water off because it would have been impossible to spot if the place wasn’t flooding.

"Holy shit Byers, how did you see that?"

"Photographers eye for detail." Byers smirks.

It could just be a plastered over vent. A piece of metal. Hell, it could just be a fluke, although it has pretty straight edges for a fluke but Nancy is already slipping her flashlight into the collar of her coat, illuminating her face like she’s about to tell them a spooky story around the campfire.

“Give me your bat and boost me up.”

Yes m’am.

It’s insane to him now that he never saw this girl until it was too late. He had caught strange glimpses, sure- swinging a bat on the side of her house like she was planning on cracking skulls, giving him a countdown with a gun trained on him as she waited for a monster to bust out of the walls- but he had been stupid enough back then to think that was a mask- crafted from the extraordinary lengths a person can adapt to in extraordinary times. He had laid movies and parties and opportunities to be normal again at her feet like a cat bringing home beheaded mice, without ever even considering that the fiercely determined monster hunter and the girl that had been afraid to take her top off in front of him were one in the same.

He bends slightly, makes a sling out of his hands for the right foot and Byers gets the left and Nancy plants steadying hands on their shoulders, bat tucked precariously under her chin and it’s one-two-three and alley oop.

She wobbles when her hands leave their shoulders to press up above her but doesn’t seem to even entertain the possibility that they’d let her fall, just focuses on the task at hand, bashing the top of the bat into the ceiling and creating a snowfall of plaster-dust as she bashing a hole into it.

“Hey, a little warning?”

“Sorry!” She says, glancing down- eyes going wide and mouth going flat to hold in a laugh before she quickly goes back to trying to break through.

“It’s in my hair.” It’s not a question. Byers smirks, nods.

“Oh yeah.”
“There’s a plastered over vent—there's something plastic behind it.” Nance sounds strained as she stretches and a short joke is on the tip of his tongue when she continues, “I won’t be able to get a grip on it. I need to kneel on Steve’s shoulders.”

Jokes on him.

“Hold on—” But Jonathan is already levering his side up and she’s planting a knee on his left shoulder and he has no choice but to bring her up on the right and Byers has steadying hands planted on the small of her back and she’s—

Well, in a position that they haven’t been in since October and yeah, he feels like shit tonight but he’s not dead yet.

_God_ Nance.

Nancy is tearing plaster pieces away with her hands, tossing them away like frisbees to shatter on the ground before making a frustrated noise and going back to whanging away with the nailbat.

“Hey, careful with my bat.” It’s starting to splinter a little at the top and he knows that ‘hammer some nails through a new baseball bat’ isn’t exactly a complex feat of engineering if it cracks all the way through but this one just feels _right_ in his hands.

And if he had been superstitious he would have said that it killed monsters and saved his life and is as lucky a charm as he’s ever had.

“Technically _my_ bat.” Jonathan says mildly and he thinks he’s actually _serious_ until his serious expression cracks into a wry half-smile as Nancy shouts a mostly unheeded ‘technically Mike’s bat’ from above them between blows.

"In that case _you_ can get the next Demogorgon, Byers."

"Actually, keep it." He says dryly, "It looms large in your legend."

"That's what I thought."

"- _Totally hypothetical, Mr. Clarke, totally-_ yeah, of course. _But say something could._"

Max hates being on the bench. It’s total garbage.

Okay, maybe not _total_ garbage, because she’s curled up on the couch with Lucas and it would be really nice and sort of romantic if they were listening to something other than a near constant stream of warped voices over the walkie talkie.

Dustin winds and unwinds the twisty phone cord around one finger as he scribbles almost continuously into his notebook, beating a nervous statcato tattoo on the paper with the pen whenever there’s a break in the note-taking while Will hovers, reading over his shoulder, ‘cause he literally can’t wait to learn about hagfish and how bats use sonar.

God, it’s like being in class.

Hopper’s come through twice to get water for El and she’s pretty sure that he had cried at some point, which is somehow scarier than the Aboleth on the radio. If he cares why Dustin is on the phone asking someone about radio frequencies and dolphins or why she and Lucas are staring at a
walkie talkie he doesn’t ask.

When Mike comes back and settles onto the couch with them he doesn’t exactly look happy but at least a little less likely to shake himself to pieces.

“How’s she doing?”

“Okay.” He says slowly, “She’s talking again but Hop’s worried about the fever. He might call Doc Owen.”

“Is that really a good idea?” They literally just got rid of all the scientist guys, “Can’t he just give her Tylenol?”

Mike looks skeptical, mouth twisting to one side.

“Yeah, maybe if it hadn’t been caused by a brain eating monster.”

Lucas punches him lightly on the shoulder.

“She’s just trying to help, don’t be a dick.”

Mike scowls at that, shoulders curling slightly as he goes to fuss with the walkie talkie, just to have something to do with his hands. There’s a low murmur coming from it now, like the sound of a crowd talking a couple of rooms away.

“It’s okay. I know you’re worried about El,” She says, nudging him with her foot and Mike looks at her with grateful eyes, “But yeah, don’t be a dick.”

That makes him wilt a little.

“It sounds far away from everyone.” Will says, sitting himself cross legged on the floor near her feet, and taking the walkie from Mike, “That’s good right?”

“Well, if it comes back we can always get you to whack it in the face, man.” Lucas reaches down to squeeze his shoulder, “That was so cool.”

“Nah,” Will murmurs, shrugging dismissively, “I was really scared.”

“Who wouldn’t be? You still smashed an Aboleth with a bat.”

“Okay but like, if you could send them on a radio frequency, yeah, like subliminal messages but right into someone’s head-” Dustin puts a hand over the mouthpiece, “Guys, I think Mr. Clarke is with a lady.”

“Wow.” Max deadpans, “Must be the best date ever.”

Lucas snorts and Dustin nods like he doesn’t see why it wouldn’t be. They really need to find him a girlfriend.

Will’s back to listening to the walkie, expression gone a little strange. Not scared or worried, just turned inward, mildly confused and he turns the volume up, pressing it up against his ear when that isn’t good enough.

[probably nothing...odds...]

“Guys? This is weird.”
Way Max sees it when a kid that’s spent weeks in another dimension and got possesed tells you something is weird it’s probably *pretty weird*.

“What?” Mike slides off the couch so he’s sitting next to Will, pressing against the other boy so he can get his ear up to the speaker, “What’s it doing?”

[can help...sort of an asshole but still..all of us...]

She heard it that time. Actual words above the low hum of background noise, an actual isolated voice.

“That sounded like-”

“Jonathan.” Will says simply, cold horror in his voice

“- *thanksMr.Clarkeavclubemergencysolvedgottagobye !”* Dustin slams the phone into the cradle and sprints for them, sliding into the space on Will’s other side.

[...god nance...okay this is fine...just think about baseball...tigers...jack morris...nine games miss hersomu-]

“Steve.” Dustin breathes as whatever Steve is thinking about Jack Morris’s season is stepped on by a female voice.

[...burn this place down and salt the earth. I shouldn’t say that outloud. They’ll think it's weird... people were monsters. Almost got it...]

“Nancy,” Mike scrambles for the walkie as a flurry of hands bat him away, “We have to warn them-”

“They’re not really on it, Mike!”

Lucas is scrambling for his bag, shoving his wrist-rocket through a belt loop.

“We have to go-”

[Jesus Christ, I hope this is something. Please be something...care if I have to rip the whole place apart...]

“It’s getting clearer.” Dustin whispers, “It’s getting *closer .”*

“It’s right there. We don’t have *time .”* She says and it’s a terrible realization, like a nightmare, spinning wheels and going nowhere.

Mike grabs for the walkie again and there’s a brief tug of war between him and Dustin as they fumble it between them.

“*Don’t, Mike !* You could make it worse!”

“*How ?*” Dustin’s face is wide open misery as he lets go and Mike brings it up, holding down the PTT button, “You guys *have to run . Run !”*

They wait in silence, ready for the walkie to explode or the creature to start talking back to them or anything else that could possibly happen.

[ you want to run... God, don’t be a coward. bad enough...useless unless the monster is scared of
mixtapes...]

[why Nance hated you, right?...run from everything. That’s what you do. Nothing gets a solid blow when you just keep...]

[...we’ll get them on the run.... Every dirty little secret-]

“Oh my god. It worked. It transmits. They heard it.”

“Sort of.” Lucas murmurs, “They’re not running.”

Mike keeps trying - panicky and breathless as he holds the button down and tells them to run, run, please run, knuckles going white as he grips the plastic because they’re running out of time and his sister is there.

“It’s subliminal so it has to be something that gets their attention, something they’ll stop and notice.” Dustin is up and pacing, like movement can translate into progress until he can’t anymore and grabs the walkie to try. “Sonofabitch, c’mom Steve. Just run. You promised to bring my hat back. You promised.”

Will grips Mike and Dustin’s shoulder suddenly, eyes wide with revelation as he puts a hand on the walkie-talkie and tugs it up between them and thumbs the PTT. She doesn’t know what she’s expecting him to do- some sort of weird Upside-Down magic, maybe- but what she’s definitely not expecting is The Clash.

“Darling, you’ve got to let me know. Should I stay or should I go?”

Mike’s brow furrows in momentary confusion before his face lights up with realization of...whatever it is they’re doing, his hand comes up to grip Will’s hand on his shoulder like it can steady him as they shout into the walkie-talkie.

“If you say that you are mine. I’ll be here ‘till the end of time. So you gotta let me know. Should I stay or should I go?”

Dustin and Lucas join them and she does too because they seem to know what they’re doing and are probably just shouting Clash lyrics down a walkie-talkie for fun while their siblings and Steve are about to get eaten.

“If I go there will be trouble- and if I stay there will be double, so you gotta let me kno-oow-”

[... Should I stay or should I go -]

[... Should I stay or should I go -]

[... Should I cool it or should I blow ?... Oh my god ...Will?]

Only in Hawkins is getting a song stuck in your head a herald of impending doom.

He doesn’t know how it happened. One second silence, next he’s singing along to The Clash quietly against Nancy’s thigh like someone just turned it on on the non-existent radio, right as Nance starts
humming the same few bars above him and Jonathan’s is taping it out on Nancy’s back and
furrowing his brow at both of them, trying to figure out who started singing it first.

There’s a moment of confusion because the answer is ‘no one’ or ‘all of them’ depending on how
you look at it.

Jonathan goes pale, paler, with horror.

“Nancy. Grab it. We need to run.”

Steve doesn’t ask why. He’s realized over the past two years that he’s pretty good at not thinking
there’s a straight line for Henderson if ever there was one) because if you have a monster and a bear
trap the monster goes in the bear trap and you figure out why later. If you have Hop shouting at you
to get in his car, you get in his damn car, and if a sudden simultaneous interest in British Punk rock
means that they need to run he gets ready to run.

Nancy seems to be on the same page because instead of trying to keep working the thing out of the
ceiling she just reaches up, breathes deep and says, ‘Catch me’ a half a second before falling
backward off of his shoulders, using her full weight to yank it lose.

Since letting Nance fall is unthinkable they catch her, even under a not-so-light rain of fist sized
pieces of plaster and actual rain because the ceiling and walls are just weeping water now. He would
give Byers a thumbs up for teamwork if they weren’t already slinging Nancy back onto her feet and
breaking for the door while she shoves a binder wrapped in plastic into her bag as they skid into the
hall and-

Holy shit.

They just got...turned around. Disoriented, that’s all-

“Wait...” Jonathan says, “Which way did we-?”

-Because there sure as hell wasn’t a blank wall back the way they came from before- blank except
for a red glowing EXIT sign pointing the way to a non-existent hallway.

“That’s not possible.” Nancy’s flashlight bounces around the wall like she can make a door
magically materialize if she remembers where it had been before.

“You traveled to another dimension through a fucking tree - run now, talk about possible later-”

The hallway doors are gone. They have no choice but to run right and then right again and right
again and Steve got a C+ in geometry but he’s pretty sure when the last right in a square doesn’t lead
them back to where they started some law of nature was being broken in a really spectacular fashion

He was also pretty sure it was fucking with them.

Because they aren’t back where they started at all- they’re in a new pitch black hallway that stretches
farther than any sane architect would design, farther than the skin of the building should allow and he
doesn’t let himself think about what the hell would happen if they ran down it into space that
shouldn’t exist.

A flashlight clicks on at the other end, a distant beam shining toward them out of the blackness.
None of them are stupid enough to say ‘hello?’

Nancy tries to shine hers back and the light moves to match it. Jonathan brings his up and a second
light joins the first.

He, with the sort of horrified, molasses slow movements of a dream reaches into his pocket for his lighter, thumbs it open and on.

A tiny distant flame appears.

“Guys...”

They turn back the way they came and run. Turn right and right and right again somehow and skid back into the ridiculously long hallway with two flashlight beams and a zippo flame waiting.

*Down the hall another Jonathan makes a noise like a dying animal, it ends in a gurgling, wet cry for his mother as a light goes out.*

Jonathan curls in on himself, fists digging into the flesh under his ribs so hard it has to hurt, a visceral reminder that the only him is him and here’s here and whatever is down that hallway is something else.

*They turn back turn left and left and left again into a ridiculously long hallway with one flashlight beam and a zippo flame waiting.*

*Somewhere some other Nancy starts screaming, a gun discharges- the screaming continues and fades into the distance alive and wishing it wasn’t.*

The look on Nancy’s face is strange as she listens to herself die. Perplexed, like looking at an old photo where you don’t recognize yourself right away- it’s only the white knuckle grip she has on Jonathan’s hand that gives her away.

They go out the door, turn right and right and right again, into a ridiculously long hallway with only a zippo flame waiting at the end. Oh god. It’s his turn.

*Down the hall he hears his own voice sobbing desperately, begging Nance and Jonathan to come back Jesus Christ please not alone please don’t leave me alone please-*

“It’s herding us.” Nancy says, voice shaky, “We need to try something else-”

The darkness down the long hall way is spreading like ink crawling the walls.

[SHOthingULD I S TAke a look Y OR Sunshine GO NOW]

“Just run - we need to -”

It was the stress, Jonathan tells himself. It had all gotten to be too much. Nancy understood. Nancy had always been kind, since the first moment he’d seen her in second grade she had never called him a loser, or a crazy psycho, never laughed behind his back. Sure, she pitied him, looked at him with big, perfect blue eyes filled with sadness and regret. It’s how she’s looking at him now.

*There’s no such thing as monsters, Jonathan, you have to listen to me. They found him. Nothing lives in your walls.*
That’s what she had said, looking at him with those big sad eyes as she took in the state of the living room, but him and mom know. They know what’s happened to Will.

He sort of wishes Nancy would stop staring at him. He’s never liked being looked at for that long.

She tried to take his gun away, but he needed it- they had struggled for it. He needed to kill the monster that took Will, the one in the walls.

“Jonathan? Jonathan, man, open the door, it’s Steve. Steve Harrington.”

Steve Harrington is still banged up from their fight. He knows now that he lost control, didn’t even realize what he was doing until they were pulling him away. He usually just keeps it down, buries it deep, the anger, the white rage, because he's not like that. He's not a psycho. He’s not like Lonnie. He doesn't want to hurt anyone.

“Look, man, I’m not here to start something,” Harrington’s face twists in misery, wide, expressive mouth turning down like he might cry, “I messed up, what I said- I messed up, okay? I- Jesus, is that blood?”

He’s about to tell him that it’s okay, it’s all going to work out, they just have to get the monster out of the walls and Will can come back.

He doesn’t get a chance though, because Steve is looking past him and makes a noise like the world is ending and he spins because maybe it’s there - maybe it’s time to kill it- but Steve is already pushing past him to run to Nancy.

“Oh my god, Nance, Nancy, Jesus Christ,” the words dissolve into terrified shouts to call an ambulance but they quiet into a low keening noise and finally turn into open sobs in the silence as he explains about the monster that took Will to Steve’s long heaving back.

Steve stands slowly, back still to him.

“You’re crazy,” Steve says, shoulders shaking so hard the words vibrate like he’s talking into a fan, turning with huge, wet eyes and advancing on him, “Oh god, you’re crazy , you’re crazy, what did you do Byers- WHAT DID YOU …”

The noise is weird. Totally unexpected. Like an egg cracking and there’s nothing but blinking dumb surprise as Steve lands on the couch next to Nancy though he’s pretty sure he’s wants to say something. Of course he does- he’s Steve- but the only sound from the other boy as Jonathan lowers the baseball bat is a strange, breathy rattle as his hand goes half-way up to the trickle of blood from somewhere around his left temple before it falls back onto his lap and Steve stops looking at him.

It’s just been a lot of stress. A lot of stress. No one in his family is good with stress. They’re his friends. They understand.

The dark in the corners of the room is spreading, eating the glow of the christmas lights his mom put up to talk to Will, forming and pulling itself across the walls like tentacles.

He lays the bat across his lap and perches on the arm of the couch and waits for the monster to come out of the walls.
I've been waiting for a girl like you to come into my life

You're beautiful, Nancy Wheeler. That's what he had said. It's what he always said.

He had smiled a soft comforting smile and called her beautiful

"Steve," She whispers into his ear, "I...look- Barb is downstairs I should- another time?"

She can feel his smile against her neck.

"C'mon Nance, why'd you come up here?" He murmurs, kissing down her collar bone, "Did you just want to show me your bra?"

He says it like it's a joke but there's a little nasty twist in it, daring, like she's a coward or a child and doesn't know what the hell she's doing. It's not so different from the way Tommy sounds when he talks to her and it makes something ugly wriggle and twist in her stomach.

-I've been waiting for someone new to make me feel alive

Yeah, waiting for a girl like you to come into my life -

"Steve," This time she doesn't whisper it, doesn't pretend that she's not getting annoyed as he just keeps kissing down her body, "Steve!"

"Jesus, Nancy, what?" He props himself up onto his hands staring down at her with a expression that must be a frustrated opposite mirror-image of her own, the soft handsome face suddenly hard and confused, "C'mon, we're having a good time, right?"

"This isn't..." How this should go, how she wanted this to go, both of them a little drunk and getting pissed off and speeding through so she can leave, "I think I'm just going to change. It's getting late and Barb is waiting for me, so."

"You're kidding me?" She gives him as apologetic a look as she can muster because Barb was right- this was a mistake- but he's just looking at her with open disbelief, "You're not kidding me."

"I'm sorry." She says quickly, scooping a sweatshirt off of the floor, "Maybe we can-"

"Jesus, I should have slipped the definition of blue balls into your index cards," He props himself up onto his elbows, flush with embarrassment, "Look, it'll be fun, I swear Nance-just-" He grabs at her, wraps an arm around her waist with an ingratiating smile that looked better on him every other time she's ever seen it and tries to tug her back to him, "Hell, it can even be fast if that's what you-"

"That isn't funny, let go." He doesn't, just holds onto her, "Steve!

The boy groans into her back, one hand still gripping her, moving insistently downward- "God, Carol said you were gonna be a frigid bitch. I told them you were cool, Nance- they're gonna give me so much shit- so why don't we just-"

She elbows back at him. She wasn't really expecting it to be his face, hadn't meant it to be at least, though she can't say she's terribly sorry and she has sharp elbows so he lets go, both hands pressed against his nose as he rocks back on the bed.

"What the fuck Nancy?"
She’s already out of the room, pounding down the stairs and out of the back into the backyard and she knows, knows the minute she sees Barb’s face that whatever composure she might have is as thin as tissue paper and her expression has collapsed completely into tears by the time the other girl is clambering off of the diving board.

“Nancy, what did he-”

She shakes her head, grabbing onto the arm of Barb’s jacket, “Nothing. You were right, okay? I just want to leave.”

“I don’t want to be right- what did he do?”

“Nothing,” Steve’s still shirtless and shoeless, shivering as he storms out into his backyard, one hand still pressed against his nose, “She elbowed me in the fucking face.”

“Barb let’s just go.”

“Yeah, no.” Steve scowls, shaking his head, “You can gimme my sweatshirt back then leave.”

“I’ll give it back to you at school,”

“Screw you Nancy, give it to me now.” He hooks a hand into the back of it like a child. A stupid, spoiled little brat that throws a tantrum when he doesn’t get his way.

“I’m in my bra,” She hisses, pulling out of his grip, “We’re parked five blocks away.”

“I really don’t care,” He doesn’t, he truly doesn’t. She had hoped that he had loved her- thought at least that he had liked her. God, how had she been so wrong?

Fuck it. He can have it. She’s not crying anymore at least, just cold and angry as she moves to yank off the sweatshirt.

“Don’t you dare,” Barb has an arresting hand on hers and she knows she means well but all she wants is to go because she thought she had worked through every possible way the night could go bad, but clearly she hadn’t been close, “You’ll get it tomorrow at school, Steve. Deal with it.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, because I don’t see how this is your business Billie Jean King. You care so much you give your girlfriend your coat.”

Barb steps forward, expression dark with disgust and she gets between them and it’s stupid, it’s so stupid.

Nancy pushes them apart.

It’s not a shove. Just a push, just to separate them so this can be over and she can talk to Barb about borrowing her coat and Steve can go somewhere and shut up but Barb wasn’t expecting it and she overbalances and-

Barb’s feet are still bare and wet from the pool. She steps on Nancy’s discarded beer can. She slips.

It happens so fast she barely has a chance to grab for her but so slow that she knows she’ll hear the noise that Barb’s head makes when it hits the edge of the concrete for the rest of her life, sees the way blood tendrils up like red smoke through the water as her best friend sinks, Steve’s expression staring, frozen, as she jumps in and desperately tries to pull Barb to the surface, struggling with dead weight in the water and a wet down coat as Barb Holland dies in Steve Harrington’s pool and the red
blood turns dark around them, black, creeping like tendrils and spreading so fast that it’s turning the water into midnight.

She has to save Barb.

She’s losing which way is up, lungs bursting because they haven’t hit the bottom of the pool yet somehow, just kept drifting down and everything is getting darker.

This wasn't how it went. This wasn't them.

She can’t save Barb. Barb is gone.

She has to let go.

She kicks up.

“STEVE!”

“Hop?”

“Steve, talk to me. Do you remember what happened?”

His face...god, his face hurts . His head .

“Steve!”

He tries. He tries to sit up in the hospital bed, tries as his head swims.

“What?” There are people around him, so it’s okay. It’s Hopper. Nance. Jonathan. Joyce. It’s good. He’s fine, He knows what’s happening- they’re going to ask him who the president is and the date and when his birthday is, “Billy...?”

“Yes.” Hopper says sharply, “Yes, Billy. What else?”

He shouldn’t rat out the kids but well- they kidnapped him and made him escort their dumb asses through the tunnels while concussed and terrified so he’s not feeling super inclined to-

“What else , Harrington?”

“The car?” His voice is wobbly, pathetic.

“Jim ask him what.. .”

“Shh. Yeah, Harrington the car. What happened?” Hop sounds sharp and cold, not like he should because they helped saved the day and okay, fine , getting your ass kicked, kidnapped by grade schoolers, and then helping said grade schoolers set hell on fire is all really bad babysitting by pretty much any standard but theirs but Hop and Eleven were okay and all the dogs were dead and gate was closed so-

“Demodogs. Demodogs. The kids- they burnt the shit in the tunnels...so you could close the gate and save Will.”
Joyce stands up, mouth open like she might scream, but Jonathan has her, is pulling her away through the hospital room double door and she never makes a noise, just the desperate, silent shape of one that he can hear anyway.

Will.

Will?

It’s him and Hop and Nancy now.

“We helped El close the gate... everyone’s okay, right?”

Nancy hits him. He wonders if Hop was giving her lessons because it’s closed fist and she has sharp knuckles and on top of his Hargrove concussion it just really sends everything right into free fall. He tries to overcome it to figure out what the hell is happening because she’s screaming at him - but he only gets half out of the hospital bed when he realizes that what she’s screaming is that he’s an idiot, she hates him, it should have been him, as Hopper ejects her from his room.

It’s only him and Hopper.

“I...is Dustin allowed in?” He asks, trying to sound more neutral than hopeful, “He can probably help clear things-”

Hopper sits next to his bed, expression so awful and cold that he’s just...really confused now.

“Kid,” He says, breathing hard, “You can’t do this to them.”

“What?”

“Create this fucking fantasy where you’re some hero saving the kids from monsters.” Hop says, fiercely, which is stupid because if anyone knows exactly how real monsters are it’s them, “You don’t deserve to get off the hook like that and they deserve better. They deserve to know what the hell you were thinking-”

What he was-?

It starts with Billy Fucking Hargrove.

Well, actually it starts with a bunch of nerds in his car after beating some shitty arcade game.

Just once, Nancy had said, because she and her mom needed to go out and it was an emergency, would he mind watching Mike? And him figuring that watching your girlfriend’s little brother was like, a thousand good boyfriend points.

No one had mentioned at the time that ‘watching Mike’ meant ‘watching a half dozen barely post pubescent nerds’ but somehow that was, in fact, what it meant. And one time turned into two and two turned into ten and ten turned into Carol and Tommy making fun of him for being the town’s number-one babysitter and him...not really caring that much. The kids were cool- obviously not actually cool, but they were interesting and smart and well, fun.

“I’m just saying that it’s creepy that this is a kid’s game and she has, like super erect nipples.” He says, hoping that at least Max will back him up on this one because he had just watched Lucas and Dustin and Will finally spend the last of their (his) quarters conquering their arcade white whale and get a cheek kiss from an okay, admittedly pretty hot, Don Bluth-animated- princess with as a reward, “Also- seat belts on, nerds.”
There’s a general groan from the boys in the back and smugness from Max in the front as they swap and stretch and tangle and share the belts between them which okay- maybe not super safe- but he already has six people in his car and everyone is mostly belted in and no one is smoking or making out so- damn good babysitter.

Until the Camaro.

It sounds like a storm coming and Max tenses even as Lucas reaches a hand up past the head-rest to lay on her shoulder as the thing pulls even at the light and Billy fucking Hargrove is glaring at them, and his little sister is freaking out because Lucas has her hand and Billy a fucking asshole and no one ever stands up to him and-

It’s stupid. He knows that Hargrove is making a little over half of the BMW’s horsepower from his 4.4-liter V8 no matter how fucking loud it gets.

So he puts his foot down.

Max screams with joy and flips her brother off as they pass him, the boys in the back shout encouragement and Hargrove burns rubber into the oncoming lane to try to match him but he’s slow off the mark and keeps falling back.

Steve Harrington is the coolest person on earth for exactly forty seconds.

Because after forty seconds of drag racing Billy Hargrove takes a corner and realizes that the clear lane isn’t clear anymore, panics and turns right- as in right into them- instead of left onto the shoulder when a semi takes the curve and spins them out into a fucking nightmare.

The back of the Beemer hits the front of the truck and pinwheels off the road, rolling over and over.

He loses a minute. Maybe two.

He’s somewhere. He doesn’t know where- just that he’s folded up like a melting plastic soldier. He didn’t wear a belt, went right through the windshield.

But the kids need to...

The kids...the fire.

The vines....

They can’t escape....

His car is Upside-Down- he blinks slowly, confused, because he has to save them but he can’t keep moving because there’s something wrong with him. Something wrong with his head.

Billy. He busted his face up in the Byers’ living room, punched him unconscious - he woke up in the car with Max driving with blocks on the pedals before they helped save the day. They set shit on fire...

The screams, they’re always screaming for him to help because he left them behind, struggling to get out.

“Mike thought you needed a distraction to close the gate to the Upside Down so you guys could-”

Hop looks at him with such utter disappointment that he knows, he knows.
He’s crying, he can’t stop, he doesn’t know why- it all worked out- they’re all okay, he was the only one that was hurt - Jesus, okay it seems improbable now- but Hop drove him here, to the hospital-

“Can I talk to Dustin, please - just- he can explain.”

Hop is a big man, like, physically and his presence- the kids said he punched out a whole lab of security guards once-

Lab? What lab?

Hop’s a big guy and he’s towering over him, one hand pressing him back into the hospital bed and he just needs to talk to the others- they’ll tell it better, because he just got swept along and hit things with a bat- Nance or Byers or the kids or-

“He’s dead, Steve. Dustin is dead. Will is dead. Mike, Lucas, Max. They died in the crash,” The man gets up, heads for the door.

“No- that’s not what happened-”

“Good fucking job, hero. Enjoy your goddamn fantasy land.”

He’s alone.

“No...please. The monsters- I-I-”

The lights are going off one by one in the hallway and then the darkness hits his room- he can’t breathe- he can’t breathe- there’s no one left-

“Don’t leave me alone .”

Something is crawling out there- darker than dark, he can see it pressing against the window in the door, see it creeping under through the crack between door and floor and door and ceiling.

He lays back against the pillows, waits for it to get him. Monsters aren’t real, after all. There was no day to save.

Good job, hero .

Wait.

He tugs his jacket off the bed rail, shoves a hand into the pocket, panics when there’s nothing and tries the other one, groping desperately in the dark as the fluorescent light above him flickers.

Cloth, a half rolled brim. Dustin’s hat.

He promised to bring Dustin his hat back.

He reaches under the bed as the darkness creeps. Feels his fingers close on familiar smooth worn wood.

Because there are monsters.

And he needs his fucking bat.
“Steve? Oh thank god ,”

Nancy is kneeling beside him on the floor of the perfectly normal Lab hallway looking at him with big, terrified eyes and Dustin’s hat is somehow crushed in his grip as he blinks away the stolen-minute feeling, holds the hat so tightly he might owe Dustin a new one as Nancy wraps an arm around him and pulls him close and she’s real, this is real, nothing has ever been more real than being held by Nancy Wheeler, and everything is perfect until she whispers, “I can’t wake up Jonathan.”

He breaks the hug, scrambles for where Byers is swaying on his feet, leaning against the wall- empty eyed.

"Did he look at it?"

"What-I don't know- I was-"

He gets a crushing grip on Byers’ wrist and tugs him off the wall. He doesn’t think he can carry him but hell, he’ll drag him if he has to. Gets lucky though because Jonathan just follows blank eyed and unresistant in his wake and the relief that floods him is so complete and so desperate that he almost doesn’t stay on his feet.

Almost doesn’t except he can feel the Aboleth now as they pound down the hallway, scratching at the back of his mind like a dog trying to get in from the yard, whining and frustrated. Feels it growing hungry and desperate and the scratching gets painfully intimate, like nails digging into his back. Nance gasp out a quiet ‘ oh god ’ and he knows that she feels it too.

“Think of something else!”

He resolutely doesn’t let himself think about what he’s going to do if Byers doesn’t snap out of it before they reach the fence because he can make him follow along but he can’t make him climb .

[leave H i m N o one would blame you y o u tried]

“Steve !”

[he’ll be g o n e]

Nancy’s skids through the empty double doors into the reception hall, flashlight beam bouncing around frantically.

[She could be y o u r s]

She makes for the busted out window but freezes and turns back to them, eyes wide, waiting like she wants all three of them to squeeze through together.

“Go, I got him!”

“ You go,” She digs into her bag and her gun is back in her hands, stance wide as she aims down the hall behind them. “I’ll cover you.”

“Nance-” But she’s already shoving him past her and the only thing worse than letting her cover them is getting all of them killed standing here arguing about it just so that he can die a gentleman so he wraps the other boy up in a bear hug and uses his weight to lever them out the window and into
an awkward hands free tumble onto the pavement, back and shoulders cracking against concrete hard enough that he sees stars. Pain seems to jolt some sense back into Byers at least.

“Steve?” Byers murmurs into his shoulder, sounding shell shocked, and inexplicably glad to see him, hands gripping his shirt, “It was in my head.”

“Welcome to the club. It sucks. It’s the worst fucking club.”

Reception lights up with muzzle flashes and echoes with the resounding crack of the gun. The bat is in his hand and he’s about to toss himself back inside when he almost collides with a surprised Nancy crawling out.

“What are you doing? Keep running!”

Yeah. Of course. What are you even doing, Steve?

All three of them hit the fence as one, hauling themselves up the chain link and past the cut barbed wire with speed born of panic. He’s tall enough that he barely climbs down the other side, just jumps most of it and hopes for the best and it’s not a good landing by any means but at least it means he’s able to grab Nancy and swing her down, just as Byers jumps after them.

With the way the night is going he half expects his car to be gone somehow, but it’s still there and the second most beautiful thing he’s ever seen in his life. He skids into the driver side door with enough force that he’s pretty sure there’ll be a Steve shaped dent in the morning, yanking it open and throwing himself across to unlock the passenger side as Nancy and Byers pile into the front seat together. Their door isn’t even fully closed before he’s peeling out backwards from the Lab with enough speed that Nancy rocks back on Jonathan’s lap and Byers has to brace himself on the dash.

There’s a shape, shadowed, indistinct.

His headlights only illuminate it for a fraction of a second before they’re aimed away but it’s more than enough. Nancy’s hand goes hard against her mouth, fingers digging into her jaw, trying not to scream. He hadn’t been able to see it in the dark of the outfall, just a vague panicked impression of teeth and tentacles in the dark and the water- now though, well, he’s glad Byers’ view is blocked by Nancy because the other boy’s arm snaking out and grabbing the wheel is the only thing that keeps him from losing control of the car completely and sending them all careening backwards into a tree.

No one says a word until they’re off the backroads and hit the street lights.

The drive back is silence and an unspoken agreement not to talk about what the Aboleth showed them. If he notices the way Nancy keeps talking to him like she just wants to hear his voice or how she reaches over to thread her fingers through his briefly just to feel him squeeze them back reassuringly he doesn’t say. If Jonathan is holding Nancy a little too tight, face buried in her hair, she doesn’t mention it. If he’s still gripping a stupid baseball cap like a life-preserver all of them keep it to themselves.

There aren’t words for what they saw at the fence- hell, there wasn’t sight for the thing they saw-
when he tries to picture it all he can say is it was...a thing? It had...a shape? Some failsafe in his brain triggers every time he tries and supplies a big, pixelated blank on top of reality like he’s trying to watch scrambled porn on basic cable.

But anything bad Steve’s ever thought about the Byers’ house? He takes it back. He doesn’t care if the living room ceiling is two different colors where a monster busted through it. He doesn’t care that he noticed it was different laying on his back, pretty sure Billy was beating him to death in front of a bunch of grade-schoolers. Right now it’s the most beautiful fucking house in the world because there’s a glow in the windows and it’s filled with people.

Because it’s the exact opposite of endless darkness and some other him crying out not to be left alone, please, anything but alone. Because the kids are there and he needs to actually see them before his fucking heart explodes.

He expects the nerds to come barreling out like wrecking balls because they apparently developed psychic powers and saved their asses and there’s no way he’s not going to hear all about how that happened. Some part of him knows that the ‘developed psychic powers’ thing should be both baffling and worrying all things considered but most of him just gives it a mental shrug.

Monsters and psychic kids? Must be Tuesday.

The screen door slams open against the house hard enough that he’s pretty sure the thing is officially off of one hinge as Joyce nearly trips down the porch steps in her haste to get to her son and wrap him up in a crushing hug before grabbing his face and checking for damage or blown pupils or demon possession, because they're them and with their track record who wouldn't, but miracle of miracle's, both of Joyce's boys are a little shaken but unscathed and back at her house before midnight.

He thinks it must be nice to have someone-

Joyce grabs his face and repeats the process.

Oh. It is. It's nice.

Of course she wasn’t calling Jonathan an ‘absolute idiot’ the entire time as she did it but she still tugs him into a hug when she's done.

“I’m going to kill you.” She says breathlessly before moving on to Nance.

Yeah. That’s fair.

They survived the night but the door probably won’t because the whole Party is hot on Joyce’s heels, crashing into them like a wave and Jonathan’s got Will in a tight hug and Mike is pretending to suffer through his sister doing the same while Max and Lucas and Dustin try to give them the play by play what exactly happened, gesturing expansively and talking over each other and waving the walkie talkie.

“- heard you!”

“Will figured -”

“And then you heard us -”

“We piggybacked off the radio signal- like a pirate station -”
“So.. are you guys psychic now?”

Excited conversation stutters to a stop as all eyes turn to him

“No Steve,” Dustin says slowly, “We’re not psychic now.”

“Oh.” He sighs, leaning back against his car as he lets his head fall back and closes his eyes, “Okay. Good”

The crazy science babble starts back up without Dustin, who leans beside him, grinning a wide, shit-eating grin.

“We totally saved your ass again.”

“Yeah, yeah, Henderson, from now on you can babysit me,” He digs into the pocket of his coat and Dustin’s grin only gets bigger as he shoves the kid’s hat back onto his curly thatch of hair, tugging the brim down over his eyes, “There you go man, a Harrington always keeps his promises.”

...Would be the exact opposite of a family motto, if they had one. Maybe he can make it a thing.

There’s a noise from the porch- a grumbly throat clearing sound from Hop who’s standing there looking halfway between a grizzly bear and a brick wall.

He’s gotten pretty good at facing the music, at least. Only considers just running to his car and skipping town forever for like, thirty seconds.

He meets the man half-way and hasn’t felt so small since grade-school.

“How is she?”

Hop seems to consider him, consider all of them, and he thinks if the his first words to him had been anything else he might have shot him on the spot. As it is he nods slowly, “Burning up, but she’s talking again.”

“Hop- I swear I didn’t- I never would have” The words jumble and pour out like a disaster that he can only watch but not stop, “I know I shouldn’t have let- “

“We’re going to talk about this Harrington,” The man’s hand lands on his shoulder, heavy as a promise, “But not tonight. Go inside kid, you look like death.”

Feels it too, but it doesn't matter. El was alive and they'd found something and if it was something useful he might have put a tick mark in the 'making it right' column and-

-It's been nine hours of terror and running from a fucking psychic monster so that’s right about when he passes out.
“If hell was anything, it was talk radio — and family.”
— Joe Hill, Heart-Shaped Box

Cause you're the joke of the neighborhood
Why should you care if you're feeling good?
Well, take the long way home

-Supertramp

"I didn't faint, douchebag. I passed out. It's two different things."

"How exactly?"

"Passing out is what happens when a bunch of gremlins drag you out of your house before you can eat and then you get attacked by a monster twice, in like, ten hours."

"You fainted like Scarlet O' Hara, Steve."

"Lucas, I swear to god-"

"Bless you for catching me Mr. Hopper, ah do declare-"

Joyce makes coffee at midnight and dumps Swiss Miss into mugs for the kids as they bicker and joke and pass highly classified intel salvaged from a CIA Black Site back and forth because somehow this seems to be what they do now.

“Nothing is dated after ‘83, so whoever put it up there probably got y’know- Demogorganed before they could tell a contact about it.” Dustin says before handing the papers he was looking at over to Hopper and cheerfully grabbing a mug of hot chocolate “ Oo, mini-marshmallows. Thanks Joyce.”

If anything about the entire situation strikes anyone as incongruous no one says so.

“Apparently Seven could set things on fire with her brain,” Will says holding up his papers, triggering a small stampede of kids trying to read over his shoulder as Steve Harrington snaps his fingers at them with a irritated ‘Focus , dipshits-' before his eyes flicker in her direction and he clears his throat sheepishly.

“Um, and Will. Dipshits and Will.”

The night goes on like that. Papers end up in careful piles.

Six, Seven, and Eight. Drug tests, psych profiles, interviews. Some so mundane that they read like transcripts of a parent teacher conference ‘ So much progress, such great work, just needs to apply themselves’ and so on. Most are so obtuse that they’re impossible to read at all unless you already know what you’re looking at, and some of them...well, Max only gets part way through reading out an account of Eight using her powers to make a Doctor think that parts of their body were slowly disappearing before she and Jim confiscate any other documents relating to the girl.

“That’s the girl that Jane met in Chicago?”
Jim nods, still a little green.

"You know," She mummers, pulling a chair up beside him, "I didn't think it was over. Not for a second."

"Joyce-

"They just keep fighting it, Jim." She closes her eyes, listens to the sound of the children's voices as they read about atrocities like they're normal, "Every few months it just starts again- it's turning them into soldiers."

He stirs beside her, takes her hand tentatively, rough fingers briefly intertwine with hers under the table.

"I promise you-I'm not going to let that happen-"

"Yes you are," She opens her eyes to take in his stricken expression, "You are. Because we're all alone out here with this place-"

She watches Jonathan lean over the arm of the couch to whisper something in Nancy's ear that makes her laugh, watches Steve Harrington notice and bury his nose in a folder until Nancy nudges him with her foot and makes him pull a face. She wonders how long Jonathan stopped to think about following the boy into that lab- wonders if he even thought about what it would have done to her or Will if he had died there or if he just went- marching orders received. She watches Will and Mike in a huddle, Mike's arm thrown casually over Will's thin shoulders as they read the same document. She doesn't even know what Will did- she keeps hearing hints but no one will tell her which means it's something likely so horrifically dangerous that it's likely to spin her right out-

The children are brave- her boys- are so, so brave. And she hates it.

"They're all just going to keep risking their lives for each until someone dies, Jim. I don't even know if we can stop them-"

Jim drags a hand down over his mouth but he doesn't argue the point.

A bundle of records is going around between the teenagers, Jonathan reading it with narrow-eyed concern, Steve with confusion and Nancy with increasing anger- she finally stands, skirting the kids as they argue about if Seven's medical records could be help or if Dustin just wants to read about pyrokinesis.

“"I think we found something”

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Document #025-I Subject 6

\[\text{\underline{\text{\copyright\text{1977 Radio Test #78}}}}\]

\[\text{\textit{VEF Sp\=idola S\# 76032314}}\]

\[\text{[Begin]}\]

Dr. R \[\text{\copyright\text{R}}\] : Hello, Subject Six. How are you feeling today?

S-006 : I'm well, Mother.
Dr. R: Note, I am now administering 100mg of dimethyltryptamine-19 to Subject 6. Use the radio, please.

S-006: I'm well, Mother

Dr. R: Please note I am now introducing a second 1973 VEF Spidola. Serial Number 86132145. Both please, Subject Six.

S-006: Yes Mother. If I do well can I play with Eleven?

Dr. R: Please note that Six is projecting through both radios. You would like to see her again?

S-006: Yes Mother.

Dr. R: Please note I am now introducing a third 1973 VEF Spidola. Serial Number 63132586. Broadcast on all three, please Subject Six. I believe Dr. B doesn’t want her in the Play Room anymore but perhaps if you do very well I can arrange it.

S-006: Thank you mother. I’ve always wanted a little sister.

Dr. R: Have you? Shall we try a fourth? Introducing a fourth 1973 VEF Spidola. Serial Number 89132547. Please split the signal four ways, Subject Six.

S-006: I don’t think I can mother. It hurts so much.

Dr. R: Attempt it again please.

S-006: Yes mother.

Dr. R: Well done. Would you like a tissue, Subject Six?

S-006: Thank you, mother.

[End]

Document #408-D Subject 6

1979 Neuroelectrical Test #1

[NAME REDACTED]

[Begin]

Dr. R: Hello, Six. How are you feeling today?

S-006: I’m well, Mother. Why is that man strapped down? Has he done something wrong?

Dr. R: Very much so. We’re going to try something new today, Six.

S-006: Yes Mother.

Patient 9-D: I’ve changed my mind. Warden said it was just gonna be a drug test. This ain’t a drug test. I haven’t done shit I-
Dr. R: No swearing in front of Six, please, 9-Delta. I assure you this is perfectly safe. Note: I am administering 9-Delta with Intercostrin preparation C. Are you ready, Subject Six?

S-006: Yes Mother.

Dr. R: Note, I am now administering 100mg of dimethyltryptamine-19 to Subject 6. I would like you to attempt to use your abilities to attempt to rewrite Patient 9-Delta according to the outline in front of you.

S-006: Yes Mother.

Dr. R: Transcription note: EEG shows a focal interictal epileptiform spike. Patient 9-Delta has lost consciousness after three minutes.

S-006: Did I hurt him Mother?

Dr. R: That’s inconsequential, Six.

S-006: Yes Mother.

Dr. R: Dr. C please prepare patient 10-Delta. Have you read the book I gave you, Six? Remember that you need to have it completely memorized for the codes to be effective.

S-006: Each one, tripping on his toe, Will be here with mop and mow. Do you love me, master? No?

Dr. R: Dearly. Just keep practicing.

S-006: When I have it memorized can I have that other book? It’s my favorite-

Dr. R: Don’t think about that Six. In any case Dr. B has to approve it.

S-006: He won’t. Eight says that Dr. B doesn’t let Eleven and Ten read.

Dr. R: Dr. B thinks that they will find excess language...distracting. Do you find it distracting, Six?

S-006: I don’t know, mother. Can I see Ten and Eleven again soon?

Dr. R: I'm afraid that's impossible. Project Ten has been terminated and Subject Eleven is no longer allowed outside contact.

S-006: Oh. Seven says that Dr. B is going to terminate Eight because she's bad. Is he?

Dr. R: You know I am not at liberty to say, Six. You should focus on your studies.

S-006: Would you terminate me, mother?

Dr. R: Please prepare yourself for patient 10-Delta.

S-006: Will I hurt them too?

Dr. R: That’s inconsequential, Six.

[End]
[NAME REDACTED]

[Begin]

Dr. R: Hello, Six. How are you feeling today? Why are you crying, Six? Did Dr. B test not go well?

S-006: Please don’t make me go in the dark again mother. Please don’t. There’s something there [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

Dr. R: Ah, yes. The doctor mentioned that a counterintelligence agent may have made contact.

S-006: It was in my head like Eight but [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

Dr. R: Please don’t become hysterical, Subject Six. We have work to do.

S-006: Don’t make me go in the dark again mother, please.

Dr. R: If you do well today I’ll see what I can do.

S-006: [UNINTELLIGIBLE] You have to tell him, mother. He can’t make the others-

Dr. R: I certainly can’t tell Dr. B how to run his projects, Six.

S-006: [UNINTELLIGIBLE] It gets out.

Dr. R: Six, if you’re going to get hysterical every time you come across a Counter Intelligence agent, Dr. B won’t be pleased. Now- focus please Six.

12-Echo: Please, I just want to go home. I want to go home. When can I see my mom? Where’s my sister? Where did you take Mary?

Dr. R: This is patient 12-Echo. We are starting a series of susceptibility studies on younger patients. Won’t it be nice to talk to children your own age, Six?

S-006: Yes mother.

Dr. R: Note I am now administering 100mg of dimethyltryptamine-19 to Subject 6. We will be attempting to permanently remove any recall 12-Echo has of the past three hours.

S-006: Yes mother.

Dr. R: Six? Six! what are you doing to him? Six? Six stop!

S-006: I think I took too much mother.

Dr. R: Six, you need to stop right now.

S-006: His name is Bill Martin and he’s thirteen and he plays softball and has a sister named Mary and he’s gone now.
“God,” She murmurs, suddenly feeling uncomfortably aware of the acrid lingering taste of coffee in her mouth and the acid of her stomach.

“The Counter-Intelligence has to be the Aboleth, right?” Mike says as Nancy finishes reading, "And Six could influence radios like El when she's searching-

"And she ate a kid's brain.” Never let it be said that Lucas Sinclair doesn’t have a way with words, "El can't eat brains right?"

"-if the Aboleth assimilated Six when she was Inbetween-

“Except there’s one problem, guys” Steve is up on his feet, more openly fidgeting-ly agitated and off balance than she can ever remember seeing him, looking like he’s trying to pace but can’t even commit to that, “It’s all bullshit. All of this is bullshit. We don’t have anything. It’s a decoy or a hoax or something-”

Jim’s brow furrows, “What-

“Bill Martin and Mary Martin lived three houses down from me and they died in a car crash in 1978. Remember Hop? T-boned at the light on Euclid? Billy Martin can’t have gotten his mind wiped or whatever in that lab in 1979.”

None of them want to be the one. Jim winces, hunches slightly like someone punched him in the gut, Nancy Wheeler’s gone all big-eyed, lips parted like the words are there but she doesn’t know where to start, the kids squirm nervously in their seats and she knows Dustin will be the one to say something if no one else does.

So she does.

“Steve,” He meets her eyes, looking baffled.

The boys have occasionally implied that the teenager was a bit...dense (kind of an idiot sometimes, in the words of Mike Wheeler, like a golden retriever had been Dustin’s slightly fonder take) but she suspects that might not be the whole truth.

He wants to keep showing up when things are terrifying but uncomplicated just in time to help save the day. He wants to believe in a world where you know the real monsters because they have heads that open up into teeth and you can beat them to death with a bat.

He must be able to see it in her eyes, because his face starts to collapse into disbelieving horror before she even says the words, “I don’t think he died in ‘78, Steve.”

“No- that’s no. That doesn’t-” He shakes his head, “They can’t just-” The words ‘steal a kid’ are on the tip of his tongue, but he obviously realizes the ridiculousness of that in the face of Jane’s entire existence and stutters to a stop. She knows what he really means to say though- ‘steal a normal’ kid, “What about the rest of the family?”

“Kid.” Jim says simply, eyebrows raised, mouth twisting in a look that’s half gruff frustration, half-
pity but Steve is already shaking his head like they’ve all gone crazy.

“Look, these are seriously bad people, *I get that*, but this is still the *U.S. government*, guys. They don’t just- *disappear* entire families for *no reason*. This isn’t the friggin’ USSR.”

She knows that after the demogorgon attack a nice man in a nice suit had sat the boy down in an office with a stack of non-disclosure agreements the size of a Buick, just like the rest of them. She knows that that nice man in a nice suit probably not-so-subtly suggested what would happen to him, them, and anyone else he cared about if he ever decided to break them and she doesn’t doubt he had taken the threat to heart. But that had been an *agreement*, if a one sided, coerced one- sign here, don’t talk, you’ll be fine. He had never been where they had been- handcuffed to a chair in an interrogation room without a soul who knew where you were as a shark of a man lied about how concerned he was about the children. He hadn't been there when they tortured Jim and would have made him another involuntary suicide just as casually as they killed Benny Hammond.

Had never walked out wondering what would have happened to him if they *had* killed Hopper-never had visions of being escorted back to Penhurst for *hysteria*, a nervous breakdown, *dangerous emotional instability* and pumped full of current and pills until you don’t remember why you were worried in the first place.

He just blinks owlishly, looking between her and Jim for some kind of answers or reassurance because they’re adults and he’s barely eighteen and they should be able to tell him that everything is alright, really, in the world.

“Shouldn’t we... *tell* someone?”

“*Who*, kid?”

“*Reagan*?” The boy says helplessly.

“Steve-” Nancy looks at Steve with bambi-ish sympathy and that’s about all the argument he seems to have left in him. He stops trying to deny it. Tries to process it instead.

It’s not exactly a surprise when he can’t- just mumbles that he needs some air and goes.

His bat goes with him.

“Stay,” She’s up and following before Nancy or Dustin can, tugging her coat on over her shoulders because she’s an adult and she can’t tell him that everything is alright but at least she knows that from experience, “I’ll go.”

His car is still where he left it and the sound of a huff of exertion and the whistle of something cutting through the air around the side of the house.

“Steve?”

The bat swings in front of him like he’s trying to break the sound barrier with it, a vicious, wild series of blows that don’t seem to start or end, just one full body scything arc after another as his heavy breathing condenses in the air in front of him.

“Steve?”

Where ever he is in his head, what- probably *who* - ever he’s beating really thoroughly to death in there, he doesn’t seem to hear her, just swings hard enough that the strength behind each blow seems completely divorced from the leanness of him and she’s suddenly concerned that he’s hurting
himself.

“Steve?”

Approaching him seems like a good way to accidentally end up on the receiving end of the bat, so she stays well away, wrapping her arms around herself against the chill.

“Steve? Steve, honey?” She doesn’t ask if he’s alright which he seems to appreciate, ending a furious swing with the nails of the bat buried in half frozen ground. “Was he a friend of yours?”

The boy shakes his head no, but doesn’t turn around.

“It could have been any of us. Bill Martin- he was only a year younger than me. He didn’t have any f-fucking super powers. He couldn’t move shit with his mind. He wasn’t even a good right fielder. And they just took him and pretended he died and then they killed him.”

She comes up even with him now, putting a careful hand on his arm, running it slowly up and down like she’s trying to warm him up, even though she knows it’s not the cold that’s choking him

“It could’ve been Nance. God, it could’ve been Nancy. Disappeared just to- jesus - just to help torture some l-little f-f-fucking girl. It was still these exact same assholes until last year... It could have b-been the k-kids. It could’ve been any of them. If they- they could...they-

As strange as it is to consider it, Joyce had known quite a few Steve's over the years.

She had known the crying-but-already-pretending-not-to-be seven-year-old that Jonathan had spotted for the first time on Halloween, the one who had held her hand like he never wanted to let it go and had gotten over his fear of not finding his way home again by chatting animatedly at Jonathan (because her son had been shy even then) about comics and baseball as they searched, and who had stated, definitively , that the two of them were going to be friends.

She had known the confident, dangerously charming little eight year old with a missing front tooth who would disappear with Jonathan to the creek or the East Woods to play but would never come inside, or stay for dinner, or go with them to the Dairy Queen in Simpson. Who just shrugged and grinned an innocent gap tooth grin when she had asked why and said his dad had told him he wasn’t allowed in their house, but hadn’t said anything about the woods.

Through Jonathan she had known of the ten year old that came back from summer break and said he couldn’t talk to him anymore and made her son come home crying because he didn’t understand what he had done wrong.

Knew the little thirteen year old Judas who stood by and didn’t stop his cool new friends from tormenting Jonathan after school. Knew the seventeen year old who started a fight that got him arrested by saying it was their fault Will had been... gone.

Then, like a goddamn resurrection, she had known the seventeen year old with a thousand-yard stare that sat all night in the hospital waiting room with them. The one who had saved Jonathan’s life by kicking the ever loving shit out of the monster that had taken Will with a baseball bat . The one that had almost been beaten to death in her living room while protecting the kids.

Now they’ve come full circle as the Steve Harrington she knows now right at this minute- who’s tall enough that he has to bend slightly to do it- cries on her shoulder more openly than he had when he was seven years old, long back heaving under her hand as the horror of the day finally come crashing down.
She doesn’t tell him it’s alright. Friend’s don’t lie, after all, and he’s right. It could have been any of them. It could have been him or Nancy if they had been the target of whatever dart killed the Martin family. It could have been the boys. Something terrible could have befallen Will or Jonathan on the way home from school at eleven, twelve years old, a hit and run driver, maybe, an accident on their bikes. She remembers the body they showed her, the sick *doll* they created somehow and she would never have known then without the thing in the walls and the Upside Down, she would have just mourned and quietly lost her mind as some lab *experimented* on her sons as they cried for her.

Steve sees the kids in a place where he couldn’t follow or protect them, getting their minds ripped away in a mistake as casual as a nurse missing the vein. Maybe he sees little Nancy too. Or maybe he sees little Nancy on the other side of the table, shaped and molded through whatever sick *process* these people created to make little girls into living weapons.

So she can’t tell him that it’s alright, just holds him until she finally feels him tense as he gets self-conscious. When he starts to pull away she squeezes once then lets him go and pretends not to be watching as he scrubs at his face with his hands like a little boy so it won’t look like he’s been crying when he goes back inside.

She sits on the porch step, takes two cigarettes out of her pack, lights them together and hands one off to him as he settles down next to her.

“*Shit.*” He manages after taking a drag like he’s trying to burn it right down to the filter, and attempting a wobbly, wry smile that wasn’t fooling anyone, “It’s been *a day.*”

She laughs a laugh as humorless as the joke, her own cigarette trembling slightly between her fingers as she waves it.

“Been a year, I’d say. *Two.*”

They smoke in silence as the boy nods a slow considering nod, staring off into the darkness.

“Let’s all move.”

She snorts, covering her mouth, smoke billowing from her nose as she lays her head briefly against his shoulder and the smile he smiles finally seems genuine as his head clunks briefly against hers.

“You ready to go back inside?”

“Yeah,” He says, not quite sounding it. But he lever him self up off the front step anyway and she watches the metamorphosis as the kid squares his shoulders, runs a hand through his hair and goes back to being *Fine,* striding across the porch, bat on his shoulder, plowing past the screen door, with a shout of “*Hey, dipshits- what’d I miss? Whose been taking notes -?*”

There are times when Max doesn’t really feel like she fits in.

Sure, it was the same in Santa Carla- but there she didn’t fit in with the *cool* kids. They idolized *New Edition,* she idolized the Dogtown Z-boys. Hawkins is different because the cool kids are lame and the nerds are *saving the world from abominations from another dimension* and she still doesn’t 100% know what to do with that.

They don’t seem to mind though, so...good enough.
But it still means that they’re talking about mind control monsters like this is just...a thing. A normal thing. She’s in a room with a bunch of people talking about monsters that eat brains trying to act like this is a totally normal conversation.

She looks around- tries to find someone who thinks this is as weird as she does and the only one seems to be Steve, trying to look like he’s still cool and knows what the hell but failing just as much as she is.

The argument about whether psionics are real (like real, real Dustin specifies helpfully) doesn’t seem to be dying down anytime soon so she takes up a nominally helpful but mostly bored position on the back of the couch, staring out the window into the dark of the woods.

Which is why she’s the first one to see the headlights turning onto the empty dirt road.

For a terrible moment she thinks that it’s Billy, even though his car sounds like a thunderstorm that rains douchebags and this one doesn’t and whoever is in the driveway pulls in like a normal person, not like they have a personal grudge against their tires, the road, and all of humanity.

She tells herself that it wouldn’t matter anyway if it were him. Hop is here and so is Nancy and they’ve both got guns and she’s pretty sure Joyce wouldn’t actually need one if Billy came in and started threatening her kids.

But it’s definitely not Billy. It’s a tall, well dressed man and...oh no.

“Suit !”

All eyes turn to her in confusion as she sinks low on the couch, pointing at the window above her.

“Government dude.” She hisses.

And then everyone is moving.

“The lab must have still had cameras running, bugs, something- shit.” Jonathan groans as he and Joyce sweep the carefully sorted documents into a messy pile, looking around frantically for somewhere out of sight to stash them- he ends up scrambling up onto the kitchen table and shoving them in the light fixture which is probably better than just putting them into a drawer but probably not going to fool the guy unless he’s just the shittiest CIA operative ever.

Not that it’s going to matter if they can help it, because Hop is already unclipping the top of his holster, turning to Nancy with a stony expression.

“Get in the back with Joyce. Don’t let anyone near El.”

“I’ll get the shotgun.” Mrs. Byers says, giving Hop an unreadable look and moving to do just that and Max already suspects that Hop might have a little bit of a thing for the woman- an idea universally decried by the boys as so totally wrong but they’re exactly as dumb about romance as they are smart about geeky shit, so she knows it’s true-and he looks like he has something to say to her. He doesn’t get the chance though, ‘cause Steve scrambling past him gets his attention.

Steve looks bad- really bad. Pale and shaky and red-eyed like he’s got the flu and she sort of wishes that he’d sit this one out. Hop seems to think the same, because he hooks a hand around the boy’s elbow, bringing him up short.

“What-?”
“That’s going to be a person, kid. Don’t pick up that bat unless you know you can use it.”

She expects Steve to, well, be Steve. Bluster or joke or say something he thinks is badass but is actually sort of lame. But he doesn’t. His face falls and he bites his lip as his adam’s apple bobs up and down on his long neck and for just a second Steve doesn’t look that much older than the rest of them.

“Yeah.” He finally says quietly, hand closing on the bat, “I can tonight.”

Something goes wrong in Hopper’s expression. Like it’s relieved and terribly sad at the same time.

“Okay, kid.”

“Max! C’mom -” Jonathan is herding the boys into the hall, away from the windows and doors but the doorbell is already ringing and someone is pounding on the wood so Steve just plants a hand on her shoulder and steers her quickly into the kitchen, pressing back against the wall with her.

The bat is raised and his knuckles are pure white and he must be feeling really crappy or really scared because he doesn’t even notice when she peers carefully around the corner.

Hop is at the door, one hand hovering near his gun.

She’s ready for anything when he opens it. Gunfire or an ambush or whatever because Lucas said last time they messed with these people they sent friggin’ helicopters.

What she doesn’t expect is Hop’s slightly surprised sounding ‘oh’ of recognition, followed by a low ‘hm’.

“Chief Hopper.” The guy knows who he is and Hop isn’t shooting him, just stepping aside slightly to let him out of the cold and into the foyer as the man brushes a few stray snowflakes off of his coat.

“I’m here for my son.”

Which is a stupid lie for some kind of undercover agent. It’s not like they don’t all know each other’s dads and this guy isn’t anybody’s-

She hears a quiet, more-than-a little-relieved sigh beside her and Steve is leaning the bat against the kitchen wall and stepping out into the living room.

“Dad. Hey.”

Oh

It’s like air going out of a balloon and the boys are scrambling over each other to get out from the hall because she knows that they had a bet going that Steve didn’t actually have parents and was some kind of emancipated minor or rich orphan because no one ever seemed to see them, not even Nancy when they were dating. Jonathan said he had met them when they were kids and Hop promised that Harrington did indeed have parents in a voice that indicated he would have personally preferred him not to have, but Dustin had pretty much immediately decided that they had been actors hired to fool everyone.

Will goes in the opposite direction, heading back to his bedroom to give the all clear and returning with a deeply confused but mildly intrigued looking Nancy.

She feels a slight stab of embarrassment for scaring everyone. But only a slight one. The guy totally looks like he could be some kind of CIA agent which, okay, just means he’s wearing a suit, but still -
they were all the way at the Byers’ house so it wasn’t like the guy was going to be out here selling encyclopedias at midnight.

The man- uh, *Mr. Harrington’s* - brow furrows and he frowns at the small stampede of kids, all of whom are staring at him like he has two heads, but it doesn’t seem to distract or phase him.

“Steven. Go get your coat.” Max doesn’t like the sound of that- so she looks to Steve to see his reaction but he just looks sort of baffled, a little bemused, definitely not scared, and an awful, terrible, very *Hargrove* family part of her almost can’t help being pissed-off by the look because it’s unfair that someone can hear their dad sound like that and look casually unconcerned instead of knowing that it means broken glass and neighbors calling the cops and mom screaming and you hiding under your comforter in your room with the door locked until everything gets quiet, wondering if Neil killed Billy.

“Is..uh, mom okay?” Steve sounds genuinely confused but like he can’t decide whether he’s confused that his dad sounds pissed off at him or that his dad is there at all.

“Your mother’s fine. Come on, Steven.”

“I’m sort of busy dad. I’m uh, babysitting- I’ll be home soon.” That ‘soon’ sounds more like an ‘eventually’ mixed with a ‘whenever I feel like it’.

“Well, these kids are apparently adequately supervised so you can go now.” He gives a sharp, chilly nod to their apparently adequate supervision, “Jonathan.”

“*Mr. Harrington*.” Seems like the feeling is mutual on that one. Nancy looks like she’s considering introducing herself but only makes a little, aborted half-step forward before obviously realizing that ‘Hi, we haven’t met but I dated your son for a year and then we broke up and now I date this guy and it’s totally not weird that we’re still friends’ is too complicated to deal with tonight so she just hangs back holding her elbows. For an awful moment it looks like Dustin is going to stride up with a grin and an extended hand but Lucas and Mike manage to grab him and wrestle him back before he can try.

“Well yeah, they are but-”

“Is there a problem, James?” Hop has a thumb hooked onto his belt and turned on his grumpy, long suffering, small-towny cop voice that well, it’s kinda just his voice but still manages to sound like the exact opposite of his ‘Guy who helped save the world from monsters and was ready to shoot a CIA agent to protect El’ voice somehow.

“You tell me, Jim. Don’t suppose these grade-schoolers are under arrest? Breaking up a wild house party?” The man doesn’t bother to fake a smile to go along with the joke. “My son is still upright, so I’ll assume he hasn’t been in another fight?”

If she hadn’t been the closest to him she probably wouldn’t have seen the little unhappy little downward twitch in the corner of Steve’s mouth because it’s there and gone like a lightning flash.

She hadn’t believed it when the guys had said that Steve used to be *kind of* an asshole, like a *real* asshole, not like how he calls them dipshits and still won’t let her practice driving with his Beemer. Never like *Billy*, sure, but the kind of guy that needed to feel bigger and didn’t seem to care if that meant someone else had to feel small.

Now she gets to see it, right here, in living color, on a version of him that’s thirty years older and she realizes that maybe she wasn’t the only one who was actively trying not to become like their family.
He almost died is on the tip of her tongue, she can feel it behind her teeth and this one time it seems like talking back to a bullying douchebag won’t send anyone to the hospital so she almost says it out loud.

She doesn’t though. You can always make things worse.

“Just a friend of the family. Stopping in to say hello.”

There’s an awkward silence where everyone over thirteen seems to be barely tolerating each other’s existence and Steve doesn’t seem able to comprehend that his dad isn’t just going to take that ‘home soon’ at face value and leave.

The man finally clears his throat, eyebrows rising expectantly.

“Steven? Your coat?”

Steve exhales sharply through his nose and seems to unfreeze like they were playing red-light-green-light, grabbing his coat from the dining room chair and shrugging it on in one motion.

“Right. Yeah. Okay.” He says vaguely, trailing after his dad who’s already on his way to the door, “Uh. Later guys.”

They chorus innocent ‘bye Steve’s’ like good little fake babysat children and Hop holds the screen open, gives a nod and a respectful, rumbling ‘Harrington’.

“Jim.” Mr. Harrington replies, sounding mildly pleased.

“Oh.” Hop says dry as a desert, “Yeah. Bye to you too, James.”

Max snorts loud enough that the man turns back over his shoulder with an expression like he smelled something bad before stepping outside. Steve trails a step behind but turns sharply, confusion of the last two minutes resolving into sudden realization, brow creasing and mouth going all annoyed and flat as he jabs an accusatory finger at Dustin before disappearing through the door.

“The hell? What did I do? No seriously, what did I do? That was a total, ‘this is all your fault Dustin’ face-”

Lucas lays a hand on Dustin’s shoulder, looking serious.

“Dude, you turned off his dad’s computer, right?”

“Sonofabitch.”

This is the last thing that he needs.

Whatever this is. He doesn’t need it.

Oh sure, he has a damn good idea but after being attacked by a brain eating horror twice in one day he doesn’t think he can take his dad’s biggest problem of the week being if he’d been snooping around in his office. His head aches from the Aboleth, it aches from crying, he feels like he’s about to shake apart and now the only things that were holding him together are disappearing in the rear view mirror because his fucking dad who he hasn’t seen in two weeks just couldn’t wait to tell him
how pissed he is.

He left his bat there too.

Hell, it’s not even that late- maybe he’ll just walk back out after dad’s stern talking-to- crash on the Byers floor and help take care of El overnight. Go out early for groceries at Wessleman’s, fill the Byers’ fridge just for the hell of it and get something for Will as a ‘thanks for saving me from an otherworldly abomination’ gift and make El the biggest Eggo stack she’s ever seen in her life in the morning if she can bring herself to eat. Then they can fill him in and they all have to figure out...

“Steven?” His father snaps his fingers in front of his face, makes him jump, “Did you hear me?”

“I just-” Spaced out, dad, I do that sometimes now. Want to know how long you can stare at a wall before people think it’s weird? “Sorry, what?”

His father glances at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Are you on drugs?” He'd usually chalk ‘was your irresponsible ass babysitting a bunch of grade schoolers and getting high’ as a very Dad question, but he realizes his hands are shaking slightly in his lap and he can't really focus and looks like he was hit by a truck so if he ever seemed like he was coming down it really was now.

“No dad,” He sighs, letting his head thunk against the cold glass of the window, “I'm not on drugs. I uh, had a stomach bug- still not a hundred percent. “

The man just nods at that, doesn’t ask how bad or how long or if he missed school, just signals a left.

“Yeah, so. I’m sorry I was in your office. I was just...” Make it good, speed it along. God, if Henderson broke something he’s going to murder him. “Those kids I babysit- they’re these mega-nerds and they said there was a cool game on that thing and I just wanted to see-”

“A game.” His father’s voice is deadpan, barely believing it, “You wanted to play a game?”

“Yeah, uh... Alice ?”

“Who was with you?”

Shit. Dustin definitely broke something. And his dad’s exactly the kind of officious asshole when he wants to be that would tell Claudia about it and try to get her to pay for the damage and that stupid paperweight cost like, five grand.

“No one, dad. It was nine in the morning. I was just bor-”

“Was that girl there?” Dad’s got a lead foot tonight- street lights are blowing by.

“Girl? Nancy ? Why would Nancy be there?”

“Why would a girl be with you early in the morning, Steven? Really?” His father says it slowly, deliberately, like he suspects he may have been replaced by a particularly brain-damaged body snatcher.

“We’re broken up. She's dating Jonathan.” He tries to keep the annoyance out of his voice, because he’d told them that in November- and December- and he’s starting to think dad just likes reminding him.

“Was Jonathan Byers there?”
He sits up straight, eyebrows going straight up to his hairline, mouth twisting in confusion.

“Yeah, that’s a definite no, dad.” Fingers crossed that he’s just trying to be funny and Nancy’s brand new nickname hasn’t made it as far as the Club. “He’s not exactly my type.”

“Steven, have they been in my office?”

“Dad, no one was with me. I just wanted to check it out. It’s not a big deal.”

The breaks screech as his dad turns the wheel sharply to pull the car over in a movement so sudden and so violent that he has to brace his arms against the dash and plant his feet in a folded up scramble to keep his head from bouncing off of it. What in the hell -

“Jesus, dad-”

“You understand that the files on there are extremely important?” He pauses, brow furrowing, “Clients, bank accounts -

His dad doesn’t sound worried often- Pretending Everything is Fine (And If It’s Not It’s Certainly Not My Problem) is a time honored Harrington tradition after all. Some families give each other Christmas pajamas, the Harringtons give each other sarcastic emotional detachment. But right now there’s actual real naked worry in his voice and eyes. The realization hits him all at once and it’s so stupid it’s actually a relief because it means Dustin hadn’t broken something important, dad was just being a paranoid dick.

“You think Jonathan would what, steal them? Set himself up with some fake company credit cards? Sell your shit to Covance or whatever?” He gives the slouchy, man-to-man shrug and a grin that always worked before, “C’mon dad, he’s a good guy, he-”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Steven. Would you please grow up.” His father barks it out loud and sharp enough to startle him, wipes the grin off his face at least because there’s real disdain there, “I thought we settled this when you were ten years old. You want to roll around in garbage don’t try to convince everyone it doesn’t stink. It just makes you look like an idiot.”

“What-?”

James Harrington pinches the bridge of his nose hard, lets his head tilt back on the headrest like he’s exhausting himself.

Everyone always said Steve Harrington looked a great deal like his father. Both tall and thin though James was broader (a deficiency in Steven that James had learned to live with but never learned to manage his disappointment in), they shared the thick brown hair, a square jaw, a beaky roman nose- but his mother had slipped in like a vandal and painted in the fineness of Steve’s features- the ones that made him look soft and fascinating to the girls of Hawkins.

Nothing was soft about James Harrington, he looked like a bird of prey, something that tore apart smaller things.

“Garbage, Steven. The mother’s a hysteric and used to be the town pump, the older boy is a no-hope fuck up, and the little one will probably screw his way into the GRID before he’s thirty.” His hand waves with each, like he’s tossing them away, crazy slut, loser, queer. He wonders how many times he heard it before last year? Enough. Definitely enough.

‘Oh yeah, yeah. That house is full of screw ups. Bunch of screw ups in your family. I mean, your mom - I’m not even surprised what happened to your brother. I’m sorry I have to be the one to tell
you but The Byers-.’

“- family’s a disgrace to the entire town. And honestly in my day when our girl started taking it on the run behind our back we didn’t spend all our time-”

“Jesus Christ, they’re my -”

“Friends? What wonderful company you keep, Steven. I’m sure they’re all absolutely thrilled to have a gullible idiot with a charge card hanging around.” He sighs a put-upon sigh, like it hurts him more explaining the the dirty lowdown than it hurts Steve to hear it.

“People like that cause problems , Steven. Remember what a mess it could have been with that missing Debra girl?” Long fingers clutch his shoulder and it’s not painful, but firm, fatherly, like dad’s being reasonable about this whole thing, watching his back. “I love you Steven, really I do, but you just don’t understand what sort of trouble palling around with them can cause for you.”

He should be mad, and he is - he’s fucking furious and can feel pressure in his chest like the lung-bursting pain of holding in a breath as long as you can stand it, but there’s something else that comes with it-

(Two little boys on the first day back to school, 1976. Steve, aged ten, suddenly very cool. Jonathan, age nine, not cool at all and tugging Steve’s prized copy of the Last Days Of Superman out of his backpack.

“Steve! I-”

“You know Johnny Byers, Steve?” Says Tommy Halloran, his new friend....he thinks. At least he’s allowed to go into their house and he doesn’t have to hide when they hang out and his dad’s proud of him for being friends with Art Halloran’s son.

Tommy’s looking at him expectantly and there’s not much he can say so he says the worst thing possible.

“Not really. He’s the weird kid, right?”

One little weird kid stutters to a stop, uncomprehending, “I-I-I-I”

“I-I-I-I” Tommy says and shoves Jonathan hard enough that he loses his balance in shock because he expects Steve, suddenly an amnesiac, to do something other than look at him like he’s never seen him before in his life but Steve does nothing.

It becomes a habit.

“Are you gonna cry, freak?” Tommy grins then looks to Steve like he’s in charge and part of Steve knows that he has to make a choice.

“Seriously- what’s your problem, Byers?”

Jonathan Byers stares in absolute horrified confused betrayal, then levers himself off the ground and runs, leaving The Last Days of Superman in a puddle and Steve can’t pick it up because he can’t admit that it’s his in the first place, so he just watches the water saturate the page until it’s almost gone.

He knows the words on the panel by heart though.
‘With desperate, dying, strength Superman launches himself into space to write a farewell message... to the whole world! ‘Do Good To Others and Every Man Can Be a Superman -Clark Kent.’

It ends up a mush of blues and reds and yellows turning the water brown as the ink runs)

-It’s relief. The absolute breathless, stunning relief of self-preservation. The kind of full body flinch and release that comes after realizing that you were seconds from destruction but that you’re still alive as passing Demodogs brush past your calves. The monster is trapped. Billy Hargrove was stopped. Will Byers just grabbed your bat and scared off an abomination and saved you from being dragged into the darkness.

You tried for a while but you didn’t become your dad.

When he doesn’t answer the man just snorts mirthlessly, shaking his head.

“Would it kill you to think of someone besides yourself for once, Steven? For chrissakes.”

The pressure in his chest bursts like a dam.

“Right. You’re right -The Byers’ aren’t quality people like us, right dad?” Swallowing is hard around the lump of stupid, heady, inarticulate rage in his throat and it’s near impossible to keep his tone casual, “How’s mom been lately? Her ‘vertigo’ must be getting really bad because every time I see her at home she’s popping diazepam like M&M’s. You know, maybe it would go away and she’d be less fucking miserable if you actually grew a pair, stopped giving a shit if the neighbors talk and split up with her instead of screwing around behind her back with- who was it? Melanie? Maureen? The one that was a year ahead of me at Hawkins. She goes to Indiana State, right? Hey, maybe if I get in you can get her to show me around the campus.”

“Steven-”

Town pump. Hysteric. The woman who had braved the closest thing to Hell earth had running to drag her son back out of it. Who never gave up and never, ever stopped looking and did whatever it took to pry some kind of evil thing out of her boy and had loved him so all encompassingly that these fucking impossibilities actually worked.

“Christ, dad, Joyce Byers is worth a hundred of you.”

His father’s knuckles are white on the steering wheel and he’s certain he’s going to hit him. Shouldn’t be that much of a surprise, really, since everyone else seems to take a shot, so why not? He’s never done it before, not in eighteen years, but looks ready for it be the first time.

First time he’s sort of wanted him to.

“Give me your keys.”

He fishes into his pocket wordlessly, drops his keys into the outstretched hand. Fuck it and fuck him and-

“You’re grounded.”

“What?” It’s so ridiculous he thinks he heard wrong. Even after Barb disappeared he’d just gotten a furious talking too about how incredibly bad the whole thing looked for the family, how they’d have press hounding them about some girl going missing from their backyard and how she could end up another Martha Moxley and there were enough jealous, petty people in town to try to lay it on him or Tommy. They’d cut him off for two weeks, which had seemed like the end of the world at the time.
Hah. Fucking. *Hah*.

“One week. I’ll call the school and have them send your work home. You’re not allowed out of the house.”

Oh no. No, no, *no way*. His father had somehow fallen backward into an awful, effective punishment, because El is still sick and the kids are in danger and the Aboleth is still lurking around town- he can’t be benched for a *week*.

"I'll miss class-

"Barely seems to matter if you go or not, judging from your grades."

“*Dad - you can’t-that’s- I’m eighteen* -”

“Want to make it two?” The man’s jaw is set hard, “Yeah. You’re eighteen. Ignore me if you want, but don’t expect to come back to the house. You’re so *grown up* now, Steven, obviously you know everything, and I’m so *worthless*. We can all see how well you manage without your old man’s money, for a while. Maybe the Byers can take you in, you can see what good friends they are when your credit cards are closed.”

He shuts up so fast his teeth click.

His father smiles like he won something with that silence. It’s the old dance- buy love with money and withdraw your investment if it starts to act up or disappoints you. He thinks Steve has had visions of a lost 733i, his clothes, all of his *stuff*.

If he got kicked out with nothing but the clothes on his back Joyce probably *would* take him in. And they absolutely *can’t* afford it.

So he shuts up.

James Harrington puts the car back into drive and signals returning to the road.

“Stay away from Byers, Steven and stop sniffing up the Wheeler girl’s skirt. It’s pathetic and people will talk.”

Of course they will. It's what people do.

A month ago the idea of being home with his parents for a full week would have been something to look forward to. It would have been a little strange, maybe, not to be rattling around the place with just the occasional hello-goodbye, but nice to actually be sitting down to family dinners and *talking*.

Now though.

They’d taken away his phone line. Found the walkie talkie and taken that away too before he could even radio over to try to figure out what do to or find out if El was alright. He guesses he should feel lucky that the bat is still at the Byers’ house- doesn’t even want to know what they would have done if they had found it under his bed.

There’s no more sign-off that reassures him everyone is okay. No more occasional surprise *goodnight* from Joyce and the very occasional, deep, warm, slightly ironic ‘*Goodnight, Harrington’
over El’s shoulder from Hop. No more bat to reach down and touch like a good luck charm. No more being able to help or even know if anyone needs his help.

The dreams get worse, the attacks more frequent, though at least he knows that something is causing them now and that he’s not just going crazy. He wakes up tangled in sheets that were pulling him into dark water. He sleeps and dreams of being too slow and watching the space around the rope closing up, kids on one side him on the other- who gets stuck where depends on the night. Dreams of walking around and around the lifeless tunnels until his flashlight gives out and he sits down to die. Dreams that El is dead when he picks her up off the ground in the Gates of Hell. He dreams of walking out of here at the end of the week and ringing doorbells looking for Dustin and Mike and Nance and Max and Lucas and Joyce and Will and Jonathan, El and Hop and every single one of them is gone without a trace- fallen off the face of the earth like Barb and he’s all that’s left, alone.

He’s back to the bad old days right after the gate closed, trying to balance sleep with what it does to him. It gets so bad that he’s tempted to sneak some of his mom’s valium, just to get a full night but remembers what happened with the Aboleth last time he got wasted.

Instead he lays around with the radio to keep him awake. Tries once or twice to tune it to the Inbetween station, just to see if maybe he can get a handle on where the thing is or what it might be doing but there’s nothing but static.

He only ventures downstairs to rummage around in the cabinets. Grab an apple and some pop or make himself toast, eating less and worse than when his parents aren’t around so he doesn’t have to face his dad over the diner table or see him pouring over work in his office. His mother is an utterly immovable object wrapped in blankets in bed and he wonders if there’s a way he can warn her to cool it for a while without using the words ‘Thought Eating Monster’.

He asks her. She tells him it’s fine. She has a headache, it’ll be better tomorrow.

It won’t be better tomorrow because dad’s in rare form and it’s Butalbital and benzos this week.

“Mom, if you could just-”

“James, the fucking girls.” She murmurs, staring hazily. Right. Marlene-Melanie-Maureen must really be getting to her - even more than Julie That Little Slut From Accounting. Looks like she draws the line at nineteen-year-old college co-eds.

“It’s Steven mom. Not dad,” He says it slowly and the stare focuses a little, enough that he’s pretty sure she knows who he is at least, “Mom, uh, you wanted me to meet Lillian’s daughter at the club right? If you just give it a rest for a couple of days maybe we could go to-”

“Oh. Steven.” She sighs in recognition, wrapping an arm around him and tugging him close, head buried against his shoulder, smelling of sour sweat and Giorgio, “You don’t know anything.”

“What? Mom-?”

“My stupid, handsome little boy. Best thing you can be in this house.” Her voice is dreamy as she collapses onto her pillow and throws an arm over her face, “Ball games and girls and parties.” She dissolves into giggles and pulls him closer, “How’s basketball?”

“Mom, please - you have to stop for a while,”

“Smile Steven, you look just like him when you frown,” He doesn’t and her other hand swats at the air around him, trying to shoo him, “Oh, go away, Go away.”
He keeps to his room after that, doesn’t see either of them for another whole day, three ghosts haunting separate parts of the house. He only hears from his dad to scold him for turning all the lights on at night.

The lights all go off.

He’s fine.

He just counts the hours. Lies on his back tossing a baseball and catching it. Wants to crawl right out of his skin. Turns the music loud.

‘Radio 6.60... and in our top story today- a big cold, dull, dark, wet, empty never ending blow my brains out weather front-’

*click*

-It's a bitch, girl, but it's gone too far
Cause you know it don’t matter anyway
Say money, money it won't get you too far
Get you too far

Don't you know, don't you know
That it’s wrong to take what is given you?
So far gone, on your own-

A skittering noise on the roof gable makes him shut the radio off and sit up and his first instinct is to reach under the bed but his fingers only close on air. Shit. Right. No bat.

He grabs his lamp. It’s not the same.

His bat tumbles through the open window like he summoned it.

“ What- ”

Followed by a struggling Dustin Henderson.

“ Steve! ”

It’s a scramble to shush him, kick the bat away from the window before he can land face first on it and help drag him in.

“Oh man, you’re going to get me in such deep shit-” He says, sounding more breathlessly relieved than any human has ever sounded about something that’s going to get them into deep shit as he wraps an arm around under the kid’s arms and hauls. Dustin hooks a foot around the window sill.

“Don’t worry man, I’m super stealthy.”

“Like a ninja?” He smirks as the kid’s feet both hit the floor safely and Dustin brushes himself off with maximum dignity. Well, kid’s getting some practice climbing drain-pipes for when the girls finally start to take notice, at least.

“Exactly! Exactly like a ninja.”

“Is everyone alright?” He doesn’t even bother to try to play it cool, just sits on the edge of his bed and tries not to dig his fingers into the blankets, “How’s El?”
“She’s okay.” His back hits the mattress as the air and nervous tension go out of him, and he can feel the springs bounce as Dustin gets comfortable sitting on the end, “Except she probably can’t use her powers against the Aboleth without it eating her mind, so we’re definitely going to need to figure out an alternative.”

“An alternative?”

“Yeah, something other than El going like,” Dustin puts a hand out and furrows his brow dramatically, “And making it friggin’ explode.”

Which is a really useful tool to be missing, considering the last thing bigger than a Demodog they ran into had been shot, beaten with a nail-bat and set on fire without being much worse for wear.

He reaches up, chucks Dustin lightly on the shoulder.

“We’ll figure it out, dude.”

“I know. That’s what we do.” Dustin sounds confident, but shifts nervously, “I uh, didn’t turn off your dad’s computer, huh?”

“You did not.”

“Sorry about that.” He perks up slightly, “We can try to break you out?”

He can only imagine how that would go down. He’s almost tempted to let them, just to see if there’s a still house to get thrown out of by the end.

“Don’t worry about it.” The kid’s still worrying about it, turning his hat over in his hands, “It was just an excuse to be pissed about something else, it’s really not your fault, man. Believe me, you’d know if it was.”

Dustin nods because if nothing else the fact that Steve would have made sure he regretted the indignity of getting him grounded every day for the rest of his natural life rings true.

“Hope you got to see your dumb game, at least.”

Dustin shakes his head, his curls, liberated from the tyranny of his hat, bounce wildly, “Nah. There was something called Ariel which sounded kind of like Alice but it wanted a floppy disk. Who’s Ariel?”

“Probably a new girlfriend.”

He feels Dustin’s apologetic full body flinch on the mattress. Shit, the kid always sounds like he’s about thirty-five so it’s easy to forget that he’s not actually.

“Um, sorry, I didn’t-”

“Doesn’t bother me anymore.”

“Are you okay?” Dustin says suddenly and very seriously. Seriously enough that he raises his head a little to look at him.

“Yeah? Just bored. It’s not like-”

“No man, I mean, with the Aboleth. You uh- look pretty bad.”
“Wow, thanks Henderson.”

“Tired. Not like, bad bad.” Dustin shrugs, rolls his eyes, and starts digging through his backpack. “Look, whatever, your hair still looks good, okay? Anyway now that we know the Aboleth is real we’ve been doing some research—and since you’re bored—”

“And by research you mean, ‘guessing based on your shitty nerd game’?” That he’s pissed he’s going to miss this week, a fact he will take to his deathbed, “Do we need to fight it with an army of zombies?”

“Wouldn’t hurt.” Dustin hauls a couple of dog-eared game books and a black and white notebook out of his bag, “But it’s actually the thing that makes zombie armies so—”

“What? Like zombie zombies? Like, ‘they’re coming to get you Barbara’ zombies?” He flips open the notebook to the page with a piece of string marking it and regrets it immediately. The first page is notes written in a careful, deliberate hand that he recognizes as Mike’s:

Aboleth D&D (Dwellers of the Forbidden City, Monster Manual II) Aquatic creature but can travel on land, highly intelligent, slimy, tentacles, can cast enslave 3 times per day, live in vast underwater cities built by slave labor housing their forbidden knowledge. Psionic. Hates humans. Only scared of Illithids.

The opposite page has one of Will’s drawings on it- a knight in armor on bended knee, head bowed low with his hands on either temple and his weapon discarded, writhing in obvious agony as the Aboleth- all tentacles and sucking hagfish mouth- rears back above him, sends little mental lightening bolts into the helpless knight’s head. Or pulls them out.

He closes the notebook.

“More like an army of mindless drones.” Dustin supplies, like that’s better, and he tries not to think about what happened to Reed- what almost...Jesus, “They’re psions. Like the Mind Flayer. But they cast enslave and psychic drain, right? Which is pretty much a dominate spell that keeps someone captive in their mind and drains their hit points- but the person can try a wisdom save and—”

Dustin gestures widely, warming to the topic and he’s getting really way too enthusiastic about the thing that nearly killed all of them. And him. Mostly him.

He grabs a hand that’s making what probably isn’t the approved ASL gesture for ‘sucking your brains out’ but could be based on how...descriptive it is, “You’re not quite right, you know that Dustin?”

The kid scowls and swats at his knee with his hat, then shrugs like he does in fact know that.

“Runs in the family, I guess,” He sighs and collapses onto his back beside him, “I had a crazy uncle that thought a cult kept stealing all of his lawn gnomes.”

“Why...would a cult steal lawn gnomes?”

“Dunno, but he got the entire Henderson family banned from Toronto.”

“Oh, now I know you’re screwing with me.”

“Nope, god’s honest. Ol’ uncle Henderson.”

He searches Dustin’s face for any sign that he’s about to crack but the kid looks totally sincere.
“Look, all that about the Aboleth, the research is nice and all- and by nice I obviously mean fucking horrifying- but...these things can’t always work just like D&D monsters, man. I know we got lucky with the Mind Flayer but-”

“We know,” Dustin agrees with surprising speed then shifts back to sitting up, biting his lip nervously, “This is something totally different. But we’re gonna figure it out. I have a plan.”
A Shadow Over Hawkins

Chapter Summary

If the first time had felt like being stranded alone in the ocean, this time feels like being the only sane person in the lunatic asylum.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“When there are enough outsiders together in one place, a mystic osmosis takes place and you're inside.”

— Stephen King, The Stand

“There are the most dangerous creatures the ones that use doors or the ones that don't?”

— David Wong, John Dies at the End

“This is a terrible plan.”

“Shut up Steve, it’s a great plan.”

“No, it’s not Dustin. Jesus Nance, how the hell did you two agree to this? Remember the guy? The guy in the suit? The one that’s going to put us in jail forever?”

“The kids made some good points-”

“Better points than 'we’re going to jail forever if we do this?’”

“We already voted, Steve, The Party is a democracy-”

“I don’t remember getting a vote, Wheeler.”

“You’re a provisional member.”

“Oh, okay. So when you need someone to kill something with a bat I’m part of the Party but when you vote I’m provisional? You guys are such assholes.”

“Fine. All in favor of Steve getting a vote?”

“You’re voting on my vote?”

“Just let him vote, dude.”

“Thanks Lucas. I vote ‘no’ because this is a terrible idea - and I’m an adult so my vote counts as...nine. Did you just snort at me, Dustin?”
“You've been an adult for four months and it doesn't count as nine. This is a direct democracy.”

“Fine. Did anyone ask Hopper?”

“Uh, better to ask for forgiveness than permission?

“Did you say Hop is going to kill us, Dustin? Because that's what I heard.”

“You agreed we needed an expert!”

“Yes! An expert! What is he an expert in, exactly?”

“Pretty much everything!”

They all freeze as the door of the science classroom opens

“I thought I heard you guys out here!” Mr. Clarke grins and doesn’t falter facing seven identical deer-in-the-headlights and one perfectly at ease Dustin Henderson, “Nancy and Jonathan! And Steven! Well, what a nice surprise! Are you kids here to show them the Heathkit?”

It’s an out. An out that it suddenly seems like most of the Party is ready to take, vote or no, because Max and Lucas are nodding enthusiastically and he has an ‘oh yeah can’t wait’ on the tip of his tongue because this is crazy-

Dustin moves forward, grabbing a confused Scott Clarke by the elbow and escorting him back into the classroom, the rest of them trailing helplessly to watch the trainwreck, “Not...quite, Mr. Clarke. We actually need to talk. And you’re uh...gonna wanna sit down- you don’t mind if Nancy and Jonathan check for bugs right?”

“...Bugs?”

Mr. Clarke’s eyebrows furrow as they talk, each picking up their own threads of what happened over the last two years. Sometimes straightforward sometimes rambling over each other until Steve has to threaten the little dipshits with a talking stick so they’ll take turns. Nancy gives her account of the world’s worst trip to Wonderland and the Demogorgon and Jonathan describes the night with Will, burning monsters out of him. Him? Well, he mostly stays out of it. Lets his contribution to science be that the small ones die if you hit them hard enough with a baseball bat spiked with nails and the big ones don’t love it either and Mr. Clarke’s eyebrows travel right up to his hairline.

“And we put a dead one in Joyce Byers' fridge but she made us burn it in the backyard.”

Dustin describes D’art’s evolution- with hastily scrawled pictures and estimated measurements, moaning that he should have measured properly and that the hard data is lost forever. Mike describes how they hunted in the lab- how they worked together like wolves to take on dozens of soldiers and poor Bob Newby. How they were a hive-mind and could communicate across distance and knew when their home was in danger.

And when they wrap up with the wide-awake nightmare machine from another dimension that's trying to kill them now Mr. Clarke stands up slowly and makes his way to the window, Steve figures they’ve fucked up- really properly, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest fucked up by telling him because even he thought that they sounded insane by the end and he’d lived through it.

The absolute silence goes on long enough that Steve adds ‘waiting for a a grade-school science
teacher to call the men in white coats to take you to Penhurst takes a year and a half’ to his list of
time becomes a relative thing.

“I believe you.”

Dustin pumps a fist in the air and the others start shouting over each other about how they knew he
would and that it’s another triumph for well presented data just as Jonathan’s eyes narrow, and
Nancy looks concerned and it seems like the three of them are the only ones skeptical about the
speed that he’s willing to jump on the ‘monster dimension’ bandwagon.

“We’re serious.” Nancy says, mouth set in a tight line. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I believe you Nancy. I wish I didn’t, this is- And my god kids...you’ve...what you’ve..” Mr. Clarke
comes back to his chair, settles back down, elbows on his knees.

It feels wrong. It feels too easy. He feels the sudden need to make him not believe them so they can
try to convince him again.

“Look- I mean, all due respect but what kind of science teacher just believes a bunch of kids who tell
him that there’s an alternate monster dimension and they saved the world twice?”

“A good one, Steve. At least I like to think so.” The man pinches the bridge of his nose, rubs at his
eyes, “The way I see it- either what you’re all telling me is true or my best students have recruited
you and their siblings to play a prank on me two years in making. They’ve asked me hypothetical
questions about parallel universes and sensory deprivation tanks and divergent evolution, created an
incredibly elaborate and consistent multi-part story which they’ve convinced the three of you
corroborate, even though it includes Nancy’s friend who passed away and the events surrounding the
disappearance of Will - which none of you stumble on factually and can pick up at any point, and
that they, including one of the kindest boy’s I’ve ever had the honor to have had in my class, have
decided to spring on me now as a cruel explanation of the death of a friend. I would believe in
multiverse theory before I believed that.”

“Oh. Uh, yeah. Makes sense.”

"And a good scientist doesn't have the option to simply disbelieve fact jut because it scares the pants
off of them-" 

"Science is neat,” Mike says quietly.

"But not very forgiving. Exactly Mike. Also I have to admit I've been sort of curious about why
you've been lying to me about ridiculous things for two years."

"We haven't really-" Mike starts but Mr. Clarke just gives him a surprisingly canny look that actually
shuts him up effectively and that Steve immediately decides he's gonna start practicing that in the
mirror every night. Hopefully the mustache isn't required.

"Your second cousin, Mike. From Sweden?"

"Oh. Right."

"So, I believe you but...” He seems to steady himself a little, smooths his mustache with his fingers
nervously, “This is a lot to take in- it changes everything. Fundamentally changes how we
understand the nature of reality. The impact it's going to have on particle physics, string theory, our
understanding of the initial singularity- This is the most important-”
"You can't tell anyone about this Mr. Clarke." Dustin says quickly 'cause that kid knows the face of a man hearing the siren song of Once In A Lifetime Scientific Discovery when he sees it.

The teacher looks mildly betrayed, "Can't tell anyone? Dustin, you of all-"

"People have been killed to keep it a secret." Jonathan says and the man looks like he's going to protest that a little thing like the possibility of getting his brains blown out by government agents' isn't any reason not to open the world biggest curiosity door or whatever but stops when Jonathan follows it up with, "If it gets out they could send people after us and our families."

If Mr. Clarke would have been willing to risk his own life, he definitely wasn't willing to risk their's because his shoulders slump slightly.

"I- I obviously won't do anything that could put any of you in harm's way." He says seriously, "So, uh... how can I help?"

"We need to know about what this thing could be. How it evolved?" Nancy says quickly, just in case the man changes his mind and decides that they're bug-house crazy after all, "If there could be some sort of offshoot that wouldn’t die with the rest when they were cut off from the hive-mind.”

“And this is the thing you believe killed Greg?”

“Yeah, it’s an Aboleth and we’re pretty sure it’s been eating Steve’s brain, so we have to stop it.” Dustin fishess his notebook out of his bag, “I have some notes.”

“Language, Steven.”

“Uh, sorry Mr. Clarke.”

“An Aboleth," Mr. Clarke says slowly, "Well- that's...certainly nothing to sneeze at. Eating how, exactly?"

“Can we stop saying...okay, whatever. When I looked at it there was this... gross light and something happened- now it feels like a hangover. Like a really bad hangover. Or the flu. I don't know.”

Understatement of the year there, Harrington, but how the do you explain it felt like something was trying to rip my soul out through my eyeballs and I'm not sure it put it back' where it found it?

“It tried to cast psychic drain but Will stopped it before it could.” Dustin supplies maybe helpfully. Who the hell knows at this point?

"Or Steven succeeded on his wisdom saving throw," Mr. Clarke is still shaken but obviously game to play along.

"No way is that what happened- it's Steve." Lucas shrugs a innocent 'you know it's true' shrug when he glares at him and they really need to finish this up so he's allowed to swear at them again.

“Alright- so- you kids think it’s some sort of leech? It didn’t have that in common with any of the others, did it?”

“The Mind-Flayer could take over your brain but that was totally The Exorcist . Not subtle.” Mike supplies before looking guiltily over at Will’s expression and giving his shoulder a comforting squeeze, “Sorry.”
“It’s okay.”

Nancy bites her lip, “It can make you hallucinate and we think- maybe it- pushes? Encourages destructive thoughts so you'll do what it wants.”

“Like toxoplasma gondii! Okay- that would make sense.”

“Toxic-what?” He’s glad Max was the one who asked and not him. Benefit of running around with at least one non-mega nerd.

“Toxoplasmosis.” Lucas supplies cheerfully, “It’s why Dustin’s mom can’t have a cat for like, ten minutes, ‘cause it’s in her brain.”

“We just like cats, Lucas.”

“That’s what it wants you to think.”

“It’s a parasite-” Mr. Clarke says, looking a little steadier now that he gets to teach them something, "It uses adaptive manipulation to alter the behavior of mice and rats in ways that increase the rodents’ chances of being preyed upon- spread by cats, unsurprisingly.”

His first instinct is throw up. His second is to scratch his own skin off because if it’s a parasite and the Aboleth is the cat then that means something from down there is in him like in Alien and he brought it back from that tunnel somehow and it’s been with him all this time squatting in his head and oh...shit.

Jonathan watches everyone, all the time, it’s just his thing, so he shouldn’t be surprised when he feels him steering him into a too-small desk seconds before his legs go out from under him.

“The tunnel- the shit floating around in the air.”

The kids go silent and pale for a moment. Well, at least that’s the end of smart comments about something eating his brain.

“Oh my god,” Dustin breaks the silence, “It got in my mouth.”

“Kids.”

“Steve was wearing a bandana the whole time too” Mike points out, shifting uncomfortably “That means any of could have it- we could all have it.”

Nancy’s hand on his shoulder, the one that was comforting a second ago tightens spasmodically.

“There were spores floating around in the forest. I could be-”

“Kids.”

“I haven’t felt any different?” Max says hopefully, but looks like the thought of it is making her itchy, like walking through spider web.

“Kids!”

“Sorry Mr. Clarke.”

“While I really do appreciate watching you all form a plausible hypothesis, it’s really great- there’s one problem. The Aboleth affected Greg and I think we can be reasonably sure he was never
exposed to what all of you were.”

Steve lets his head hit the top of the desk, “Oh, thank god.”

At least nothing was necessarily inside of them- a boiling hot shower had definitely moved up the priority list, though, just to try to banish the feeling of something crawling around.

“Although I’d say none of us are out of the woods yet, in that case.” He looks between them all, “I-understand your concerns about the people from this lab but the best thing to do is to let the professionals handle this. Something this dangerous-”

"We face dangerous all the time," Lucas shrugs.

"And whenever the military shows up they mostly get eaten, so it's pretty much just us."

Mr. Clarke blinks owlishly at Dustin and by his expression Steve's pretty sure the one part of their story the man thought was exaggerated bullshit was the 'teenagers defeating all the monsters and pretty much everyone else besides Hop and Joyce being no help at all ' part.

"Club- I....Nancy, Jonathan, Steve- I appreciate that you’re almost...this is all too...”

He stands, brushes himself off and straightens up.

“I’m sorry but- I need to speak to the adults involved in this.”

There’s a dead silence and he wonders if he’s finally found his way into their little psychic circle because he knows exactly what every single person in the room is thinking.

It’s Mike who finally says, “Hop is going to kill us.”

It was a good plan.

No- it was a great plan.

Dustin knew it was a great plan- regardless of what Steve had said about them all going to jail forever. What did Steve know? Jack, that's what. He was their fighter. He was good at nearly getting himself killed doing stupid, reckless stuff but that was the opposite of coming up with great, totally 100% well-thought-out plans that weren't even a little bit desperate or born out of worry because no one else had apparently seen Steve elbow him away back in the Gates and when he had brought it up while they were sitting around bullshitting in his room the other boy had just looked at him like he was totally crazy.

Yeah, Henderson, I'm gonna get eaten for you shits on purpose. High opinion of yourself you got there.

But he knew what Steve had done.

So they had to kill the Aboleth before Steve did something really stupid and really reckless and got really dead and if that meant they had to tell Mr. Clarke about it, well, that's just what they had to do. And that worked out great too, because he had believed them (Dustin hadn't doubted for a second) and then he had had ducked away and come back with a precarious stack of books from the school library because lending limits are a thing that happen to other people to take along to the
Emergency Meeting at Will's house. Mr. Clarke had even promised him like, twenty-five times not to go to *Scientific American* with any of it. It all couldn't have turned out better and overall as plans went Dustin was giving it a solid 9 out of 10.

“Of all the *- idiotic-*."

-It just hadn’t stuck the landing, is all.

“Irresponsible-”

“Look, if we just all *think* about this for a minute-” Hopper rounds on him, stormy expression making it very clear that he *has done a totally adequate amount of thinking about this, thank you very much Dustin Henderson*, before going back to pacing a trench in the Byers' living room floor.

“Have you all lost your *goddamn minds*?”

Joyce perches on the arm of her living room sofa beside Mr. Clarke, looking anxious and tired but resigned to the overall situation, "Coffee, Scott?"

“I'd love some, thanks Joyce.” Mr. Clarke says with the forced and mostly unconvincing equanimity of a man that has found himself dropped unprepared into someone else's awkward Thanksgiving dinner argument and just had to get through it.

The rest of the party were scattered around the room because while they were all pretty good at undying loyalty and the power of friendship when it came to facing off against the Upside Down, it was apparently every kid for themselves when it came to a rampaging Hopper and everyone besides him was vying to look the least like someone worth yelling at. Lucas and Max were creeping toward the kitchen-because of course the friggin' Ranger and Rogue were trying to stealth away. Mike had given up trying early 'cause Hopper still *really* wanted to yell at him about taking El to the Gates and this was a decent substitute but he was benefiting from being next to Will, who knew *exactly* what he was doing by sticking close to the impenetrable force-field style protection of being next to Joyce. Nancy, Jonathan and Steve were getting the worst of it so Dustin knows it's *extra* unfair when he nudges Nancy directly into Hopper's path and the look she gives him when he does it is that scary one that she gets when she's going to shoot something so he's pretty sure that he is *definitely* no longer her favorite of Mike's friends and any future help at not being a loser at dances is right off the table. It doesn't matter though- the plan is more important and what the plan needs now is a Face.

“Hop, we know that you're concerned about how this could effect Jane-” Nancy starts carefully in her best good-girl teacher's pet voice.

“Oh, *I'm getting there- believe me,*” Hop is wow- so loud- when he yells so Nancy retreats back to Jonathan and his valiant, doomed, and pretty characteristic attempt at Staying Out Of Things, “How the hell did you two agree to go along with this? I expect this kind of hail-Mary bullshit from the kids and Harrington-”

Steve pushes off the wall that he's been holding up for half-an-hour, scowling.

“*Whoa, whoa-did you just lump me in with the kids -?*”

“*You gonna argue with me about it right now , Harrington?*” -And immediately goes back to trying to disappear into the ugly floral wallpaper like the world's most conspicuous chameleon as Hop refocuses on Nancy and Jonathan, “*You* two know exactly what these people are capable of. One change in upper-management and you've gotten him killed-”

"Chief Hopper," Mr. Clarke tries, "You're going to scare-"
Hop shakes his head, scowling, "No, believe me, they know exactly what sort of danger they put you in and they did it anyway."

"We only told him what he needed to know to help with the Aboleth-" Dustin interrupts because he’s feeling like the whole 'helping know how the Aboleth works' aspect of what makes this a great plan and not a really, really terrible one is getting buried under a lot of unnecessary emotional, knee jerk reactions.

"He didn’t need to know anything about the Aboleth, Henderson- he’s a grade school science teacher!"

"He’s the best grade school science teacher and he’s been helping us for two years!"

"Thank you Dustin," Mr. Clarke clears his throat slightly, as Joyce hands him a coffee mug and Dustin's close enough to hear Joyce whisper that she put bourbon in it before Mr. Clarke takes a really big sip. "Maybe we should all calm down and talk about this in a more-"

"Look, Teach- I’m sorry that they’ve brought you into this but you don’t understand everything involved so you need to stay the hell out of it."

Mr. Clarke frowns.

"Ah. I see."

"He told us about how to travel between dimensions and find Will!" He plows on ahead, because he's got more than the plan to defend now- Mr. Clarke's reputation is on the line, "He helped us build the sensory deprivation tank- and he didn’t even know what he was helping us with! Imagine what we can do now that he has all the information-"

"And who cares if he's a science teacher," Mike adds, "Bob was a manager at Radio Shack and he saved our lives. He saved your life twice!"

Joyce freezes on the arm of the couch, fingers gripping hard at the cloth as Will's expression goes sideways and wide-eyed.

"Is that really the example you want to bring up for this ending well, Wheeler?"

"He was a hero!" Mike crosses his arms and they really, really should have made a rule beforehand that Mike wasn’t allowed to talk during this meeting under any circumstances because he's not wrong but they should maybe avoid bringing up the guy that they got eaten alive by Demodogs, "And what do you want us to do, Hop, It's not like we can un-tell him!"

"You shouldn’t have told him in the first place, you little smart-ass!"

"All right, everyone stop!" Mr. Clarke stands up right in the path of Hop's pacing so that the two men are...well, not nose-to-nose 'cause there's too much height difference for that- but nose-to- almost-chin definitely and Dustin is pretty sure he's never heard Mr. Clarke yell, actually yell, before this second. Not even when Marty Bellerman hit him in the back of the head with spitballs or Chrissy Hargensen accidentally-on-purpose set her science text book on fire with a Bunsen burner, or Troy put a dissected frog in his desk drawer.

"Chief Hopper- You're absolutely right. I'm a grade school science teacher- which means it's my job to protect these kids- from bullies, from strangers, from their own parents, or from creatures from another dimension if I need to, so let me end this argument- I honestly don't know how I can help you face this thing- I don't own a gun and I'm not much of a baseball player- but unless you decide
that this secret can only be kept by five kids, three teenagers and Joyce and shoot me right here in the living room as long as my kids need help I'll be helping them however I can." The man inhales and squares his shoulders, rising to a height that almost gets the two men nose-to-beard, "Okay?"

Dustin never realized before that there was more than one type of silence, 'cause there's the silence of people just not saying anything and then there's the silence of Scott Clarke and Jim Hopper starring each other down like they might get into a fist fight. A few seconds later he adds a type of silence: the silence when Jim Hopper is the one to blink first and look away.

"Holy shit." Max says, breaking it for all of them.

"Language, Max."

"Fine, you're helping." Hopper mutters, dragging a frustrated hand down over his mouth, "What've you got?"

"I brought some books," Mr. Clarke says it as cheerfully as if the last forty seconds hadn't happened as he sits back down, "On the way over I was thinking about your question, Nancy- about some divergent species- just to be clear- before now the only living things you've encountered in your explorations into this place follow this- sort of- Corpse Lilly-ish phenotype?"

“The Mind-Flayer controls them all and it looks like a huge spider.” Will digs through his bag, pulls out his sketch of the massive thing the Will's told them all is lurking above (below?) them somewhere in the Upside-Down and smoothes it out onto the side-table, “But I think it’s head is just closed.”

Mr. Clarke’s curiosity-based composure wavers as he glances at the paper and fully processes that the otherworldly abomination towering above the telephone poles is a representation of a thing that exists rather than a product of Will's imagination. And man, have they been there, 'cause the Demogorgon was bad enough without being the size of Godzillia. Mr. Clarke’s hands are shaking as a little as he lays it back down.

“Hmm.” He says, playing for time until he can regain his equilibrium, “So that’s the queen bee, so to speak...the... wait .”

The man’s eye’s light up as he sorts through his books, thumbing through the *Environmental Physiology and Biochemistry of Insects* until he finds what he’s looking for.

“What’s part of the hive but not part of the hive mind ? A brood parasite! Your Aboleth is a brood parasite!” He stops as he realizes that he’s letting himself get carried away, “...Would just be my theory, of course based on limited-”

“What's a *brood parasite*," Steve asks cautiously, "’Cause I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say that sounds even shittier than the toxic one.”

*Toxoplasmosis*, Steve."

“Not even a little important right now , Wheeler.”

“This,” Mr. Clarke opens the book to a page showcasing a bright green wasp as they gather around, “This is brood parasite. A little kleptoparasitic insect known as the cuckoo-wasp.”

*Lightbulb!*

"So it's like the cuckoo bird, right Mr. Clarke?"
“Cuckoo like the clocks?” Max asks skeptically.

“Yeah! Like the clocks! Cuckoo’s lay their eggs in another bird’s nest, murder their chicks and force them to care for their young instead!”

“That’s not like the clocks, Dustin.”

Mr. Clarke is grinning at him though, “Exactly Dustin! From what you’ve said of these Demogorgons they’re extremely powerful and vicious apex predators- any competing species would have to get clever to get an ecological foothold in this Upside-Down place -clever like a Cuckoo Wasp, it tricks the swarm intelligence into accepting it and convinces the bees around it to feed it pollen...”

“It patched itself into the hive-mind.” Jonathan says slowly, “It never stops, it'd never go hungry-”

“Until it followed the group into another dimension and got cut-off.” Hopper's drifted back over to them, looking ever so slightly less murderous.

“So it wants to use Jane's powers to open the gate back up?” Joyce suggests.

“Logical! But not necessarily. If its kleptoparasitism is based on being in a place with a competing apex predator- and if these Demogorgon have any relation to real world targets of brood parasites they’ll go out of their way to destroy its eggs or offspring when they notice them-”

"When I was down there two years back I saw some kind of broken egg," Hopper says and less murderous has turned into fully invested, "I figured it was just what they came from but now we know it's not. Coulda been this thing."

"Perhaps! In any case it likely had to work hard to thrive there. Here- well- ”

Mr. Clarke's enthusiasm retreats like a tide going out as he clears his throat nervously,

“Well, it's an invasive species- there’s plenty to feed on and nothing to stop it.”

There's a grim speculative silence as they all share a look.

He's the one that breaks it.

"I told you this was a great plan!"

Nancy doesn’t know exactly when going home stopped feeling like going home and started feeling like a tedious obligation.

Sometime last year, she thinks, when dad started making cracks about his invisible children and home had started to feel like specific people rather than a place.

Of course she still loves her parents- well, mom at least. She loves her dad with the sort of vague neutrality that Ted Wheeler inspires in every aspect of his life and because it’s more trouble to stop loving a parent than continue out of habit- but she’s not sure how Mike can do it everyday- sit at the table and push mashed potatoes around his plate and listen to their parents bitch at him for not
cleaning his room because all she wants to do when she’s there is stand on her chair, clink a fork against her glass and declare nastily that every little aspect of their suburban lives are bullshit because the world has a dark, terrifying basement that spits monsters at them every few months just so they'd know and every conversation with them wouldn't feel as empty and juvenile as talking with Holly.

Considering the events that led to why Jonathan and his mom share the secret she knows that she shouldn't be jealous- but she can't help but get twinges of it occasionally and she tells herself that she agreed with the kids about Mr. Clarke because they were all in danger and Steve and El are hurting somehow and they needed to fix it- not because she understands that secrets get incredibly lonely.

She hangs her purse on the hook in the hall beside the pictures of all of them, picking up one of Holly’s barbies from where she left it on the floor and tries not to think about how the house has the frozen in time feeling of a museum.

“Mom?”

“In the kitchen, honey!” Her mom trills happily then laughs.

It’s a weird, charmed little laugh. She can barely picturedad being the cause of it.

“Mike is staying over Will’s and-” She rounds the corner, sees her mom first, perched on a stool at the kitchen island, pink across the cheeks, giggling like a schoolgirl at something the boy leaning on the island across from her just said.

She freezes.

She can smell him.

“How was Ally's?” Her mother says cheerfully before turning to Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove who is standing in their kitchen, to offer an explanation “Nancy was tutoring a friend.”

“Wow.” There’s a smooth softness to him that somehow manages to be even more frightening than his usual brittle mania because if she didn’t know what he actually sounded like she would have almost thought it was completely sincere, “That’s great, Nancy. Brains and beauty obviously run in the family.”

Her mother rolls her eyes up in a flattered oh you sort of way before turning back to her.

“Are you alright, sweetie, you look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“I’m...fine,” She manages to just barely sound it, “It went...fine.”

“Nancy!” Holly collides with her legs like a little blonde cannonball, “I missed you.”

Would he hurt all three of them? That’s the question. She could start screaming. Tell her mom that Hargrove is insane and tried to murder Steve and to run and call the cops. But all of that means explanation and doubt and an angry Billy Hargrove with nothing to lose in her house with her little sister and mother. All of that takes time.

“Hi, Holls” She says slowly, because Billy’s eyes are still locked on her, looking amused and languid as she twists, “I missed you too. Uh, mom, doesn’t Holly have to go to her dance class at five?”

“Five?” Her mother blinks then straightens in startled surprise before quickly downing the last of her orange juice and snatching her keys up from the island, “Oh, dammit- I completely lost track of the
time- I have a PTA meeting- can you take her before the two of you start studying? I wouldn’t ask but the bake-sale...

“Mom-”

Billy looks distressed, “I’m so sorry Mrs. Wheeler- I didn’t mean to distract you. Of course we can.”

“It’s not your fault,” Her mother smiles, “I’ll be back in a forty minutes Nancy- Good luck with the test Billy.”

“Oh, if anyone can help me pass it’s Nancy.”

Her mother is sweeping past her to the front door, planting a kiss on her cheek as she goes, whispering he’s such a sweetheart conspiratorially in her ear like she thinks that Jonathan Byers was a fluke and she’s decided to be supportive.

She wants to vomit. She wants to run.

Holly is tugging at the hem of her shirt, wants to tell her all about the picture she drew.

And Billy Hargrove is eating a ‘Nilla wafer, staring at her hard as he pops the last of the cookie in his mouth and licks crumbs from his fingers. They stand in silence except for the crunch of his chewing.

“Holly, go watch TV in the living room, okay?”

Her sister frowns in obvious confusion, “But I gotta go to dance-”

“Five minutes then we’ll go.” Holly nods, looking like she can barely believe her luck that she gets to watch more Rainbow Brite instead of going to ballet.

The amused look drops off of Billy’s face like someone wiping down a chalkboard.

“Your mom wants it so fucking bad. Bet she creaks like a rusty hinge.”

He grins, his real grin, not the soft, fake one he had been putting on for her mother.

“Get out of my house.”

“That’s rude, Nancy,” He says, leaning back against the kitchen island, “Seems to me that the smart thing would be to be little Miss. Manners since your bag is all the way in the hall.”

She could make a run for it, but that means passing Holly and he could-

She clamps down on that thought. First she needs to get the island between them- he could vault it, but it’ll cost him time. Then she needs a weapon.

“Fine,” She says, trying to sound more annoyed than terrified as she walks toward the kitchen counter as casually as she can manage, “What do you want, Billy?”

His mouth turns down in an exaggerated frown, “Well, I got this trig test.”

The look she shoots him makes him smirk.

“Where’s your harem? Or do you not bring ‘em home to meet the parents?”

She has to turn her back on him to get into the drawers and make it look natural, the air in her lungs
feels frozen as she reaches up for a mug and a teabag and tries not to think about mountain lions.

“You don’t like me much, do you, Snow White?”

“No.”

That makes him grin.

“Tina says I’m misunderstood, you know,” He says in a stage whisper.

“I understand you just fine.”

The kettle isn’t much more than lukewarm. Getting it in the face might surprise him but it won’t stop him.

“How did you avoid the deputies?”

“I didn’t,” She can hear the the shrug in his voice, “They just fucking suck.”

Her hands shake slightly as she opens a drawer, slides a steak knife up the sleeve of her sweater and turns back around with a spoon in hand.

“Going for a knife?” He sounds more curious than accusatory and he doesn’t move to stop her so she trades the steak knife for a five-inch kitchen knife from the block- might as well suit herself. “Damn, Snow White. I knew you were the smart one and all but how the fuck did a scary little bitch like you date Harrington?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer.

“But that’s the million dollar question isn’t it? Why don’t I doubt that you’re ready to stab me in your kitchen? Why does Little Miss Honor Roll carry a gun in her bag? Where did my thirteen year old sister get drugs and a nail bat? What's in my fucking head ?”

Any hope that he wouldn’t hurt them shrivels and dies.

“I don’t know what you're talking about.”

“Don’t you fucking lie to me!” His fist comes down hard enough on the island that the glassware rattles in the cabinets, and a quiet, confused Nancy ? floats in from the living room, “What is it? DMT? Jimson? Psilocybin? You getting Max to slip it to me? Some kinda sick revenge for Harrington to make me think I'm going crazy? Put me in the nuthouse?”

“Make you think you're crazy?” She manages to laugh around the thick, choking lump in her throat, “You sound like a lunatic. You tried to kill someone, Billy. You need help .”

He shakes his head emphatically, teeth bared in a scowl, “See, I know what kinda crazy I am- this isn't it. Nobody tells me what to do-”

A jingly, happy little tune that seems louder than it should be coming from the living room TV freezes conversation.

[ Oh, let the sunshine in

Face it with a grin....]

His expression cracks, mouth going weird and slack in what looks like legitimate misery, “You don’t
know the shit it wants me to do.”

It’s a horrifying opening, but an opening nonetheless. In the other room the TV bursts into static.

“Nancy, Rainbow Brite-?”

“We aren’t...Billy, we aren’t doing anything to you, I swear,” The look gets even more desperate, like he would have preferred her to say that they were getting his little sister to dose him with deliriants, because at least it would be an explanation, “But I need you to leave now.”

He’s staring, searching her face like a human lie detector and he must see something- something he likes - because something new comes over him- it’s not hate and it’s not fear...it’s recognition?

“You’d actually kill me?- No- you want to kill me. Do you hear it, too?”

“I just want you to go. ”

“I know what kinda crazy I am Snow White, do you know what kinda crazy you are?” The look is nostalgia. Like a wolf that sees a dog and knows somewhere in the memory of its bones that they’re the same, and he’s stalking forward, tongue running along his canine teeth, "You wanna stick that in me. Make me pay for what I did to Harrington."

"I don't-"

"Bullshit," The word cracks in the air between them like a whip, " It says you do. Face it with a grin, Wheeler."

"Billy-"

"I'm gonna kill him, you know that," It's not a boast or a threat- it's a statement of fact- all the more terrible for how exhausted he sounds when he says it, "Next time It's not gonna let me stop. So you better fucking do it."

(First time his breath rattles and his gaze losses focus. He mutters that he loves her and she's beautiful and he's sorry that he was shitty boyfriend and she yells at Hopper to go faster please because he could be dying in her arms and she says she loves him but he's unconscious again so he never knows that she does-

The second time Jonathan makes tea as she wipes mud and leaf bits off of her legs with a paper towel- he picks up the phone on the second ring right as the kettle starts screaming and turns pale and stricken when he tells her that it was Hopper and Billy Hargove just tried to murder Steve Harrington. They go see him together and the bruise on his neck is dark and his voice is broken and the white part of his left eye is full of blood -)

And she can make sure it never happens again.

It takes thoughts that are already there and pushes so you'll do what it wants- that's what she had said to Mr. Clarke. But now the question was what did it want and which of them was it pushing? Would she even know if it was her?

What kind of crazy are you, Snow White?

"C'mon, Wheeler, your piece of shit boyfriends are too pussy to seal the deal so it's up to you-"

"Nan-cy!" Holly’s peering around the door frame, "The TV-"
She takes the step in front of her sister to block her from Hargrove, kitchen knife clutched in a white knuckled fist as he moves inexorably toward them.

*It's going to make me kill him in front of Holly,* she thinks vaguely, like she’s observing herself from a distance, because what it wants is to leave as big a stain as it can- spread that inky black water wide.

Billy's still moving forward but his intense gaze is going hazy and distracted as he seems to catch sight of something in the vicinity of the ceiling and she remembers-

"Billy, don't look at it."

His attention snaps back to her, startled, and there's dead silence that seems to last forever as he stares an accusatory stare and tilts his head.

Then he turns on his heel and walks for the kitchen door,

It's a trick, she decides as he unlocks it and opens it as calmly as though they had been studying and it's *I'll see myself out, good luck in Trig, see you in class.*

“I gave you a chance, Wheeler, *remember* that,” He says quietly and she's not certain if he means a chance to tell him what's happening or a chance to kill him but there's no time to ask because he’s gone, past the threshold and she’s gasping for air and locking and bolting the door and throwing the chain on and relief is buckling her knees into a slow collapse, head in her hands, back against the wood.

The only sound is static from the living room then the cheerful voices of Holly’s cartoon- ‘*Heya, Glumface, next time-look up! You'll feel better and you might see me too!*’

“Nancy?” Holly says quietly, poking her shoulder, “Are we gonna go dance?”

She reaches up to leave the knife on the kitchen counter, wraps an arm around her little sister and pulls her close.

“How about we skip it, Holls?” She murmurs, burying her face in hair that smells like baby-shampoo, “We can color instead.”

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El is *On The Bench* (*On The Bench* means when you're useless and sick and can't use your powers to help anyone even though your friends are in danger and you and Hopper argue about it for an hour in Joyce's kitchen after you wake up and *don't break Joyce's windows, Jane, so help me god -*) and she refuses to put *On The Bench* in her notebook because it's a stupid phrase and she hates it.

Hopper hadn’t told her that going out was stupid when she had first woken up, just held her so tight- because he was happy that she was alive and then when it seemed like she was staying alive they had fought- because that’s what they do when they’re afraid for each other.

No more using her powers. No more leaving the house. *You're On the Bench this time, kid.*

When the fight ended he *compromised* without her even asking him to. Said she could stay at the
Byers’ house over the weekend so someone would always be around and that when they go back to the cabin he’d bring Mike and the others up to visit whenever she wanted just so she never has to go into the Inbetween and Watch and that’s when she really knew that he was afraid for her.

The two days at the Byers’ were like a dream, even though she was sick- Joyce gave her soup and called her sweetheart and let her curl up next to her on the couch to watch TV even though she was supposed to stay in bed. Jonathan played her music because he knows that Steve goes up to the cabin and he can't let him poison her musical tastes (which means she's supposed to like Joy Division but is not supposed to like Journey.)

She saw Mike and Will for as long as she wanted as Will sat cross legged at the end of the bed she had accidentally stolen from him and drew her as part of the Party- a Mystic- wearing a robe (which is like a pretty dress but magic and he makes it blue like her Snowball dress without her even having to ask) and Mike sat between them and held her hand.

And when Hopper's day was over he went there instead of the cabin he read to her and Joyce would come in and do the girl voices and touch him so often she started to think Joyce might understand delightful and prepossessing and endearing ( Hopper) even though she's still sad about Bob. A hand on his shoulder or the length of an arm nudging against his or once an stray eyelash from his face that Joyce had told her blow away because they grant wishes and Hopper had faked being sulky about because they'd stolen his wish and he had been going to wish for a sugar cream pie. 

(He attempts to make one later that night. Everyone silently agrees that it's terrible and the best thing they've ever eaten because he's proud of it and wearing an apron.)

For two days it feels like having a family.

Which makes it even worse when it ends.

It’s been a nearly a week back at the cabin. A week of no more watching people. A week without the Inbetween. Just her work books and Tylenol for her fever and Eggos that suddenly taste like dust because she's eating them alone and All My Children because the Party has school during the day and Hopper is working until late because everyone is going Bughouse (which means going crazy because an Aboleth is in your head) and the compromise of bringing the Party up fades away into her being lonely again- even more than before because Dustin told her over the walkie that Steve couldn't go up or bring them all to the cabin because they made his father mad at him and he was stuck inside too until today and she's sad about it but also a little guilty-happy. Happy that she wasn't not the only one and guilty because they both know about how being alone all the time sucks.

And she could Watch if she wanted. No one could stop her but she tells herself that she listens to Hopper because he made a rule and they aren’t stupid and-

She’s afraid to go back.

The Aboleth had hurt her. She keeps coming back to that thought with a feeling like being angry and confused at the same time- indigent- she thinks is the word and writes it down to ask about later.

It wasn’t that nothing else ever hurt her- Dr. Brenner had made SECURITY hurt her when she was bad because he wanted to be the one that stopped them so she would be grateful. The Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer had tried to hurt her but mostly made her hurt herself- pushing her powers until she didn’t have anything left.

But she had let Brenner and the Bad Men hurt her because didn’t know how strong she was and that she didn't deserve to be hurt and when she realized that she could fight she had hurt them back.
She had hurt herself to protect Hopper and her friends because she loved them and would do anything for them.

But the Aboleth had hurt her because she couldn’t stop it.

Everyone had been screaming. Steve had been screaming because it had him and Mike and Dustin and Lucas had known that she could save him like they knew that 2+2 was 4 and gravity stuck people to the ground. They had called to her and she had tried and it had-

She didn't help. She couldn't kill it. It just grabbed her and wouldn't let go- left her floating in the darkness until she figured a way to break through.

On the TV Erica Kane's sister Silver thinks she murdered Kent Bogard and Erica has to run away to the Hollywood Hills like when she ran away to Chicago. El pulls her knees up under Hopper’s giant sweater and holds her ankles to make a tent and she has to will herself to pretend to care about Erica Kane's sister even though she would usually care a lot but her friends are in danger and she’s On The stupid Bench.

Sister.

Mike had told her about what they had found in the papers- said one of her sisters was gone and another had maybe met the Aboleth in The Bath and there had been papers about her until 1979 and then never again and she thinks it's because even though her sister had powers she hadn't had friends to hold tight to the thought of and help her struggle out of the Inbetween- hadn't had anyone but Brenner and Mother and the lab- so her sister had fed the monster and disappeared forever.

Eleven flips to a page at the back of her notebook- a secret page- just for her. Hop showed her how to write in lemon juice to make sure no one else would see and she traces a finger over where she knows the invisible words are.

_Six- Gone_

_Seven- Sets fires_

_Eight- Kali_

_Ten- Gone_

_Eleven- Jane Hopper_

Five sisters so far and Brenner killed two of them just so he could get what he wanted.

_There’s nothing to be frightened of. It’s reaching out to you. Because it wants you. It’s calling you. So don’t turn away from it this time. I want you to find it. Understand?_

That time in The Bath she had found the Demogorgon in the Inbetween but she thinks now that maybe Brenner had wanted her to find something else- a thing like him that could make you think the way that It wanted you to think and would hurt you when you didn’t. A thing that liked when you were afraid because afraid means stupid and easy to control. A thing that would eat everything you could ever be to satisfy It's own endless hunger without a second thought.

Never. Again. Not to her. Not to her friends.

She launches herself off the couch toward the TV -knows that she had promised Hopper not to because it was stupid and that she was On the Bench this time and because when she pulls the collar
of the sweater up over her eyes as a makeshift blindfold she knows that now that it had found her and bit her it could still be there- waiting to trap her Inbetween and it’s not impossible that Hopper will come back to her laying in the middle of the living room floor in front the TV and she won’t ever wake up this time and the thought is terrifying.

She reaches out- tunes the TV to static.

But she loves them. She would do anything for them.

The black expanse stretches out, wet and endless- she focuses on a single point and hopes that nothing is hunting in the darkness.

“She? Kali?”

“We have to do something- everyone is losing their minds.”

Nancy remembers first time the Upside Down had come to Hawkins as like being on the boat in Jaws. They were all in danger but only a few of them were stranded in the middle of it knowing exactly what they were facing in absolute enforced isolation.

The second time had been an invasion. The town still went ticking along - noticing the missing, putting up their flyers, concerned for missing dogs and missing cats and missing people but getting on with things in the way only small Midwestern towns could.

But now.

“He said not to come back?” Jonathan shuffles the papers on his lap for what feel like the hundredth time- as though if he does it often enough a page that they missed explaining the Aboleth and exactly how to kill it will appear like a magic trick.

“He’ll let us for this.”

Hawkins was sick, watching a tumor spread with absolute indifference.

A year ago Mrs. Torrence coming to class at 8 a.m. so drunk that she couldn’t stand-rambling about the end of the world up would have been the talk of the school. A year ago Carol sporting a barely covered black eye and bursting into tears in the middle of fifth period math would have been fodder for a wave of cruel schadenfreude as Hawkins’ least liked but longest-running couple disintegrated spectacularly. A year ago Billy Hargrove returning from jail after a fight that was rumored to be an attempted murder would have made him even more dangerously interesting. A year ago Sam Edgecomb going to Penhurst after trying to drown herself in the lake because she was convinced her dead brother Kyle told her to would have been the sort of story that would have kept Nicole busy for the rest of her life. A year ago people disappearing-

Well. That would have still been a thing. But people would have at least noticed.

But everyone goes on like everything’s completely normal. They ignore the sobs in the hallway and the screaming fights in cafeteria and empty seats in the classroom. They talk about their math tests and English papers and plan the next dance like everything is completely fine. The Hawkins Herald only mentions the sudden epidemic of people being found in strange places locked-in catatonic and rotting from the inside out in a shock piece about the horrors of drugs and by extension
the influx of quote-unquote ‘city people’ who bring them invading their otherwise perfect small town.

If the first time had felt like being stranded alone in the ocean, this time feels like being the only sane person in the lunatic asylum.

A sudden tap on the car window startles both of them, all too reminiscent of that day in the park when she had been certain that they were being driven to the labs to be disappeared, Steve’s warning from the library playing over and over in her head. Except this time it is Steve, sunglasses pushed down his nose, waiting expectantly as they blink at him. Finally he taps the window again, spins a finger lazily in the universal roll it down gesture like he’s already practicing for handing out speeding tickets.

“Steve,” Jonathan says slowly, rolling the window down to the precise amount of open that somehow manages not to be rude but discourages any further conversation, “We’re a little-”

“Yeah, I know. I want in.”

“What?”

“Whatever little investigation vacation you two are planning.” He says, leaning on his forearm against the roof, “I want in.”

“We’re not-” Jonathan starts but Steve’s mouth is already twisting skeptically downward, eyebrows raised as his gaze travels over Jonathan to her to see if she’s going to lie too. It’s not accusing, just mildly bemused, like he’ll leave them to it if she does.

She leans over, pops the lock on the back door with a sigh.

“Get in the car if you want to talk about this.”

The brightness of the grin that Steve aims at her as he thumps the door triumphantly before moving toward the back almost balances Jonathan’s wry uncertainty.

“Seriously?”

She shrugs, glancing back past the headrest as Steve folds himself into the back-seat, rubbing the chill out of his hands.

“Okay. What are you two planning.”

“Why are you so certain we’re planning something?”

“Oh, I dunno Byers. We found a bunch of shit from the labs but maybe you two skipped the last sixth period before break to sit in your car and look serious at each other.” He leans forward, head between them, one arm slung around each of their seats, “Not to mention the kids told their friend about the Aboleth, so you two are probably dying to tell whoever your guy is. Like, I get it, idiot Steve Harrington, but c’mon.”

“We don’t think that you’re an idiot-” She starts.

“Mostly.”

“Screw you, Byers.” Steve says reflexively but without malice, taping him on the shoulder with an extended middle finger.
“We thought you’d want to stay with the kids and... maybe you weren’t feeling up to it?” Jonathan says diplomatically because Steve can still smile and fake it- but he’s shivering on a unseasonably warm day in a warm car and the the miserable slump of his shoulders read abject exhaustion.

“The faster we figure out how to take this thing out the safer they’re gonna be. And yeah, I feel like shit, but that’s not going to change until it’s dead either, apparently. 'Physic drain' remember?” He glances from her to Jonathan, “Look, you guys don’t want me along that’s one thing but I’d like to see this thing through.”

"Okay- but if you're not staying in town everyone has to have as many sleep-overs as possible at our place." Steve looks quizzical as Jonathan elaborates with a shrug, "Mom has a shotgun."

"I mean, I don't hate it," And by his expression he definitely doesn't hate that him being around falls anywhere near 'Joyce Byers with a shotgun' on the Keeping the Kids Safe scale, "But I doubt a gun is going to do much against this thing-"

Jonathan gives her a sideways glance and while silence between the three of them usually manages to be uncannily comfortable this one is decidedly not.

"Uh-guys- what's happening?"

"Billy Hargrove was in my house yesterday." She says with a sigh and predictable results.

“*What ?*” Steve leans forward through the seats so far that he’s practically in their laps and she takes the opportunity to grab his arm and Jonathan puts a steadying hand on his chest to stop him from immediately jumping out of the car and doing something stupid. Even though she's reasonably certain that none of them are one hundred percent sure *what* he’d do if they let him there’s a definite general unspoken agreement between the three of them that he will do *something* and it will be *stupid* .

“It’s okay,” She says quickly, “*Everyone is okay.*”

“Like hell it’s okay -” He squawks.

“It’s the Aboleth-He thinks he’s going crazy.”

“You had an *extra crazy Billy Hargrove in your house ?*” His features are twisted with wide open concern and she's ready for it: the *why didn't you call me? Did you call Jonathan? I'm going to go find Hargrove right this second and get my head kicked in by him for you-* but the concern flickers-not entirely gone but it resolves itself into something new and she thinks that she's never loved him more than when the next words out of his mouth are a shaky but *trying*, "Okay, well, my afternoon is clear. Where do you want us to put the body?"

Steve wasn’t an idiot.

Maybe none of them were what they thought they were anymore.

Nancy had thought she was a romantic for so long- Nancy the romantic, Barb the practical one. She had filled her room with ballerinas and stuffed bears and soft, frilly things. Had fallen in love with a unattainable boy and gave herself to him with the knowledge that she would inevitably love him more than he loved her and he would break her heart, because that’s what he did and even though she was a romantic Nancy was never stupid-

Steve shakes off their hands, and settles back into the seat with scowl, “I knew this was gonna happen. Hop needs to hire someone besides incompetent assholes, swear to *god.*”
“I heard he was eyeing you,” Jonathan smiles crookedly, ”Then he can hire a competent asshole.”

“I’m going to focus on the fact that you just called me competent, thanks man,” Steve runs a hand through his hair, ”We have to get Max out of that house.”

"Mom is handling it."

-And then she had found out that absolutely nothing was how she thought it was, herself included. She could field strip a revolver and fight monsters and take down conspiracies. Her boy turned out to be the romantic and she broke his heart and she took Jonathan Byer’s virginity in Murray Bauman’s guest bedroom not because it was romantic, but because she liked him and she wanted to.

If she had been the romantic everyone had thought she was she might have agonized and despaired at the rising swell of affection that she can’t seem to shake or secretly tend to it until the banks burst and drowned all three of them and their strange friendship because a doomed love triangle had its own type of tragic romance.

But she isn't so she thinks that it’s A Problem- because she's with Jonathan and if she knows anything it’s that the grass isn’t greener on the other side- the other side is scorchd earth filled with monsters- and she knows that she was right last year and it isn't fair to only love someone when they’re throwing themselves at abominations with a baseball bat for you.

“So what’s the verdict, team? Roadtrip?”

But god, you want to when they finally trust you to throw yourself at abominations with them.

She’s looking at Steve. Jonathan is looking at her.

"You can come. But he’s probably not going to like it."

Scott Clarke believes in quite a lot of things.

He believes in ethical science, well researched and well presented. He believes in honesty and integrity, he believes in open publication of data, peer review, replication, and citation. He believes in any sort of intelligent design for exactly as long as it takes him to get off the phone with his mother so he doesn't upset her. He believes that there’s no such thing as a hopeless case and that when he fails to inspire a love of learning in a child it’s his failure not theirs. He believes that the bonds of friendship between his AV Club have the approximate tensile strength of graphene and are just as self repairing.

And now he has to believe in another dimension filled with predatory creatures (to say monster would be unfairly attributing human moral understanding to something which surely doesn’t have it-though he doesn’t begrudge the kids for calling them that, after everything they've been through) and that so much else of what else he believed was built on shakier than expected foundations.

They always say that students teach their teachers just as much as vice-versa but 'rewriting the known laws of physics' was a little excessive- even for Dustin.

But he also believes in the human mind’s extraordinary ability to adapt to extremes and simply get on with things as usual when faced with something that could and maybe should shut it down in animal terror and existential indecision.
That belief is why Scott Clarke is still sitting in his classroom at six in the afternoon on the last day before winter break grading 8th grade essays on Geology and the Fossil Record which he’s suddenly very glad was the topic because unlike a great many things he believed in he’s at least nominally sure that it’s still true.

Maxine Mayfield didn’t quite put the effort in and Mike Wheeler’s work has been suffering lately and he finds the impulse to add extra credit for fighting off creatures from another dimension in a storm drain as strong as it is absurd.

...He’ll give them an optional group project at the end of the semester- Dustin will probably jump at the chance to bump his A to and A+.

He reaches idly for his coffee mug (Think like a Proton! Stay Positive! ) without looking up from Chrisy Hargensen’s essay, even though the coffee’s been cold for hours. After all cold coffee is still coffee and since the Emergency Parent/Teacher/Police Officer Conference at the Byers’ house two days ago he’s found normally reliable sleep giving way to a racing mind and worry because apparently all that stands between them and possible destruction are a bunch of uncommonly bright teenagers, a girl with telekinesis-which, by the way, is absolutely real Scott. Enjoy never getting to publish anything on that- the Police Chief and Joyce Byers.

And him. Him too, now.

Good lord.

-Again another type of direct evidence comes from paleontology which is the study of fossils. The findings of paleontologists are important to earth sciences because fossils show the order that things appeared on earth and went extinct-

But one thing Scott Clarke doesn’t believe is that ignorance is bliss. Knowing might be terrifying, sure, but these are life’s trade-offs- you can't spend forever staring at the shadows on the cave wall no matter how familiar and comforting they might be.

-Because of meteors or because other animals took their place. There are many forms of fossil-

The Demogorgon. The Mind Flayer. The Aboleth. He admires how the kids can boil it down to basics and find context for the madness that they've been facing- part of him is even grateful for it because facing an Aboleth (CR 10, HP 135, Movement speed 10ft land 40ft swimming, still got it, Scott) is less terrifying than some nameless psionic thing from another dimension that can somehow manifest anywhere it wants and that you know absolutely nothing concrete about. Theoretically, with the tear that allowed the Demogorgon and Mind Flayer to travel between dimensions closed the thing should be beholden to the same laws of physics as the rest of them- no more dancing around the bottom of the tight rope- but if what the kids were saying was true-

-Furthermore, all animals with backbones pass through a stage of development in which they have gill clefts. These fossils show that animals are descended from organisms that lived in water. In conclusion-

His groping fingers miss the handle and he knocks the mug off the desk with a clatter. He scrambles after it like he can reverse the spill if he gets to it fast enough, straightens up to scout out some paper towels and-

-Gasps, reflexively brings up hand to cover his mouth as he drops the mug again.

This time it shatters.
When he was a freshman at Amherst his roommate had had these awful sleep paralysis episodes every semester around finals, like clockwork. Bill had refused to talk about it- he had insisted that the condition was hosted in the mind of an individual and that it could reproduce itself and jump from one person to another once you knew about it. He had tried to explain to him that memetics were a pseudoscience and his nightmares were a simple matter of different sleep states overlapping- caused by increased stress and ill-advised final’s-based amphetamine binges- because you couldn’t catch ideas.

He thinks now perhaps he has to rethink that because he learned about the Aboleth two days ago and now Greg Wilkes is standing in the back of his classroom, dripping water onto his floor.

Fight or flight get a lot of publicity when it comes to involuntary fear responses. Freeze less so.

Scott freezes because when facing something like this the other two seem like they’d be ineffective and he does the first thing that comes to mind- he squeezes his eyes shut and tells himself with absolute certainty that he’s doing it because he has a theory about the nature of the creature that is exactly thirty seconds old and not because it’s the closest thing he can do to hiding under his blanket because the thing that’s under the bed is out from under the bed and staring.

[Put your hands over your ears and you’re gonna l o o k like those monkeys, Scott. Speak no evil s e e no evil-]

Greg’s voice is closer than it should have possibly been because Scott is incredibly aware of sound right now and there were no footsteps on linoleum, no increasingly close dripping, no rustle of a soaked parka.

[what are you doing? let the sunshine in.]

“You’re not real.” He says into his hand- hyperventilating through his nose as his brain tries to get enough oxygen to handle this situation while fighting against the millions of years of evolution telling him in no uncertain terms that you want to see the thing that's about to attack you- not just stand frozen in in self-inflicted darkness as it circles.

[I’m not r e a l enough for you Scott? Do you need a dissertation prospectus? Double b l i n d tests and studies and-]

“You have a physical form and that is not in my classroom,” He hopes. Oh Jesus Christ, he hopes. “And y-you aren’t physical but you have some way to hijack the sensory regions of the brain- make people see things that bring them to you- that's what you did to Greg-”

[I am Greg, Scott-]

“No, Greg is dead. I went to his funeral,” He holds onto that thought as the thing in the darkness in front of his eyelids moves, pacing, hungry. He went to Greg’s funeral, he comforted his widow, he watched his children cry. These were things that had happened. Fact. “But he saw something - take a look- that’s what was on the heathkit- and Steven said - when you attacked him he saw-”

[You’re gonna trust some teenage shithead to know anything, Scott?] The Aboleth’s voice has a Doppler effect, like it’s unraveling across the room [B e t y o u r l i f e?]

It’s touching him- what feels like a human hand on his shoulder even as the voice seems to be somewhere back by the supply closet. Physical sensory input is no less controlled by perception than any other- it’s touching him- god- something is touching him.

“You violate the principle of locality but that would only work if you existed in - oh, shit.” Its hands
are on his eyes, like a child playing peekaboo and he half expects it to pry them open or shove its fingers into them.

[language, Scott.] It scolds cheerfully, [l o o k. If you don’t open your e y e s how will you know what’s b e h i n d y o u]

The impulse to look is so strong, so absurdly strong- not least of all because he knows that even though the voice is by the window now and the sensation of hands touching him is coming from in front of him, that some aspect of it is actually behind him. Knows it with the same evolutionary fail-safe that still lets humans know when someone is looking at them too hard from across a crowd. Prey instinct.

[Aren’t you c u r i o u s? Can’t leave that door shut. ]

“- theoretically you- you- could exist in a state of quantum superposition and need t-to be observed in order to-” The hands disappear and-

-He’s looking at an empty classroom-florescent light and desks and class projects on the radiator and posters the kids made about organism classifications and evolutionary history pinned to the cork board and Randall the Taxidermied Raccoon and the ceramic remains of his mug and splattered coffee and no sign of Greg Wilkes- absolutely none at all- and everything is so perfect and normal that the relief is like a physical blow.

If he had been a less rational man maybe he would have slumped into his desk chair, blinking as reality settled back into place like a comfortable blanket.

But he was very rational and while the classroom looked perfect there was still one problem-he had never actually opened his eyes.

The thing’s frustration feels tangible, its rage overwhelming, its desire to harm him absolutely horrifying in its intensity as he experiences what he could only describe as the psionic impressions of creature from another world’s temper tantrum as the feeling of something waiting and watching starts to fade.

[You’re a real prick aren’t you, Scott? ] Greg’s voice is right beside his ear as he tries to convince his brain- which is incredibly certain that his eyes are open and he’s looking at his classroom and it’s absolutely okay to blink- that they are in fact not open and really desperately need to stay that way regardless of what it thinks it's seeing, [ No one likes a know it all. now open your fucking eyes and l o o k]

The projection of his classroom disappears as quickly as it appeared- leaving him with blackness and the vague impression of the things that float in the human eye and the Aboleth’s voice in his ear.

[ if you won't l o o k y o u should come back d o w n to the quarry s c o t t bring the k i d s bet you s o m e t h i n g ’s biting]

There’s nothing after that. He just stands stock still, breath hitching, eyes screwed up tight in the darkness behind his eyelids and a silence he doesn’t trust.

When he finally opens them it’s 7:15 and Scott Clarke believes in monsters.

The school payphones feel like they're an eternity away and his legs are unsteady- but he makes it there- shoves his dime in the slot with shaking fingers.

“Hello?”
His lets his head rest on the cold metal of the phone, balls one hand into a fist that he presses against his forehead like he can force the fear out through brute strength and the other grips the phone cord like a drowning man grips a lifeline.

“Hi- Jen- No- everything is fine. I'm not- I just wanted to hear your voice. It’s- fine- yeah. Nothing's wrong, I promise.... It's been a strange week. That's all.”

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage
I uh- think we've looked behind enough curiosity doors today, kids.
“The world, although well-lighted with fluorescents and incandescent bulbs and neon, is still full of odd dark corners and unsettling nooks and crannies.”

— Stephen King, Firestarter

“It's better to face madness with a plan than to sit still and let it take you in pieces.”

— Josh Malerman, Bird Box

Sesser, IL

February, 1985

“Hey, third kid. Camera.”

“What?”

“Look up at the camera.”

“Should I say cheese?”

It had been hard to leave Hawkins- and you can toss that one right in the ‘incredibly unlikely sentences for anyone to ever say’ file but it was true. Two years back he would have just thrown some shit in a bag, left a note that usually remained totally unread saying that he was going to an away-game in Rockford or wherever the hell else and was definitely not testing out fake-IDs with Tommy and Carol in Indianapolis or Fort Wayne and gone. This time it was finding Henderson trying to stowaway in his car (which they weren’t even taking, since apparently if you don’t want to be noticed a beater Ford is a better spy car than a BMW and who cares that it looks like it can barely make it to Maple Street let alone Illinois) then it was trying to explain to Dustin that he absolutely wasn’t coming with them no matter what face he made at him and then it was Dustin explaining to him that he had to come because they didn’t know how far from Hawkins the Aboleth could affect people or what would happen if he got out of range and he didn’t trust them to properly document it in case Steve’s head exploded like in Scanners or something (“Unlikely but not impossible, Steve!”) -which fucking great, thanks for that Dustin- but then the kid looked legitimately concerned about the possibility of his head exploding, which was...nice?

And then it had been actually saying goodbye to the little dork and leaving which was the part that had taken a while because the list of shit they weren't allowed to do without him had reached two pages before he balled it up and had to explain that it was anything. They weren't allowed to do anything.

And then the dipshit had hugged him and he'd had to explain the list again, more emphatically.

It was only going to be like, two days tops- they’d all be fine. Everyone was gonna be fine. Except him if his head exploded.
Which maybe wouldn’t have been so bad because while no one would ever accuse Steve Harrington of excessive foresight even he should have realized that a road trip with Byers and Nancy meant hours in a car with Byers and Nancy and no one was acting like it was weird but-well, Henderson-unstoppable nerd encyclopedia that he was had told him about a thing called the observer effect where just looking at stuff makes it change and it had been somewhere around Watseka that he started to wonder what the two of them had been like the first time they made this trip and how they would have been this time if he wasn’t third-wheeling them because lunches and chats in the hallway and running for their lives away from monsters together was one thing- nearly four hours trapped in a car with the girl he was in love with and her boyfriend as the two of them studiously avoid doing anything more affectionate than share the same bottle of pop was another.

And it's going to be another four hours back.

*You wanted a place at the grown up table so bad, Harrington, deal with it.*

Sounds like whoever is on the other side of the door is making their way through a dozen different locks as the cur-chunk of deadbolts and rattle of chains being slid away fill the silence. The others seem singularly unconcerned by all of this.

He’s not sure what he was expecting when Nancy and Jonathan had mentioned they had a significant-pause friend who was also ‘an expert’; a scientist from the lab, maybe, or a rogue government agent. Someone clued in to the insanity. Another adult who knew what was going on-like Hop but with more firepower.

Definitely not a bearded, middle-aged man in a ratty, half-open bathrobe and slippers.

“Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers.” The man smirks at them, “And the Harrington kid? Well, well.”

Doesn’t quite know what to make of the fact that the man already knows who he is but it seems like the guy doesn’t expect him to actually respond- just glances over at Nancy whose expression has gone a little crooked and Jonathan who is looking especially stoic as Steve leans past him to shake the man’s hand.

“Oh, yeah. I’m Steve, Steve Harrington, hi. Nice to meet you.”

“Thought I told you two to stay away?”

-And is oh-so-pointedly ignored. Okay. Fine.

He lets the hand drop.

“You did,” Nancy goes digging through her bag and he figures she’s looking for the files- turns out she’s looking for a bottle of Stoli that Ted Wheeler probably won’t realize is missing until sometime in 1988, “For your travels?”

“Fine. *Fine*. But you were never here.”

The man ushers them inside and honest to god does the looking both ways out the door thing like he has a paranoid nutcase checklist to get through before shutting it and going back through the locks.

...And the way Steve figures it things have gotten pretty badly out of hand and it’s time to bust out that map of Rock Bottom again when sitting sandwiched between his ex-girlfriend and her boyfriend on a stained couch in front of a wall of TVs in a obviously crazy person’s living room while said crazy person hands him a moldy water-glass half-full of what appears to be straight vodka is not
even a contender for top five strangest things that have happened to him lately.

The man squints at them behind his glasses and settles himself on the couch across from them, leaning forward, fingers steepled. “Alright, I’m sitting down. What have you got for me this time, Nancy Drew? Hardy Boys?”

“It’s sort of—”

“I mean it’s-complicated—”

He cuts through the other two, ‘cause it’s been a long month and his head is pounding (but definitely not going to explode) and unlike them he’s gotten a lot of practice lately not caring how stupid he sounds talking about all the absolutely insane shit they have to deal with.

“Look man, have you ever heard of some kind of... Thought vampires or rewriting people's brains?”

"You mean psychic driving.” The guy says without missing a beat, which is weird because he honestly hadn't expected 'thought vampires' to get much beyond a blank stare and questioned sanity- definitely not a the man making a beeline for his bookshelves, "You came all the way out here for that? Give me something hard next time."

“Psychic driving ? Like- with cars?”

Nancy and Jonathan look at him. Murray looks at Nancy.

"Like with cars ? Is this kid for real?” The man seems curiously delighted, like they must have found him under a rock and there's something about the ironic, knowing, half-pitying look that Murray shoots Nance-that, well, he's pretty used to the whole 'Steve is an idiot' thing- hell, he hangs out with Dustin and those nerds way too much not to be used to it- but this time it makes him absolutely burn with embarrassment.

Murray tugs an unmarked but ragged black binder that looks absolutely no different from a half-dozen other unmarked but ragged binders out from a shelf but seems to be the one the man’s looking for, “Here you go, gang. The declassified MKUltra files up until when it 'ended' in 1973,"

The man tosses some air quotes around that 'ended' then licks a thumb and starts flipping through mimeographed pages before turning to him, "Sorry, they never declassified a Little Golden Book version."

"I can read, thanks."

"What you're looking for is...ah, here we go. Subproject 68.” He spins the binder toward them, grinning, "Physic driving experiments. Started by Donald Ewan Cameron and continued by your very own Dr. Martin Brenner in the 60's during his time with Project Artichoke ." The man leans back, crossing his legs and laying his interlaced hands against his white wife-beater "So let's say you want to change someone's undesirable behavior, right? Anxiety, depression, post partum- hell, nicotine or alcohol addiction- first you get them in some kind of sensory deprivation- that's-”

“We know about it,” The man raises an eyebrow and Nancy just shrugs casually, “We built a sensory deprivation tank in the middle school gym two years ago.”

“With your extracurriculars I’m not even surprised. Gold star sticker for Nancy Wheeler-head of the class, as always . They didn’t use a tank until later- at the beginning they’d restrain them, pump them full of sodium amytol, give them an IV and put a blacked out football helmet and some headphones on their heads for a couple of weeks- or months if you were really unlucky or resisted- while playing
tape loops of repetitive statements—‘I will stop smoking’ or ‘I hate my mother’ or ‘kill the president’
that sort of thing—they called it *depatterning*”

He never pinpointed exactly when but sometime between the demogorgon and the tunnels Steve’d
acquired the nervous habit of biting his nails down to the quick—which is why they only leave little
purple crescents instead of blood when he drives them hard into his palm.

These fucking people.

Months. Months of nothing but being alone with your thoughts in absolute blackness until you just...
*run out of them* so it’ll be convenient for a bunch of scientist dickheads to *replace* them with
something else. He shouldn’t even be surprised after what they did to El, what they probably did to
whoever the rest of One through Ten were, and what they did to their town and Bill Martin—he
should just be sitting here looking serious and interested like Nance but he’s digging his nails into his
palm and trying not to think about it because his ability to imagine terrible things has gotten pretty
impressive over the last two years but he honestly can’t imagine anything worse than being trapped
alone in the dark.

“Unsurprisingly it actually drove people batshit insane—some of them came out the other side
basically catatonic. Guess you could argue that it worked since they weren’t in any state afterward to
be drinking anymore.” The man takes a illustrative sip of his vodka, ends it with a long satisfied
aaaaahhh, “Now why do you want to know about psychic driving? C’mon- Velma- Shaggy-
Scooby-what did you bring me? I gave you a DOE-free Hawkins for Christmas and I didn't get
anything from you in the mail for Hanukkah. Hand it over.”

“We salvaged these from the Hawkins lab.” Nancy slides the Subject Six folder across the coffee
table and Murray pounces on it with a grin, “We need any information that can point us in the right
direction. Any direction.”

“You just *found* this? O-ho-ho-hoo- *Someone* forgot their burn-bag at home. OpSec is gonna be
*pissed*.” The man leans forward to start rifling through the files but stops and glances at him over his
glasses, “I’m probably gonna regret this but go find a record, *Steve*. I’ve got some reading to do.”

Fuck it. Better than sitting here.

The albums are leaning precariously against the bookcase and he figures that this is likely just an
excuse to give him more shit when he inevitably chooses wrong but he starts to carefully shuffle
through them. It’s all oldies—big shocker there—doubts Murray or, hell, Jonathan for that matter
would have let him choose if there was the slightest chance of something he’d actually *want* to listen
to being in the stacks but he manages to dig out a record he recognizes at least and tosses it on the
turntable.

- *Why does the sun go on shining?*
*Why does the sea rush to shore?*
*Don't they know it's the end of the world-*

Murray makes a considering sound from the couch but doesn’t look up from the papers.

“Julie London. Interesting choice.”

“My mom used to like it.” More like weaponize it. He still has a vivid memory of his dad walking
into the house just to hear the strains of *The End of the World* coming from the record player and
turning on his heel and walking out again to get a hotel room because that meant that mom had found
out about the Secretary of the Week and had decided that it was going to be *An Issue*.
“Sorry about him,” Nancy has separated herself from the couch and Murray and Jonathan and drifted up beside him, placing a gentle hand on the crook of his elbow and looking sheepish, “He means well.”

She stops, brow furrowing.

"We think .”

“Yeah, no, sorry- I’m pretty sure I like the nerd’s expert friend better- even if he did give me a C-,” That makes her smile a small, wonderful smile as she turns the record cover over to read the liner notes and he chalks it down to muscle-memory and vodka when he leans in too close, lips grazing the shell of her ear, “I still say the baking soda volcano is a classic.”

They freeze together and separate like school kids caught passing notes as she puts the record sleeve back on the pile and heads back to her boyfriend on the couch.

Fuck.

Julie London continues to sing as he trails behind Nancy and if Jonathan saw he doesn't mention it or seem to notice when he perches on the arm of the couch as far away from Nance as possible.

“All right I got it.” Murray snaps his fingers and sits up as the three of them wait expectantly for revelations about mind-wiping experiments and MK Ultra and psychic children, “Abandonment issues. Your old man was never around, right? Real ‘Cats in the Cradle’ situation- complete with the silver spoon.”

“Excuse me ?” He starts to stand but the man is just smirking at him as Nancy tugs him back onto the sofa between them by the hem of his shirt.

“He does that to everyone,” She says quickly, like that makes it okay that this fucking guy feels like he has any right to- god- he’s had enough of things trying to get into his head uninvited, “And he’s not going to anymore, right?”

“Not even going to ask if I got that one,” The man grins, obviously unfazed, “Let me guess- you’re in your rebellious ‘I’m never going to be like him’ stage- right before you put on a suit and take an internship at daddy’s Pharmaceuticopia.”

"Screw you , man. At least I’m not a weirdo wearing a bathrobe and pounding vodka with teenagers at three in the afternoon."

" Ouch." The man deadpans and he’s back to talking to Nancy instead of him,"Are we sure we like Steve?"

“Stop it, Murray,” Nancy says sharply enough that he’s actually kinda surprised that it’s on his behalf and he’s extra surprised when Jonathan- who stays out of everything that isn’t life threatening- chimes in with an equally annoyed- “Seriously, leave him alone.”

The man pauses then laughs a delighted laugh.

“Oh. Oh! We do! We like Steve.” He taps the side of his nose conspiratorially, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not judging - I lived through the 70’s- not like I haven’t been to a couple of key parties in my day.”

He's not sure what the hell that's supposed to mean but Nancy takes a gulp of vodka.
“Now your mom she-”

The man freezes, brows furrowing as he starts flipping pages in the Subject Six folder and the binder simultaneously.

“My mom what, Sherlock Asshole? Finish your sentence-”

But the man has decided that he’s surplus to requirements again as he focuses on the papers and his fingers drum a rapid tattoo on the coffee table.

“Oh. This is good. This is too good,” Murray’s knee is jittering up and down, expression going from serious to gleefully maniacal as he looks up at the three of them, “Do you know why this is too good? Don’t answer- you don’t. Among the myriad other evils of the MKUltra program you can chalk up a pretty significant lack of diversity in workplace hiring, especially in directorial positions. Not a lot of women that weren’t secretarial in ‘77 is what I’m saying.”

“Six called the Doctor mother.” Murray actually grins at him and thumps a hand down on a black and white group picture pasted into the binder- about a hundred men standing on bleachers at what looked like an air force base smiling cheerfully in 1950’s suits.

A hundred men and three women. Murray taps his finger on the one in the back.


Because of course.

“Great. We have actual Nazis now.”

Byers gives him a Look.

“Wunderkind just means she was young. Seriously Steve, not all Germans are Nazis.”

Murray clears his throat, “Actually you can give him that one, that’s what Paperclip was. Free pass for war criminals provided they were willing to work for the good old U.S. of A.”

Byers mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like ‘he didn’t know that’ which - okay- he didn’t but he feels like ‘Germans that do mad science are definitely Nazis’ is one of those things you can just assume.

“She worked on Project Bluebird which then transitioned into Artichoke- thesis statement: Can we get control of an individual to the point where he will do our bidding against his will and even against fundamental laws of nature, such as self-preservation? Sound familiar? And who else do we know that was part of Artichoke?”

“Brenner.” Jonathan says quietly glancing at Nancy with that eerie side-eyed look that always makes him think the two of them are operating on some other level than the rest of the world- like the kids and their mundane telepathy, “She worked on psychic driving with him?”

“Better believe it,” Murray is rifling through pages again with an intensity that banishes the ‘goofy conspiracy crank’ in favor of ‘probably competent private eye’, “ The Times did a piece about the Boys From Brazil crowd that were still kicking around. I wanted the byline on it- for obvious reasons- but we couldn’t prove anything concrete about Roethe being Paperclip rather than a refugee and her lawyers threatened a libel suit if we ran with it- that was when she was working out near Tucson. Lost track of her after that but it looks like Brenner had some staff loyalty when MKUltra ‘shutdown’ and set her up in his own little pet project.”
“We have to find a way to get access to the lab’s personnel records,” Nancy’s a bullet in the barrel now, waiting for a target, “Find out if she died when the Upside Down came through and if not we have to find her-”

“Oh, finding her is totally impossible,” Murray says, topping off their glasses with vodka, “Unless you check the teacher registry at McMannis University in Windsor up in Ontario. Then you can get her office hours. She’s been working there since ‘79.”

“You’re shitting me. The mind-wiping Nazi Doctor is a professor?”

“I shit you not, Steve, I shit you not.”

“If we drive in shifts we can make it there by tomorrow afternoon,” He takes some slight satisfaction in the fact that it’s Murray that’s invisible now as Nancy turns to the two of them- bullet aimed and fired, as terrifyingly determined as she is unstoppable.

“We already did five hours today,” Hopefully a little stoppable, “I don’t know about you two but if we do ten more hours in one go I’m gonna crash the car.”

“Seconded.”

Murray’s grinning that shit-stirring grin at them again, “If you want to stay here again and get a fresh start in the morning I’m sure you three could figure out who gets the bed and who gets the-”

“No.” Nancy and Jonathan say together so quickly that it’s a little unsettling just as he says, “Again?”

“Oops,” Murray’s eyes go wide behind his glasses and he brings his hand up to his mouth in a way that couldn’t be less sincere as Nancy glares furious daggers, “Should I not have mentioned that?”

They had come back a couple- that much had been obvious- everyone had been distracted by setting up for an exorcism and discussing closing a giant portal to a hell dimension and getting ready to be eaten by demodogs and it was still obvious. Actually breaking up had been a formality of exchanging stuff they’d left at each other’s places and him pretending to be completely okay with it all.

But while he had been hunting down Dustin’s monster dog the two of them had been- right.

It’s okay. He had said it was okay and it is. They’d basically broken up that day behind the gym. Basically. And he’s not going to think about how things could have been different if she had been home to get the flowers he brought her instead of hooking up with Byers in a weird old guy’s bunker.

Nancy is looking at him with apologetic concern, bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“It’s fine,” He shrugs his most noncommittal shrug because it is fine and he’s king of pretending not to care and also not getting a rise out of him might piss off Murray, “I mean, romantic atmosphere like this, who wouldn’t?”

“Hm.” Murray hums a little evaluating hum to himself and seems to decide on something, “Hold on. I have something for you.”

Jonathan and Nancy exchange a concerned glance which can’t be good and he half expects the manilla folder the guy slaps into his chest to have spy pictures of the two of them together in it-which would honestly serve Jonathan right but he might actually die from the irony.
It’s not- thank god- it looks like-

“What’s this?”

“A reminder,” The man says cryptically, “Page three.”

It’s a police report. Witness testimony.

“This is from when Barb disappeared.” Nancy’s reading his ‘gift’ over his shoulder, “How did you get this?”

‘Steve’s a friend, you know? You don’t want to even think that sort of shit about a friend. It’s not like Holland was his type so no way were they screwing or something. But yeah- him and Wheeler had been shaking the walls and Holland was just hanging around- jealous, I guess? Carol and I saw him go downstairs at ten thirty and she was gone when we left. I mean, you guys don’t think he could have done it, right?’

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to, Nancy.”

‘Yeah. I mean, Barb Holland didn’t want Nancy going with him- everyone knew she was a dyke, y’know? Maybe they fought about her? Tommy and I were in his parent’s room and we saw him go downstairs at ten thirty. I checked the clock because I had a curfew and my mom would have killed me if I had been out past midnight. I thought it was weird that he was going outside so late but- he must have had a reason, right? You guys don’t think Steve would have-’

He can just picture Carol making big, innocent eyes, twirling gum around a finger.

Those fucking assholes.

“Steve never left his room.” Nance sounds furious on his behalf but he just hands the folder back and wonders vaguely if the two of them had tried to get him suspected for murdering Barb to make sure Tommy wouldn’t be or if they just thought getting him arrested would be funny. The former would make sense but knowing the two of them he suspects its the later.

God, it was from before they even fought.

“People you can trust are hard to find. Hell, impossible to find.” Murray actually sounds sincere as he takes them in over the top of his glasses, “But the three of you seem to have a good thing going on- don’t screw it up with petty bullshit.”

And just this once it seems like he means all of them- not just that it’s going to be him who inevitably screws everything up with petty bullshit.

“And now- get out of my house.”

“Thank you Murray~” Nancy says, slipping into her coat but the man is shaking his head, one hand catching her elbow.

“Don’t thank me, Nancy Drew. Just do that voodoo that you two do so well~” He pauses, gaze going narrow behind his glasses as he scans the three of them, “And I don’t want you to get the wrong idea that I like you or anything- but watch your asses. Stay in public. She might not look like much but she’s been doing this for a long time- and not just dishing out feel-goods to the army so they could mind-control goats like Owens’ crew was doing before Hawkins. This lady is serious.”

“She’s a college professor and she’s gotta be what- in her 60’s? I think we can handle it~”
And this total asshole snaps his fingers rapidly right in front of his nose and he’s done with this shit so he bats the hand away and ‘what the fuck is your problem with me’ is on the tip of his tongue—

“Be. Careful.”

“Jesus. Okay, fine, man.”

“I’d say don’t come back but that’s obviously pointless,” The man doesn’t even need to look as he goes through the process of undoing the locks and swings the door open, ushering them outside with an exaggerated swing of his arm, “Bring bourbon next time- I’m working on expanding my bar.”

“Bye Mur.” Nancy starts but the door swings shut in their faces with a definitive clang.

Hawkins, Indiana

February, 1985

“-God gave Noah the rainbow sign- no more water- fire next time. But it looks like it’s gonna be water again, folks. That never-ending blow my brains out, seasonal affective disorder freaking kill me now weather-front has met a lake-effect rainstorm and when two storms love each other very much you get the storm of the century. Hope someone out there is building an arc. Over to Kent in the ironically named Sunshine chopper-”

Doc Owens kills his engine in the dirt driveway of The Byers house and stares.

In the year that Sam had worked in Hawkins he’d never actually been in the place that served as host to so many B-Site incursions that half a dozen of his people had started suggesting ‘accidentally’ burning it down and buying Joyce Byers a nice split level with various degrees of seriousness. Sure, he had enough documentation of the place that he could walk in and find Joyce Byers keys for her but he’d never seen it in person. Not a lot of house calls in his line of work after all and once the Portal got the size of the Flat Iron building he hadn’t really had time to make social ones.

There was an idea. Just toss in the ol’ lab coat. Become kindly country physician Doc Owens—treating kid’s stomach aches with cans of Coke and pulling hooks out of drunk fishermen—because kindly ol’ Doc Owens would never have to have this sorta conversation.

The Chief’s car is already there, parked crookedly on the lawn with the kid’s bikes scattered in front of it because ‘Adults Only Meeting’ obviously holds absolutely no sway when Jane Hopper is free from the cabin for a night, and Joyce Byers’ car is pulled off to the side to make room for him and—somewhat concerningly—a completely unfamiliar white Camry

Hm.

They’re obviously not the sort to let cars pull up to the house unnoticed because the Chief is already waiting on the porch.

Well, here goes nothing.

“Doc.”

“Chief-o! Where’s the little lady?”
The man jerks his head toward the door, “Thanks for coming, Doc. Fair warning, she’s not happy about this.”

Oh. Wonderful. Subject Eleven: Capable of Telekinesis, remote viewing, telepathy, psychometry, limited technopathy, and crushing your brain in your skull when she’s unhappy about things.

“Well. Let’s see what we can do, huh?”

The living room is ugly in a way the pictures conveyed but warm in a way they didn’t and for once there aren’t any christmas lights or map drawings- just a pile of kids on the couch attempting to ensure Jane that everything was totally fine - which was appreciated- and Joyce Byers smoking out the window and...

“Okay, who the hell is that?”

The guy with the mustache extends a friendly hand, “Hi. Scott Clarke I’m-

- Expendable. Need the names of the people that have Subject Eleven. C Budget will cover any added clean up - send D expense report - B -

“The science teacher,” The man’s smile goes a little crooked in surprise that he knows him but he still shakes his hand, “Okay, so now I have some questions.”

Hopper snorts a half-laugh, “Yeah. No kidding. The kids decided we needed an expert opinion. Is it going to be a problem?”

Is it going to be a problem? Nah. Just tell everyone. Put it in the paper.

“I mean, now we have to kill him,” The room goes still and Clarke’s eyes go wide exactly as Sam realizes that joke might not have been well timed, “Kidding. Not a problem for me. You on the other hand- oh boy, will we have some paperwork for you. Hope you like hand-cramps.”

"I grade papers all day," The man smiles and shakes his hand in a way that makes it extremely clear that whatever else he knows about what's going on he has no idea that Connie Frazier was one wrong answer away from making him a terribly sad death by home-invasion, “I think I can handle them.”

He should have brought his stress ball.

Subject Eleven- Jane- is in the middle of the kid pile on the couch, looking like brain-crushing is right up on the table and clutching Mike Wheeler’s hand so hard his knuckles are white.

Not like he can blame her for not liking doctors.

The day that he had taken over from Brenner he had been given a folder on the Subjects- what they’d done to them, what had eventually become of all of them. That had been...a rough day at the office, no mistake, because while Sam wasn’t an idiot- progress always came at a price and you don’t get into CIA Black-Ops thinking it was the Red Cross- he also drew the line at the at Brenner’s particular brand of abundant mistakes. The fact that those mistakes had been paid for by little girls doubly so. The fact that a tiny, horrific, part of him had been incredibly impressed by the results was why he drank a bottle of bourbon that night.

He should say sorry but in an infinite universe there’s no amount of ‘I’m sorry’ that fits the bill for what had been done to her. Wants to ask forgiveness but knows none of them deserve it, so he just says-
“Hey there, Jane, I’m Sam. Heard you weren’t feeling too hot?”

The girl glares at him and tightens her grip on Mike to the point that she might be breaking his hand.

Jim comes in with the assist, “Sam is the one that got you your birth certificate. He’s here to help.”

“You made me Jane Hopper?” Her voice is quiet and serious.

“Nah, you made you Jane Hopper- with a little help from the Chief over there, I just got the paperwork in order,” The glare softens slightly and that ready-to-strike posture relaxes just enough that he’s pretty sure turning his brain into soup isn’t a priority, “Best kinda family is the one you choose yourself. Looks like you picked a good one.”

“The best one.” The girl agrees as he tugs a completely unnecessary stethoscope out of his bag. Unnecessary because he’s going to ask them what happened and they’re going to tell him exactly what he expects to hear and this night is going to get a whole lot worse for everyone, himself included.

“So- Jane, Pops, team,” He listens to the girl’s heart beat, “What happened, exactly?”

They tell him. It’s not exactly what he expects to hear. It’s worse.

“The fever isn’t going away,” Jim Hopper sounds calm but his jaw is tight and his hands twist helplessly in the pockets of his uniform, “Is she going to be alright?”

“It’s primary encephalitis.” He says because he already knows and sits back on his haunches, “It’s one of the early symptoms of limited exposure to this thing. Bed rest. Advil for the swelling. Lots of water. No, uh, mental strain.”

Jim Hopper had a daughter who died young- he’s only seen it reduced to medical records and detailed analysis in a psych profile before- but now it’s right there in the man’s stormy expression, because the man knows a weasley non-answer to that question when he hears it.

He clears his throat.

“You said another kid saw it in the storm drain?”

“Yeah! Steve.” Dustin Henderson pipes up from his spot on the couch, “Just for like, a second because Will-”

He’s almost afraid to ask.

“Where’s he now?”

“Checking out colleges with Nancy and Jonathan,” Joyce’s tone couldn’t make it more clear that not a single person in the room believes it, but she shrugs a slightly helpless shrug and gestures with her cigarette towards the kids on the couch, “That’s their story and they’re sticking to it.”

Hell. At least the boy’s alive. And this time he won’t end up on the evening news with the Teenage Super-Sleuths out of the picture.

“So you know what this thing is, then?” The science teacher’s smiling a wide, open smile at him like he just knew that he could trust the good folks at the Hawkins National Lab to have insight, “I have to tell you, that’s a relief. I had some theories-”

“I know of it. Brenner’s people made contact with it in 1979. It uh- caused a bit of a stir around the
place.”

*Five murders by the time Brenner finally pulled the plug on the tank and Subject Six. Two deadly self-mutilations. Three catatonic with their bodies rotting around them. Twenty three sick or temporarily insane. The lab had trapped them in Quarantine with it and let it run wild.*

And it had been on the other side then before the gate opened. Now it’s here.

“So how do we kill it?” Lucas Sinclair pipes up, too cheerful by three-and-a-quarter.

“*We don’t, Lucas, not this time.**” The Chief’s stormy expression has resolved itself into something to rival the weather front heading toward them, “They do.”

The teacher nods an approving nod and Joyce practically *sags* in relief.

“Yes, yes,” She jabs a finger at him, voice fierce like that day she took them to task in the boardroom, “Finally. You people unleashed this thing on our town— *you* take care of it.”

“You can’t just call in the Empire! We can handle this!” Dustin Henderson protests, glancing at the rest of the under-fifteen crowd for support and getting only the tepid shrugs of kids who’d rather not die fighting a monster on their winter break.

“Believe me, I don’t like it either,” Hopper settles against the wall, “But this is bigger than us. Call your men in Doc. Call the damn army. Keep these kids and Jane out of it and let them sort this thing out.”

Well. Fuck.

“Alright,” He says slowly, “I need everyone who can’t walk into a bar and order a martini out of the room.”

There’s a complete lack of motion, except maybe a contrary settling in and narrowing of eyes from the little group of kids.

“Huh, lax bartenders in this town,” The smile is getting strained, he knows it, “You really... *they* really shouldn’t hear this.”

“My son shouldn’t have been taken,” Joyce Byers says, “*They* shouldn’t have had to fight your monsters for you. *They* shouldn’t have had to fix your lab’s mistakes. Whatever you have to say, say it.”

The smile is gone.

“I can’t call anyone,” He sighs, closes his eyes tight again the tension behind them and presses his hand between them “You don’t *want* me to call anyone. There’s no cavalry coming.”

“That’s bullshit,” Mike Wheeler straightens up with a scowl, “What, are they *busy*?”

Fuck, they're young. They’re so young.

He wants badly that they get the chance to get old.

Hopper’s looking at him hard.

“*Why.*” It somehow manages to be a statement rather than a question.
“My superiors believe that this thing or the uh, the Mind-Flayer - being on this side of the gate instead of just being temporarily channeled is incompatible with the continuation of the project, can’t have them falling into the wrong hands.”

“He means the Russians.” Max Mayfield says, definitively.

“Who are the right hands?” Joyce mutters, hugging her elbows.

“Good ol’ Uncle Sam, of course.” He spreads his hands wide, like he’s about to do a magic trick. *Nothing up my sleeve, watch me make a town disappear,* “Not that we have the means to contain them, so, it’s a simple Anatta order. That way no one gets them and our world doesn’t end up looking like B-si...the Upside-Down.”

“An Anatta order?” Scott Clarke isn’t smiling anymore so he’s pretty sure the man is working his way to the meat of it with impressive speed.

“Quarantine and eradication.”

There’s blinking, confused silence. Hopper understands immediately though, because Jim Hopper is a cynical bastard that learned first hand that however willing you think the government is to callously throw away life they can still surprise you and throwaway more and the man’s hand is hovering too close to his gun for comfort.

Sam Owens takes a pull from his beer, just in case it’s his last.

“Wait,” The teacher murmurs, something going a bit wrong in his expression as some certainty about The Way Things Are inevitably crumbles, “You don’t just mean the monster.”

He nods.

“Three mile radius.”

The room explodes into chaos.

“*Everyone -*”

“Over my dead body-”

“That’s thousands of people-”

“I told you. I TOLD YOU ! You don’t call the Empire for help! It’s gonna be just like Alderaan-”

“Stop talking about Star Wars, Dustin!”

“The kids- there are hundreds of children-”

“*How?*” It’s amazing because Jim isn’t even particularly loud when he says it and it still manages to cut straight through everyone else.


Jane is shaking her head.

“No one. Is hurting. My friends.”
He doesn’t ask what she’ll do to stop them, expression couldn’t say a preemptive ‘whatever I have to’ any louder or clearer.

Hopper lays an arresting hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah. He’s not going to. Are you Doc?”

Sam Owens. Savior of thousands or the putz that dooms the world.

“I’m not. But like I said, we’re on our own on this one. My people even get a whiff of what’s happening here it’s gonna be say goodnight, Gracie.”

“No,” Maxine Mayfield hisses, “There’s no we. We can’t trust him. Why wouldn’t he tell them?”

Lucas wraps an arm tighter around her, “Max- why would he tell us?”

“Alright Miss. Mayfield, fair question. Let me tell you a story,” He spreads his hands wide, “Once upon a time-”

“Are you serious right now-”

“Once upon a time there was a man who sat at a watch-post all day long. It was a boring job most of the time, gotta say, but this man had a phone in front of him and his only task was to watch the screens and pick up that phone if he thought missiles were incoming. It wasn’t gonna save the world-once that button got pushed the world was already fucked- uh, excuse my language, kids- but his call would mean we’d all die with payback. So one day, what does the man see but five nuclear warheads incoming- well, his job is to pick up that phone and tell the man on the other end to send some back. Wham, bam, welcome to the apocalypse. But this man, he does the the most powerful thing a man can do- he thinks about it. Decides the whole thing just doesn’t make sense and he’s not going to pick up that phone until he’s a hundred percent certain, damn the consequences.”

“What happened?”

“We’re still here, aren’t we? Turns out it was a system glitch.”

“Uh...That guy-?” Lucas asks, shifting nervously. “Whose side was he on?”

“Does it matter?”

“So,” Will says uncertainly, “You thought about it?”

“Yeah, kiddo. That’s what I did,” He sighs, “Now, if I was good at my job I'd say well, few thousand people against a tiny chance of avoiding a possible apocalyptic event- good deal at twice the price. But I'm clearly not good at my job and I’m not gambling thousands of people on a distant chance.”

He scans the silent, contemplative faces. Kids. Most of them are kids. God, what the hell is he doing.

“So,” Everyone startles when he claps, rubs his hands like they’re about to start work on putting together a dresser, “I hope a plan is coming together.”

Hopper takes charge of the first part of the plan.
Which, as it turns out, is getting three beers deep with Sam Owens on Joyce’s porch, listening to Bill Wilson loud enough that the kids won’t over hear them if- who is he kidding, when - they start pressing their ears to the door.

Because they still need to talk.

“What's the real reason, Doc?”

“Real reason?” The man looks at him sideways, expression as canny as it is hard to read, “Not wanting to kill people isn't enough reason? Real high opinion of me you got there, Chief.”

“Nah, low opinion would be that you'd actually let the world die for one small town in Indiana if you thought the alternative would work.”

“That’s pretty ruthless calculus,” He let's out a low considering hum around the mouth of his beer bottle, then blows across it like he's in a jug band, “You were in ‘Nam, right?”

“You've read my file, you know I was.”

“I wouldn’t ever have a conversation if I didn’t ask questions that I already know from people's files.” The man seems to see the ‘and this is why no one wants to socialize with CIA special ops in his features so he just waves a hand like he’s clearing smoke, “Alright, yes, I know all about Huế. We can pretend that was rhetorical if it makes you feel better. Point is you know all about how many bodies some people are willing pile up to win a battle, even if you lose the war.”

“So you think we're bound to lose against these things?”

“I think,” He says carefully, “That we'll lose a helluva lot faster if we wipe this town off the map.”

“Why?”

“You mean besides the fact that you people apparently have the toughest, smartest thirteen year olds in America? You've been to the Upside Down, Chief, really been there. What's it look like to you?”

“Looks like shit.” He shrugs, because there’s not exactly an eloquent way to describe the place, “Like a- oh.”

“Like a bomb went off, right?” Owens says, peeling the label off of his beer, “Pet theory of mine. What if we’ve done this before? What if whatever people or hell, the us that used to be in that place already made that call to try to stop these things and it didn't work?”

“They come from there, though.”

Owens folds the beer label, accordions it carefully into eleven folds and holds it up.

“No, they come from somewhere . I know you weren’t really playing Eye-Spy while you were down there but there are fundamental differences between some of the man-made things here and some of the things there that I have no fucking clue how to explain. So maybe- just maybe- it’s not just...our flip side- like a coin. What if we’re here,” He points to a fold in the middle of the label accordion, “And the Upside Down is here.” He points to the fold below theirs, then runs his finger up the others below it, ruffling them, “And it’s already gone through here, here and here. Each one get’s its turn being Right-Side-Up as it’s Dimensional Sub-Basement floods, so to speak.”

The man collapses the bottom folds, scrunching them tight against Real Them.
“I think if we make that call, wipe out everything just to try to shut ourselves off from that place all it’s gonna do is crack it open like an egg. And in a little while some Will Byers from the next Right-Side-Up is going to get lost right where we’re sitting now.”

There’s silence except for the record player and Doc Owens takes a deep pull from his beer.

“I’m simplifying, of course-“

“Oh. Of course,” Jesus Christ, “This really just a theory?”

“Just a theory, Chief,” The man gives him a humorless smile, “But I have it on good authority that dropping bombs on places generally gets you giant monsters attacking the city, not vice versa.”

They drink in silence for a while after that.

“Do you have kids, Doc? A family?”

The other man smiles slightly, shakes his head, “Ah, no. Bachelor. Why?”

“I don’t know what happened to the us all in those other dimensions- what we did or didn’t do, or how many this shit has chewed through but I’m telling you right now, it stops here, in this one, because nothing and no one is hurting Jane or those kids.”

Above them the skies open up, sheets of rain pounding down as that big ol’ Storm of the Century hits Hawkins head on.

“Cheers to that, Pops. Cheers to that.”

Nancy Wheeler was going crazy.

It was the Aboleth, it had to be, because there just wasn’t any other explanation for why she would bring Steve Harrington on this trip besides a mind-altering monster from the Upside Down. There was no possible way she had actually thought that bringing him to Murray Bauman’s house and sitting on the man’s stupid pull out couch fifteen feet from the guest bedroom wouldn’t be the single worst idea anyone’s ever had since whoever decided opening gates to another dimension in their town was a good one.

And there was no possible way that she had actually thought the three of them spending uninterrupted hours together in a car was going to go well because Steve was as good at being patient on long road trips as Mike when he was eleven years old and also desperate for a smoke that Jonathan wouldn’t let him have in his car, and Jonathan wouldn’t stop snapping pictures of him at awkward times until Steve threatened to turn the car around in the most dad-ly voice she’d ever heard, and the two of them bickered endlessly about if the driver or shotgun had final say on the radio until Jonathan finally had enough and said that if Steve stopped his tape and tuned it to WIOG one more time he’d turn the car around and they’d leave him at Murray’s for the weekend because no one was listening to Top 100 Hits in his car.

And there was definitely no sane explanation for why she was enjoying it so it had to be mind-control. It was the only logical explanation for why stepping out of the car into a cold motel parking lot just outside of Detroit after seven hours on the road didn’t feel like a relief.
“Look, it was just a feeling—”

“Yeah, we were being followed by two dozen completely different cars. That’s called ‘driving’ Jonathan.” Steve mutters crankily, pulling a desperately and long-awaited cigarette out of his pack and fumbling with his lighter. He doesn’t stick around to get the room with them—just shoves his credit card into Jonathan’s hand and makes a beeline for the bank of vending machines and payphones around the side of the motel.

She’s a little glad for that—because well, there’s nothing suspicious about the place or the woman at the front desk with the chain on her glasses and a knowing expression that would rival Murray’s when they ask for a room with two beds.

But they check for bugs anyway and she’s not sure Steve would understand.

Paranoia’s a ritual for the two of them now, nerve wracking and calming at the same time. They scan crowds to see if anyone is staring too intently for it to be passing interest. They play games with the faces—dark, half-joking rounds of Spot the Government Operative. She tells Jonatan that the man with the horn rims is a spy, his briefcase is secretly handcuffed to him, and he has a note that says *tamám shud* in his jacket pocket. He tells her that the lady in the practical flats is FBI, you can tell because no one really leaves the grocery store with a baguette and carrot tops sticking out of their bag. She tells him that the little girl with the pigtails is actually a dwarf and a Russian assassin.

She wins that round.

And they check new places for bugs, just in case someone, somewhere is one step ahead of them.

They try to laugh about it because the reality is too frightening and crushingly huge to bear. It’s probably not healthy but at least it’s a measure, maybe an illusion, of control.

Steve comes in after they’re nearly finished, looking a little less stressed with a forgotten Newport tucked behind his ear, a pack of chips and a Cherry Mash.

“How are the kids?”

“How did you know—?” He starts to say like there was the slightest chance he just couldn’t decide on what candy to get and hadn’t obviously just spent the last forty minutes talking to Dustin with their usual mix of brotherly affection and mild verbal abuse, then shrugs, “Plotting, probably—apparently there’s some big news they can’t mention over the phone— but everyone’s safe. Seems like those little douchebags are the only people in town this thing doesn’t give a shit about.”

“My mom.” Jonathan says with quiet relief, “She hasn’t seen it yet.”

“Wait-really? It hasn’t gone after Joyce?”

“Yeah.” It’s not quite a glare that Jonathan shoots at Steve, but close to it and a terrible part of her is glad that Steve is the one who said it, because Joyce Byers is a great many things—fiercely protective, frantically neurotic, effortlessly supportive— one thing she certainly isn’t is free from fears— and for a thing that exploits them to ignore her completely is strange, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Steve says quickly, hands up defensively as he sidles toward the bed, “Just that it’s not messing with the nerds that stop a monster every year and your mom’s basically the Terminator when your brother is in danger so this thing might be even smarter than we thought.”

His Pentax is across the room but she takes a mental snapshot of the look on Jonathan’s face because it’s a perfect illustration that it’s been a long, strange trip from a ‘family screw ups’ and a fist fight in
“Huh. The beds vibrate. Classy establishment.” Steve doesn’t even take his shoes off, just flops bonelessly onto the sagging mattress, knees bent and feet still on the floor.

“We could have always crashed with Murray-”

“It’s the Ritz. I love it.” He raises his head, just enough that they can see his grin, reaches up to tap on the Magic Fingers box near the headboard, “Anyone have a quarter?”

She flicks him on the knee as she walks past to the bed stand, goes back to opening drawers, unscrewing the lightbulbs and checking under the lamp, and Jonathan is already dragging the chair away from the little round table by the window using it to climb up to the light fixture and check that too.

“You guys ever think you might be a little too-”

“No.” They answer together, fast enough that Steve winces slightly from the force of it.

Steve just watches them, seems torn between helping and some vague idea that this is something that They Do and he eventually settles for making himself useful by attempting to get a signal besides rolling snow on the shitty old Zenith Chromacolor that the motel manager hadn’t felt the need to update when the new decade rolled around.

The bug hunt turns up nothing, confirming the not totally unexpected outcome that the owner of some random motel in Michigan is not in fact, tied to to any Anti-Soviet CIA mind-control programs.

And after that they realize that they have absolutely nothing to do.

The stillness reminds her how much the three of them rely on motion. They need the forward momentum that hurdles them along without the time to think- the kids sweeping them along with them, the terrifying presence of extra-dimensional monsters. It’s strange things that tether them together and in the mundane silence of a hotel room with a broken TV set and ugly patterned carpet they’re adrift- out of context- and the easy friendship that develops when they’re doing something completely insane starts to crack a little. They suddenly become her boyfriend and her ex, orbiting her out of habit, wary of each other.

She tugs her book from her bag, lies on her stomach, one leg swinging idly and feels a bit like a traitor as she occupies herself, leaves the two of them at a loss-

‘Youth is like having a big plate of candy. Sentimentalists think they want to be in the pure, simple state they were in before they ate the candy. They don’t. They just want the fun of eating it all over again. The matron doesn't want to repeat her childhood—she wants to repeat her honeymoon. I don’t want to repeat my innocence. I want the pleasure of losing it again-’

-and tries to ignore Jonathan looking at her like she just dropped the last lifeboat off the Titanic without him in it and Steve glancing back over his shoulder with open disbelief, finally giving up on his attempt to convince the rabbit-ears to turn the static into signal.

“Nance.” He says carefully, like she might have gone dangerously insane, “What are you doing?”

“I have reading for Mrs. Torrance’s class.”

The two boys share a glance; equally disbelieving, equally wry. Just this once they seem to be mirror images of each other, looking amused and laddish because they’ve spotted a common enemy in the
form of This Side of Paradise and if there’s anything that the two of them do well together it’s work to take down their enemies.

“Reading?” Steve says slowly.

“It’s what all those books they give us are for, Steve.”

“Now?” Jonathan smirks, eyebrows raised curiously, “You’re doing homework, now?”

“On the way to question an ex-CIA researcher about a mind-stealing monster from our town’s hell dimension?”

“A mind stealing monster that’s trying to eat Steve.”

Steve turns to Jonathan sharply, expression going crooked.

“Seriously, man-?”

“I’m supposed to finish it by the end of break and I don’t get extensions for Upside Down monsters.” She should, she really should, “So unless you two have something better to do-?”

She waits expectantly, watches Steve scan the room for any possibilities, Broken TV is a no. Beds- his gaze flickers over those with particular speed because anything you do in beds is out for obvious reasons, a crummy radio. They can’t be hungover tomorrow so no beer run.

‘-all lands of sad, haunting music and many odors, where lust could be a mode and expression of life, where the shades of night skies and sunsets would seem to reflect only moods of passion: the colors of lips and poppies.’

“I-Uh.” Jonathan mumbles, sitting down to dig through his bag, before tugging out a suspicious hand-rolled cigarette, “I brought weed. Figured we should smoke it before we cross the border? If you guys want to?”

They get high.

And as usual they’re total opposites.

Steve is taking up as much space on as many levels as he can, stretched out like a luxuriating cat, half on the bed and half-off, careless and boneless like he had left his skeleton at the Indiana-Michigan state line and talkative about anything, everything. When they say something that pleases him he smiles at both of them with a sort of unguarded reassuring affection that excludes everything else in the world. When it overwhelms them, stutters their conversation to a stop with the need to smile back he asks What? like he’s got something on his face, baffled but still grinning

Jonathan is quiet, watchful. Not too different than normal Jonathan except the way he watches. Usually he watches people like an embedded war photographer, not dispassionate about events but inherently separate from them. It had made the way he looked at her, like she was something real and close and not on the other side of some invisible lens feel special. Now though, he’s there with both of them.

And her?
"You're handling it really well for a first time." Jonathan’s a little glassy eyed as she hands the joint up to him, “I mean-It doesn’t affect some people until after a couple-”

“I’ve smoked before.” She says simply, “After the gate.”

Both boys look up at each other and are surprised out of mellowness by the fact that both of them are equally confused- obviously expecting the other to have done it. She takes advantage and reaches up to pluck the joint out from Jonathan’s lips, using her position between them to pass it over to Steve who takes a distracted pull before handing it back to her.

Round and round and round it goes.

“Everyone else is thirteen,” Steve says eyebrows furrowing like he’s ready to go back to Hawkins tonight and have a Drugs Are Bad conversation with Mike and his friends while stoned off his ass, “Who the hell-”

“My mom.” Jonathan says with a resigned sigh.

She nods.

“And Hop. After we got back from the hospital.”

Steve nearly falls completely off the bed.

“You smoked for the first time with the chief of police ?”

She had his blood on her. That’s what had started it. After Will and the exorcism and the lab and and the demodogs and the race to the ER and cleaning herself up she had found his blood under her thumbnail and that was it- everything came down like dominos falling. She couldn’t breathe and Joyce, who wasn’t doing much better, sons safe but boyfriend dead, had given her a paper bag to breathe into and then lit a joint for the two of them once the air finally came back and the tears stopped.

Hop had joined them on the porch without comment. Simply sat down next to her as she watched him, wide-eyed and unsure if he was going to yell at her, before he motioned for her to pass it on.

“After that night I would have smoked with the demogorgon.”

They smoke in silence for a while, until Steve looks up, obviously holding a laugh back behind his teeth.

“Hey, Byers, who gave you this weed?”

Jonathan sits up just long enough to whip a pillow across the room at him.

‘ This is WIOG - rockin’ the signal from Saginaw all the way to London- Ontario , that is. Coming at you with the all the Hits on 106-’”

-Come out Virginia, don't let me wait
You Catholic girls start much too late-

“Dance with me.” She grins, grabbing Jonathan by the wrists, trying to drag his willfully dead weight off of the bed as he groans, “C’mon .”

“Billy Joel, Nancy? Really ?”
“Shut up, Jonathan, dance with me.”

Steve takes advantage of Jonathan’s predicament, leaning backward off his bed, long torso spanning half the space between them, one arm holding him up, the other outstretched for the joint.

“Don’t make him, Nance.” He says, looking at her upside-down, hair dangling but somehow staying mostly in place, “The Music Police will show up at his place and confiscate all his Frank Zappa albums and his copy of Three Of A Perfect Pair.”

“That’s true.” Jonathan says with exaggerated misery, leaning over to meet Steve halfway, nearly losing his balance but making the pass without falling on his face. Steve somehow sit-ups himself back up onto his bed, even though all the laws of physics seem against him.

“Fine. Steve will dance with me.” She hears herself say because she’s apparently lost her mind in the last thirty seconds.

“No, Steve will not.” Steve says without looking at her because he hasn’t lost his, punctuating it by gesturing expansively with the joint, leaving a trail of skunky smoke behind.

“You’re both the worst.”

She sits herself down on the floor between the two of them as they go back to passing the joint back and forth in companionable silence.

-You might have heard I run with a dangerous crowd
  We ain't too pretty, we ain't too proud
  We might be laughing a bit too loud
  But that never hurt no one -

“You’re not, you know?” Jonathan startles them by being the one to break it, intense if slightly foggy gaze leveled at Steve.

“The worst?”

“No, you’re kind of the worst,” Steve looks like he might be tempted to wing a pillow back at him but pulls a face and shrugs a conceding shrug that he might in fact be at least kind of the worst- at least by Jonathan’s standards, “Turning into your dad, I mean. Murray was wrong.”

Steve tries to look casual but pulls on the joint too hard and fast- chokes a little on smoke and passes it over to her as he tries to recover from a hacking cough.

“Yeah?” He wheezes as casually as he can manage, “How’d you figure?”

“You care about people,” Jonathan’s gaze travels between them and the category of ‘people’ seems to shrink down to specifically the occupants of one crappy motel room in Wayne County before he looks away, “You care about the kids.”

“Yeah. Little shits grow on you, I guess- like fungus.” Steve somehow manages to do a phenomenal impression of someone that didn’t call Dustin to check in the minute Jonathan put the parking brake on, “You’re- I mean- you’re not like Lonnie either...at all, for what it’s worth.”

By the look on Jonathan’s face it’s worth a lot and as far as moments of emotionally honesty go it’s not much but it’s something- at least until Steve ruins it.

“Nancy’s totally turning into Ted though.”
“Oh, definitely.” Steve and Jonathan ruin it- together - and it occurs to her that she may have absolutely terrible taste in boys.

-I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints
The sinners are much more fun-

“Stop it .”

“Just her and a La-Z Boy, watching the game.”

“Oh my god .”

“Sleeping during the game, you mean.” Jonathan says mildly and there’s a rare lightness in his voice. It’s not the cautious defensive humor or wry sarcasm that he usually falls into around Steve- it’s a type of comfortable that she thought only belonged to her and Joyce and Will but it’s there and it’s strangely natural- like someone putting on an old, worn in pair of shoes that they had forgotten they had but were glad to see again.

Hawkins is a small town- the kind that was basically made for kids playing tag in cul-de-sacs and running wild in the woods. The kind where everyone was friends once before breaking apart as the social wheat separated from the chaff and and she knows through vague childhood memory and two equally embarrassed and shifty confessions that the two of them maybe, sort of , kinda used to hang out as kids...when no one else was around, of course.

Steve grins a singularly uncool goofy grin back at Jonathan.

“Nah, she’s just resting her eyes."

-Darling only the good die young
Only the good die young-

“I’ll kill you both. No one will ever know. We’re in Detroit .” Her head thumps against the bed stand and-

The radio bursts into static.

The reaction is immediate.

She’s up and scrambling away from it just as Jonathan reaches down and hauls her onto the bed beside him and Steve tosses himself away so fast that his back hits the Magic Fingers box and knocks it out of the wall.

The static and their breathing is the only sound as they wait for the awful little jingle to start. At first she thinks that it’s gotten even worse somehow and decided to make them wait for it- string them along before showing itself- until Jonathan, suddenly braver than any of them, slowly reaches past her and adjusts the radio antenna.

-You know that only the good die young
You know that only the good die young-

Holy. Shit.

She brings her hands up to stifle nervous laughter as Jonathan clears his throat, looking sheepish.

“You jostled it,” He mutters half-annoyed, half-relieved, “But good to know we’re all afraid of
radios now—that’s just—”

He trails off because Steve is still pressed against the far wall, looking past them not at them and certainly not laughing because he’s breathing through his nose and his chest is hitching like he just ran a mile.

It’s here. He heard it and they didn’t. He’s looking at it.

It’s a small room and she’s across it between breaths, tossing herself onto his bed and trying to turn his face toward her so he doesn’t see it and maybe she can break whatever awful fucking fake memory he’s trapped in and-

Jonathan is kneeling on the bed beside them, expression strangely calm.

“‘It’s okay,’” He says- absurdly -because there’s a monster and she still doesn’t know what sort of nightmare it made the two of them see but if it was anything like hers it certainly wasn’t okay , “It’s going to pass in a second. Breathe.”

When Steve shakes his head it’s almost imperceptible but it’s there - he’s not completely spaced out like the two of them were in the lab when she couldn’t wake them up but he’s still sucking air like he’s drowning, “I can’t—”

“If you can talk you can breathe,” Jonathan brings Steve’s hand up to his own chest, lays it splayed just under his collar bone and breathes deep, “With me, okay? In- out- that’s good- look, you breathe with me and you can play Billy Ocean the rest of the way to Windsor.”

“Fuck... you, Byers.”

Jonathan smiles, “See, you can breathe. In- out—”

The terrified far away look resolves itself into shaky normalcy and Steve relaxes ever so slightly in her arms, breathing fast but heavily and she doesn’t want to even say the thing’s name...or at least the name her nerd brother gave it...so she just catches Jonathan’s eye and keeps rubbing a hand up and down Steve’s back.

“It wasn’t—?”

“Just a panic attack,” Jonathan’s voice is low and slow because he’s still taking deep breaths, Steve’s hand pressed against his chest- or at least it is until he says that, because Steve startles like he burned him.

“I wasn’t panicking.” There’s something desperate and brittle in his voice and the last time she heard him sound like this the demogorgon had just broken through Jonathan’s ceiling , “It was just this...stupid monster bullshit.” He shoves the other boy’s hand away and Jonathan reels back on his haunches, back catching against the night-stand, “Get off of me, Byers .”

“Jesus.” The easy childhood camaraderie of less than a minute ago disappears in an instant and suddenly she’s between King Steve and Creepy Jonathan Byers as the two of them fall backward into old habits, “What’s your problem? It was a panic attack. My brother gets them too and my mom sometimes—”

“Yeah? Well, guess what- I’m not thirteen and I’m not—” Crazy hangs in the air between them and maybe it wasn’t that long since family of screw-ups. He doesn’t say it though and looks ashamed for even thinking it, “Your mom and I don’t panic- I’m fine.”
He might not have said it but Jonathan heard it, loud and clear, his mouth pressing into a thin line.

“Yeah. You looked fine.”

It should have been obvious in the car but it had been so long since she had last seen Dead-End-Cul-De-Sac Everything is Normal Steve that she hadn’t recognized his reappearance but here he was again- a variation on a theme.

*If everything else had to be crazy he couldn’t afford to be. He was fine.*

“What do you-” The fear has rearranged itself into shaky indigence, “What do you know, anyway Byers? I’ve fought these things and you- what? What do you *do* besides get knocked on your ass and hide behind everyone else?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means the first time you couldn't protect Nancy for, like, twenty seconds and the second time I had a bat and Nancy had a rifle and Mike was ready to take out a demodog with a fucking candlestick. Where were you, exactly?”

The two boys stare at each other in heavy, furious silence.

“Fine,” Jonathan concedes with an exhausted shrug, “*Fine*, Steve. You weren’t having a panic attack and you have the bigger baseball bat and you’re not scared of anything. Congratulations.”

“Steve-”

He won’t push her away but his voice is hard and he twists out of her arms, “Look, you can get off of me too, Nancy. I’m not your responsibility anymore.”

“My responsibility -? Steve, we’re friends .”

“Are we?” He asks mouth twisting into a miserable frown- awfully reminiscent of that day behind the gym, “ ‘Cause I feel like a friend would have warned me that the first stop of the trip was gonna be where they cheated on me with their new boyfriend and some asshole was going to throw it in my face.”

“I didn't think-”

“It’s *fine* Nancy,” It’s so not fine that it’s painful, “It put things in perspective. You waited for Byers for two months and I got, what? A whole day and a half?”

It’s not as biting as it could have been- not *Nancy the Slut Wheeler* this time, just sad and frustrated and uncertain if he would have given *himself* more than a day and half. He runs a hand through his hair and she wants to reassure him- say it *wasn’t* like that but he must see in her eyes that well- it pretty much *was* because he just sighs as she drifts back to Jonathan, “Sorry. Look. This was a mistake. After we talk to Roethe I’m going to get a bus back to Hawkins.”

“Don’t” Jonathan starts.

“What? Split the party?” Steve flops bonelessly onto his back, staring determinedly at the ceiling, “We’re not the Party. We’re not *a* party. Three’s a *crowd .*”

There’s apparently nothing more to be said after that because he turns onto his side and when she gets back from brushing her teeth he’s sleeping, or at least pretending to so he doesn’t have to watch
her curl up beside an unusually stiff Jonathan.

Knows when he really is asleep when the familiar, frightened noises start.

She wonders, as Jonathan’s breathing slows to sleeping if in the dark she’ll be able to tell who’s whimper is whose.

Fuck you, Murray.

Shared trauma is bullshit.

Jonathan watches people.

Growing up he’d never thought of it as a talent - more of a defense mechanism than anything else. If you watch you know that Davey Arthur is coming before he dumps your books, that Tommy Halloran brought eggs earmarked for you to school and is showing them off to Steve Harrington, that Ray Drayton and his friends are prowling the halls like a pack of wolves looking for the weak, the sick and the weird to pick off and if you’re quiet and unobtrusive and if you watch and listen you might get away, if you watch you know exactly how many beers disappear from the fridge even when Lonnie hides the empties.

Now though, well, it’s useful in different ways.

It was amazing what you hear when you aren’t talking.

“You should kill two birds with one stone, Nance,” Steve whispers in that nonsensical way that seems to come naturally in quiet and unfamiliar places as the three of them walk down the nondescript, orange-carpeted, florescent-lit hall way of the McMannis School for Psychiatric Medicine, ”Grab an application.”

You hear Steve Harrington pretending that everything is back to normal and that last night never happened even after he surreptitiously snatched a bus schedule from the motel office. You’ve spent months hearing him bashing himself bloody between the rocks of social expectation and his love for Nancy.

“I think I’m alright, thanks.”

You hear Nancy sinking her teeth into their friendship with all the unstoppable tenacity that she applies to everything she decides is hers to save. You can hear the selfish, inexpert rebel that ignores that Steve barely knows which way is up while she experiments with just how far she’s willing to push the three of them in her quest to never be her parents.

You wouldn’t hear Jonathan- their quiet, watchful audience- not because he has no opinion on the matter- mostly because he’s afraid of what that opinion would be.

(Two little kids. Suddenly Steve- not Steven-Steve- even though he’s been Steven for years, is age nine- cheeks red and warm with sunburn and Jonathan, run for Flat Rock creek like twin comets even though the increasingly complex rules Jonathan makes for their game are becoming trivial and Steve entertains himself by breaking them. For instance, intentionally landing on the same rock as him and dumping both of them in the water. Jonathan is wet, soaked through his jeans, sitting crankily on the creek bed as Steve grins and flops into the water beside him like he's making snow
angels, because Steve has lots of clothes and his jeans don't have to last 'till Monday.

Steve sits back up, sopping wet, and seems to realize that he's annoyed. He decides to fix it - in typical Steve fashion- by annoying him further, wrapping his soaked arms around his head and shoulders and planting a kiss- mwah, smacko- right on his lips just like Bugs Bunny, before splashing water at him and he splashes back and both are a soaking mess of silt and leaves when they go home and when Steve slings an arm around his shoulders he says that he's bright red and has a sunburn too even though one never materializes. )

“C’mon, you know you’re like, thirty seconds away from doing an expose on how they have an ex-Nazi ex-CIA mad-scientist working for them. This is like Christmas for you.”

Nancy only makes a small, conceding hum at that, stopping short at the door with the plaque labeling it the office of Dr. A. Roethe.

“Uh, do we knock?” Steve asks, hovering uncertainty behind them, “Do spies knock?”

Spies apparently do knock, or at least Nancy does, rapping quickly on the wood.

“Come in.”

The older woman behind the desk barely looks up, just shoots a quick glance at them over her thick coke-bottle glasses.

“Karen Hawkins, I take it, have a seat, your friends must stand,” Her voice is clipped and still slightly accented, “I got your message. As I told you- I’m afraid my classes this semester are closed. I am not sure why you insisted on-”

“I was hoping you could recommend someone else?” Nancy says quickly and both he and Steve recoil in surprise when she reaches into her bag and places her revolver primly on her lap, “I’ve heard good things about Dr. Brenner?”

The woman looks up then-inhaling a deep, almost disappointed sounding sigh.

“Either CIA assassins are getting younger or I’m getting very old.”

It’s not the reaction any of them were expecting but Nancy does a solid job of looking unfazed.

“We’re not- we just need some answers.”

“Teenagers from Hawkins, Indiana, looking for answers. I take it you are Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler?” Nancy does a less solid job at looking unfazed at that, however, and he can only imagine his own face, “You I do not know, who are you, boy?”

He manages to slap a warning hand onto Steve’s shoulder before the other boy actually just introduces himself out of pure habit and the woman laughs a high, nasty little laugh.

“Charming. Just charming,” she deadpans, “Alright. You have guns and questions and my office hours are almost over, what would you like to know about Brenner? I’m afraid I’ve signed quite a lot of non-disclosure paperwork.”

“We don’t need to know about Brenner. We need to know about Subject Six.”

The woman’s stiff bravado seems to fall away a little, “Subject Six? Why?”

“Because of the thing that attacked her. In Brenner’s sensory deprivation tank.”
There’s a moment where her face goes so dark that Jonathan thinks she’s going to stand up and throw them out—gun or no gun—but she just sits back, expression twisting in bleak commiseration.

“The Intelligence. I always knew that bastard would find it. He never could leave well enough alone—Brenner was a brilliant man...perhaps...” There’s something strange about the way she says that perhaps and he’s not certain if she means that perhaps he was brilliant or perhaps he was a man, “But a fool in his own way. The man with a hammer to which everything looks like a nail.”

She sighs, pauses and looks hopeful, “I don’t suppose a cigarette would be possible, my cruel young captors?”

Nancy is the one to dig one out, puts it in her own mouth and lights it before passing it to the woman who drags from it and blows the smoke through her nostrils like a dragon.

“Ah, much better. Thank you. Inherently flawed. That is what he called my Six. As though his little pet idiot’s remote viewing and telekinesis was all that—”

Steve reaches over, plucks the cigarette from her fingers and grinds it out on her desk blotter next to the ashtray with deliberate malice.

He’s starting to think that it actually would kill Steve to think before he acts—like it’s some secret that only the other boy knows that taking five seconds to think and hairspray are incompatible and mixing the two leads to spontaneous human combustion.

The woman raises an eyebrow, obviously intrigued.

“I meant no offense.”

Nancy leans in quickly, laying on the big-eyed innocent curiosity thick to change the subject.

“So he tried to get Six to...project? Is that it?”

“That damned tank.” The woman sighs, “A hammer, as I said. We were making progress through electrical signals slowly expanding her range, but no, she must travel. As though being a spirit of the air was not enough. Radio broadcasts, computer interference—”

“Bill Martin.”

“Who? Ah, one of the Deltas—yes, exactly. Rewriting brain waves directly! Why spy when one could simply walk into a room and...change minds?” He feels a little sick at her grin, “But no, it was taking too long, the process kept failing. As though Rome were built in a day. He decided to try her in his damned tank.”

“That's where she met the Ab- uh, Intelligence?”

“Yes. We thought it was the soviets at first, of course. Some counter-intelligence agent. Subject Eight reported seeing it first, but felt no ill effects—said she argued with it—which, honestly was hardly surprising considering Subject Eights’ particular personality quirks. Six— the second time she encountered it...she came back quite different.”

“Look,” Steve says slowly, “You’re obviously a mad scientist and all but it at least seems like you sorta gave a shit about her and we’re fighting against the same thing that ate her so if you can—”

“You are not fighting Intelligence 00001, I assure you.”
“Uh. Monster from a shitty hell dimension? Eats thoughts? Yeah we are.”

“Oh, ho. To be a young man and know everything.” The woman grins again, “Walk with me,”

The woman stands- proving exactly how little she was concerned about Nancy shooting her for making any wrong moves and pushes past them out of her office door- sensible shoes clicking a sharp tattoo on the linoleum and making them rush to follow.

“She’s talking too much.” Nancy says simply, mouth pursed, eyes so focused on the woman’s back that it looks like she’s trying to burn a hole through it.

“Sorry. What?” Steve hisses, looking baffled, “You wanted her to talk. That’s why we’re threatening a grandma with a fucking .38.”

“She’s talking too much.” He whispers and sighs when Steve spreads his hands helplessly, “Like she’s not worried about us being around long enough to tell anyone, Steve.”

“Oh.”

The hallway has people in it- not many- but a few burly orderlies, a nurse pushing a cart of medication that Roethe greets with a cheerful evening Marcy, a couple of medical students, huddled around a cork-board that freeze a little as Roethe goes by.

The woman stops at a nondescript door that also happens to be the only one with an electronic key card lock and waits expectantly.

“Well?” She says, “You had questions? The answers are here.”

An absurd part of him thinks of Will and Dustin talking about Mr. Clarke’s Curiosity Doors as they do science homework in the living room, books splayed out around them like tiny scholars.

Some Curiosity Doors should stay shut. Some of them could close behind you.

“Nancy-” He whispers, catching her arm, “Stay in public, right?”

It’s useless. He knows it before she even looks at him with that steely, pursed lip, beetle-browed expression that means she’s going to save El, save Steve, save Hawkins and god help anyone and anything that stands in her way,

She doesn’t hesitate to follow Roethe inside.

Steve follows behind her with a helpless shrug because Steve will follow Nancy is gravity, it’s the rotation of the earth, it’s one of the fundamental constants of the universe and Steve certainly doesn’t have any say in it.

The door clunks shut behind him as he steps into the room with them because Jonathan isn’t any better at fighting against gravity than Steve.

It’s a glassed-in nurses station and beyond that a normal hospital room, a sallow looking blonde girl that can’t be much younger than them laid out sleeping in the bed, a pair of headphones over her ears.

“I can be certain it is not the same because Intelligence-00001 did not eat Subject Six’s consciousness..”

She opens the door, ushers them in. The room smells of antiseptic and the sick sweetness of tiger
lilies that someone had left on the bedside table.

“Six assimilated it.”

“Holy shit.”

No one can say that Steve doesn’t have a way with words.

“That’s...” Nancy creeps forward toward the girl on the bed, “That’s Six?”

“It is.” The woman smiles a wicked smile, the kind that grandma Rachel would smile when she snuck whiskey into her morning coffee, “She is, of course, officially deceased. I oversaw the autopsy myself.”

“And you smuggled her out and out of the country?”

“Myself, with the help of a contractor who saw her potential.” She snorts, waves a dismissive hand, “An idiot. But a useful one.”

“Dr. Roethe, we need to speak to her.”

“I am afraid that is not possible.” The woman leans forward, runs a fond hand through the girl’s hair with affection that seems strangely genuine, a little sad, enough like mom and Will that he almost wants to look away, “They say the most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the mind to correlate its contents. She took a creature of unfathomable hugeness into hers- the experiences of a completely alien entity, an alien world with no way to filter them.”

“Is she...It put her in a coma?”

“Oh no, not at all. I put her in a coma- so to speak. She is simply drugged.”

“Why?”

“Because it drove her quite insane,” The woman shrugs, “That bastard Brenner wished her terminated. Simply too dangerous to have her anywhere near the other Subjects. Now, she is powerful. Were she in a position to... incorporate Eight or Five or Eleven it would be catastrophic- all of them together- well, humanity would have a mad god.”

They stand in silence. Unsurprisingly Steve breaks it.

“You people are the fucking. Worst.”

“In any case I cannot wake her for you. As it is, a decimal point on a chart is all that stands between the four of us and destruction. Perhaps someday I will make a mistake. Perhaps I already have and she is awake and listening, yes?”

Steve takes an almost imperceptibly small step back, cradling his elbows as Nancy leans forward, and he wishes he had his camera because he can’t think of a more perfect illustration of the two of them.

“She is not as it happens. My work is impeccable young man, do not look so nervous.” The woman waves a dismissive hand in Steve’s direction and his expression goes from wavering to crooked bravado, a ‘ I wasn’t’ telegraphed in every inch of him, “She does not listen anymore. We would all be quite dead already.”

The woman herds them back toward the door like children on a field trip, “So, as you can imagine
neither of us can do anything to help you with your- well, Intelligence 0000- 2, I suppose.”

“There must be something-” Nancy starts to protest but Roethe is already shaking her head.

“I simply have no answers to give you,” The woman shrugs, keying them back out of the room and he breathes deep when they step back into the ugly but populated hallway, “No one does, except Six, and she will not be talking.”

It’s pretty clear that Roethe isn’t their hostage anymore- if she ever was in any sense besides humoring them- as she hustles them back toward the lobby, tutting slightly about it being half-past and that her office hours are quite over.

“But-

“No, no more questions children,” The woman cuts Nancy off again with an agitated wave, “I must say, you’ve done shockingly well to find the two of us.”

“Thanks,” Steve says from her other side, scowling like her approval makes him want to take a shower, “We live for your good opinion, seriously. Gonna put that in my scrapbook.”

The woman between them shrugs delicately, obviously unphased.

“Take it or do not. It makes no difference to me.” Her eyes go to Nancy, who’s brow is furrowed with concern, like there’s something wrong that she can’t quite put her finger on, “Your mistakes were amateurish, but understandable.”

“And what mistakes were those?” Nancy asks, stiffening defensively. He loves her, but she does not take criticism gracefully. Dr. Roethe seems to notice it too- gives her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and Steve scowls as an orderly nearly shoulder checks him in his rush to get past.

“Assuming that there are no CIA black sites in Canada. And that any of this building is public.”

Something in Jonathan’s chest feels like a camera aperture closing to it’s smallest f-stop, blood pumping in his ears and suddenly everything is happening at once.

The orderly behind Steve brings a black bag down over the boy’s head and pulls a cord taut in one motion. The bag conforms around his mouth as he inhales in panic and the man plants a hand down over his face before he can yell for them, pinching the his nose through the cloth to make him breathe in deep as he struggles.

Time has slowed to a crawl as Jonathan grabs at Nancy, no plan in mind except get her to him and away from them but a security guard already has her around the waist, yanking her back, and she’s screaming his name as his fingers skate over the back of her wrist but can’t hold, like every nightmare he’s ever had of that day in the woods where he fails her and the hand flailing for him disappears back into the tree. She kicks both feet out in front of her, gets the man holding Steve in the ribs with a sound like a branch breaking but she can’t do anything about the one holding her- black bag, cord tight.

Violence isn’t Jonathan’s strong suit, not usually. He’s not like Steve, ready to jump in with the bat the minute something stands still enough to hit, or a dead-eye shot like Nancy. His father was always quick to use his fists and Jonathan had always felt the potential for it bubbling under his skin so he had fought temper, fought anger, tamped it down into silence and patience until something finally cracks him and then all he can see is a blind red rage.

He brings a hand up, half-accident, half-instinct, and feels cloth, and smells something sweet and
high-pitched like gasoline and the cord drawing but it can’t pull tight because his arm is blocking it and he’s ripping it away, pushing forward, aiming low, bowling the man over and slamming his knee upward as the guy scrambles at him in surprise. The cartilage of the man’s nose compresses and he feels the burst of hot blood. He has to get to Nancy- he has to-

Someone behind him operating on skill rather than wild panicky rage kicks his left knee out to the side, hard, and he hits the ground at a skid- feels them driving a knee into his back, and a fist into his hair and he’s face down on the tile as they twist his arm behind him.

Steve is discarded, folded upon the floor in front of him like a rag doll, long limbs awkward and utterly unmoving. Nancy’s white sneakers are still dangling above the floor in his line of sight, twitching spasmodically as she tries to fight, as he screams her name.

"As I said, you were doing very well."

They disappear with a whisper of black cloth, a sweet gasoline smell, a cord pulled so tight around his neck that he almost strangles and Dr. Roethe’s voice in the darkness.

“Welcome to The Shop.”

Chapter End Notes

The Lone Bauman

Hey, kids- I'll take it from here.

Donald Ewan Cameron was a real person- and while I'm sure the author wouldn't usually lump someone who really lived in with a shit like Brenner, Cameron was almost certainly the inspiration for him. The Psychic Driving experiments AKA MKULTRA Sub-project 68 took place at The Allan Memorial Institute of McGill University, Montreal and were exactly as unethical as described. A number of the 'patients' involved and their families successfully sued the United States and Canadian governments for damages. It's detailed in the excellent book In the Sleeproom: The Story of CIA Brainwashing in Canada or for a faster hit- check out this abridged version.

The man in Doc Owens' story is Stanislav Yevgrafovich Petrov- a lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defence Forces who became known as the man who single-handedly saved the world from nuclear war after correctly judging an incoming attack was a system malfunction. In return he received a reprimand from the Soviet government.

Just a reminder, kids. Never trust The Man.
“No one can tell what goes on in between the person you were and the person you become. No one can chart that blue and lonely section of hell. There are no maps of the change. You just come out the other side.

Or you don’t.”

— Stephen King, The Stand

“It’s obviously an important factor, Mike.”

“I’m not basing which campaign we play on what monster from the Upside Down is going to show up in town next year.”

“Well, fine if you want to be shortsighted about things, I’m just saying.”

Dustin wasn’t stalling.

That was ridiculous. They had finally finished Forbidden City so he and Bilfrick the Bard totally couldn’t wait to start the next campaign and everyone had actually managed to get to Mike’s house even though with the way the weather was going they might need canoes instead of bikes to get back out again.

And they all really, really needed to get their minds off of things and fight something because one thing that’s becoming clear is that a distant, looming threat is somehow worse than an immediate one and the one thing even scarier than running away from danger or running toward it was waiting for it to find you.

It wasn’t though— it wasn’t finding them.

They should be glad, right? Anyone else would put not having to go toe-to-toe with a mind-eating fear monster during winter break in the plus column in a big way. It wasn’t like they haven’t been operating way above the mean when it came to ‘almost being eaten’ or ‘killed by the U.S Government before getting your first chest hair’ and that second one was still in play, so they should just take what they can get on the monster front.

The problem was that when you’re in the eye of the hurricane everyone else is still in the hurricane.

He told himself that it wasn’t their fault that the Aboleth had gone after Mr. Clarke right after he had helped them and that it was probably coincidence and his great plan probably hadn’t nearly gotten his favorite teacher’s brain eaten. Told himself that Tewes was going through a phase when he walked around the living room, puffed up like a Halloween cat and hissing at walls. Told himself that his mom wasn’t lying and really was just overworked and tired when she fell asleep during
Press Your Luck and woke him up at midnight, crying, just to hug him and make sure he was there.

And it wasn’t like it was ignoring kids- that had been an early hypothesis- thoroughly shattered by missing posters of Stacy Mancheski and half a dozen others. And it had gone after Nancy and Steve and Jonathan so unless the Aboleth operated on the exact same basis as the clerk at Wesselman’s selling cigarettes when it came to age it was not discriminating.

It could go after their classmates, it could go after their parents. It could go after their siblings-

...Not that Steve was his sibling. Friend. Mentor. Obi-Wan Kenobi.

-It just didn’t want them.

They’d set up Lucas’ dad’s projector, marked up a map of Hawkins as best they could based on spotty news reports and much less spotty information that El overheard from Hop. They’d mapped out bodies found and violent incidents and strange sightings.

Random red dots speckled the town like it had gotten chicken pox. They’d tried to correlate it with bodies of water, rivers, lakes, storm drains. They’d tried to find patterns or messages.

Because besides that day when they had walked right up to it like a pizza delivery it hadn’t gone after anyone in the Party and the entire area around the Byers house seemed to be protected by some invisible force field. Sure, it was possible that it hadn’t gotten around to it or that it just wasn’t interested in them but this was something from the Upside Down they were talking about and basic pattern recognition made that incredibly unlikely.

“I’m with Dustin,” Lucas grins, tossing his d20 idly from hand to hand, “If we find out that the next boss is a tarrasque I’m moving.”

“See!” He spreads his hands triumphantly, “Thank you.”


“Bye Mike,” Lucas matches him scowl for scowl, grabbing a piece of popcorn and winging it at the other boy over Will’s head, “Enjoy having no one to save your ass when you fight a tarrasque next year.”

“What’s a tarrasque?” Max asks suspiciously.

“Godzilla,” Lucas supplies trying to sketch an approximate scale depiction in the air, then re-thinks it and makes it bigger, “Mega-Godzilla.”

Max frowns like they might be messing with her but when even Will nods apologetically her eyes go wide.

“Don’t make it a tarrasque.”

“Oh my god,” Mike stands and thumps a frustrated hand down behind his screen, “It doesn’t matter if we fight a tarrasque- we aren’t doing it- it’s the scientist guys who-”

“Three times in a row, Mike.”

“Make the next boss a flumph,” Lucas suggests hopefully, “I bet we could kill a real life flumph before first period-”

It wasn’t helping that the others weren’t back yet.
The last time Steve had called him was nearly two days ago from Michigan (when they were supposed to be in Illinois) and he had no reason to think that anything was wrong because two days probably wasn’t that long when you’re on some kind of fact-finding mission slash really weird post-break-up vacation and he also had no reason to think that Steve would definitely make it back by game night even though he said that he would- And- okay - so Steve wasn’t officially a member of the Party and neither was Sir Steve- The Second -

(“You can’t just come back as the exact same character after you die, Steve- that’s just stupid.”

“Fine. He’s Sir Steve the Second, son of Sir Steve who was killed by a sore-losing little douchebag.”)

But he was close enough that they should at least try to wait for him! And nearly two days might not be that long but he’d promised to call everyday. Just like he’d promised to bring his hat back from an Aboleth infested lab that had ripped open reality and he’d done it. How hard was it to pick up a damn phone?

Unless... well-he had been joking- mostly - about the head exploding thing but who knew how the Aboleth worked?

Nancy or Jonathan would have totally called if Steve’s head had exploded, though. Except they haven’t called either- about anything in nearly two days- and Will is extra quiet and Mike is extra needlessly belligerent so he knows that he’s not the only one that’s getting worried-

Or the only one that’s relieved when the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it!” He’s up and scrambling up the stairs, Will following after, Lucas and Max close behind and Mike bringing up the rear, “I knew it, I knew Steve’d make it-”

“No way is he coming to play tonight, dude, he’s with Nancy-”

“And Jonathan.” Will adds more than a little reproachfully, like they might have forgotten about him.

“Bet you a roll of quarters the three of them never talk to each other again,” Mike shoves his hands in his pockets, strolling instead of running and Dustin thinks he might be onto the fact that he was...definitely not stalling his game just in case of this exact eventuality. He looks a little less tense and like, twenty percent less likely to make the next boss fight a tarrasque though.

“You’re on,” He stops long enough to shake on it and make it official- those quarters are his and once this storm is over and the Aboleth is dead so is Princess Daphne, “They totally figured it out amicably. Like how I stepped aside and let Lucas have Max-”

“Let me-?” Lucas starts incredulously.

“Have me-?” Max finishes and slugs him in the shoulder and oh man, her knuckles are like, freakishly sharp, “Dickhead.”

“You know what I meant.”

Will is already peeking out from the front curtain when he reaches the door and his face says it all before he actually says what might be the most disappointing words in the English language.

“It’s Pinbacker, guys.”

Sonofabitch.
“Don’t open it,” Mike’s casual ‘I don’t care if my sister is back and safe’ stroll disappears and melts into open disappointment, “I really, really don’t need another stupid Dark Dungeon pamphlet.”

Lucas throws his head back dramatically, “I don’t want to be Elfstar anymore, Mike. I want to be Debbie.”

“You shut up, Debbie, she’s gonna hear you.”

He peers through the peephole and it is, indeed, the huge and unwelcome silhouette of Edna Pinbacker, soaked from the storm and swaying slightly, holding something -undoubtedly a varied collection of comics about how Dungeons and Dragons promotes suicide and homosexuality and witchcraft and Devil worship-behind her back.

“Children? Open up -”

“Guys, get the spray bottle.” Dustin’s not proud of himself but he’s willing to accept that there’s a certain level of disappointment that can only be resolved by pure spite.

Max crosses her arms, eyebrows raised, “It’s pouring -she’s as wet as she’s going to get-”

“Open up.”

“Behavioral modification is about consistency, Max!”

Will is still peeking through the window, frowning- more than the usual amount when they have to deal with Pinbacker, “Guys, don’t open it.”

“Why?”

She rings again, more insistently, really insistently like it might be an emergency and it’s only because of the momentary quiet when Will ducks quickly out of the window gesturing that she saw him and she stops ringing that they can hear that along with the swaying she’s singing to herself on the other side of the door.

“Open up... your heart and let the sunshine in-”

Will presses himself down into the cushions, looking at all of them with wide, uncertain eyes.

“I think she has an ax.”

He slowly pulls his hand away from the doorknob because that’s well- a pretty huge over-reaction to the spray-bottle thing, really-

“It’s the Aboleth-” Max whispers like she-it-The Aboleth- didn’t already know they were there.

Will's nostrils flare as he breathes deep, “Dustin...get away from the door-”

“If it’s the Aboleth Mr. Clarke said that it can’t really influence physical objects as a projection- just sensory-”There's a splintering of wood and the tip of the axe head comes crashing through the door inches from his nose.

Or it’s actually Mrs. Pinbacker. With an ax.

Dustin stumbles backward, lands hard on his butt and crab-scrambles back ‘till he hits the stairs, “Holy shit, guys she’s real-she’s totally real-”
Okay. Okay. This doesn't actually change the hypothesis that the Aboleth is avoiding them. It's terrifying but terrifying in a way that works.

It's like...the Zimmerman brothers.

_They'd_ stayed away from them because they were scared of Steve, but that hadn't stopped them from encouraging Troy and James and Chris J. to go after them. Bullies were cowards when you hit back but they were like hydras, cut off one head and they just grew another.

And if the Aboleth was scared to come after them personally for some reason-

Wood crunches and creaks and the ax disappears.

There’s a long, surreal, nightmare-like stillness as nothing happens and they all freeze in place like they’re playing red-light green light.

The darkness outside shifts and the window above Will explodes inward- a rain of glass and wood and actual rain as the storm outside blasts sideways into the living room and the woman’s hand reaches inward past the billowing curtains, groping first for the door lock and failing that sweeping downward and grabbing hold of Will’s hair but Mike and Lucas are on her in a second, ignoring the wind and rain and the effect of scattered broken glass on socked feet.

"Get off!!" Lucas doesn't even seem to think about it before snatching a shard of glass from between the cushions and driving it into the back of the woman's hand just as Mike gets to Will- swinging him off the couch in an inexpert but effective tumble. Max lunges forward grabbing the arm of the couch and lifting like their lives depend on it which- well, they do, currently- and Lucas joins in until the thing is on end, blocking the broken window so Pinbacker can't get in. For his part he shoves one of the end tables against it so the three of them can keep it braced and prays Karen didn't really like any of this stuff _that much._

"I'm trying to help you," The woman can't get in, but her voice can, sounding genuinely confused about why they might not want to get ax-murdered today, _thanks_. “You put the devil in that boy with your game, children. He’ll bring about the end of all things- ‘I saw a windstorm coming out of the north–an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light.’“

Something goes very wrong in Will’s expression- wronger than ‘annoying neighbor-lady going crazy and trying to break in and kill us with an ax’ wrong- desperate and terrified and uncertain.

“She means the Mind Flayer,” Will whispers, voice quaking, "I'm not-"

Mike is already shaking his head, tugging Will close, “It’s gone, Will- she doesn't know what she's talking about-she's got the Aboleth in her head-”

"The One Above took Will Byers-"

Mike scrambles forward, slamming a closed fist against the door, “Shut the hell up, Pinbacker, don’t talk about him-"

"The Angel told me, Michael. The Angel will preserve us."

“Hey, lady,” Lucas shouts, shoving hard against the end table, “Tell your stupid angel we’ve seen way scarier shit than you .”

“Stop arguing with her and call Hopper!” Max howls as an ax blow from the other side of the couch jerks them backward and ruins Mike’s mom’s upholstery, just before another splinters the wood of
Jonathan Byers is alive.
Alive and surprisingly not handcuffed or tied to a chair. For a brief optimistic moment he thinks, well, we’re rescued. El or Hop realized they were in trouble and came after them. Mom. Mom would be here too. The cavalry arrived and he’s going to wake up to Nancy holding him and Mom telling him he’s never leaving the house again and Steve making some stupid joke-

“Jonathan, we’ve got you. *But don’t. Move.*” Nancy’s whisper is terrified, frantic and he suddenly wants to move very, very badly.

He doesn’t- just blinks, tries to focus the hazy, indistinct coronas away and figure out where he is.
It’s a hospital room and he’s sitting on the floor, back up against the wall being stared at by-
A sallow, blue-eyed blonde girl sitting on the bed.
Oh god.

Hands come down- Nancy, Steve- bundling him upward, pulling him into their petrified huddle, clutching at him and each other so tightly it’s like they’re trying to merge their bones. He can feel Nancy’s breathing like it’s his own, the curve of her spine, the pulse in Steve’s hand, wrapped around from the other side of her, long fingers digging into the back of his jacket.

“The door-”

He half expects Steve to crack a joke, *oh yeah Byers we forgot to try that, good thinking* but there’s just a slow, silent headshake, eyes still fixed on Six.

“A weapon?”

“She won’t let us.” Steve says, voice cracking like they’re thirteen again and that sounds...incredibly ominous.

“How long have you been aw-”

“A couple of minutes,” Nancy murmurs, “She hasn’t moved.”

There’s a crackle of intercom static that makes all three of them nearly jump out of their skin. Steve gives a little yelp, loud enough that Six’s hungry gaze snaps in his direction and Nancy clamps a
hand down over his mouth like they can put the sound back.

“I am very sorry about this.” Dr Roethe says, actually sounding it, “The Subjects tend to shake sedation very quickly, but she is taking her time today. You were not meant to be awake for this part.”

He would have preferred if she had gloated, cackled, explained her plan- because at least that would be following the script and he could have fooled himself into hoping that there was going to be a way out. Her genuine sympathy sounds like a vet putting down a beloved dog, no choice, better this way, do what we can to minimize the suffering.

“I have no ill will toward you, but you know Subject Eleven somehow. I need to know where she is and I cannot have Brenner knowing about Six.”

“He's dead.” Nancy chokes out.

Roethe snorts dismissively at that.

“Lady, we wouldn't say anything, swear to god. We wouldn't-”

The woman shakes her head, mouth twisting in genuine annoyance.

“You could not even keep your association with Eleven to yourself unprompted, boy. You would say nothing? You are speaking of a man who could have added chapters to KUBARK. It was his job in Bluebird to break CIA men and believe me- under torture you America-and-Apple-Pie boys always go the fastest. It is like clockwork.”

The girl stirs, makes a thick, phlegmy, barely human noise in her throat.

“It will not be pleasant but I need to know what you know. And I am doing you three a favor. I am keeping you from Brenner.”

Feverish blue eyes focus on them.

They're going to die. Or as good as.

The girl will take everything, everything they are, everything they've done. Their minds going dark like a photograph without fixer.

He'll forget Nancy.

She stands between them in the protective cage of their arms, brows drawn and features set like she's facing a firing squad, brave beyond measure.

Steve's not ready for it when she cranes her neck and kisses him. She gets the corner of his mouth, bittersweet and sad and he looks so grateful that it's heartbreaking. Like he got to go home one more time.

He's ready when she turns to him. He came to kisses late and each one with Nancy was a gift, the chance to make up for lost time. He's not going to waste the last one.

He’ll forget Mom.

Mom’s worst fear will finally come true, a son that leaves the house and never comes back, truly never this time, because there’s nothing left to rescue. She'll never stop trying though, not until the day she dies and he knows that any hope she has to fully recover from this will go with him. She'll
be strong for Will, she's the strongest person he's ever known, but the cracks will widen.

He'll forget Will.

In the days where school was kids calling him a freak, hiding in the bathrooms until past four in an attempt not to see anyone on the way home and home was Lonnie, drunk, waking him up in the middle of the night just to rail at him for being a sissy, dumping all of his 45s in the garbage to make him cry then being pissed off that he was crying. Making him stand and listen to the sound a wounded rabbit makes - he had been able to tolerate it without losing his mind because Will had been everything. Will was someone to love, to protect, who gave suffering meaning, and Will protected him back, let him into the worlds he built, worlds so much better than the one they had to put up with day to day.

Will who-

Nancy inhales sharply through her nose because Six has slid forward, bare feet dangling off the hospital bed, manic, starving gaze locked back on him through a curtain of hair.

She ignores the buzz of the intercom.

“Hello Six, how are you feeling today?”

Something twitches in Six’s expression, so fast he thinks it’s wishful thinking on his part at first.

It couldn’t be.

_Gotta toughen you up Johnny._ Those had been the words that meant things were going to get bad. _Worse_. Things were always shitty when Lonnie was around, but those meant it was directed and premeditated and the eternal effort not to have his sons be freaky little fairies was about to start again. _Gotta toughen you up Johnny_ and the cycle begins again, and again and again.

He doesn’t even know what he’d do if he heard them now. Go fucking crazy, probably. Make the red rage that had broken Steve's nose look like a measured response. Certainly doesn't know what he'd do if he had actual power.

_She's quite insane._

The expression had been pain. It had been the hopelessness of the _not this again, _of there never being anything else but this and the uncertainty if there ever would be.

He had escaped with Will - music and Fort Byers and pouring over negatives and the adventures of Will the Wise - she never-

He moves fast, because if he moves slow his mind is going to absolutely refuse to even make the attempt to break away from Nancy and Steve’s vice grip on him. He tries not to hear the horrified strangled noises from both of them, how Steve say his name with a voice like a house of cards collapsing.

He’s on one knee in front of the girl, a little below her eye-line, unthreatening, hopefully, talking fast because her hand snakes out toward him  and he probably has five seconds tops before she eats his brain.

_“We're friend's of your little sister.”_ The hand that's halfway to his face stops, “Eleven?” No response, no recognition, “None of us call her that, though. Mostly El -but her... dad- Hopper- he calls her Jane and Steve - that's him - he calls her Supergirl sometimes because it makes her laugh.
Uh-do you remember her?"

She’s so still and blinks so little that when she does it’s almost surprising, like watching a crocodile’s nictitating membrane flicker shut and he wonders if it’s a chance to run or a signal that she’s about to attack.

“I think- I think you really cared about her. Even though they stopped letting you see her and you- you still tried... because she’s your little sister. I know how it is.. I- I remember the first time mom let me hold my little brother- Will, you just- you look at them and you know you’d do anything for them.”

The hand doesn't move forward, but it doesn't withdraw, there's no acknowledgment either way so he plows on.

“She did it. She got away. She’s been free for two years and the lab is shutdown. She saved the world... twice. She has friends- they found her after she escaped and they helped her hide and she helped them save my little brother from... that place and from a monster that tried to take him over. She uh-”

He's faltering, words aren't his strong suit to start and he's terrified besides so he stutters, stumbles.

“Eggos.” Steve picks up, voice horse, “She loves Eggos. Uh, they're these shitty cardboard waffles but you can’t say that to her or she calls you mouth-breather for a week.” Steve wilts a little under Six’s bright blue stare, but just swallows the fear down and continues, “And you have to sit and watch All My Children with her until she forgives you.”

“She's in love with my little brother Mike.” Nancy says slowly, “I'm pretty sure she was his first kiss and they...they went to a dance together.”

Well, here goes nothing.

“She’s why we’re here. There’s this monster from that other Place that’s after her-the same kind of one that went after you- and we need to know how to stop it so it doesn’t hurt her. If you’re still- if-if you still want to protect her- please help us.”

Six doesn’t move. Doesn’t speak. Just stares. The intercom buzzes above them, crackles to life.

“Do not toy with them, Six. It is cruel.”

God. No.

The girl leans forward, the hand comes down on his face, the others are screaming his name, Steve holding Nancy back as she tries to surge forward. Oh god oh god oh god.

“Please don't take mom and Will!”

Everything goes white.

He had been expecting black.

He hadn't really been expecting to be able to ruminate on it.

He doesn't feel pain. Doesn't feel much. Smells burning maybe, like a match going out. Can't tell if he's slipping away- how would you know if you were, after all? If she was wiping his memories out,
would he miss them or would they have never been there at all?

Suddenly the white fades, the roaring tinnitus drone of blood pumping in his ears fades into frantic voices saying his name over and over.

He blinks, protective hands are all over him, holding him, chafing at his arms, cradling his head.

*Nancy*?

He still remembers *Nancy*. Mom. Will.

Mike Lucas Dustin Max Eleven Hop Steve Hawkins, Indiana. Developer, stop bath, fixer, wash. The Smiths. Psychedelic Furs. The Clash. The Doors. The old Sanders Oak the creek in the summer. The time he he threw up in math class in third grade and still gets embarrassed about at random for absolutely no reason.

Did they stop Six somehow?

The room comes into focus. He's on his back, Nancy and Steve holding him at the base of the hospital bed- too afraid for him to be afraid of Six, who's sitting cross legged above them, watching them silently again.

“What- *Nancy*?”

Steve’s eyes go wide.

“He can still-?”

“Jonathan?” Nancy’s voice cracks with desperate joy, “Do you-?”

“I’m okay? I think?” It’s not exactly a ringing self-endorsement, but it’s the best he can do. “What happened?”

“She touched you and you had a seizure. I thought-” No need for her to elaborate what she thought because her eyes are huge and bright with tears.

“Thought you were going to swallow your tongue, Byers.” Steve supplies with breathy relief, “Six didn’t have a spoon.”

Roethe is pounding the glass in the nurse's station to get their attention, clicks into the intercom when he lifts his head to look at her.

“You are still responsive?” She sounds elated, “You are unhurt? The pain, on a scale of one to ten-”

He's about to answer purely out of reflex but Nancy does it for him, in a manner of speaking, flipping the woman the bird with a silent, vicious scowl.

There's a low, throaty noise above them, a drop of blood on his shirt, and all three of them startle backward at the sight of Six staring straight down at them, nose bleeding, blonde hair dangling.

“Ho-oly s-Six. Uh, hey there.” Steve says in his most babysitterly voice after riding out the heart attack, “Thanks for not killing Jonathan?”

“Yeah.” He says, still a little woozy, not sure if she even understands, “Appreciate it.”

The girl nods, exhales, licks blood off her lip.
“Friends of my sister. Friends of my…” Her voice is deeper than he’d expected and she trails off thoughtfully, “You aren’t lying.”

“You checked?” Nancy hisses low, “You checked without hurting him?”

The girl shrugs, nods, leans down until she’s nearly off the bed and the heat and fetid morning stink of her breath is right in his face.

“Run.” She whispers before she sits back up again, the unnaturalness of her movements resolving themselves into something almost normal, bouncing slightly on the mattress like a child.

“Six- This is Doctor Roethe?” Roethe’s voice comes over the intercom, “What are you telling them? Will you speak to me as well, Six?”

There’s a blast of static through the speaker, followed by Six’s voice, even though her lips don’t move.

“Mother?”

“This is extraordinary.” Roethe is through the door, nearly tripping over them to get to the bed as they scramble backward together,. “Whatever you three did- my god, we can start again-”

Nancy is scrambling up to her feet at that, helping lever both of them up and not letting go of their hands once she does, dragging them at a dead run toward the open nurses station like the tail of a kite.

“You can not leave- the door is-” Roethe is cut off by Six wrapping her arms around the neck and shoulders of woman who raised her, tortured her. She hugs the woman she calls mother.

“Mother I am so, so…”

“It is alright Six, it was not your-”

“Hungry.”

He slams the door of the nurses station closed behind them as Steve makes a wild, full body lunge for the intercom button to stop the awful noise coming from inside the room and Nancy snatches her purse from on top of the filing cabinet. The lights flicker- just once- but the three of them are already back to back to back, Nancy with her gun and Steve with a desk lamp he obviously wishes he could transform through sheer force of will into a nail-studded baseball bat, and he grabs a thick binder from off the desk, hefting it high, ready to swing.

The lights go out.

Steve swears creatively. Nancy sweeps her aim blindly, frantically through the darkness.

He closes his eyes tight, giving it a slow thirty count like when he first goes into the dark room, trying to adjust to low light and opens them to vague shapes that are better than nothing. There’s…noise. The remnants of whatever is happening in Six’s room and commotion in the halls, feet pounding the floor above them. Rush and scramble and alarm.

Then all eyes go to the hospital room door as the maglock buzzes and disengages and it swings open.

The girl is a barely visible silhouette in the doorway, dragging Roethe behind her by her coat and Steve makes a move to push the two of them behind him before remembering that he’s holding a lamp and Nancy has a gun and getting out of her way.
“I feel better now. We can talk.” Six says, dropping the woman’s body in the doorway and crouching down to dig something out of the woman’s coat. As if on cue the lights flicker on as some back-up generator kicks in and in the light the terrifying girl just looks gangly and pale and awkward as she stands back up, orange pill bottle in hand, tugging at her hair, hiding behind it a little as she takes the three of them in.

For once he speaks first because she hadn’t killed him before and maybe they had a rapport going. Hell, there was probably a joke in there somewhere about how the only people that appreciated his social skills were lab experiments that Steve was too terrified to make.

“Six. We...we need to know about the thing that attacked El-Jane- how to kill it-what they want-”

“To eat.”

“That’s it...?”

Her mouth twists downward in confusion, like she’s not quite sure how ‘to eat’ needed any elaboration.

“...Everyone?” Six sways slightly then tugs at a piece of her hair and chews the ends idly. It would be a weirdly normal, if childish, gesture if they hadn’t just been talking about the unstoppable hunger of an Upside Down creature and Jonathan wonders vaguely if they were making her hungry again.

The noise from the hallway has resolved itself from being very far to being very close and there’s a man shouting for them to come out- hands up and Jonathan realizes with growing horror that they failed to immediately re-prioritize their list to include the G-men that ran the facility.

Steve goes white as a sheet, mouth forming a silent oh shit because he obviously remembers Roethe’s warning about how fast these people can break America-and-Apple-Pie-Boys when they get their hands on them and Jonathan doubts they’re much worse at torturing information out of Loner Weirdos or Honor Roll Students so his hand is shaking when he grabs Steve's arm. Nancy just looks at them with big eyes and checks her gun to make sure it’s still loaded.

“Six shots.” Her whisper is thick with creeping horror because this isn’t a monster with a face that opens up- this isn’t the dog things or even the thing inside Will that she’s determined enough to burn away- she’s never killed a person before and maybe isn’t sure she can do it, even for them.

“Nancy don’t-” They can’t let her do it- because there are some things you don’t come back from and there has to be another-

There’s a rattle as Six upends the pill bottle into her palm- tosses them back dry- and her head snaps to the side like a dog catching a scent as her blank expression breaks apart into a grin.

The door crashes open and a man is shouting at them- get on your knees get on your knees now subject Six is out of containment - and Six is laughing like she’s never seen anything funnier in her life, which considering her life might be true and Nancy is bringing her gun up and he’s almost certain that Steve is about to do something deeply stupid to try to buy them time and-

Six's nose starts to bleed.

The man in the doorway goes wide-eyed as he brings his gun up to his own chin and it’s pure instinct when Jonathan throws himself forward- shoving Nancy and Steve into the far corner behind the metal filing cabinets and tossing himself over them just as the gunfire of an involuntary circular firing squad starts in the hall.
It’s so loud. The thought is oddly calm and detached from the situation but he’s only ever been around one gun firing at a time and this is so absurdly loud that he can barely hear Steve’s litany of profanity right next to his ear as the boy jerks and scrambles underneath him with each shot or Nancy’s shriek as she curls up small.

Jonathan closes his eyes and ducks his face in someone’s hair. He’s not one hundred percent sure whose.

The gunfire starts to peter off- ten guns turning to five and five to two and two to a final, definitive bang.

Nancy’s head is still buried in his neck, Steve is staring somewhere past him with wide, glazed eyes that look on the brink of panic or tears.

Six spits blood onto the tile floor from a nosebleed so bad that it’s going back down her throat and grins a red grin.

“You- killed them-” Steve murmurs thickly as he un-balls his hands from the death grip they have on the back of his coat and Nancy looks up, pale and shaken.

“Now they can’t make me go back to bed,” She says with a shrug and a twitch, “Did Eleven look pretty at the dance?”

Jonathan blinks, uncertain if he had heard right or if his ears are still ringing but she’s looking at him expectantly- like it’s a perfectly normal follow up to using mind control powers to commit mass murder.

“Uh. Yeah? She...looked nice?”

That seems to satisfy her and she pads over to the man slumped in the doorway, tugging his suit jacket off and shrugging it on over her hospital gown before undoing his shoelaces with a furrowed brow.

“How did you make them-?”


“Guys,” Steve murmurs, still focused on the very dead bodies in the room and the hallway, voice somewhere between warning and calm resignation, “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Don’t.” Six orders sharply enough that the other boy brings a hand up to his mouth to try to stop himself.

“Why?”

The girl blinks rapidly at him, confused.

“It’ll be gross .”

The three of them exchange a glance. Steve buries his face in his hands.

“I’m so done with kids, I swear to god -”

“Six- we need to know what to do- how to kill this thing before it-.”
“I can’t help you kill it,” She says simply, tugging a shoe off the dead man and sitting cross-legged to pull it on with her tongue between her teeth in concentration, “Would. Can’t. You’ll die if you try.”

“You-” She saved their lives but contradicting her still seems to fall somewhere on the suicidal side of the bad-idea scale, then again, they were them, “You killed one though?”

“I ate it.” She says distractedly, then glances up hopefully like she figured out a solution, “Can you eat it?”

“No.”

Six nods like that was basically the answer she was expecting.

“It was there reaching through and I caught it. Now it’s here - we reach, it grabs and drags you down and eats you.” She tilts her head- concentrates on tying her new, too big shoes mumbling something to herself, “Over, under, around and through. Meet Mr. Bunny Rabbit, pull and through -”

“What if we get it out of the water so it can’t-” Nancy bends down to help, either out of a need to be doing something or to stop the depressing sight of a girl who must be somewhere around fifteen fumble with laces like a six year old. God, how much of her life was spent in hospital beds?

“Not drag you down in water. In your head. Inbetween.” The girl makes a thick, frustrated barely human sound that makes them all startle back in concern, Steve’s back clanging against the filing cabinet and Nancy nearly falling over in the scramble to get away - then she rolls her eyes at them exactly like any teenager, ever, in human history.

“But there has to be something-”

Her eyes narrow and her brow furrows and there’s something weirdly familiar about the disapproving expression, “You can’t kill it. I can’t help you. It’s over, it’s under, it’s around and now it’s through. It can be more here or more there but you can’t kill it everywhere at once so you can’t kill it. It’ll come back.”

“Everywhere at once -” Nancy gets it first, chewing her bottom lip hard enough that a bead of blood forms, “Where’s everywhere?”

“The threefold world. Upside down. Right-side up. Inbetween. You see the worm and you think it’s the fisherman.”

“The Gate is closed -everything from the Upside Down is supposed to be trapped-”

“It’s not from there. It smelled the fear when things were thin and went to eat but now everyone is dead and The One Above is no fun-so it came here when things got thin again.”

Steve shocks the hell out of all of them by somehow being the one with insight into the thought process of an otherworldly monster.

“The One Above? That’s the big spider asshole in the sky, right?”

The girl nods distractedly making a second attempt at trying her left lace, “They play hide and seek and eat each other’s children- Above is blind but it is s e e ing you.” The girl’s voice grinds like a record slowing down and she frowns, focusing on her right boot, “Above makes it afraid and it doesn’t fight when it can’t win.”
“Oh, yeah, perfect, great,” Steve seems to have decided pacing will at least give him something to do with himself, and Jonathan pretends not to notice the slightly hysterical pitch of his voice that means another not-panic attack might be on the horizon, “So the only thing that worries this thing is a bigger, scarier, monster.”

“One that possessed Will and is currently in another dimension.” He adds, because why does Steve get to have all the fun summing up exactly how screwed they are, “I think we can rule that out as an option.”

“A scarier monster.” The girl says, nodding to herself as she wobbles unsteadily to her feet and steps over the man laying in the doorway, “Come on.”

They follow Six out of the room in a cautious huddle that he ends up the center of again- Steve trying not to look at the bodies and Nancy who can’t stop looking at them and him leading them because someone has to- shutting something inside down and pretending that he has the distance and detachment of a lens between him and everything else as they follow Six down the hall, security cameras shorting out with electric pops in their wake.

There’s no noise but them. Doors are shut against them, the halls empty of people. If there’s an alarm going it’s a silent one.

He only sees one person as they walk and he’s pretty sure he's the only one that spots her in the dim emergency light. The front desk secretary. The woman who had taken their information and let them in and locked the doors behind them. The woman who had sat at her desk and watched while they were kidnapped is curled up under her desk, heels off in case she needs to run.

Her desperate, pleading eyes meet his. She brings a finger up to her lips.

Six is out of containment.

“You need a scarier monster,” Six says slowly and his instinct is to draw back when she takes his hand but she puts the pill bottle in his palm, closing his fingers around it, “Give this to Eleven.”

“What is it?”

“Before the Intelligence I was the weakest. I couldn't do anything right. Mother needed something to make me stronger so Brenner wouldn’t terminate me like Ten,” She shakes his hand slightly, rattling the pills in the bottle, “The tall man made me medicine.”

“This will...El can fight it?”

He turns it over in his hand. It’s labeled with a precise, sharp letters.

LOT-Seven. Diethyltryptamine-19. Project Arrowhead, Sub-Project-

“Probably not.” The girl says honestly, if sadly, “But I don’t have anything else to give her.”

Six stops short in the doorway of the building, holding the door open like the host of a party seeing her guests out, no intention to leave with them.

"You can't stay here-"

"I'm not done with The Shop," She says, tugging the sleeves of her too-big jacket up to her elbows, "I need to make sure they can't make me go back to bed."
“Six...you... you need to come with us- we can help you.” It’s a stupid promise, it’s so stupid because how he has no fucking clue but-

“No. Can’t.” She says simply, though whether they can’t help her or if she can’t come with them is unclear, “I’ll hurt people-”

“No- we can figure something out and you don’t...don’t want to hurt anyone, right?”

“That’s inconsequential, Jonathan,” She smiles a still-pink-tinged smile, gaze traveling back down the hallway because there’s movement- the secretary making a run for an emergency exit or a panic room “Say hello to my sister. Say hello to my...” She pauses like she’s considering saying something and he’s almost certain what she does isn’t what she meant to, “Jane. Say hello to Jane.”

She shoves them out the door and slams it closed behind them just as the lights in the building flicker like a shot lightbulb and go out for good.

Her smile is the last thing he sees in the dark. Somewhere down the hall there’s a scream.

Six is out of containment.

Phil Callahan was mediocre.

He didn’t mind admitting it. No one expected much of anything from deeply mediocre people and that suited him fine. Solid C- D+ student. Didn’t go to college. Joined the force with a vague idea that the uniform might get him laid and for that petty little taste of power being able to pull over the likes of Mr. Ratliff for a broken tail light would give him. He’d been perfectly content spending his days shooting the shit with Cal and ducking Flo and the Chief when anything more strenuous than Eleanor Gillepse’s owl-related issues crossed their desks.

So really, he hadn’t signed up for this shit.

Hadn’t signed up for Henry Sheldon shooting his wife ‘cause the way she was vacuuming was irritating him.

Hadn’t signed up for Ed Beales and his drinking buddies ‘convincing’ George Burness to make the jump off the Drop again. Or, for the first and last time, rather. Turns out Chief was right about that one.

Hadn’t signed up for Pastor Nelson hauling gas cans up to Father Morris’ house, ready to burn the place down and proving that the only good thing about the storm was that everything was too waterlogged to catch fire.

Hadn’t signed up for someone killing Troy Lowe’s dog. Troy Lowe was a little asshole but who kills a kid’s dog? Even an asshole kid’s dog?

Hadn’t signed up for Troy Lowe deciding the one that did it was James Chalmers and braining the other kid with a hammer.

And he definitely hadn’t signed up for Edna Pinbacker with an ax.

“Put the ax down, Edna” Hop says slowly, rain-water streaming off of his hat like he’s a human novelty fountain, “Let’s go back to the station and talk about this-”
He had been on sandbagging duty— which was bad enough as far as pain-in-the-ass needlessly strenuous work went— when Hop’s call came in that Edna Pinbacker— church-bingo-night-organizing Edna Pinbacker— was trying to break into the Wheeler house with an ax. Two months ago he would’ve been pissed at Flo for passing on a crank call but he hasn’t slept more than ten hours in the last week and everyone is going totally friggin’ crazy so he just resigns himself to it being true when Hop says to burn rubber to Dearborn.

“The Almighty came to me, James!” The woman is beaming at them, a wide beatific grin, even as she swings the ax in a wide arc, making the two of them have to jump back. Edna’s a big lady— kind where when you look at them you can still see the ghost of a twenty year old Hoosier farm girl that could carry a pig under each arm. She’s already nearly taken the front door off its hinges and busted out the front window and he can hear half a dozen kids shouting inside, “In a vision—”

Hop already had Joyce Byers with him when he showed up— which, hey, chalk calling that one down to his keen investigative skills and detective intuition— and one of those half a dozen kids is Joyce’s boy so the Chief isn’t fucking around when his hand moves slowly toward his gun.

“Edna- I need you to put the weapon down .”

“He said I can save us.”

“Edna whatever you were talking to it wasn’t the lord, alright? Put it down .”

“They pretended it was just a game but it trained them to raise demons. They made summoning circles and called creatures from the beyond. I tried to stop them—”

“It is a game you crazy bitch.” The Chief has to block Joyce Byers from throwing herself bodily at the woman and Pinbacker might have an ax but looking at Joyce— well, he’s not sure which direction that one would go.

Thing was, what if Edna was right?

You heard all kinds of weird shit about Satanists and cults all over the place. Chief had called all the SRA pamphlets county sent along every couple of months sensationalized bullshit and dumped them in the trash but you couldn’t deny that everyone in town was acting loony and the bodies they were finding weren’t right.

And the Byers kid had kinda come back from the dead two years ago.

Hawkins was a weird town. Even he gets that. They had had a lab making space weapons or something up on the hill. They had missing people and chemical spills from the space weapon lab. They had kids coming back from the dead.

It was weird.

But it had never been church ladies deciding to ax murder kids because God told them to weird. Never people’s best friends turning on them or dog-killing weird. It had never been vicious like this.

“I can’t let you stop me, James Hopper, ” The woman shakes her head sadly, “I had a vision- the Devil they called will pick the sinners of this town off, one by one-and the faithful will walk together to be reborn in the waters of the lake—”

“Edna. One place you don’t want to be right now is the lake. Listen—”

The woman isn't listening.
She brings the ax around and swings a swing that would’ve opened the Chief up at the neck if Phil Callahan hadn’t shot his gun for the absolute first time in his career.

He joined the force to maybe get laid. For a power trip.

The Chief calls the ambulance. He waits in the Chevy with the heat turned way up, ‘cause he’s soaked from the storm. He radios Cal, who’s still on Hargrove duty and talks about nothing—certainly not this— even though it’s gonna be common knowledge in the morning.

Eventually Hop peels away from Joyce Byers and the wildly gesturing gaggle of kids, leaning in the passenger side.

“You...did good,” There’s a hitch in Hop’s voice that’s somewhere between uncertainty and surprise, like he’d never really expected to say that. “Thanks, Callahan.”

“She was my ma’s Bingo partner,” he says slowly as that realization dawns, “I’m gonna have to tell my ma I killed her Bingo partner.”

Hop blinks, seemingly startled by his response.

He did good. He saved a bunch a kids. He should feel good.

But he doesn’t. He feels scared and confused and pretty sure this isn’t what he signed up for because couple more days of this rain they’re going to have to open up the storm shelters. You don’t have to be a genius to realize that hundreds of people packed in together in close quarters in the school gyms and churches with nothing better to do than get on each other’s nerves are going to get crazier and crazier-

“Phil-If you want to talk-”

The Chief stops as the scanner erupts into a screech of static and ... the radio 6.60 DJ?

He's pr-etty sure it's not supposed to be able to do that.

[- a story that you don’t hear everyday, gentle listeners. It’s picture on the milk carton time, not for a missing kid, but for a whole town. Everyone is saying hallelujah, hail Mary now that the storm is over- and we can let the sunshine in and f a c e i t w ith a gr i n. Everyone except the inhabitants of Hawkins, Indiana who aren’t saying anything at all because they’re g o n e. That's right listeners, better stock up on cereal because it’s a lot of milk to go through. Every man, woman and child. Did they wash away? A ghost town or a town full of g h o s t s? You know what they say listeners. Ghosts don’t haunt houses, they haunt the empty places. Neighboring Police are saying that they’re going to get to the bottom of the mystery but you know what I think, listeners? I think Indiana has its own little Hoosier Urkhammer, Roanoke on the Wabash. The word of the day is Cr o a t o a n, listeners- ]

The two men blink at the radio as it falls silent again.

Phil Callahan is mediocre. He’s unreflective. He only has one question about everything that’s going on and it’s probably one of the smartest he’s ever asked.

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we, Chief?”

The Chief, pinches the bridge of his nose, runs a hand down over his mouth.

“Yeah. Callahan. We’re in trouble.
Jonathan wonders vaguely as he breathes free air again if this is what Nancy had felt after he pulled her back through the tree- an unsteady sort of disbelief where safety feels equally within arms reach and impossible- like a rug ready to be pulled right back out from under you- and nothing seems quite solid or certain as adrenaline ebbs and everything comes back into focus and only one thought is able to make it through the jumble with perfect clarity.

_I want to go home._

Steve doubles over and wretches yesterday’s vending-machine chips behind a tree and when he straightens up Nancy grips his arm and tells him whatever he does don’t _run_ because it’ll attract attention.

They walk _casually_ back to the car in the student parking lot in dead silence. No one comes after them. No one at all.

He doesn’t really want to think about why that might be.

_Six is out of containment-_  

They drive. Moments feel like snapshots with nothing in between them.

He tells Nancy that she has a bruise on her neck, fingers skirting it carefully and she tilts her head to lay her cheek on his hand.

Nancy starts to cry when they cross the border into Indiana. Silently and like she’s not sure why she’s doing it.

Steve curls up in the back, long legs planted on the opposite door, he only moves to mimic him and dip down when a suspicious car passes them, expression so blank that he doesn’t even think he knows why he’s doing it, dead to the world otherwise.

Nancy makes nonsensical turns. Doubles-back. Just in case. Turns a two hour drive into a three and a half-hour one. After all, it’s not paranoia if they really _are_ out to get you.

They had a lot to talk about so naturally they didn’t talk about anything, driving in silence until they finally risked a break at a truck stop outside of Fort Wayne so Nancy could grab them something to eat.

He expects Steve to make a run straight for the payphones. He definitely _doesn’t_ expect him to come to talk to him afterward- glancing back toward the mini-mart like he’s keeping an eye out for Nancy.

“How are the kids?”

“No answer,” Steve shrugs, looking _mostly_ unconcerned, “It’s game night. They’re probably too busy shouting at each other like morons and killing snake-guys.”

They stand in awkward silence, Steve scuffing the side of his sneaker against the pavement and rubbing the back of his neck.

“Look, man. I just wanted to say sorry.”

“For tipping off Roethe? Yeah- you’re maybe _not_ invited next time.”
“Understandable— but that’s not...what I said in the motel, about you...not helping. I was wrong. I never would have gotten us out of there.”

Steve’s so sincere when he apologizes he can’t even bring himself to suggest not acting like an asshole in the first place, so he just shrugs.

“I guess when all you have is a nail bat everything looks like a monster?”

“Pretty much,” Steve’s miserable expression deepens, mouth going sideways as he gives a conceding nod, “And...that kiss. You know she didn’t mean anything by it, right? She was just...she just thought we were going to die and was being nice. I just- I’m sorry.”


He used to be jealous of Steve Harrington. He doesn’t mind admitting it. To himself. He’d die before admitting it out loud. There had been days— exhausted from getting his books dumped, chased, cornered, trying to scrub sharpied Byers is a Freak off his locker and finally giving up when the words are a still visible ghost because someone’s just going to write it again tomorrow— when if some evil genie had come to him and told him that he could be like Steve Harrington but he had to spend an hour a day on his hair and he could listen to nothing but Wham for the rest of his life he would have taken the deal.

Because it always seemed so easy for Steve. Effortless. He just swanned in and people loved him like it was what the universe owed him. And he had hated Steve because he had fallen for it too, once upon a time, though at least he had had the excuse of being seven years old.

“You’re sorry?” His voice is deadpan and his expression must be about as chilly because Steve recoils slightly, “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” The other boy says, shoving his hands into his pockets with a shrug, “Yeah. I don’t want you to think- I don’t want anything to be y’know. Weird.”

Weird.

“Fuck your apology, Steve.”

Whatever Steve had expected it wasn’t that because the boy’s face falls, flinching like he had thrown a punch. Probably thought they’d share a manful nod of understanding as whatever social code that governed ‘near death experiences’ was adequately fulfilled so nothing would be weird between them.

“Oh-kay - I don’t really know where to go with that-”

The part that pisses him off, really pisses him off, is that he had been wrong. He wouldn’t trade places with Steve Harrington if you paid him.

What had looked like confidence had been fear of being alone so crippling that he thinks that Steve wouldn’t have cared so much if he had died in that room as long as he hadn’t been the last one left. What had looked like adoration and friendship had been poison so strong that Steve still can’t wrap his head around the fact that a friend wouldn’t begrudge him a second of happiness before they all died and would dismiss the kiss as some kind of charitable act before he’d believe that Nancy still cares about him.

Would apologize for it.
“You a lab experiment now too? When’d you get the psychic powers?”

“What?” Steve is getting desperate as the unreflective ‘ yeah, we’re cool man ’ he wants so badly slips away.

“Did Nancy actually tell you she didn’t mean it? Or did you just decide that for her?”

Realization dawns slowly but it dawns, the taut rubber-band tension falling away from Steve to make room for stunned disbelief.

“Holy shit. You’re pissed off that I’m apologizing for kissing your girlfriend?”

“She kissed you. And if she wanted to apologize she would.”

“Jesus, right- I almost forgot- you’re just so nonconformist and avant-garde and society is bullshit. But this -” The other boy gestures wide, summing up the this in question as ‘ basically everything in the world but especially them ’, “This isn't normal.”

“Are you sorry?”

“What? I just said-”

“Are you actually sorry about it or are you apologizing because you feel like you’re supposed to?”

“Byers-”

“So, are you sorry?”

“Jonathan, look-”

“Steve, are you-”

“No!” He slams the passenger door shut with both hands, rounding on him, all the bullshit finally frustrated out of him, ready for a fight if that’s where this is headed, “No, okay? God, of course I’m not. It was the happiest I’ve been in fucking months and I was about to die!”

Steve leans back against the car, neck craned back dejectedly because that was obviously information he would have preferred to have kept to himself and there’s the silence of two people actively not saying anything rather than the coincidental absence of noise

“So you’re supposed to be sorry, and you’re not and I’m supposed to be jealous but I’m not so what are we even talking about?”

He leans on the trunk next to Steve with a thump.

“I love her.” Steve says, because apparently they’re just...stating the obvious now. Or he thinks he’s gone deaf, dumb and blind.

“I know.” He murmurs, sympathetic, “Me too.”

Steve is staring all the way back to Indiana now, determined not to look at him, hell or high water.

“I was gone from Tina’s party for less than ten minutes.”

“What?”
“Tina’s Halloween party. I got back and tried to find Nancy and Nicole said you had already taken her home and I just thought, ‘Yep. That’s what you get, Steve. That’s how long it takes anyone to jump at the opportunity to put the knife in when you screw up. Eight and half minutes.’ It was almost a relief, y’know? That you weren’t actually different from anyone else. Not that I deserved you to be- considering...everything.”

“I”

“So you can imagine how surprised I was to find out that I asked you to take her home. I mean, by the time she mentioned it we had already gone to hell, but still. I spent like, a week trying to figure out what your angle could have been.”

“What’d you decide?”

“That you didn’t have one. You love her but you just...What are we, Byers? Friends? Is there a word for ‘person who barely tolerates you but is ready to die for you’ ‘cause the last friends I had wouldn’t buy me a Coke without making me pay them back and I’m pretty sure you hate me but you were gonna take a bullet for me.”

"I don’t hate you, you asshole."

Which wasn’t to say he never did. He’d hated him more than the mild, off-handed tag-along torment and vague below-his-notice ostracism that was the hallmark of Steve Harrington ages ten to seventeen probably deserved. He’d hated him more than he hated most people even though Steve hadn’t been the worst of them by a long shot, at least compared to the active, relentless, blood-scenting cruelty of Tommy H. or Derek Mancheski or Ray Drayton.

He'd hated him the most because he had actually... liked him, once.

( Two little kids. Steve, age nine and Jonathan age nine, existing together in the brief period of overlap where age seems to stand still for the older boy and Jonathan catches up.

But this time Steve says ‘I’m nine and a half,’ with a crooked smile, because time never stops for anyone and the days go by and he can’t wait to grow; stretch his bones, get tall and fast and strong, pull the curtains back on the world and race toward the things that adults do.

Jonathan doesn’t understand why. Steve already runs so fast.

This summer Steve’s developed a mania for the old Sanders Oak. He wants to get to the top, the very top and goes about it like there’ll never be another chance. It’s like he’s decided that if he doesn’t climb it by the time the first bell of September rings in the halls of Hawkins Middle School he’ll never climb it for the rest of his life and Jonathan thinks sometimes, as he’s scrambling for a branch he can’t quite reach and Steve is already planning his next grab that if he can’t keep up he’s going to leave him behind.

But the thin fingers always wrap around his wrist, his shirt, the band of his jeans and help haul so he’s never abandoned.

That day they straddle a wide branch together. Steve has just finished carving their initials into the tree, like he has at every new height. ‘Like an explorer’ he claims. Jonathan thinks Steve just likes seeing his name on things, likes to remind people that he’s there.

A game of Freedom has broken out half-way down Dearborn. He can hear Davey Munsen shouting as the other team scatters across the block.
He hates Davey’s guts and of course Davey’s team is winning.

Except a girl has made a heroic, single-minded and clearly unexpected run for the base to rescue everyone, fingers outstretched to touch the hand of an imprisoned Barb Holland with a triumphant cry of one-two-three-freed by me before the whole gang of them scatter like dandelion seeds, the girl running right to them to hide behind the oak’s trunk.

They lay on their bellies to get a better look, legs clung onto the branch like limpets, arms dangling free below them.

“Who’s that?” There’s a light in Steve’s eyes when he turns back to him.

“Nancy,” He says quietly.

“I’m going to marry her.”

And because he knows the girl from class and decided that he was going to marry her in second grade he adds; “Me too”

Steve nods at that and reaches over to fix his hair for him, because apparently Jonathan’s chances of marrying Nancy aren’t good in his current condition.

And the next moment Steve has leaned out so far Jonathan has to hook a hand on the back of his shirt to keep him from falling.

The girl looks up, startled, eyes like blue planets.

Somewhere there’s a rallying call of Olly Olly Ocean- Free, come home, Barb and Jimmy and and-A voice shouts her name and she’s running off to catch up to Barb Holland on the way back to base.

He thinks Steve is going to throw himself off of the branch to prove his immediate and eternal devotion- like knights in the stories proving their love with impossible deeds, fighting impossible fights and Steve will fight anything.

He catches the back of his shirt.

“Hey, don't leave me-”

Steve snaps out if it, bites his lower lip and grins in a way that turns his stomach in knots and makes Jonathan wish he was Steve.

“Yeah, no way. Never.”)

Question was did he like him now? Steve is shallow and competitive and can still be casually, reflexively cruel when he’s cornered. He clings to the suburban jock phony persona that Jonathan despises and prolonged exposure apparently leads to the two of them bickering like kids and cracks his carefully cultivated air of being above petty bullshit. They have nothing but Nancy and nearly dying in common because Steve has terrible taste in almost everything.

And yet.

He had meant what he said in that stupid motel room. Now that he’s not too cool to let himself Steve cares about people with a completeness and immediacy that Jonathan can barely comprehend beyond a very select few. He’s braver and smarter than he thinks he is and sometimes when he smiles at him
he looks just like that boy in the old oak.

Maybe friends wasn't the right word. They were something else now, all of them. Mom and Will and the kids and Hop. The three of them. The events of the last two years had caused an irreversible covalent bond, changed them all into something new, even if the what was still up in the air for some of them.

“Why’d you tell Nancy it was okay? Her and me? Why didn’t we have another big fist fight right there in my living room because I stole your girlfriend?”

Steve shrugs one shoulder. “No point. I... want her to be happy. And she wasn’t. With me.”

“So, you get it.”

Nancy is out of the mini-mart giving the two of them a considering, pensive once over as she heads back to the car.

“There’s a screwed up piece of paper on the floor of the backseat that he recognizes as a Detroit to Fort Wayne bus schedule and he takes more than the usual amount of satisfaction at kicking it out the open door into a puddle.

“I choose...” Nancy smiles slightly, forcing it but considering the last day none of them can blame her, “Jonathan’s mixtape.”

Steve throws his hands up, “Betrayal, Nancy, betrayal.”

They’ve broken the back of the silence. Or at least they’ve collectively reached that point where fear becomes a tertiary thing and realized that they’re going to just have to get on with everything at some point- might as well be now.

“And I know I was wrong
When I said it was true
That it couldn’t be me and be her
Inbetween without you
Without you-

“So—” Steve says speculatively, coaxing the ignition of the car to a sputtering start, “If those pills gives the girls with superpowers extra superpowers do you think if we—”

“No.” He and Nancy say together and Steve pulls a face -his dreams of being Superman dashed yet
again-as he fishes the bottle out of his pocket, turning it over in his hands. “Diethyltryptamine 19-any idea what they could-?”

It’s the longest of long shots but Steve’s dad does work on stuff like this and his mom- well, he knows that they have a well stocked medicine cabinet.

“Don’t even start, Byers,” But Steve gestures for him to toss him the bottle anyway and snatches it out of the air one-handed without looking, “I can tell you if it’s aspirin or Valium but anything in between and you have to talk to my-”

He trails off, running a thumb over the precisely handwritten label.


“Yeah,” He tries to keep the surprise that Steve Harrington had actually done his 10th grade English reading once upon a time out of his voice, “In the transcripts- The Tempest was what they were having her memorize for the code-”

Nancy scowls, “A spirit of air. Oh, I bet Roethe thought that was hilarious-”

She stops when there’s a low hum from the other boy, ironic and brittle as he fumbles to undo his seat belt and gropes for the door handle like he’s gone blind.

“Byers, you drive.”

“What-”

“You. Drive.”

They switch, Steve tosses himself into the backseat and shoves the bottle back to him between the seats like it’s cursed before settling back into a distracted thousand-yard stare.

“Steve...” Nancy says carefully, obviously remembering the last time they suggested he was anything other than the picture of stability, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine-I...I need us to go to my place when we get back. With your camera, Byers.”


“Just in case.”

Steve had half-expected his parents to be home, statistically improbable as that was, just because it would be the worst possibility.

He’s never been so happy to see no car in the drive, no lights in the house. The hastily scribbled note on the kitchen counter in his father’s sharp, neat writing that he looks at for a very long time as Byers and Nance dry off in the hallway.

*Steven- called away suddenly. Work emergency. Hotel will put you through. +1-519-334-6731*
He doesn’t call the number. He’s feeling cowardly tonight and can’t bring himself to confirm what he’s pretty sure he already knows just looking at it.

Left to his own devices he’d burn the note and wake up in the morning and run to the ends of the earth. Never look back at this shitty empty house where Nancy’s best friend died or this shitty town full of monsters. He’s becoming increasingly sure he’d never look back at this shitty family either.

But he’s not going to do that because he has a different one now. And it’s a bunch of nerds and a pint sized superhero and an angry cop and a woman that’s fragile and strong as spider web and the maybe love of his life and her boyfriend and it’s a strange fucking family but whatever ‘stop giving a shit’ button he pressed his entire life doesn’t work with any of them, so he’s not running away.

But he isn’t calling that number, either.

“Why are we here?” Byers says, setting down his camera bag to dig out his Pentax and some film.

Moment of truth.

“I don’t...look I don’t know for sure yet, okay?” He sighs and motions them to follow him, pulling open the door to his dad’s office, “You still have your gun on you, right, Nance?”

“Ye-s?” She says slowly, and very, very carefully.

“Keep it handy- I’m not sure when my dad’s getting home.”

When he turns back around they’ve both stopped dead in the hallway,

“Have my gun handy in case your father comes home? Steve...” Nancy’s mouth is set hard because it’s her turn to be worried and Byers is starring with open concern bordering on horror. Like he’s gone nuts. He hasn’t though. Probably. Probably hasn’t.

“Shit. No look, I’m serious, that wasn’t the Aboleth talking.” He slumps a little against the doorframe, “Please guys, you have to-”

“We trust you. Give it to me,” Byers says slowly to Nance who looks skeptical but passes it over anyway, “He’d be more likely to think I would actually shoot him.”

Steve snorts at that.

“Well, you’ve met him, so yeah.” He heads for the desk, Nancy trailing behind, taking the whole place in, probably trying to decide if it could be bugged. He tugs the note his dad left him out of his pocket and hands it to her.

“Can you call this, Nance? Find out where it’s for?” Nancy nods slowly heading for the phone on the desk, “Byers, with me. I might need your camera.”

Jonathan is beside him, camera in hand, fitting in a lens, expression unreadable and he pulls a tightly folded square of notebook paper out of his backpack, smooths it out on the desk.

“What’s that?”

“Instructions. Dustin made them for me when I was grounded- just in case I ever wanted to use this stupid thing. Dipshit spent half the night telling me I have move with the times. Like anyone but mega-nerds and assholes like my dad want a five grand typewriter.”

1) There’s a button on the far right. Press that to turn it on. Even you can’t screw up this part.
“Is it doing anything?”

“Making noise?” Very helpful, Byers.

It’s nearly a minute before the screen resolves into a gray background.

2) This is the desktop. The little pictures are icons. Use the square thing next to the Lisa with the rectangle button to touch them. Do not touch the square thing to the screen, Steve. When you move it the arrow on the screen moves. Use that to click those twice very fast on icons open them. Seriously twice, fast. Don’t just click twice.

He clicks the one called Ariel, twice, fast.

This file exists on an External disk. To Terminate the operation hold down the Apple Key-

“Hi, yes, I'm calling for James Harrington-? Oh. How long ago?”

3) The file I was looking at needed a floppy disk. That’s where the file is stored. I don’t know where it was but when you find it it goes in the slot in the front. Then try clicking it again. Good luck. Don’t break it.

“That’s a square plastic thing that-”

“Yeah, I know what it looks like Byers, check the drawers.”

“-Oh. Yes. Thank you.” There’s the click of the phone back into the cradle and Nancy comes up even with the two of them.

Big blue eyes meet his.

There was a time when he could have looked into those eyes forever but right now he can’t look at them at all. She stops trying to make him, looks over his hunched shoulders at Jonathan instead, hand outstretched.

“Jonathan. Give me the gun back.”

He almost laughs. He almost cries.

“Canada?”

Nancy nods, slowly, one hand goes to rest on his back and he can’t take the casual, dead-end affection. Not now.

“It doesn’t mean-” She starts, hopefully.

He shrugs her off.

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t, that’s why we need to find this disk.” He doesn’t trust that a smile won’t fail catastrophically, just keeps searching through the drawer next to Byers.

“Steve-”

“I’m good.” He says. Fast, automatic, and fiercely discouraging follow up, “C’mon, you guys are great at this. If you were contracting out your pharmaceutical company to government black ops where would you hide all your shit?”
He can see the next plaintive, concerned *Steve* coming and decides to head it off at the pass.

“Start sleuthing, Nancy Drew.”

The look she shoots him is annoyed which is miles better than dewy-eyed concern and she makes for the bookshelves.

“Maybe he has *The Tempest*."

Byers doesn’t need convincing, at least. He looks like any he’d love nothing more to not talk or be talked to about anything that’s happening.

Alright. His dad’s a dick but he’s not a mastermind. *Useful idiot*, Roethe had said. The Harrington family legacy in a nutshell, apparently. That means wherever he was hiding it wasn’t far and isn’t terribly brilliant. Easy enough that he had been convinced that they could have possibly found it last time or else it was in something else those little shitheads moved-

*Hey. Disneyland.*

He picks up the picture frame- doesn’t look at the nine-year old frozen forever from the perspective of his dad on Main Street U.S.A.- just flips it over and pulls back the little metal tabs with a thumbnail.

The disk is flush against the cardboard backing.

The floppy disk goes into the slot with a satisfying mechanical *clunk* and Nancy and Jonathan are at his side before he can even open the file.

Jonathan is already leaning over they keyboard, focusing his camera on the screen with Nancy flush against his side, one hand white-knuckling the back of his jacket. The two of them are in their element and he’s surplus to requirements now, which suits him just fine because he’s sitting down hard in his dad’s office chair.

Nance glances at Jonathan, “How many rolls-”

“Two sixteen shot rolls of color, three sixteen shot rolls of black and white. Shit-I might not have enough to take doubles on different rolls for safety in case there’s a light bleed-”

“We can go get more. We need to make sure in case we can't get access again.”

He should have known he couldn’t skate above it forever. Couldn’t just stay Steven ‘Wrong Place Right Time’ Harrington: Nothing To Do With Anything- just a damn good babysitter and handy with a bat. He knew what the lab was.

It was fucking *cancer*. Even if they had never broken through into the Upside Down it *still* would have been a sick, poisonous untreated tumor on the town of Hawkins, Indiana left to grow and infect unchecked for ten years. It’s absolutely no surprise that his family didn’t exactly have the moral immune system not to let the poison into their blood.

They concentrate themselves into silence, broken by occasional interested hum from Nance and the rapid raspy clicks of Jonathan’s camera shutter as she scrolls the documents and graphs, earnings reports and pie charts. He watches Jonathan with detached fascination as he oh-so-carefully rolls his film back, does something that pops the back of the thing open and threads in the next one.

“How bad is it?”
His voice startles the both of them enough that Byers is probably glad he has his neck strap on.

“It’s only for the Ariel project- the company was working on her LOT-Sev...but uh, some of the spending and R&D comparisons go farther back- to the National Lab.”

“ How far back, Nance?”

She rolls her bottom lip under her teeth.

“You’ve...lived here since ‘73?”

When Steve was seven he hadn’t understood why the hell they would move back from Chicago to Hawkins, Indiana. It had, of course, been the biggest disaster of his young life; uprooted from his friends right before the beginning of second grade, to a place that as far as he could tell, just didn’t make sense for anyone to live in. It wasn’t cool, he didn’t know anyone, there was nothing there, and instead of coming home every night his father ended up away half the week doing business in places where things actually were. His father had just said that it was his home-town, like he hadn’t run to the city the minute he left school. More room, his mother had said and young Steve had started a months long subliminal messaging campaign, leaving dozens of real-estate booklets scattered around with big houses in Winnetka and Claredon Hills and Glencoe circled in red crayon until his father swore that if he found another Re/Max in his briefcase or under his pillow he would move them all to Siberia. He had come to terms with Hawkins- ended up King Steve, biggest of the small pond fish-but he had never figured out why they had moved here of all places.

Well, that’s at least one mystery solved.

Life, the way he figures it, is a series of crossroads where you wager what kind of person you’re going to be against comfort and wealth and reputation, outcome frequently dubious. He’d chosen wrong for a very long, stupid time. He didn’t like that person and decided to change it-

“Forget about the camera. Put it away.”

Nancy looks up sharply, “Steve - I know it’s your father but-”

The floppy clunks back out of the slot when he presses the button in spite of her protests and in spite of her fingers digging into his wrist trying to pull him away, but the protests dry up as he presses it into Nancy’s hands, movements mechanical.

“Just take it, Nance..” He jerks his thumb at the computer, “Do you need anything else off of that thing?”

“No that’s the only file...” Clients. Bank Accounts. Dad was so full of shit.

"But we can’t just take it-" She sounds baffled as he repositions her without explanation, steering her away from the desk by her shoulders like she’s in the way and does the same to Byers before he walks past toward the bookcase to retrieve his bat from where it’s leaning.

“Yeah you can, Nance. You need to. Take it and make copies.”

“And do what, Steve?”

-And he’d thought that was enough, for a while. But it wasn’t. It wasn’t enough because he was choosing sure, but it was always after everything had already gone to Hell and choices were limited.

“When this is over you bring them to Bauman.”
And sometimes you need to choose what kind of person you are. Really fucking choose, not just wait for Hell to come to you.

“Steve, Murray will make sure this gets out—"

"Yeah, that’s the point."

"—and if we just take it your father will know you were in here when he gets home—"

It’s like the song. Nobody’s going to help you. You’ve just gotta stand up alone. You’ve got to dig in your heels and see how it feels—

“Oh, yeah, Nance. He’s gonna know .”

*And raise a little Hell of your own*

*Raise a little hell, raise a little hell, raise a little hell.*

The first swing nearly cracks the computer in half. The screen and case shatter in a cascade of glass and plastic that makes Nancy shriek in startled surprise. Even makes Byers let out a breathy, half-impressed *holy shit*.

Something in his chest squeezes in panic and elation. No turning back now because Steven J. Harrington has finally committed to something.

Second swing shatters the lamp with an electric pop. Third and what’s left of the computer hits the ground in a catastrophic explosion of off-white plastic and he thinks he hears Nance make a another startled noise. God, they better not tell Dustin that he just killed the thing. He’ll never forgive him.

The phone clatters into the opposite wall. The frame around nine-year old Steve shatters as the bat comes down right on it, a flimsy, cheap little lie against a bat that fights monsters.

When there’s nothing left to break he slows to a stop like a wind-up toy soldier, lets the bat hang loose at his side as he stands still in a circle of destruction, the quiet in the eye of a tornado.

...He’s starting to think these times when he’s not...one hundred percent sure of the order of events aren’t a great thing. Psychologically speaking.

He remembers standing in the partial ruins of his dad’s office and the *total* ruins of the life he had been counting on having with Nancy’s arms around him and Jonathan looking at him with a light in his eyes and grin that he’s never seen before and can’t really interpret, except that he obviously passed some kind of weird Byers test that he didn’t know he was taking.

After that Nancy is untangling herself from him, passing him off to Byers, and then he’s sitting on the living room couch as Nancy pounds up the stairs, two at a time, and Jonathan is asking him something about textbooks. Clothes. Shouting his answers up the stairs like a game of telephone.

*Text books on the bedside table. Backpack on the back of his bedroom door. Four hundred bucks he took out of his account after dad threatened to throw him out last time -just in case- hidden in his underwear drawer. Shove some clothes in the backpack.*

He doesn’t need anything else. Rest of it is bullshit.

He remembers being very concerned after thinking that and grabbing at Byers’ sweater.

“Shit, man- the walkie-talkie. Make sure she gets Dustin’s walkie-talkie.”
“Steve-?” Suddenly they're by the door, looking at him expectantly as he stops at the threshold.

“I’ll meet you guys at Byers’ place, okay? Soon as I can."

"You can't just-" Byers starts to say, but Nancy puts an arresting hand on his arm.,

"I have something I need to do, guys."

They exchange That Glance. Only question is which of them gets to be the one to ask it.

Byers gets to do the honors.

“Steve, are you okay ?"

Fine

Good

Fine

“No.”

The first time Steve had heard The End Of the World was the summer of 1977.

He’d heard it a bunch since then. For Jill and Margaret and Ann-Marie The Secretary and Julie That Little Slut from Accounting , for Marlene-Melanie-Maureen . But he still remembers the first time he heard it.

He’d been ten. Freshly free of the loser influence of Jonathan Byers and well on the way to being Cool with Tommy Halloran. He’d learned that only babies play in the stream or climb trees or read comics and that he’s supposed to be trying to get girls and date them like the older kids date. He’d just smoked his first cigarette and Tommy had laughed his ass off when he coughed until he cried. He’d lied that his mom needed him home early and had slunk off back to his house to puke, promising himself he’d never smoke another one and knowing that he would the minute Tommy made fun of him for it.

He remembers it clearly because when he let himself in with the key under the mat the song had been on and the record had been skipping.

End of the world end of the world end of the world  end of the world end of the world

If he had still been nine he would have thought it was scary, been worried about where his mom was and that she was letting her record skip like that, ’cause it ruined them. But he had been ten and not scared of anything so he had just fixed the needle.

He’d found her in his dad’s office, sitting on the floor, surrounded by manila folders. She had looked up at him with huge eyes and silently held an arm out for him. That really scared him because parents were never supposed to look that upset and also because they weren’t supposed to be in Dad’s office- he definitely wasn’t- and he didn’t want dad to take his bike away.

She’d held him there in silence for so long that he started to wonder if Grandma or Grandpa had died. Held him until dad came home from work and became a tall, broad silhouette in the door. He’d told him to get out and Mom and Dad had gotten into a screaming match that had drowned out the song.
Steve was growing up and learning adult mysteries as fast as he could, so even at ten he had figured out what that meant and what his dad had done. He couldn’t have known at the time that he was way off—though it did turn out to be an accurate prophecy as mom soothed her conscience with barbiturates and dad found other company with Jill, and Margaret and Ann-Marie The Secretary and Julie That Little Slut from Accounting, and Marlenne-Melanie-Maureen.

His life feels like one of those Magic Eye puzzles that they print next to the Sunday funnies. Look long enough and focus and it’s a sailboat. It’s a bus. It’s a bunch of kidnapped kids tortured by shithead scientists until they rip a hole in reality.

Surprise.

His dad gets home three hours after Jonathan and Nance leave. Must have gotten one look at the place, turned around and put his foot down on the gas. He doesn’t call for him or mom, just heads straight to his office.

One. Two. Three-

Frantic footsteps running past the living room toward the kitchen.

“Phones out,” His father skids to a startled stop in the hall, “The storm.”

“Steven?” The man composes himself but he can still see that he’s pale as a ghost, “Why the hell are you just sitting there—there’s been a break in—”

He notices the bat, right around then.

“Steven... what have you done?”

He shrugs, tapping the end of the nail-bat idly against his sneaker.

“I’d say ‘what I had to’ but let’s be real, it was pretty unnecessary.”

Part of him wishes Byers was here right now, just to get a shot of his dad’s expression, ‘cause the usual stoic condescension drops into baffled, slack jawed confusion before settling on cold anger.

“Oh, god, Steven-you idiot. Let me guess, that little bitch Nancy Wheeler put you up to this? You absolute idiot, you have no idea what’s going on—”

“No idea?” He stands, still tapping the bat like he can find a rhythm for himself with it, nails digging into his calf a little with each tap. Pinpricks of pain to keep him focused, “You moved us here ‘cause your company won the bid to handle the pharmaceutical work for the Hawkins Department of Energy which wasn’t actually a Department of Energy ‘cause if they were they, y’know, wouldn’t need pharmaceuticals. It was a MKUltra program run by this total asshole Brenner who kidnapped little girls and screwed with their heads until they became superheroes that they could use to fight the Russians. But the Lab got shut down because it tore reality open, got Will Byers kidnapped and Barb Holland killed in our backyard and spilled of bunch of shitty monsters from a shitty dimension into our already incredibly shitty town, twice.”

He’s swinging the bat too hard, he knows it. Little pinpricks of pain are going to be bruises in the morning.

“So, go on Dad, call me an idiot. One. More. Time.”
There’s silence as his father’s jaw twitches and his throat works like whatever he wants to say is trapped there between his adam’s apple and tongue.

"How do you-"

"Why, dad?"

The man blinks, obviously startled that his idiot kid actually cares about something enough to talk back to him.

“I...it was important work, Steven. When you were a kid...the nuclear escalation with Russia was... What father wouldn’t try to make sure his boy got to grow up? The Search and Arrowhead projects practically guaranteed that we'd win-” He stops, licks dry lips, “It was for the family.”

“Yes? Oh yeah? The family? The kid that never got to see you? The wife that had to keep it a secret? I remember what mom was like before we moved here. It destroyed her,” His vision is swimming, he digs a nail into his ankle to clear it, “And they...they...stole kids from their families, right? And they couldn’t read or eat food they wanted or tie their shoes and they let monsters get them or terminated them if they weren’t useful. Tell me you didn’t know that part.”

His father shifts, tries to set his face hard and fails, ends up looking shaky and uncertain.

“The country needed every resource-”

“Screw you, asshole! They weren’t resources! They were kids.”

“Steven, they were successfully triggering super-human abilities. The potential- the opportunities if it expanded-”

The money. He means the money.

“Jesus Christ, you helped them hurt kids just so we could be rich in suburban Indiana?”

If he wasn’t about to cry already that might have done it because boiled down it’s the saddest thing he’s ever heard in his life.

His father swallows, trying to find his voice but it comes out as a croak, “Steven, where... were you this weekend?”

“Took a road trip with Nance and Byers, Dad. Up to Ontario. Probably just missed you.”

Nothing has ever been soft about his father. He was hard and sharp and distant, pathologically in shape and proud of his hairline. But before the sentence is fully out of his mouth something changes, his expression goes slack and stupid and strange, more open and honest than he’s ever seen it, even if it’s ‘honestly horrified’ and without the usual look of wry detachment it’s like every feature changes by a tiny degree that alters the whole. The sharp lines look stretched, the thinness turns to hollowness, paleness looks sallow. He sees lines and dark circles and a place where the man missed a spot shaving and the stubble is going gray.

His father suddenly looks old.

“God,” James Harrington wheezes the word out, knuckles pressing into his stomach like he needs pain to focus too, “God. Steven. It was you. You let it out of containment.”

“Her,” His father flinches hugely, “And we rescued her, yeah.”
Sort of.

“You rescued-? Steven, you have no idea what you’ve let loose.”

“Who. And yeah, no. She wasn’t some monster. She helped us when your co-workers tried to use her to murder us.”

“Tried to-” Steve uses the grip of the bat to swat away the hand his father stretches toward him, watches the man’s face fall again as his carefully cultivated popular, stupid, handsome son scowls like he’d rather be comforted by the Demogorgon, “Steven- she was there for a reason. A...a cat can spare a mouse but it doesn’t make it less of a predator.”

He shrugs, “Too late now. Just a thought-maybe next time don’t make little kids into weapons.”

“You don’t-”

“Understand? Still? What am I missing, dad? Go ahead, I’m all ears.”

“She’ll eventually come back here, to Hawkins-”

“She didn’t want to come here. She wouldn’t come with us.”

“You offered-?” The knuckles digging pits in his father’s ludicrously expensive suit jacket are white as the bone below them, “Jesus. It doesn’t matter she’ll come here anyway and she won’t be able to control herself and with the lab closed there’s no one to contain-”

“Why would she want to come here?-” God, why would anyone? “I mean, ‘Town where assholes experimented on me’ wouldn’t be high on my must visits-”

“She will...”

“Why?”

“She just-”

“Why?”

The side of his father’s fist hits the wall with a thump that rattles half a dozen family photos and knocks eleven year old Boy-Scout Steve off the wall.

“Because her father is here, goddamnit. She’s Sara Hopper.”

Steve Harrington has experienced a pretty wide range of physical blows. He’s had his face pummeled into the pavement with righteous- if slightly unhinged- rage. He’s won fights with monsters and lost fights with Billy Hargrove- lost fights with Billy Hargrove so badly that they made him wish for the monster. He knows the helpless feeling of being clobbered with a plate or a sock full of gym locks and the absolute horror of being completely at the mercy of something whose only desire in life is to cause you pain.

He’s never felt a punch thrown half a room away, though. Never felt the air knocked out of him and something essential breaking without ever being touched and his brain checks right out.

The room sways and distorts like it’s November and he’s concussed again, punch drunk.

“What?”
“One of her doctors was...from the Lab. She had some limited technopathy...readings didn’t work right with her medical equipment- she could turns things on and off- Brenner- well, she's probably only alive because of the things Brenner's people did, so from a certain point of view.” His father is shrinking by the minute, shoulders hunched, expression collapsing, “...After she went into remission...he-he needed something to keep her-”

Sick.

“-and make it seem as though she had- passed. She's Jane Doe-even in the project documentation- but there are medical records on that disk. People will put two and two together. This can't get out, Steven, you understand that don't you? Not without ruining us. All of us. I need it back-”

Maybe it’s the weight of it? Maybe that’s why he can’t breathe at all. The weight of the secret that his father just inflicted on him.

He'll have to tell him. He'll have to stand in front of Hopper and open his mouth and this is what's going to come out.

Or worse. He doesn't. What does he even say? Is it worse to let him think she's dead? Or is it worse to tell him that she's alive and she's been years without him being tortured while he mourned for her and that she's kind of a monster and doesn’t remember how to tie her shoes-

His father is crying. It's a weird thing to see. He’s never seen him cry before and it might have meant something to him if he was crying for anyone besides himself.

Steve’s bleeding. He hadn’t realized before but his pant leg is damp with it where the nails pierced cloth and skin. It hurts? He guesses. He can't really feel it because he's just watching.

Can invisible punches knock you unconscious? It suddenly seems like a really important question because everything has taken on the detached, flat, unreality of a dream and he feels like he's outside of himself, which is terrifying enough without-

[Hey, amigo, what the fuck are you doing there?] Billy Hargrove grins his wide, manic grin at him between banister slats [Why do you even carry that piece of shit around?]

*It kills monsters.*

The nails of the bat make deep, white trenches in the perfect hardwood of the living room floor as he drags it. His father is backing away into the front hallway, hands up in desperate supplication. He’s saying something but honestly, who cares what at this point?

[Well, fuck, Harrington, what are you waiting for? He’s not even real. Does your dumb ass even know what’s real anymore? He’s just wearing human skin. His face is going to open up]

*Your heart and let the sunshine in.*

Hargrove slithers down the stairs onto the landing.

[That's it Harrington, that's it-you're gonna taste so good when you se e me, princess- his face is gonna open up and it'll just be Eth. Look at yourself, you aren’t and neither is he. You aren’t anybody. You don’t even exist anymore. might as fucking well, right? What does it matter?]

Dad trips over a discarded sneaker, goes down hard on his ass against the side of the stairs.

Might as well.
“Steven-? Listen to me, Steven -”

[Hey, Harrington- it’s the world series! Hey batter batter batter s w i n g batter-]

He should have let Nance and Byers stay. They’d be able to tell him if he was dreaming this, like that day back in the lab.

[C’mon amigo! WH A T DOES YOUR B A T DO?]

“It kills monsters.”

"What-

When all you have is a nail bat everything looks like a monster, Steve. Breathe. It's going to pass in a second-It's going to pass-

It's going to pass in a second-It's going to pass-

It's going to pass-

"It's going to pass."

It doesn’t completely- everything still feels distant and sluggish and dreamlike- but he can talk so he's breathing. And he can feel that he's breathing so he can't be watching himself about to hit his dad with a nail-bat from somewhere else- it's actually him doing it, not the Aboleth or some wind-up toy version of him. Ironclad logic. Dustin would be proud.

Thanks, Byers.

He twirls the bat one handed, lets it land on his shoulder and walks past his father.

[Where the hell do you think you're going Harrington w h e re are you going you can't R U N]

"Steven..." The man says to his back because no one in his family ever knows when to just stop talking, "Those people. Your friends getting you involved in this-they're going to get you killed- we can fix this-

The rain coming in feels pretty good when he opens the front door. Maybe he'll bike to Byers' place.

"Not sure when I'll be coming home again, dad."

Neil Hargrove doesn’t know why the woman won’t stop looking at him. Hell, it’s not like he killed her.

She’s twenty, maybe a bit older, with a hole in her head and accusing eyes. He remembers the first time he ever saw her, laying on top of her kids- or someone’s kids, hardly mattered that day in Pinkville, one body was the same as another.

[ Tạ i sao tôi chê ?]

He doesn’t fucking know. He’d come in with Thompson in B Company after Charlie company and Medina lost their fucking minds. It wasn’t his fault she was dead.

But here she is regardless, hovering over Susan as she makes meatloaf. Susan with her red hair and
bleeding cuticles and fragile, people-pleasing nervousness so, so much like Alice before Alice finally cut ties and ran. He doesn’t know how he finds them- it’s like he’s a radio, tuned into their station. Women that need a firm hand, women on the edges of the pack, waiting to be taken down like limping gazelles. Women who want to be dragged away by the neck.

[Tại sao tôi chết ?]

The woman leans over Maxine when the girl ducks in and out of the house like a ghost, hands clutching like she can make her stop. Like maybe he should. Maxine isn’t his though- Susan wants to let her daughter whore around with a group of boys it’s her business and laying hands on her is a line that he’s only skirted the edges of.

The woman leans in close as he drinks to try to get rid of her, light streaming through the hole in her head.

Last time she went ducking out of the house he gripped Maxine’s arm. Not too hard. Nothing that Susan would object to. Just held her wrist and moved his thumb gently over the tendons and blue-green veins.

The little bitch looked at him with wide eyes that at least had the sense to be concerned.

“William is going to come get you if the sirens go off. Don’t give him any lip.”

Maxine hunched up like a frightened dog and nodded and he thought, even as she twisted away from him that he could feel the static of a radio tuning.

[không có sự tồn trong]

The woman wraps her arms around his neck like a lover as he slams his boy’s head into the vanity mirror, leaving blood and cracked glass and the goddamn worthless kid clutching his face and bawling on the floor of his bedroom asking if he sees it too , as though the boy had ever seen anything in his life worth crying about.

Alice had left him William. A goddamn long-haired waste of a son. An embarrassment. An insult . She’d known, she’d fucking known when she packed a bag and disappeared what she’d given him. Weak fruit from a weak tree.

He’d known that there was something wrong with the boy the minute he held him in the hospital, saw that he was dead somehow behind the eyes. If it had been a few thousand years ago he would have been able to go out back and chuck him off a cliff. Better luck next time, Alice. A few hundred and he would have been able to hand him off to a minder that would have made sure he died in his crib.

Neil was not a man with much imagination but sometimes he found himself falling down a hole of thinking that the boy was his punishment- from her , from the kids she had tried to protect, from a hundred others he had seen scattered in Mai Lai after they got there too late. Thinks that some things are stains on the world so huge that they can’t even be witnessed without being passed on and William had nothing but that inky black stain where a soul should be.

He’d done his best to make his son normal . Did his best to beat the strangeness out of him when he found him in the backyard catching and dismembering little lizards as a child. Had told him that a man kills for food and made him eat the squirming, dying things.

Found reasons to tan him raw when he spent too much time around Alice, tried to keep him from turning into a weak-sister mother’s boy that hid behind a woman’s skirts. Trained him so well that
the boy didn’t even say goodbye to her when she packed up and left them. Sure as hell didn’t let him see him cry for her.

And after all that effort he still had to beat the deviancy out of him when rumor of what Maxine had seen him doing under the boardwalk had gotten back to him through Susan. Thought he had killed him that time. No court would’ve convicted him if he had.

“A man doesn’t cry, William, say it.”

He unloads on him pretty good. Open hand striking him across the cheek hard enough to make his palm tingle because William doesn’t deserve to get hit like a man when he’s crying. It would be a lie to say that he takes no satisfaction in this. He hopes somewhere Alice feels it. They say mothers can do that, don’t they?

“It won’t leave me alone -”

He had hoped Indiana would straighten him out but here he is, crying on his bedroom floor, begging him for help like a goddamn pansy.

He makes him take his medicine. No mistake.

“Say it.”

“A man doesn’t cry, sir .”

William thinks he’s a man. Thinks getting into fist fights and screwing a bunch of high school girls that are too stupid to know shit from Shinola makes him a man .

“Louder.”

“A man doesn’t cry, SIR.”

And there’s something about taking apart a hollow man, seeing the shame and the acceptance that he deserves this and that he was no man at all- just a weak, pansified, little boy who would have to think again if he thought he had ever done anything that earned him the right to smart off to him.

He’s not even looking at him. He’s looking past him- at Susan he thinks at first, walking past with flinching, silent disapproval. But she’s not- the boy is just looking at nothing.

“Stand-up, goddamnit, take your medicine like an adult.”

He tugs his belt from his trousers, flips the loose end over once and pulls it tight around his knuckles so the buckle jingles and swings free. It was a practiced motion- been giving him the belt since he was five years old, buckle since he was nine- and William finally looks at him with those dull, bloodshot eyes that are making him so furious as he gets slowly to his feet, gripping his mirror to steady himself, blood dripping down the bridge of his nose.

William doesn’t say a word or make a sound- there’s only a split second when his posture changes to warn him to bring a hand up before the boy swings the tall, half shattered mirror at his head.

He tries to whip the belt around- it cracks in the air like a starter pistol- but his boy ignores it, brings the mirror down again and again and-

The woman with the bullet hole in her head crouches beside him as his son beats him to the ground. He knew. He knew what William was. He knew from the day he was born-
Over the course of his life Billy Hargrove had fantasized about killing his father the way that other kids fantasized about being astronauts or superheroes. He'd pictured the look on the man's face when he finally did it down to the dilation of the pupil. Pictured the things he would say. How he would build to it. How he would know for days, weeks, before he did it as the man screamed in his face and ate breakfast and drank beers on the couch watching The A-Team. Pictured the way he would make him beg him not to. How he'd humiliate him. Make him call him sir. But for the act itself...he'd always pictured it like in the movies. He'd stab him or shoot him or hit him over the fucking head and down and out he'd go. See you in Hell, Neil.

But none of it had happened that way. He'd hit him because he just couldn't get hit anymore- not now, not with the thing watching and telling him what to do. He couldn't stop hitting him because he knew that if Neil could stand back up at any point after the first one he'd kill him. The man hadn't just gone 'oh' and fallen down dead-he's still making noises.

"Dad?" He says stupidly, not sure why he's even saying it.

He drops the vanity mirror, lips pulled back from teeth as Steve motherfucking Harrington who won’t ever, ever leave him alone gives him a slow, sarcastic clap from the doorway.

[Good job buddy. You really got ‘im]

“Fuck. You.”

[In your dreams maybe, Hargrove]

In all of the fantasies it did something to him. Changed something in him. Banished the broken glass shards in his blood that screamed for destruction because he had finished his masterpiece, his Ride The Lighting, and the one person on earth that scared Billy Hargrove had been deleted.

But nothing is different.

Nothing changes.

He's still afraid. Afraid of the thing wearing Steve Harrington's face that won't leave him alone.

[You know what you have to do Billy] Steve grins a grin that he wants to break, [Go n u t s]

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage:
The Satanic Panic of the 1980s looks silly now, not least because of how unintentionally hilarious Chick Tracks like Dark Dungeon are. But people truly believed that absolutely ludicrous dark rituals were being performed all over the country. Remember kids, the brain is an amazing organ, but it's all about how you use it!
“The mind was a trap—it was a cage that slammed down over you.”

— Peter Straub, Ghost Story

It's a dead man's party who could ask for more?

Everybody's comin', leave your body at the door

Leave your body and soul at the door

--Oingo Boingo

At ten after six in the morning The Eno river breaks its banks. A series of blocked run-off pipes and storm drains from Denfield up to Loch Nora cover the road with so much water that half the routes out of town are perilous to impassable. The Roane County Highway patrol keeps their distance and close the exits on Route 224 and the Interstate. Winnie Larson spends twenty minutes trying to raise Jim Hopper but gets nothing but static and some song that sounds like it should be coming out of a Sunday school. Officially calls it in as Weird as heck and decides to drive into town. Hours later dispatch receives a panicked call, 'It won't let anyone in'.

At twelve after six Don McCorkle of the Hawkins Department of Public Works redirects a catastrophic volume of water from the Quarry reservoir back into the drainage system and Lake Jordan goes roaring through the Lakeview Trailer Park with devastating speed and force, sweeping homes from their foundations and into each other like a car pile-up. It turns the streets of Southern Hawkins into canals and Phil Callahan goes down to Lakeview with Emergency Services—expects at least a dozen dead when he sees the mess. Ends up twiddling his thumbs as each search comes up empty like the whole place was already abandoned. Don can't for the life of him remember who ordered him to dump the quarry run-off.

At twenty past Gary Bernard gets an emergency call at home from the overnight ME for the first time in ten years. Tom Austin claims the refrigeration system in the morgue must have shorted out because black liquid is leaking from a dozen drawers. Doesn't think much of it except to be glad that it's Tom's responsibility until the man starts reading off the names of all the rapid-decomp's Jim sent his way. He tells Tom to lock the door and leave the stuff alone. Never did know in this damn town.

At a quarter past Mayor Larry 'A Bright New Future For Hawkins' Kline—(who has been awake and orchestrating throughout the crisis and was not just recently pulled out of bed by a frantic aid) stands soggly in the Hawkins Police Department and tells Florence Larkin that he needs everyone currently sandbagging the area around Cherry to redirect their efforts to the Starcourt construction site near the Fair Mart. It would be a real disaster, after all, if the storm delayed the project. They couldn't afford to lose that sort of economic opportunity just to keep a few rec rooms from getting soggy. Everything between Dearborn and Cherry boils and foams with what half a dozen witnesses would swear is
motor oil. Another half-dozen would swear that something was moving in it. Bev Mooney battles through the water to try to start her generator and finds a hank of long, blonde human hair clinging to her rain boots.

Susan Hargrove cleans up broken mirror glass, wondering what on earth she’s going to tell Neil. The kids can be so careless with their things and he gets so angry sometimes. She sweeps half a dozen teeth into her dust pan and leaves bloody footprints that she can’t see on the carpet. She doesn’t hear the cries of the dying man as the creature beside her eats.

At six thirty Billy Hargrove tries to drive out of town. Do you want to hear a story? There were these people right? In the olden times. And they’d choose a King - not the strongest or the most handsome - just some random douchebag who didn’t do anything to deserve it- and this guy, he’d get everything he ever wanted. Adoration, money, women- his life was perfect and he’d lord it over everyone else like he was better than them. Except when winter rolled around they had to make sure that the sun would rise- so they took the King and they bashed his fucking brains in and then they picked a new King. See even shithead olden times people knew that you gotta kill the king to be the king Billy. You see where you fucked this up, Amigo? Now you’re gonna get your ass in gear and fix it, aren’t you? I want to hear a yes sir' yessiryessiryefore he finally gives up. There’s nothing out there. Fuck Springsteen but he got one thing right- there’s only darkness on the edge of town.

At seven The anemometer on the roof of Hawkins middle school clocks average speeds of fifty miles per hour and the udometer has long since over-flowed. Bob Newby had put it all there as part of a mostly forgotten weather station built by a mostly forgotten man. The only person who ever checks it is frozen, starring out of his window.

One of the greatest moments of Scott’s childhood was the eclipse in 1963.

Unassuming and quiet and fifteen, he’d known even then that he wasn’t the sort of person that was ever going to be a part of history. He hadn’t minded- after all the world needed good people that did small, kind things just as much as it needed the ones that made earth shaking discoveries- but on that day in July he had a chance to be part of something big. Only two states were in the path of totality and everyone in the country had gone nuts about it. A quarter million visitors had streamed into little towns that could usually count the number of new faces you saw in a year on one hand. There’d even been a Peanuts cartoon about it in the paper. He’d taken his eclipse glasses and found the single best place that the almanac could point him to within biking distance and stayed there all day to stake out it out, reading EC comics that he technically wasn’t supposed to have because they were ‘pulp trash’ and listening to repeats of The Strange Doctor Weird on his radio. When it finally happened the streets were packed with people as traffic stopped dead, cars abandoned to watch the spectacle and not a single call went through the telephone switchboard until after it was all over.

It had felt a little like the world was ending.

From a sociological standpoint it made sense- after all, some cultures built entire belief systems around making sure the sun rose every morning and whenever the sun disappeared completely there was always a primal sneaking suspicion that maybe, just maybe, this time it would stay like that.

Of course no one had been worried enough about it being the end of the world to start offering blood sacrifices in the streets of Haven Village like Aztecs but he remembers more than one person expressing that the whole thing gave them a pleasant sort of heebie-jeebies. Young Scott Clarke
loved the heebie-jeebies but got his from the Friday night Roger Corman double feature at the Aladdin rather than predictable astronomical events.

But now, trying to make sense of what’s happening in the sky over Hawkins, Indiana, he thinks that this... this might actually be the thing to drive him crazy. This might be the first thing he just... can’t live with. A crack down the center of everything he believes so wide and catastrophic that it brings the whole thing down like a house of cards. A crack where pi is random and that old joke about Planck’s wife falls flat and a circle can sometimes have six sides and right angles don’t meet in the corners.

Because there’s no such thing as an unplanned solar eclipse. The planets don’t just jump ahead in their orbit’s like they’re cutting in line. He just...didn’t know about it. Heck, he’d been busy. It had gone under the radar and everything was...

Oh for Pete’s sake.

Of course he would know about it, he would have been telling the kids to watch for it all last week, he would have made a project out of it and taught them how to make pinhole viewers, he would have written a letter to the Hawkins Herald reminding everyone how neat it was going to be but to be sure to watch safely.

Scott’s not sure if it’s the part of him that’s trying to stay logical about the whole thing or the part of him that’s feeling hysterical about it that suspects that the sun is perfectly fine in Huntington and Simpson and Bangor and Los Angeles and New York City and Cape Canaveral and it’s only the sun over Hawkins, Indiana that’s going out. He has nothing to back that up but a desperate hope but he has to believe it. He has great faith in his AV club, but the idea of stopping something that could truly make that happen...

The rising sun, already obscured by by the storm, hangs on the horizon like a drop of ink as the already storm dark morning turns black.

The eclipse is at totality. He waits.

If this was a natural phenomena there would be a sliver of light on the other side as the shadow passes- any moment now-

The sky is absolute midnight darkness except for distant lightning flashes behind the clouds.

There’s a rattle of mugs and a sleepy ‘Scott, is there coffee?’ from the kitchen followed by a quiet, "Why is it so dark? Did we lose power?"

Morning is canceled indefinitely due to insufficient human sacrifice, Jen. Someone should write to the town Council about building a Wicker Man.

"I...I...don't." He barely manages before squaring his shoulders and doing his best, "Just the storm. Maybe the substation went?"

Hands wrap around him in the dark. Her hands. Jen's hands. Absolutely. No reason at all to jump out of his skin or for the sudden goosebumps prickling his arms.

"We'll probably have to go to the quarry soon."

"What?"

"To the school? With the power off they'll open up the shelters? You didn't forget that we signed up
to help with registration did you?” She yawns against his back and he can hear her pattering off down the hall, in search of coffee or candles and he’d know which if could bring himself to turn around and look, "It's awful out there."

The transformer at the substation blows first thing in an already coal black morning- which Hopper figures makes Mayor Kline’s repeated assurances that the storm drains were clear and that the thing wouldn’t go until 'tomorrow' true by the strictest, most weasley definition of the word. No doubt Kline’ll be patting himself on the back for a promise well kept.

Makes a hell of a light show when it goes, too- neon blue light flickering behind the clouds like it’s challenging the lightning- and Hopper has two thoughts, near simultaneously.

The first one is that they’re going to be dealing with I&M for a good long time after the storm blows through, 'cause that wasn’t a couple of downed lines or even just some flooding and he’s going to have to figure out a duty roster for clean-up-

And the other is it’s never going to blow through .

It’s never going to blow through, just like the unchecked tunnels would have just kept spreading demodogs and poison and spores as the things from the Upside Down remade their world to their specifications. This was their storm. Just theirs. And if the downpour ever ended-

You know what I think, listeners? I think Indiana has its own little Hoosier Urkhammer, Roanoke on the Wabash. The word of the day is Croatoan, listeners-

-It would only be because there was nothing left to eat.

"...So what if it's not moving around between dimensions like the flea or acrobat? What if it's the pen? " The kids have assembled a pile of assorted quilts and sleeping bags and at some point they’d commandeered the armchair and one from the dining room to build themselves a tent while Wheeler lays out what is either some of kind of advanced scientific theory or total nonsense from a game or, knowing them a little of both.

"So it's like Looney Tunes?"

"Um, no, Max. It's like quantum mechanics."

"I mean, it's like when Bugs Bunny spills ink on the floor and then he can climb through it like it's a real hole but if Elmer Fudd tries it's just ink. The thing that people are talking to is actually the hole." The girl looks a little uncertain, but straightens when Lucas beams at her and elbows Wheeler in the ribs.

"Okay. Yeah. It's like Looney Tunes."

"That's why Six said we can't kill it-it's transdimensional," Will chews his thumbnail, "It can be the hole in our dimension or it can be ink but when it's the hole-

"Bugs Bunny comes through and eats your brains."

"So we have to collapse it so it's stuck in our dimension," Dustin claps his hands like a snap trap closing, grinning at the others, "Then Hop could just blow it up with dynamite or something."
Oh. *Good.* He'll just have to dig out that Acme dynamite stash that county sent over last month.

"We just *collapse it into our dimension,* dude? How do we do that- *exactly-*? You have a dimensional collapser you didn't tell us about?"

"...This plan is still a work in progress, *Lucas.*"

"That's what I *thought.* Look, we should face it head on. El's *already* powerful and if those pills are some kinda super solider-serum I bet she can smoke it this time," Lucas looks at the girl hopefully "Right, El?"

Hopper clears his throat with a mildly threatening rumble and the kids all turn, wide-eyed and mildly guilty over casually volunteering his kid to fight the thing that already nearly killed her once already.

"-Hypothetically," Lucas trails off sheepishly, "Not as an actual plan that we're going to do."

Max gives Sinclair a mostly-fond whack on the arm with the back of her hand, "Stop talking." Jesus, he envy's them.

They bounce back from every awful thing like Spaldeens. They face the Demogorgon and Brenner with slingshots and bad attitudes and the demodogs with gas cans and swim goggles. Edna Pinbacker tries to kill them and they pour out of the house with theories and hypotheses like it's no worse than a visit by a particularly aggressive Jehovah's Witness and only Will Byers even *wants* to go home when he insists that game night is *definitively* over.

Hopper’s gonna lose his goddamn job because half a dozen parents are going to demand to know why he took their kids to Joyce Byers’ house instead of home after they were attacked by a crazy woman with an ax. And that’s the *best* case scenario. Worst case their parents are going to be like Roger Merrill who had watched the whole Pinbacker incident from his porch and sidled up afterward saying that the *tree* that went through the window must have been a *beaut.*

Doesn't matter though. They might not be *safe* here but he can't think of anywhere safer right now than together.

No one apparently told Jane though, 'cause she levers herself up off the floor as the kids start bickering about if making her more powerful could result in a *Dark Phoenix situation* whatever the hell that means- and padding quietly past Nancy and Jonathan asleep on the couch and back toward the kitchen. Wouldn't think much of it, except the kid usually glows like it's Christmas morning anytime she gets to be with her friends- right now her expression is the unhappy frown that he's come to associate with coming home late without signalling and mildly resentful TV-Dinners.

It's fine. She can have her space. He can hang back and not worry and-

He finds her sitting alone at the kitchen table with an ignored glass of orange juice and *no* snuck Eggo waffles, which is concerning. Lays the back of his hand against her forehead.

"Feeling okay?"

Jane shrugs noncommittally and takes a while to finally commit to an answer, "Yes."

“You're upset?”

“No.” She lies immediately. Jesus, it *is* serious.
“Okay kid, let’s pretend you told the truth there. *Why* are you upset?”

Her frown deepens like he's asking a question that he already knows the answer to and that’s **cheating**.

“*They* could have been hurt. *You* could have been hurt. I *need* to be able to help.”

*Help*. Introduce Jane to Ronnie Reagan and she could probably end the Cold War, defeat Communism and ensure the supremacy of the U.S of A through remote viewing and brain crushing assassination. Jane could cause world peace or world war or open a gate to a dimension that would annihilate everyone equally. Edna Pinbacker with an ax threatening her friends was *nothing* to her. Literally *nothing*. Swatting a fly.

That was the problem, though, wasn’t it?

“Mhm. Flo must have forgotten to tell me that you joined the force. Gotta talk to her about introducing the new recruits.”

There’s steel in her eyes and she bites out her words like each one is a blow, “I need to *help*.”

“We’re not having this fight,” Ignoring all evidence to the contrary, of course, “We had the whole thing handled. And you *did* help. You called me.”

They both know that she isn't talking about Pinbacker and both of ’em are too tired to keep the fiction that she is going for long.

“You *have* to give them to me. They’re *mine*. My sister-”

“I’m *not* giving you drugs.”

“It’s not-”

“It’s some kind of *DMT*, Jane. It’s literally drugs. The answer is *no*.”

“You *don’t* understand. They *need* me to fight it. To *save* them.” Jane slams her other hand hard against the table and he’s ready for the rattle of Joyce’s crockery in the cabinets and the windows in their frames, but there’s nothing, just the slight lingering vibration in the wood of the table, “And I’m getting *weaker* and it's not coming *back*. I tried to watch Mike, after the Code Red. Nothing. Nose bleed.”

“Youir powers aren’t recharging? Has that ever happened before?”

Jane shakes her head miserably.

“I was tired after the gate but this feels like...a nothing. A hole.”

He’s a heel. A real goddamn sonofabitch, ’cause there's alarm and fear for her, yeah, but there's a small, terrible part of him that can't help but think-

*They’d never have a reason to come after some normal little girl. He’d never have to worry that a fight in the school cafeteria would end with her breaking another kid’s arm with her mind or busting every window in the building. She’d never have any reason to fight a monster for the rest of her life-*

Intense dark eyes meet his and if he wasn't reasonably sure that actual mind-reading wasn't in her bag of tricks he'd have thought she'd reached right in and seen exactly what he was thinking.
"I don’t know the right words. I don’t know things like they do but I had gifts. I could help. Now I have nothing."

Hopper’d seen too much of the realities of the world to have any kind of rose colored glasses left. No matter how many bedtime stories and work books and words of the day they went through the more time she spent around her friends the more she would start to feel that she wasn't like them in some essential way. Start to notice the jokes that she didn't understand and the emotions that didn't come easily and the twelve years of normal development that had been stolen from her that he couldn’t replace. She might still not know what exactly, but she was far enough along to start to see that the puzzle was missing pieces.

“Christ kid, they don’t care about any of that,” He puts an arm out, lets her scoot her chair over and duck under it, "You're their friend."

“They need me to be their sorcerer.”

"No we don't, El." Not sure how long Wheeler's been listening in but he'd put good money on it being somewhere between 'since Jane left the living room' and 'fifteen seconds after Jane left the living room 'cause he's in the doorway, brow furrowed in confusion and concern, "You're more than your powers, you're not just our-" The boy stutters to a stop, those big eyes of his going wide, "...I never asked you if calling you 'El' reminded you of them or if it made you feel like you were still... do you like Jane better?"

She looks to him like he's got the answer for her. He shrugs his most unhelpful shrug 'cause the kid has to work some things out for herself.

"El," She finally says, "But not for Eleven."

"Not for Eleven?"

"A...second name?" She looks to him uncertain- he helps this time.

"A middle name."

"A middle name. Jane Eleanor Hopper," Wheeler sits beside her and she threads her fingers through the kid’s without missing a beat and the temptation is there to send both of them to separate rooms. In different houses. Miles away from each other- but that terrible fear of being nothing at all is out of Jane's eyes and he can be the scary father with the gun when this shit is all over, "It's pretty?"

"It's beautiful, " He'll eat his ugly brown hat if Wheeler's talking about the name, 'cause the kid has a voice like melty ice-cream, "We don't need a sorcerer or a superhero, we need Jane Eleanor Hopper."

On days one through say, fifty, he hadn’t thought of Mike Wheeler at all besides to explain to Jane that no matter how many times he called her, answering would put everyone in danger and be stupid. There’d been to much shit to do with clean-up and trying to figure out how the hell he was meant to take care of a super-powered thirteen-year-old CIA asset to worry about Jane’s little crush.

On day two hundred and fifty he began (too late) to think he should discourage this, or stop it altogether. Wheeler needed to find a regular girl that wasn’t in hiding from the U.S. government and way he figured it Jane had imprinted like a duckling on the first boy that ever showed her kindness-hell, one of the first people she ever met outside of that lab- It was too much power to have over someone else, especially for a thirteen year old.

He doesn’t know how many days it’s been now, ’cause the counting got quieter after the Snowball,
and he doesn't know if they're the great love that Jane's decided they are but he does know that the two of 'em have their hands in each other's clay in equal measure.

Still there's still a downward twist to her mouth and stormy unhappiness in those young-old eyes of hers as she seems to realize that Mike Wheeler's affection helps but somehow hasn't completely solved all of her problems in a stroke. Kid stares down at the table tracing condensation into the patterns of the wood grain as she works through it.

"I need to be able to help my friends or... Brenner. The Lab. It's for nothing. Mama would be for nothing. The pain and lonely and scared- would be for nothing." Her stare is entreating, a statement and a question all at once, "It can't be."

At twenty-three he emerged from a month-long siege to scorched earth, a nearly leveled city, and a field of dead civilians and marines, wondering what the hell the brass were declaring their victory over exactly. Doesn't remember much for a while after that but he knows that he asked the same damn thing, over and over and over. It can't be for nothing. It can't-and the universe always replied, 'Sure it can, Jim, sure it can.'

Not going to let her know that though. Ever, if he can help it.

"Alright, compromise. I get more information about what those pills are. You're not going touch them or take them...hell, you're not going look at them until I do. Alright, Jane?"

She nods seriously looking so grateful it hurts.

"I'll try to raise Owens. If anyone'll know anything about them it'll be him. Wheeler- the middle school has a HAM radio with it's own power supply and decent range doesn't it?"

The boy nods, "A Heathkit."

The kid is the defacto leader of the little group- pretty sure even the teens go on his say so when push comes to shove so he gets to experience the incredibly strange sensation of handing off command to a thirteen year old - "No one goes anywhere alone and that door stays closed until you hear the knock. I don't care if it's me on the other side, you don't let anyone open it. When she wakes up tell Nancy the Mossberg is in the hall closet."

Wheeler squeezes Jane's hand and gives him a nod of such grave adult responsibility that he suddenly sees why they all follow him.

Joyce is already waiting for him in the hall, still dressed and expectant, attention divided between the other kids squabbling over blanket-tent logistics and if they need snacks and whether or not the Aboleth is a Gödelian spoiler (Henderson seems completely and equally invested in the answer to the last two things being yes) in the living room and Wheeler and Jane holding hands in the kitchen. Thinks there's something a little bittersweet in that look but can't place it until he sees that Will is watching Mike and Jane too, at least until Max calls him a space-cadet and throws a pillow at him.

"Joyce Rachel Horowitz."

"James Christopher Hopper."

He can't help himself, "It's pretty?"

"You're always pretty, Hop." She looks up at him, anxious and stressed and tired but then she smiles a smile that takes ten years off of her. Ten, hell, make it twenty five. For that split second she might as well be a kid again in saddle-shoes and a Salvation Army school-set.
God— if someone had asked him two years back if you could love someone—really love someone—at thirteen he'd have said that he'd get back to them once he figured out of you could really love someone at forty. Now, though, with Mike and Jane in the kitchen holding hands on day four-hundred and whatever-the-hell he thinks that maybe he has loved Joyce since the first time he saw her. A tiny girl with too-short hair and rolled up jeans with a pack of cigarettes in the cuff, calmly eating a Good-Humor bar on the bench outside of Sherman's Drug Store as Jack and Bobby Gordon informed her in no uncertain terms that Hawkins didn't want her type of people there. As a boy from the wrong side of the tracks with too-long hair and an attitude problem that Hawkins also didn't want it hadn't been so much a decision as a compulsion to walk straight up and slug Jack in the face, even though Bobby was sixteen and big as an ox and going to kick his ass.

Bobby never got the chance because the tiny girl had unceremoniously grabbed the boy's belt and shoved her Good Humor bar down the front of his pants-didn't even miss a beat afterward before she grabbed his hand the two of them ran until they couldn't any more and they had to stop in an alley, breathless and laughing. He hadn't even known her name.

Maybe in all the years in-between that love had ebbed and flowed and found new outlets and gone dry like a creek-bed in a drought but it seemed like the path it took was indelibly carved into him, ready to overflow again the minute the rain came back.

Wasn't the right time though. Never seemed to be.

"Generator is set for a few hours if this side of town loses power- it's late, you should get some shut-eye."

"It's early and if you think I can sleep with this thing on the loose you're nuts, Hopper," She shifts, squares her shoulders against an argument he hasn't made yet, "If you're going out, I'm coming with you. It's not safe to be alone."

He doesn't insult her by agreeing to let her come along- an alternate dimension hadn't slowed her down, he sure as hell wasn't going to be able to stop her and it was only going to be a matter of how put-out and huffy he was going to act on the way. So he gives her a nod and waits by the door while she ducks into the living room to kiss Will on the forehead and wake Jonathan long enough to whisper something that he can't hear but would bet on being some variation of 'look out for your brother' before she's back at his side.

"So, we're breaking into the middle-school?"

"Yup."

"Mr. Cooper was right about us."

"Sure was," He hasn't slept in two days and showered since...well, sometime before that and his breath tastes like he ate an entire wet dog, but he can't help but grin, "Couple of hell-raisers."

It's like Jonathan and Nancy have never even seen The Empire Strikes Back.

Well, maybe Nancy actually hasn't because it doesn't have Tom Cruise or Molly Ringwald in it but Dustin knows that Jonathan has and he at least should know that you don't leave one of the heroes alone with their evil dad that works for the Empire.

How many times? How many times does he have to say it? Don't split the party. It's not rocket science.
‘He needed to do it alone’ Nancy had looked all serious and kinda proud when she said it- at least until he had pointed out that every time someone says that it always leads to something bad happening that could have been avoided completely if all of their stupid friends had just stayed and helped instead of just deciding arbitrarily that they had to do it alone. No one ever has to do anything alone! That’s why they have friends and girlfriend s and ex-girlfriend-friends or whatever to watch their back.

If Steve comes back missing a hand, he’s going to be so pissed.

Figures he probably still has both when Steve finally rides up- on his bike. His bike! In the storm! Like that's a totally reasonable thing to do even though after three days of rain everything that isn't pavement is a basically muck and all the drainage ditches were overflowing into the road and he could have crashed and died or been hit by lightning. Steve probably doesn’t even know that cars are grounded and idiots on bikes aren’t.

And he acts like they’re the ones that need a babysitter.

"Do you know that bikes aren't grounded and it's really dumb to ride them during a lightning storm?" Steve startles slightly as he cracks the front door open before the other boy even gets up the porch steps, "Also hi."

"Hi, Dustin." Usually Steve'd at least pretend to sound exasperated with him, but he mostly just sounds tired.

"Hop says everyone has to do the secret knock."

"You’re talking to me right now. You already know it’s me."

"Yeah, but we have to check and make sure it’s really you."

The barely composed expression on Steve’s face drops immediately into miserable, horrified confusion and he wants to tell him that he’s not accusing him of being a spy or anything and that he knows that he’s the real Steve- but then that look falls apart and Steve starts to laugh - laugh so hard that he has to sit down on the porch.

“Fuck man, even I don’t know that.” Dustin has no idea what that's supposed to mean, except that it's probably not great, but Steve pounds the secret knock out on the wood of the porch between laughs so good enough. Hopper’s instructions followed. Check and check and he’s out the door like a shot ‘cause Steve is soaked and not wearing a coat even though it’s just above freezing and he can see in the porchlight that there’s a big, dark stain on the leg of his jeans that he’s ninety-nine percent sure is blood.

“Hey, buddy,” At least Steve’s stops laughing when he sits down next to him, “Lemme take a look at that.”

The older boy blinks at him like he’s just realizing that there might be a reason to look at that-

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.”

-and that’s way too many affirmatives and way too little asking for his medical credentials, protesting, and calling him a shithead for normal Steve so part of him thinks he should run inside, lock the door and call the others because there’s ‘acting weird’ and then there’s ‘evil supernatural impostor’ and he's not sure which one this is- but that part of him can go straight to hell because even if it is in Steve’s head he’s not going to just let it stay there until he’s crazy like Pinbacker. They’ll figure out something, like they did with Will. They could drive it out of him with the power of... friendship.
Omigod, he does not have a plan here.

He half expects to take a nail bat to the head when he leans over and rolls up the leg of Steve’s jeans, but Steve just sits there and lets him. The blood is tacky and dark and the porch light is dim but he can still see a half-dozen punctures in the teenager’s calf and it’s weird for Steve to be this...still...because even sitting down he always looks a little like he has to be ready for a starter pistol fired by a tiny subconscious gym coach- 'Ready... steady... nailbat! Let's see some hustle out there Harrington!” but right now he practically looks like he's sleepwalking.

“Okay. Yeah. That’s not great...we’re going to need to...do something about that,” What that something is, he does not know, ‘cause they look kinda deep but he can wing it like last time. Really Steve just needs to stop getting injured because at this rate Joyce is going to run out of band aids.

"Did your dad-?" He trails off, because Steve is just staring into the middle distance somewhere.

“No. I hit my leg with the bat.”

“What were you trying to hit-?”

“My leg.”

“With the bat?”

“With the bat.”

Huh.

“Yeah, okay, this seems like a pretty inevitable outcome in that case-”

Steve's mouth twists downward slightly and he shrugs a conceding shrug , like, sure in hindsight.

“Um, Nancy and Jonathan mentioned- I’m...uh, you know, the Death Star probably had contractors?”

Are you seriously talking about Star Wars right now, dipshit? What the hell is wrong with you?

... is what he desperately wants him to say. Instead the older boy gives a considering, noncommittal hum and keeps trying to avoid looking at him.

"I just mean, even the Empire had to have people who worked for them but didn’t know how evil they were. Maybe your dad-’"

“No.” Disgust flashes across that vague, spaced-out expression as Steve bites off the word, quick and savage and abundantly clear that his father doesn't deserve a single second of anyone making excuses for him, "He knew."

“Shit.”

Dustin gets it. He does-

Not how it feels having your dad work for the CIA, of course (although that would explain a few things) but he'd thought everything with his Dad had been okay too. Until is just...wasn't.

Just like that. One day he had a dad. Then he was gone.

He'd figured that there'd been some kind of mix-up 'cause Dad's don't just leave when nothing's
wrong. Parents are supposed to start fighting first and then the fighting is supposed to get worse and finally they're supposed to sit you down together and tell you that they both still love you and it wasn't your fault they were splitting up. But his dad hadn't done any of that.

It was weird how with everything that had happened to them in ‘83 that was what had seemed like the end of the world.

Speculation by Troy and James that his father probably had another family somewhere and another son that wasn’t a toothless freak hadn’t helped at all-especially on top of the the fact that he had just found out about the Upside Down, and they all could have been shot or eaten by the Demogorgon, and their new super-powered friend had sorta exploded herself saving their lives, and Will had still been recovering from being kidnapped by a monster so it wasn't exactly like he could make 'my Dad left' a Party priority. That fall had been a lot to deal with-

Oh. Shit.

Dustin didn't think Steve was Superman. Okay, so there might be some mild hero-worship going on and maybe some absent male-role model stuff that he hadn't totally dealt with but the point was he didn't think Steve was invincible or anything- it was just...he always just kept going, right? He'd fought a Demogorgon hours after Jonathan beat him up and had gone into the tunnels with them right after Billy, even though he thought it was a terrible plan. He'd jumped in front of Max- ready to swing away or die trying on that bus in the junkyard and he'd carried El half a mile and run another full one after the Gates and then gone to the Lab. He was their fighter- always ready to jump into the next battle for them.

Always. Even when he wasn't.

Steve's not acting weird because he's mind-controlled or psychic drain-ed or whatever else.

He's sad.

Dustin closes the distance between them and wraps an arm around Steve's shoulders in a wet, squelchy hug. He expects him to get self-conscious and embarrassed- shrug him off and call him a dipshit and do something baby-sitter-y like tell him to go inside so he doesn't catch cold because hugs are only acceptable directly before or after near-death experiences but he doesn't. His mouth turns down hugely and he looks up and away from him like there's something intensely interesting about the moth battering itself to death against the light fixture.

"Hey...you know you can talk to us, right? You don't have to always have to go through stuff alone."

The silence stretches out, only interrupted by the sounds of the storm- he doesn't expect much because Steve swore him to secrecy over what brand of hairspray he used, he probably wasn't going to-

"I...used to have this nightmare all the time," The older boy says quietly. "I’d get home and no one would be there, which was just like, normal -but I’d go upstairs and...it was like they were never there. All their stuff was gone- all the closets were empty and the drawers were pulled out- like they'd moved and forgot to bring me. But you’re fucking stupid in dreams so I remember thinking if I could find anything- just one sock-it meant that they had to come back. When I was ten I stole one of my dad’s- used to sleep with it under my pillow- even brought it to camp and on away-games."

“When did you stop?”
“Three hours ago, I guess.” Something in Steve's voice cracks and Dustin doesn't look until he
recovers, 'cause he knows he wouldn't want him to, "He wanted me to work for him after school,
Dustin. Dad must have thought I’d just join the sales division and be such an idiot that I wouldn't
notice any of it. Or maybe he just figured I was a piece of shit and as long as I kept getting new cars
and expensive fucking Nikes I wouldn't even care-”

“You would have cared.”

Steve still doesn’t look at him, just brings one knee up and wraps an arm around it. “You didn’t
know me before last year, man-”

“No, your asshole dad didn’t know you before now. Why do you think I even asked you to help me
find D’art?”

"Because you literally couldn't find anyone else."

"Okay, I’m not going to say that wasn't a factor but I would have gone alone before I brought along
King Douchebag .” Steve looks at him a little sideways, like he might be down on himself right now
but he kinda hopes they didn't actually call him that, "But hey, remember how fast everyone raised
money to cover Will's hospital bills after we got him back from the Upside Down? He wasn't
even awake yet and the doctors told Joyce the whole thing was taken care of. By the community."

There's the non-committal shrug again, "Yeah, shit like that makes people pull together-"

"Shut up, Steve. It was six hours. Mr. Clarke hadn't even had time to start a fundraiser. You were
'the community' and don't say you just did it to impress Nancy ’cause I'm pretty sure she doesn't
know either."

"I...said some stuff I regretted, okay?” Steve looks at him very, very hard, "Look if you ever tell
anyone about that, especially Joyce-"

"I won't, but you've just got to face it Real Steve- you tried, you really gave it a shot but even King
Steve was kinda shitty at being a bad person."

Silence washes back over them and Steve chews his lip and looks uncertain, like he's comforting him
against his will and what he really wants-deserves- is for them all to hate him and Dustin doesn't
know how he knows but he knows that there's something even worse that Steve isn't telling him.

“Real Steve, huh?” Steve’s obviously trying to go for sarcastic but just sounds sorta hopeful, "Don't
you have to ask me about my favorite superhero? Or...or about Benzene or whatever shit you did last
time-?"

“I’m pretty sure you’re real.”

“That makes exactly one of us.”

“Look. If you were the Aboleth you wouldn’t be telling me you didn’t think you were real. You'd try
to sneak in and insinuate yourself. Like the Thing. Why would you make me suspect you?”

"Maybe I'm stupid?” Steve sighs like there's a more than zero chance that even Evil Mind Controlled
Steve could be kinda an idiot.

"Or maybe you figured that I’d figure that you wouldn't be telling me that you weren’t real and this is
trick,” The other boy blinks at him, brow furrowed with sudden concern because this had started off
a hypothetical question to make him feel better and he quite clearly wasn’t feeling much better, "This
could be like, *The Liar's Paradox* -"

“Yeah, whatever, paradork, can we focus here?”

“Paradork?” Dustin snorts, "You're real. The Aboleth couldn't even pretend to be as lame as you are."

“Bullshit, Henderson, you think I’m cool.”

“That’s slander Steve," He shoulders sideways into Steve's chest, "You can go to prison for that.”

Steve shoulders him back, “Some nerd told me it’s only slander if it’s a lie.”

It's like a tiny time bubble- it's two months ago and everyone is okay and happy and there's no Aboleth and his biggest concerns are bullies and girls and the impending shadow of high school and Will not being possessed and if Steve is actually his friend or if he's just going to get bored with hanging out with them-

But like all bubbles, it has to pop.

The moth is getting even more frantic as it batters itself against the light, the thump-flutter-thump of a tiny body knocking itself silly against glass strangely loud even with the storm raging. He's tempted to try to catch it, 'cause it's one thing for it to get eaten by a spider or something- that's just the circle of life- but it seems kinda sad and pointless for the dumb thing to die because it's mesmerized by the Great and Terrible 60 Watt Bulb. Steve seems to have had the same idea- reaching up and trying to shoo it away but lacking the moon or the sun to navigate by it just makes a wide arc, hits the glass harder, and drops like a stone- stunned or dead.

"They're positively phototactic," he explains as the other boy's face falls a little at the failed rescue attempt- obviously he would have really liked to save something today, "You can't really stop them from doing that."

"Yeah, thanks. I know how moths work, dipshit," Steve runs a hand through his hair with a heavy sigh and uses the banister to lever himself up- almost doesn't make it on the first try, some combination of hurt-leg and bone-tired, but Dustin grabs his arm and helps, "Is Hop inside? I need to talk to him."

"He and Joyce just left to break into the middle school."

"What-? Nevermind. Okay," Steve looks like he's psyching himself up-and even though he's still soaking wet and and still not wearing a coat and finally starting to shiver- like convincing him he's real made him remember that he’s also supposed to be cold- he still looks like he’s going go chasing after Hop instead of inside so he grabs him by the shoulders and steers him toward the screen door.

“Nope. Inside. Make up some sports rule about it. When was the last time you even slept, anyway?"

"Does-"

"No, being chloroformed by the CIA doesn't count."

“Look, man, you don’t understand. I have to talk to Hopper. Now.”

“Hop'll be back soon. Let’s go inside before your dumb leg falls off."

Steve's eyes narrow incredulously, “It's not going to fall off."
"You don't know that."

"Did you go to medical school in the last three days? ‘Cause when I needed like, seventy stitches you just stuck some random band-aids on my face—"

“It could be breeding Upside-Down bacteria, Steve! Did you even clean the bat after you smashed a bunch of demodogs with it?"

There's a long, considering pause.

“I wiped it down?"

"Gonna fall right off. Or-or- you could turn into a weredemogorgon. Also you need to take some Advil so your brain doesn't explode- no seriously, this time- Doc Owens said-"

Steve could just swat him away as he pushes him toward the door- hell, he could lift him up and move him if he wanted to- but either he's suddenly concerned about how difficult it would be to play basketball with one leg and actually believes that a weredemogorgon is a thing that exists or no matter much he has to talk to Hopper he really, really doesn't want to.

Steve leans on him, pretends it's 'cause of his leg.

"I can’t believe you found out my dad was evil and you didn’t quote Star Wars once."

“I was keeping it in my back-pocket.”

Steve tells them everything.

He wants to say that it’s because he’s really great at the whole ‘friends don’t lie’ thing. Or it’s because it’s important information and you don’t keep shit from the Party. Or it’s a tactical move so they can all come up with a plan because the team can’t figure out the right play without knowing the layout of the court.

But that's all bullshit.

He tells them because he needs them to... he just needs them, alright?

There’s been so much shit that he’s dealt with alone. Thought that he had been dealing with it at least. Thought that he was going to be able to just treat it all like a lazy attempt at cleaning his room. Add it to the pile, shove the pile under the bed. Long as you don’t look there the t-shirts and gym shorts and the monsters and the constant fear just...stop existing. Boom. Problem solved.

But that wasn’t true. They were still there. Now you just had a monster under your bed, invisible and waiting- good going, genius - and he's not sure how many more monsters he can fit under there before they start spilling out.

So he tells them.

Nancy is trying to walk the fine line between horror and pity, but he’s known her long and well enough to see the little twist of her brow, the tightness around her lips- the expression that places blame with ruthless efficiency and promises- hell, threatens - justice. The one that sees James Harrington squaring off to Murray Bauman in some sort of unstoppable asshole-tornado. But her eyes go softer than he has a right to when she looks at him. Sure, he hadn’t known. Hadn’t known
there was a Demogorgon in his backyard and that Barb was being murdered either—this time...he could have. If it had been Nance's dad she would have sleuthed it out—would have realized something was wrong and cared that it was and connected the dots.

Jonathan listens, disgusted but ultimately unsurprised because Jonathan already knew that his dad didn’t give a shit what or who he had to break to get his way and didn’t care if he ruined people's lives if it benefited him. And of course Steve had done one hell of a great impression of the man for a while. Now all he wants to go back and fix it—re-write the story—

(Two little kids. Steve, aged eleven, carves his name with Jonathan Byers, aged ten, at the very top of the old Sanders Oak. They needed to get a little taller to get there and they did— one more summer in an endless parade of them. There was never any rush. No hurry. The days are long and they have nothing but time. Steve's father tells him he can't see Jonathan anymore for reasons that suddenly make no sense at all—dumb adult reasons that make the boy that's been itching to grow up have second thoughts about the whole stinkin' thing.

Steve realizes for the first time the limits of his father's grasp as the two of them travel the secret places of Hawkins, Indiana as inseparable twined shadows. They race the light home to stretch the summer days out like rubberbands and discover if they do it right and they can fit three maybe four days in one as they roll and tumble and their sneakers beat parallel trajectories through town. It's a race that no one loses.

Steve, aged thirteen, gets his ass kicked by Tommy Halloran on Halloween night defending Jonathan Byers. Jonathan Byers, age twelve, lays Tommy out like a rug in furious retaliation that he would have never been able to work up on his own behalf but that explodes like a new-born star the minute Tommy's fist connects with Steve's nose. The wolves of Hawkins Middle School lick their wounds and search for easier prey. Steve never puts on the wolf mask, never runs with them, never hides his soft under-belly with casual cruelty. He never gets cool, never gets to be King Steve, but he does get Joyce Byers fussing over him as she holds a bag of frozen peas against his black eye and sure, he lost but whenever Jonathan looks at him he feels like he's faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound. Jonathan doesn't have to flee and hide and hope that today won’t be worse than yesterday.

Jonathan doesn’t grow up alone and Steve doesn’t grow up so fast.)

-But he can't. The story stays the same and Steve can’t even fucking look at Byers when the friend that his father convinced him to throw away for being a liability, a waste of time, a no-hope fuck up, sits on the couch beside him and wraps a towel around his shoulders.

"Thanks, man."

The kids are rapt, of course, ‘cause they look at everything like it’s a game or movie or a comic book. Makes perfect sense to them that superpowers are real, they fight a bunch of monsters, discover a long lost sister or two, and someone’s dad turns out to be a bad guy ‘cause that’s just how shit goes. Dustin is probably like, thirty seconds away from giving them all a lecture on the Hero’s Voyage or whatever the hell Mrs. Torrence called it. He doesn’t though. He doesn’t say anything—just listens as promised as he sticks rainbow band-aids on his calf.

Then there's El who looks as pale and exhausted as he feels but who has wide, bright eyes and is so focused on the fact that she has a sister— a real sister— that he’s not even sure she understands exactly how fucking mad she should be. He almost wants to explain it to her. Hey, Supergirl— you know that car the Party all think is awesome? Cost thirty grand. Your sister bought me that. Or maybe
something he made for you. Thanks, it got me so much tail.

God.

By the time he starts to wrap it up the girl has her eyes squinched shut in desperate, painful concentration, one hand clamped over her other wrist so hard it's gotta be cutting off the circulation. When her nose starts to bleed Mike whispers something in her ear and reaches over to gently pry her white-knuckled fingers loose from their death grip on...the blue hair-band she wears like a bracelet. The one that Hop gave her- Oh.

"Can you-?"

El doesn't answer- just levers herself up off of the floor and strides away into the hall. It takes Will and Lucas's combined efforts to keep Mike from going after her.

At least he knows he can count on Wheeler to put him in his place .The kid stands up when the story drifts into a vague stuttering stop because he has no idea how to explain ' and then I might not have been real anymore and maybe I'm fucking crazy' but he’s ready for a really good Reasons Steve Harrington Is An Asshole and A Liability and A Probably A Spy speech-

“You can’t go back to your house,” Wheeler says simply, “We can figure out someplace for you to stay. Maybe a rotation?”

Contrary little dickhead. He almost wants to hug him.

“Here,” Jonathan doesn't even hesitate and two years ago Steve would have believed someone telling him that there were monsters and alternate dimensions before he would have believed that the other boy would react to the possibility of him staying in his house with anything other than the deepest existential dread, “If you’re okay staying here? Safety in numbers and everything.”

"Yeah. I mean...that would be good,” Not that two-years-ago Steve would have believed it if you had told him he would actually like the idea of staying at the Byers' place either, instead of adding "sleeping in the same house as your ex's boyfriend' to the map of Rock- Bottom. He does though. It's a good house. It's proof that they don't give up on anything even if the paint is chipping, or the windows are drafty, or a monster crashed through the living room ceiling, or it was an asshole for eight years, "My dad's gonna cancel my cards but...I mean, I can give your mom some money-"

Jonathan gives him a look. It's a very Jonathan look. It's Jonathan in three-quarter time. Annoyance, offense, and disgust at society in general and you in particular. Repeat until you realize that you're definitely still an ass-

No. No that's not right.

Annoyance that it has to be an issue at all and offense that he thinks Byers would give a shit about that right now. Disgust that he's gotten so twisted by the using assholes around him that it's the first stupid thing out of his mouth-

“Later. Look, ground rules, One, no corrupting my brother’s musical taste with Bon Jovi or Hall and Oates or whatever you listen to.” Jonathan sounds so intensely serious that he's like, eighty percent sure he's messing with him.

“Fine, got it. No music that isn’t depressing.” He gestures to the radio next to Will, the one that they've left quietly tuned to the Inbetween Station, "More of a voices of the damned kinda house."

“Two. No giving him romantic advice.”
“What?” Five minutes ago he would have been terrified to try given what everyone says about the kid, but now that it’s forbidden he suddenly feels like he has to, “Jonathan, I give great advice.”

Max scowls, “You told Dustin to act like he doesn’t care.”

“Which is great advice when you’re talking to a bunch of try-hard little nerds. Anyway, Will has the natural charisma that the rest of you gremlins sorely lack so he doesn’t need advice.”

Will snorts at that, but ducks his head and he’s pretty sure the kid looks pleased as hell behind that fringe of hair.

“Three. If mom is looking for her keys, it’s couch, coat pocket, then behind the toaster oven. If mom is looking for Will, get the bat.”

A little voice in his head tells him it’s going to be weird, that it’s going to be awkward, that people are going to talk, that Nancy ‘Fingercuffs’ Wheeler will cease to be entertaining bullshit and start being serious speculation and that the Hawkins High Rumor Mill will be working overtime and...he beats that little voice to death with a mental nail-bat.

Fuck’em.

"Thanks, Byers. I mean it."

"Still friends," Dustin reaches across his legs to poke a scowling Mike, “Whole roll of quarters.”

"You bet on us?" Nancy frowns, realization dawning as she thumps Wheeler on the shoulder with the side of her foot, "You bet against us? You're such a little-"

Whatever Wheeler is remains a mystery because the quiet background drone of the voices on the radio are gone and the voice in the forefront comes through as clear as if it were coming from one of the walkie-talkies.

[ sara? ]

And it's El's.

The kid's are up and screaming her name before he can even grab the bat and he can add another tick to the 'time is relative' column because 'getting to the kitchen before everyone he cares about on earth runs straight into an Aboleth' takes a hundred and fifty years-

El is sitting at the kitchen table, nose bleeding black, a dishcloth tied around her eyes like a blindfold, the little blue hair-tie in one hand and the empty LOT-7 bottle in the other and completely oblivious to the fact that-

"Holy shit, holy shit-"

-Darkness is spilling out of the walls. Flooding in like someone decided to sink the Byers house to the bottom of a lake of oil before ever bothering to make it water-tight. It's coffin dark, tunnels under Hawkins dark, empty space in his head where the monsters live dark, endless nightmare hallway in the National Lab dark. But here and real and every inch of it is moving - little grasping tendrils of crawling nothing, dissolving the cabinets and fireplace and kitchen chairs into the total blackness. And all he can think is that it was waiting to make its play- looking for a hole in the defense.

Mike Wheeler, the world's stupidest or bravest nerd, runs right into it, reaching for her-
"El, stop!"

"Mike. I need to find her. For Hopper-

The kid's hand closes around the dish rag and pulls it loose, even as El fumbles to keep it.

"El, it's using you to come through! You have to stop!"

El blinks at Wheeler, obviously disoriented but then there's the realization, wide-eyed and terrible that they didn't break into her vision quest somehow and that the blackness is here.

El raises a hand, face screwed up in concentration and he doesn't know how her powers work- just that he's pretty sure that it's too late to magic this shit away because there's a familiar sickly orange light in the darkness - the one that almost killed her last time. He hears Nancy make a breathy sound beside him, shock or fear or both, hears Jonathan's rapid breathing, the kids' shouting for El and he tries to yell too- make this all stop somehow through sheer force of will because the bat is useless against the nothingness surrounding them- useless against the light in the nothing that's drawing them in like moths-

-The blackness pulses, ripples around the girl. It crashes into them like a rogue wave with a riptide, a sucker punch with a plate, he feels a sudden psychic surge of triumph-El or the monster he can't tell- but either way he knows in some essential way that everything is about to be immediately f*cked and he only manages to bleat out a choked shout that sounds half like 'Nancy' and half like something dragged out of his chest with fish hooks before the dark hits him.

He's eighteen. He doesn't want to die.

But he doesn't freeze.

He drops the bat, grabs Dustin and shoves just as the dark tears them away.

/\hive aspect/endlesseternal unrolling shifting and settling, unfurling like a shaken out sheet in a sky somewhere something so much bigger than itself stretching out in all directions slow unhurried the collective hunger of its thousand young it squats in its lifeless city and it's children send it dreams of the raw flesh of the little endoskeletal figurines it casts out dragging tendrils of smoke and root a trail torn across the warp of the web which spreads and stems watching WillByers and /food(female aspect)/motherdanger and /food(male aspect)/brother always watching watching no no longer watching WillByers is gone gone from sight impossible furious it suddenly cannot see WillByers in the slice of the raw flesh world below from above NO Find It KILL IT EAT IT'S EGGS suck out the juices all mine got here first unfair the thing in a sky waits at the wall between worlds trapped and furious trapped and furious trapped and furious trapped and furious

"Code Red. Can any of you hear me? I don’t know how your dumb nerd toy works. Tell Lucas Mom and Dad are acting real weird- and not like you guy’s weird- real weird. Tell Lucas I need him to come home. I’m not scared or anything- don’t tell him I’m scared ‘cause I told you to shut up last time I swear to god I will kick your butt so hard you’re gonna be the only loser in heaven in a wheelchair."

"Still Code Red. Something in the water just TOOK Keith Barlow. He was over here getting a gas can from Dad and one second he was there and then the gas cans were just laying there in the street. I know it sounds stupid but I know what I saw, Lucas. It's gotta be one of those alligators that people
get when they're tiny and flush down the toilet and eat rats and stuff 'till they're giant. Dad was standing right there though- he would have seen what happened but he just went back to his paper. Lucas if you don't answer I'm gonna assume you got eaten by a sewer alligator and I'm an only child now and I'm gonna take all of your stuff."

"Code STUPID Red. I'm kinda scared now okay? That what you wanna hear Lucas? Will you pick up your walkie-talkie now? Fine- I'm freaked out. I reminded mom that you weren't supposed to be sleeping over - I wasn't trying to get you in trouble or anything- seriously I wasn't- if your dumb nerd butt had been lost in the woods or eaten by a sewer gator you would have been happy I told. They weren't mad Lucas. I know I'm their favorite and all by like, a lot but it was like they didn't even care. You know that's not right. She should at least be trying to find you so she can yell at you. I think they're on drugs. Can parents take drugs? Would you PLEASE pick up your stupid walkie-talkie?"

"Code..Whatever. I'm really scared. Mom and dad keep talking about going to the quarry. Something's wrong, Lucas. I need you to come home. I'm sorry I called you a nerd and threatened to kick Dustin's butt and told on you to mom and stole your Guy-Man action figure and hid it in my closet 'cause I snapped his head off. Where ARE YOU?"

The sirens calling Hawkins to the storm shelters start to scream when Jim turns onto Mt. Sinai.

They’re the old ones left over from the Civil Alert drills- the type that use a turbine to fill the air with a slow spooling and unspooling wail that should remind Joyce of ducking and covering with Bert the Turtle - but don’t. Honestly, if she thinks about it they’re nothing like the calm, reassuring ‘everything is fine but please evacuate the building before you get killed by whatever hideous monster we dragged out of hell this week ’ bleeting of the Hawkins lab alarm.

Nothing at all.

The darkness isn't helping- oh, sure, the buildings aren't covered by a cancer of fleshy vines and the air is filled with rain, not floating spores but the deep, bone chilling darkness of the storm is making the town look far to close to the Upside Down for comfort.

“Hey,” She must have made some sound because Jim reaches over and takes her hand in his- god, it's always amazing how such huge hands could be so gentle- Lonnie used to squeeze until she felt like her joints would pop and then play the injured party when she pulled away ('Jesus, that's what I get for showing a little affection, huh Joyce? Gotta make everything a production. ') but Jim just holds and she can feel his pulse on her wrist, warm and steady as a metronome. “Hey , it's alright.”

Big Jim Hopper, never afraid of anything.

“Well,” She forces a smile, “At least the doors at the school will be open. We won’t have to break in.”

Jim makes a small, disappointed hrm at that, childhood dreams of vandalizing the place obviously crushed.

“Hopper .”

“Fine. Fine , we're good kids. Cooper’s ghost can rest easy.”

He’d be the only one.
Jim seems to have the same thought judging by the sudden mild terror that flickers across his face at the idea of the Aboleth appearing as that old bastard. She doesn’t know if she could handle a creature from the Upside-Down wearing that man's lemon-sucking expression as it stares down her blouse and lectures her about her tender virtue - *Everyone knows that a young lady who smokes will drink and a young lady who drinks is easy and a young lady that’s easy is no lady at all!* - She doubts Jim’s visions of rulers snapping across bloody knuckles and the man trying to buzz-cut his hair right there in the middle of his office are much better. He'd probably prefer the Demogorgon.

"You still haven't seen it?"

"No. Not yet." She can tell that Jim is trying to believe her but probably doesn't-it's not as though she can really blame him considering the last two years. Funny though, claim monsters in your walls took your son and no one believes it. Claim you haven’t seen a damn thing out of the ordinary and no one believes it. Can’t win for losing, sometimes, "Maybe I'm already crazy enough that it doesn't want to waste the effort?"

Jim doesn't like that at all, brow furrowing, mouth drawing tight, "Joyce."

"It was a joke, Hop."

It wasn't. Of course it wasn't. She couldn't remember a time before the constant thrum of nerves that felt like over-tuned guitar strings, the downward spirals that fed back into each other and made her father say that she was ‘short on furniture on the top floor’, that Lonnie never tired of bringing up any time he wanted to convince her that he always knew best. The ones that she had learned to turn to her advantage in an uneasy symbiosis against the Upside Down, because you had to be a little crazy to do the things they’ve done and she'd gladly be bughouse *nuts* if it meant that she could keep her boys safe.

Those nerves are humming now, even with Jim’s hand on hers.

"You're going the wrong way, Hop."

The man frowns, "What?"

"You took a right on Mulberry." The headlights of his truck illuminate the street sign for Kinney. "This is going to take us out past Eugene's place."

Her nerves are singing now, Hop is going too fast for the weather, wheels throwing up waves of water in their wake.

"Hop-"

"Joyce, I've spent over twenty years in this town. I know how to get to the quarry."

She pulls her hand away, slowly.

"The school. We're going to the school."

Jim blinks at her with horrible confusion, like she might be going crazy or he might but doesn't turn the car around, just keeps driving the roads toward Sattler's Quarry. The narrow beams of his headlights show that he's not alone- people are filing out of their houses as casually as if they'd all just decided at once to take a nice stroll in the middle of the worst storm Hawkins has ever seen and none of them are walking toward the storm shelters.

"Yeah. I know. What did I say?"
Her nerves are screaming.

"Jim. Stop the car."

"Joyce, what-"

He realizes what he's doing. Realizes but doesn't or can't stop.

At least now she knows what scares him because there's fear in his eyes—desperate fear like nothing she's ever seen in Jim. Fear that he isn't in control. Fear that he's a big man with handcuffs and a gun on his belt, alone with her and he's driving them both to the Drop. Her nerves are wailing their warning along with the sirens, but she's certain that she could never be as afraid of Jim as he is of himself at that moment.

"Please, Jim. Stop the car."

He manages to roll to a stop, thank God, using the curb and Elenore Gillipse's lawn to bog them down but his hands are still white knuckling the steering-wheel like he doesn't know what would happen if he let it go.

"Joyce. I need you to reach over and take my gun," he's so quiet that she almost can't hear him over the sirens and the storm, when he continues she wishes she couldn't, "And when I let go of this wheel I need you to be ready to shoot me."

Axel knows shit.

You don't spend as much time on the street as he has without getting a sixth sense for things. Not like, a supernatural sixth sense or anything, not like Kali and her whacked out lab-rat sisters— but he does know shit.

He knows how to get a ten inch mohawk to stand up with egg whites and Elmer's glue. He knows what kinda ugly 1970's cop porno mustache means they're just gonna warn you off outta town and which kind is gonna rough you up. Knows when a hitchhiker is just some stranded kid and when they're gonna try to roll them (makes sure they always pick-up that second kind, 'cause holy shit, their faces when they realize who they're messing with). He knows that if you pile up all the pointless everyday things that the average person in their average little ticky-tacky house cares about it ultimately adds up to nothing more than a tiny speck of Who Gives Fuck in the grand scheme and that the real secrets of the universe belong to the misfits, the broken, and the freaks. He knows the signs of impending disaster— especially the most serious one—

"I'm just sayin', we passed a closed Waffle House," He glances side-long at Kali in the rear-view mirror, "Shirley's got us driving into the fucking apocalypse."

Kali doesn't respond— completely still, eyes closed and he'd think she was Doin' Her Thing if there had been something to do it to. Mick flashes a glare over her shoulder and leans over to turn the music up loud and drown him out 'cause she obviously doesn't understand the seriousness of a closed fuckin' Waffle House.

-Way-aaaaaaO-ooo-oO

Possession of the mind is a terrible thing
It's a transformation with an urge to kill
Not the body of a man from earth
Not the face of the one you love

Cause I turned into a Martian, O-ooo-oO -

Not like they're going to turn around anyway. Just wants to make sure he's on the fuckin' record when everything goes wrong.

He still can't believe Kal’s soft spot for that flat-leaving little kid won a battle that the rest of them had been waging for years. They’d all learned the hard way that they could circle Hawkins at a radius but suggesting paying the town a visit or making plans to crack the lab open with homemade Thermite (his plan and he’ll never forgive her for not taking him up on) or a simple, tactical raid (Fun- boring ) or grenades full of bees (Dottie- not boring but stupid) were neither requested, nor fuckin’ appreciated. But one S.O.S from Shirley Temple and they haul ass straight to Mayberry.

Not that there even seems to be a Mayberry to haul ass to. Just road and fields far as the eye can see and Axel knows that this is Indiana and the only things in Indiana are corn and despair but they’d passed the Welcome To Hawkins sign- Jesus... nearly an hour back with no sign of the town.

"Hey, Micky Mouse-we lost? We're gonna run out gas if we don't find this friggin' place."

"We're not lost. And if you wanna get your skinny punk ass up here and drive all you gotta do is ask." There's something a little more than annoyed in her voice, that kinda mean-brittle she gets when something's going wrong, "We're not."

They're so fuckin' lost.

"Hey, not my problem if Shirley gets eaten by a monster 'cause you can't read a map."

"Jane doesn't really mean there's a monster right?" Dottie sounds more hopeful than skeptical 'cause it's kinda hard to disbelieve shit out of hand when you know two chicks with magical mind powers, "Are we gonna go kill a Frankenstein?"

"Frankenstein's monster," Fun rumbles quietly from the back, "Frankenstein is the Doctor."

Mick whips an empty beer can past him - misses Fun by a mile.

"Get the hell out of this car."

"Well, I can't even recall my name O-oo-oO
Sometimes I never hardly sleep at night O-oo-oO
Well, I turned into a Martian today-

"Maybe it's a old guy in mask!" Dottie leans forward and crows it-right next to his fuckin’ ear- as she tugs her plastic dime-store clown mask out of it's place between the seats and holds it up to her face, "Woulda gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for us meddlin’ kids."

She beams at him as he mimes their particular form of meddling, sighting down the barrel of an imaginary M1911. Pow pow pow. Blow that fucking monster away-

"Maybe it's just a creep grabbing people-" Mick gets to an intersection, frowning deeply again and making a decision, that surprise surprise, eventually leads 'em back to the same series of roads and fields and fields and roads again, "Or someone from the lab-"
"It's real," Kali's clipped, slightly strained voice cuts through the rest of them for the first time in ages, "The monster is real."

"Yeah?" Fun frowns, "How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm fighting it," The woman says quietly, "And because it's sitting next to Axel."

Bullshit.

He knows that there's nothing next to him and if there is something it's just... gonna be Kal Doin' Her Thing to mess with him, like those goddamn spiders. "Cept there's silence and suddenly he's got no spit in his mouth as he turns his head to see-

-Nothing.

"Goddammit, Kal," He spins back around and kicks the back of her seat hard enough that it ratchets forward two clicks, "That wasn't fucking funny."

He expects to see her glaring at him in the rear-view but she isn't- still got her eyes closed in concentration and now there's a thick, heavy drop of blood forming around her nostril...'cept it's not blood, not the type you get from a nosebleed at least 'cause it's so dark it looks like she snorted ink and there's no question now that she's using her hoodoo for something.

'Bout to ask what when he spots something else in the mirror.

Sitting next to him.

-I walk down city streets
On an unsuspecting human world
Inhuman in your midst-

It's a fuckin' Frankenstein. A skin suit- a patchwork person put together like a quilt, pieces of loosely held together flesh shifting and changing, individual features going formless like it was made of old chewing gum before deciding on a shape. Some of the shapes it finds are horribly familiar- he recognizes his grandad's milky white eye, the hair-lip off of one of the nastier Screws from the Parish Juvenile Hall- but some gotta belong to the others- horsey snaggle teeth behind bright red lipstick, an old black man's tattoo'd hand with bruised split knuckles, a boxer's nose, a pale soulless blue eye and shock of white hair that he's seen in Kal's pictures-

It's fucked up.

"Gnarly." Dottie whispers, reaching out to try to poke it before Fun snatches her hand back.

"That isn't funny, Kal," Mick scrambles away, gaze locked on the thing's mouth- snaggle teeth gotta be from her nightmares, "Stop it."

"It's not me, I promise you."

You roll with Kal long enough you start to get a sense for when she's Doin' Her Thing. Sure, the shit still looks real and knowing it's not doesn't mean jack when you're covered in spiders but you get a sense of what's reality and what's not.

This thing ain't real but it's also not her.

They freeze like those dumb fucks in horror movies- the ones that stare like as some monster appears
in front of 'em instead of beating the shit out of it and running like hell. The Frankenstein grins so wide that the corners of it's mouth tear like wet tissue paper and those red lips start to move, forming an endless stream of words. Not sure what the hell it's saying 'cause he doesn't hear words- he hears the sound of the handle of an old man's cane banging relentlessly against a thin plaster wall. It's looking at Kal and it's mouth is sayin' something to her but all he hears is that hollow thump thump thumpthumpthump - and his grandad's evil eye shoots him a conspiratorial wink-

He scrabbles for his gun.

He doesn't get a chance 'cause Kal finally stops meditating or whatever she's SO BUSY WITH UP THERE and when she raises her hand the world-ripples-

It ripples.

Axel doesn't know any other another word for it. He'd say that he's never felt anything like it but that's not strictly true- never felt anything like it when he wasn't rolling on 500ugs of Psycho Eddie's best Orange Sunshine claiming he could hear things across space and time and see the tower in the center of the universe- and the first ripple makes the Frankenstein distort wildly, turns it into something like a twisted kid's drawing of itself if the kid was a real shitty artist and a total maniac, limbs everywhere, features breaking down and sliding off-

It ripples.

Then the thing kinda...explodes...into black bubble-gum shapelessness. It struggles to re-form itself-sending real fucking unkind thoughts their way as it does- and there's a flicker of struggling light in the blackness and he has just enough time to think SPIDER and blow the window out of the other side of van before the next ripple gives him a hot shot of reality, straight to the vein.

Buy the ticket, take the ride. Break on through to the other side.

Axel doubles over and throws up on his boots.

[This world is mine to own, 'cause smilers never lose
And frowners never win
So let the sun shine in
Face it with a grin]

When he straightens back up the Frankenstein is gone, the fields are gone, any sign of daylight is gone and they're parked on the side of a flooded main street next to a old movie theater with The Breakfast Club on the marquee and some Andrew's Sisters sounding 1950's bullshit blaring on the radio and air raid sirens blasting away like it's D-Day or something.

Shit. They're dead. The monster killed them and suburbia really is hell.

"What. The Fuck. Was that?"

"My evil twin," Kali's voice is thick and wet as she cups her nose in her hand, black water streaming between her fingers, "This town is a killing jar- we need to get to Jane. Now."


Wright-Patterson Air Force Base
Dayton, Ohio

It’s always a bad sign when the people you’re sharing a SCIF with don’t have titles.

Get introduced to Chief Warrant Officer John Doe, USMC, PHD, ESQ. IRT, IND, BMT, LBJ, LSD and you were golden because that was a fella with a go-getting attitude and a lot on his very high profile plate. Get introduced to John and you might have problems. Get introduced to Mr. Doe and you’re past having your own problems and it’s likely that someone else has decided you are the problem because that inauspicious little Mr. means that they’re both high enough up to have the security clearances and the sort of person who may or may not technically exist.

So sitting in General Stillson’s very, very difficult to access office in a Top Secret part of the base with Mr. Bates and Mr. Cuff is making Sam Owens deeply uncomfortable for obvious reasons.

“I’m a big fan of your work with Project SCANATE, Dr. Owens,” Mr. Cuff shakes his hand and lies through his teeth because no one on earth was a fan of SCANATE, himself including, “And we were just discussing SEARCH. Dr. Brenner’s findings were amazing. Shame how it ended.”

Fact that two Mr’s have the clearance needed for SEARCH moves the needle from deeply uncomfortable to wondering if he can just borrow Stillson’s gun and shoot himself in the head- save everyone a lot of trouble because portals to another dimension in suburban Indiana was pretty firmly in the Need to Know Category.

“Yeah, we lost a lot of good people.”

“And access to B-Site.” Mr. Bates has the smile of a grade school teacher, the eyes of an authoritarian and shakes his hand with a grip that promises mutually assured destruction.

“Funny thing- turns out you can have access to an alternate dimension or you can not be eaten by monsters. Can’t have both,” He turns to Stillson, “Not that I don’t love making small talk about the time my co-workers were all killed, Art, but what is this little get together about?”

“You remember Intelligence PD0-0001 don’t you, Sam?”

Shit.

“Not ringing any bells.”

“It caused a five floor quarantine in A-Site in ‘79 and last time the issue was raised in ‘84 I believe you called me a trigger happy moron and advised me to- and I quote- go fuck myself. That get the ‘ol switchboard going?”

“Right. That Intelligence PD0-0001,” He makes a show of a sarcastic finger snap and keeps an eye on the Misters. Cuff is or was military. Doesn’t like not having a handle on their chain of command and wants to know just where the hell this Doctor gets off taking that tone with top brass. Bates just keeps smiling, “Yeah, alright, I remember the records. What’s this about, Art? And before we discuss Annata-level SEARCH I need to know who Goofus and Gallant are under. Hill? Cutter?”

“Hollister.”

Sam Owens isn’t an easy man to surprise. He’s been assigned to neutralize a rip in the fabric of reality- didn’t succeed but certainly gave it the old college try- nearly been eaten alive by alien dogs, and most importantly he grew up on the Lower East Side. Not much shocks him but he stands up so fast his chair nearly falls over.
“The Shop -? Stillson, why the hell-”

“The Department of Scientific Intelligence, if you please.” Mr. Cuff scolds, looking at him like he’s the biggest moron to ever walk the earth and Mr. Bates is still smiling. Art at least has the decency to look morbid about them being within ten miles.

“Sorry, Art- I don’t get it, maybe you could help me out here. Was SEARCH not a big enough disaster? Going for a monster the size of the Chrysler building this time?” He says it like it’s joke but it wouldn’t even get a laugh at the Gaslight at 2 a.m. If the Shop had caught wind of PD0-0001 being on the wrong side of the Gate in Hawkins and AGAMEMNON handed over control of the site...well, Art’s nuclear option would be kinder. Faster at least.

Art sighs, pinching his nose where the glasses that he’s too vain to wear to meetings dig divots, “There’s been an...unforeseen overlap in operations.”

“Alright. What are we looking at?”

“We’ve recently learned that there was an unauthorized exfiltration of a National Lab asset... led by a SI cell in 1979.”

“Unauthorized on our end, as well. Rogue agent.” Mr. Bates says loyally and it’s probably a lie but at the moment he doesn’t care because there was only one ‘asset’ that could have gone missing in ‘79 and according to Brenner’s own records 006 was meant to have been terminated. “As far as we can tell that cell was compromised at approximately 19:00 on Saturday by persons unknown and the asset was removed from containment. Site’s a complete loss.”

“Well, can’t say I’m not sympathetic to something rampaging through your lab and killing all your guys but SEARCH has been decommed for over a year and FIREBREAK is winding down so-”

Cuff reaches into his suit jacket like he’s planning on pulling a bouquet of oversized gag flowers out of it. Pulls out a book instead and drops it on Art’s desk.

“What do you think about this? We found it with Dr. Roethe’s possessions.”

He picks up a worn, dog-eared copy of This Side of Paradise, turning it over in his hands, before leafing through, ending on the stiff, gluely borrower card holder on the back.

Property of Hawkins Library, Hawkins Indiana.

To think he had actually considered it might be a good thing that Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers were out somewhere quote unquote ‘looking at colleges’. Of course they were burning a rogue SI Black Site on their winter break. Why would they- two seventeen year-olds - not being doing that? Why are any of them even bothering with decades worth of research and planning and counter-intelligence? They should just drop the two of them off in Moscow and wait a couple hours. See what shakes out. Give ‘em a full week and the KGB would probably beg for mercy.

There’s no card in the slot, thank whatever hilarious bastard is up there looking down at them because there’s no amount of paperwork on his green Earth that would magically fix this one if the trail of breadcrumbs led back to those two.

“Interesting.”

“That’s all you have to say? Interesting?”

“Dr. Roethe stole a Test Subject and a library book, she's a criminal mastermind. What do you
"You were in Hawkins recently, weren't you Sam?"

"Am I being accused of something?"

"No of course not," Art says quickly, though Cuff looks like he would beg to differ, "Did you see anything strange while you were there? Anything out of the ordinary?"

And it's not technically a lie when he says, "Nah, didn't see anything strange. This is Hawkins though, so maybe you want to be more specific?"

Cuff reaches into his coat again and he fights the semi-hysterical urge to ask how big his pockets are when he pulls out a tape recorder.

"We sent a couple of our people in-"

"This is bullshit overreach, Art- just want to get that on record."

"Noted."

"Time was a factor," Bates shrugs, obviously done with even pretending to humor him.

"In any case- we sent a couple of our people in as soon as we realized that 006 was out of containment."

The tape recorder spins to life in the man's hand, whirring quietly before the series of buzzes that confirm that the phone line it was taped off of was secure.


"We hear you Juno. Confirm arrival at A-Site?"

"Uh. Confirmed. But uh. There's no one here, Command."

"You're not meant to rendezvous with anyone else Juno-"

"No, you don't understand- there's no town here. We've been driving for hours."

"Repeat? Juno I don't think I copy-Juno? Your line is breaking up- did you say there's no town? Juno-?"

"- anyone in zzt-look-zzzzzzt-"

The line goes dead, leaves the four of 'em sitting in silence with only sound of tape feeding reel-to-reel. Sam resists the urge to get into his car and drive straight back to Indiana- digs his stress-ball out of his pocket instead and gives it a completely unsatisfying squeeze 'cause there's only so much you can expect from the thing.

"No further contact with Juno after that."

Art clears his throat.

"AGAMEMNON has concerns, Sam."
Maybe there are just friends, people who stand by you when you're hurt and who help you feel not so lonely. Maybe they're always worth being scared for, and hoping for, and living for. Maybe worth dying for, too, if that's what has to be. No good friends. No bad friends. Only people you want, need to be with; people who build their houses in your heart.

- Stephen King, IT

Tonight I'll be on that hill 'cause I can't stop
I'll be on that hill with everything I got
With our lives on the line where dreams are found and lost
I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost
For wanting things that can only be found
In the darkness on the edge of town

-Bruce Springsteen

“Fine. You drop a horse on it. The Aboleth reels as the horse strikes it, leaving it near death. Its tentacles swing wildly and it sends out waves of psychic pain. ‘Nooo, it cries, noo I am the doom of this world!’ In its last moments it makes a mighty effort and lashes out at Sir Steve with a terrible psionic assault! Roll a saving throw for wisdom, Steve.”

“Okay nerds, watch how it's done...subtract one- uh...nine.”

“...Take...48 psychic damage.”

“Oh shit. Shitshitshit- ”

‘Oh shit’ what-? Wait-am I dead?”

“Uh, you’re more than fifteen below your base health so... Pretty dead, yeah.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“We’ll avenge you, Steve.”

“By killing Mike?”

“It’s not my fault you had a shitty roll.”

“Wait, we still have that Scroll of Resurrection we got from the Yuan-Ti shaman-”

“Seriously, Will? You're going to waste that on Steve ?”

“Wow, screw you, Wheeler.”

“We’ve been playing since we were nine . You’ve been playing Sir Steve for three sessions. It’s just stupid to use it on someone that isn’t really part of the Party. Just make a new character.”
“...Fine.”

“Steve, he didn’t mean it like that.”

“Like I give a shit anyway. I’m gonna go make popcorn.”

“Steve-”

“Look, just make it count, dipshit. You better win this.”

Dustin hates Steve more than he’s ever hated anyone in his life.

It’s true. It’s totally true.

It’s not.

It is. He hates him more than the Zimmerman brothers. More than James. More than Troy.

He decides this when he’s closing Mike’s eyes. He didn’t want to. Because they aren’t...they’re all still... but he can’t deal with everyone looking at him with empty, glassy stares and it’s probably better for their cornea...for when they wake back up. Because they’re going to. They’re all going to wake back up and they’ll be pissed if their eyes are dried out like gross raisins when they do, so he goes around the flooded kitchen closing their eyes.

One by one by one by-

Because, sure, the bullies stole his shit and threatened to cut his teeth out and nearly killed Mike but none of them thought that they were doing him a favor. None of them were stupid idiots that pushed him (Dustin Henderson: Not a fighter, has no idea what to do about the Aboleth) out of the way instead of getting out of the way themselves (Steve Harrington: Expert at kicking monster ass, would probably do that and be way more useful not... unconscious) and left him completely alone.

Until they wake up. Which they will. Sure, the dozen other people that were found like this just went to the hospital and died after a couple of days but they won’t. They’ll all wake up, just like El did. And she wasn’t only able to do that because she has superpowers. They’ll all find a way back. All of them.

And no one should have to do anything alone, not when they have friends. But here he is because he has friends that keep trying to die for him, throwing themselves off of cliffs and at monsters and what does he do? Can’t even think of a plan. And even if he did have a plan what good would that do alone? He needs Mike to lead him and Lucas to go on the offensive, and Will to stay calm under pressure and Steve to... well, be Steve. What is he supposed to do by himself? He’s the bard - it’s a support class -

Dustin chokes, pulls his legs up and cries into his knees.

He is so, so dumb.

You’re not a bard. You’re a friggin’ eighth grader. You have no idea what you’re doing.

All their great plans that always worked out? Yeah, they were all bullshit. They were guessing based on a stupid game manual like David Cook and Stephen Marsh actually had some special insight into the Upside Down- which they didn’t- probably - and it had worked twice so Dustin had
forgotten that correlation isn’t causation and figured that they were actually getting good at this instead of getting lucky. It’s a miracle it took this long for them to screw up big time.

It’s a miracle it took so long for them to...

They’re not dead.

Grow up, Dustin.

And after closing their eyes he hadn’t had anything else to do because he has no plan (None. Zero... Invent a trans-dimensional collapser? Nope. None. ) so now he’s just slumped on the floor next to Steve, sobbing snotty sobs over this douchebag that sacrificed himself for him and split the damn party.

Maybe they never wake up. Maybe you invent a trans-dimensional collapser out of Joyce’s VCR some string and Will’s ATARI and kill the monster single-handed and they’re still just lying there in the kitchen ‘cause it ate them. Gonna have to dust off that suit you wore to Will’s funeral eight more times.

They need an adult. Some really young and irrational part of him wants his mom but he needs someone-anyone- in the know. He has the bright idea to call Mr. Clarke because he'll know something -he always does- and gets halfway to the phone before remembering he can't call anyone because the phone's are dead, too. And it's back to screaming sobs that have run out of air at Joyce’s ugly wallpaper. He can’t even breathe-

But they are. All of them are breathing and breathing means alive which means that they can wake up.

And Joyce and Hop will be back soon, right?

Right?

And Joyce will see her sons, Jonathan curled over Will in an effort to protect him from the Aboleth, eyes closed (‘cause of corneas, he’ll say, like he knows what the hell he’s talking about) and Hop will see El, slumped bonelessly against the table and they’ll lose it.

The worst part is he’s almost certain the Aboleth could have gotten him too, if it had wanted to, Steve or no Steve. Could have gotten him then or now or ten minutes from now but didn’t and isn’t because not getting him means that he has to sit here knowing that his friends are probably trapped in some terrible nightmare-place waiting to be eaten and he doesn’t have a plan to save them or if they can be saved and doesn’t know how this could possibly work out.

And this thing feeds off of misery and fear which he’s definitely providing.

Outside there’s an ominous rumble of thunder that doesn’t seem to stop, just keeps rumbling closer and louder, even as lightning flashes again and more thunder crashes above the house like the storm is right on top of them but the rumble keeps going, which should be impossible because you can’t have thunder that just keeps going after the initial-

Shit. Oh shit.

Dustin reaches out and grabs the hilt of Steve's bat with a shaking hand.

Because it’s not thunder.
It's a car.

When El had fought the Demogorgon she had been ready to die. She hadn't really understood any other possibility because she had been fighting all night and her powers were burning her up inside and even if she won against the monster she knew that she wouldn't make it through. But it was okay. They...all three of them...were so much more people than she was, because they had friends and Yoda's and kisses and family and they understood each other. She was a monster that they had adopted as their friend for a while and made feel like she wasn't a monster so she was ready to die for them.

She still doesn't know how she didn't.

When El had fought the Mind Flayer she had known that she would live. Because she had loved Mike and Lucas and Dustin but now it was Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Hopper and the messy knowledge of all the things a life could be- work books and Anne of Green Gables and mushy peas and arguments and a sister in Chicago and Mike- and that if she died all the wonderful things would too. Including Hopper. So it wasn't an option.

When El fought the Aboleth the first time she hadn't been ready. It had hurt her and scared her and stolen her gifts from her and she had curled up and tried to find a version of the world that this version of her belonged in.

And it had made a mistake. Because now it's Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Will and Max and Steve and Nancy and Jonathan and Hopper and Joyce and a world that she wants so badly to have the chance for all of them to live in and GIFTS from her sister- her real sister- burning through her blood like a fever so this time when The Aboleth bites into her mind and tears her away into the darkness she sinks her teeth into the thing Below and bites back.

The monster shudders as they go crashing through the black together, into the space beyond, suddenly struggling against her in a compromise where no one is happy because it wasn’t pulling anymore- it was still biting but pushing her away, trying to get rid of her, because she’s hurting it, really hurting it, like it hurt her and she feels a surge of wanting to hurt it more.

So she does. She rips into its mind.

She doesn’t have the right words for what she sees or where she is- doesn’t realize that no one on earth would and that maybe not having them at all is a gift- just that it’s laid bare and huge. It’s thousands of invading, criss-crossing lines, weaving their way through thousands of minds, licking at their thoughts and pulling them back to be eaten when their misery boils over. Something old and terrible and bright that only understands time as the difference between eat and ate.

It’s trying to shake her off, frustrated and petulant (a brat, she thinks wildly as it tumbles through dimensions, clawing at her, it’s a brat) but with each attempt she just bites in deeper and harder, trapped and trapping.

But she can also feel their threads- Lucas and Will and Max and Steve and Nancy and Jonathan. Mike. Her Mike. They’re all slipping away, disappearing into the Aboleth as she fights it. The thing thrashes and mewls and screams and she knows that she can hurt it. She needs to be stronger, use more power, even if it burns her away to nothing. If it's the last thing she does she'll kill it, the thing that's hurting her friends-
Brenner and the lab had taught 011 what hate was.

Kali had taught Jane to use hate, to let it flow and wind into her powers until the two things were all tangled up in impossible knots.

_We don't need a sorcerer or a superhero, we need Jane Eleanor Hopper._

_Mike._

_Her Mike._

(Mike studies her face at the kitchen table- he says she’s beautiful even though she's pale and clammy with dark circles. He says he's never seen anyone so amazing. Never in his life. And that you can't stop amazing people from being amazing. You can put them in cages or wear them down in empty rooms in a lab but they'll break out and be the heroes they were meant to be. That no matter what El would still find a way to be a monster-slayer, a rescuer of nerds and the entire world-)

But she’s El. She's Supergirl. She's _Jane Eleanor Hopper_. And Hopper’s _protect_.

The things escapes when she let's it go, plunging back through a thin spot in dimensions, but not before she closes her eyes, gathers their threads and it might be impossible-

But she _watches_.

It's not like watching normally is. Not like watching someone on the TV, a body walking around somewhere, past, or present, an image in the dark that disappears into smoke. This is like _Breathe_. _Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty_ but even more- it's them and it's everything they are, _everywhere_ around her and it's more and more and more moments so fast that they overlap and blur at the edges until all of them are happening at once.

_is this_

_Bug, what are you doing here?_

_I ran away. They can move and I can stay and we can pretend I got kidnapped and murdered. Neil won't care, he won't even look for me. I just want to stay with you._

_Your mother will care and if I let you stay with me you will have been kidnapped. I don't have custody. I love you, Bug, but I -can’t believe you told Neil you little bitch_

_Let go of me Billy you're hurting me, get off!_

_Hurting you? You even want to fucking know what hurting is like- me like me? Like I was thinking we could you know...go to the Snowball...together. And by together I mean like as a date. Not just since we're both in the party._

_Okay, Stalker I’l go to this lame dance with you, as long as you promise never to say totally tubular, ever again-_

_is this_

_I'm not saying it, Steve. I won't. It's disgusting._

_Nance, everyone is going to think it's really strange if her best friend doesn't do a eulogy. What about her parents?_
So what I just pretend? It's bullshit! This isn't how she died! It isn't.

Look, I understand Nance, and I'm so, so- Sorry. Jeez, hey, let me get those for you. Oh, wow. Hi. I'm Steve Harrington, have we met?

Yeah. A bunch of times. I'm Nancy. Nancy Wheeler? I'm a year below you?

Oh. Oh shit. I thought you had braces?

Yeah, eventually they take those- out couch. A pull out couch. A middle age man was making contraception puns over orange juice about us fucking in his guest room.

Do you regret it?

No. Never.

is this a

Dad, hey dad, watch me! I can dive! Watch! Please watch! I've been practicing all summer! I'm getting really good. Did you watch?

That wasn't a dive, Steven.

You weren't even watching. Mom did you watch?

She's busy, Steven. Do better and we'll- watch it with us Steve, my mom is making brownies.

I don't care about some stupid space wars movie.

Star Wars, Steve. You know it's called Star Wars. Don't do that thing were you pretend to be dumber than you are. And you're going to love it. You're totally Han Solo. And I already told my mom you were coming so you have-to find that freak Byers, Jesus, Steve. I still have like, a whole carton of eggs and a can of silly string.

Let it go Tommy. He probably ran home. I think they live out here. This shit is stupid anyway. Who cares about Byers. C'mon let's go see if Dan has beers at the -QUARRY AND E V E R Y O N E W I L L L L L L LIVE AND LIVE AND LIVE AND LIVE INSIDE US digested for eternities a n d none o f y o u w i l l ever be A L O N E don't fight YOU'RE GONE YOU'RE G O N E you're long G O N E

is this a dream

Dad, please. Don't make me-

Jesus, it's already dying, just shoot the damn thing and put it out of it's misery. Stop being such a pansy.

It's screaming.

I took you out here for your birthday and all I get is bitching and crying, you're just like your fucking- mom please, you have to eat something. I know things are tight but we'll figure it out.

No, I'm fine. I'm on a double. I can grab something at work. Make sure Will gets breakfast before you- leave me behind right, Steve?

No. Never.
Erica? What the hell are you doing in my room? It's late.

Swear. And I decided I like it better. I'm gonna get mom to switch our rooms and wanted to try it out.

Oh, yeah? I thought you might be scared of the boogeyman again. How about I get my wrist rocket and we go hunting for him? Bet we can take him down before - Midnight aw, look at him cry, what you don't have your stupid slingshot this time? Where's Frogface, the faggot, and the freakshow-

am I dying

You go to school dances with someone that you like, not - a friend. Would you be my friend? I'm Mike.

Yes. I'm Will.

guys help me

She opens her eyes in the dark, the silent black void of the Inbetween.

But not silent for long.

“El? Where are we?” Mike whispers beside her as the others sit up around them, blinking into the blackness. She reaches out, finds his hand and squeezes, finds it as solid as she is when she's here.

Mike. Mike. Her Mike.

There are...a lot of words in her head right now, but she still can't find the right one because Jonathan has both arms around Will and is rocking him and and Lucas is hugging Max and Max's hair is like a fire in the dark as she whips her head around, looking all around like someone's playing a trick on her and she's waiting for them to jump out and shout surprise.

"Guys, guys, is this the Upside Down?"

"No," Will says quickly, "I think we're Inbetween?"

"I kinda thought this place was in El's head," Lucas chaffs his hands up and down his arms and shivers even though it isn't cold or warm or anything in the Inbetween, "El, are we in your friggin' head right now-?"

She considers the question. The answer would take A LOT of words.

"It's okay. We're all here. I can bring us back. Soon."

"Back?"

"Our bodies. The kitchen."

"Holy shit. We're like, astral projections? Mike-how cool is this? El can we watch people from here?"

"How soon?" Max is breathing hard, "I'm not supposed to be in another dimension. I'm not even supposed to skateboard past Maple."
El thinks about, tries to gauge how she feels so she doesn't lie, "Five or seven."

"Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Days?"

"Minutes."

"Thank god."

"It was so strange," Nancy says quietly as Jonathan helps her stand and pulls her close, "I thought I was dreaming. Or that...we were dreaming?"

"I thought I was dead."

Everyone stops. Steve is standing a little farther away, expression thoughtful and strange.

"Yeah. I was. I was dead," She knows something's wrong when he looks at her curiously, "Am I dead?"

Nancy's shaking her head, expression concerned as she untangles herself from Jonathan and goes to wrap her arms around Steve and bring him back to the rest of them-

"It was fake like at the lab, you're fi-"

-Arms that pass through him like he's made of smoke.

He should have fucking known.

Billy should have known it wasn’t even going to give him this. Wasn’t going to let him get one second of the promised satisfaction, one second of feeling the roaring, screaming joy of victory before the crash 'cause he knows what kind of crazy is and he’s also not fucking stupid, he’s spiraling down and out of control- party time on the highway to hell and all that shit- but at least the Thing promised he was going there hand-in-hand with Neil and Harrington- two sides of the same Fuck You Billy Hargrove coin.

So he should have known it would find a way to make it rot. Because here he is again, kicking down the door of this freak-show of a house, ready for a fight, ready for Harrington to come at him swinging but they're all laid out on the flooded kitchen floor. Snow White and Byers, Max and her piece of shit friends and of course, King Steve, flat out on his back- dead to the world- just like that night at Nicole’s when all this shit started.

Looks like some kinda scene out of Jonestown ‘cept someone forgot to pour the Flavor Aid.

It’s laughing somewhere. He knows it. It’s laughing at him .

Because it's all of them except the curly haired, retarded-sounding kid with the hat that doesn’t look like he could fight his way out of a wet paper bag. He’s standing next to Harrington, holding the fucking nail-bat that these kids seem to play around with all the time like the priest in The Exorcist holds a cross- straight out in front of him, elbows locked, obviously sweaty palms clutching the grip like he’s trying to strangle it. It would be funny as hell if it weren’t so pathetic.
It could have at least left him Sinclair. ‘Cause Harrington’s a threat, the wildfire you gotta stamp out before it gets out of control and burns down half of California and you with it and Neil is- was-Hiroshima and Naga-fucking-Saki combined, but at least Sinclair has fire.

This kid isn’t even a cigarette burn.

“I’m not gonna let you hurt them.” Not that he was intimidating anybody under any circumstances anyway but the kid’s voice warbles up an octave like he’s about to burst into tears, *again-* kid's already got tear tracks running down his face and puffy red eyes, “ Y...you cannot pass .”

“You Harrington’s understudy, Slugger?” He mimes a swing that rustles the kid’s hair- pulls it at the last second and expects the kid to squeak, piss his pants, and run... but he doesn’t. The little shit is practically vibrating, yeah, but he just squares up to him, keeping his body between him and the others like if he wants to get to them he’s gotta go through him first and that’s an issue somehow, “Gotta work on your stance. The bat goes over your shoulder. Feet apart, get some power from the lower half of your body. Here- lemme show you.”

There’s barely any resistance as he reaches out and snatches the bat away out of his hands. Kid just gives a panicked, indignant squawk and wastes both of their time groping for it like they're playing keep away. Not like it matters if he has it or not ‘cause there’s no chance in hell the kid has got the balls to put into play. Probably just terrified that he’s gonna use it to swing-away at Harrington. Bash that pretty-boy face in, “This makes you feel brave, huh? Sure made Max think she was hot shit, didn't it? Let's see.”

He turns it over in his hands, cuts the air in front of him with a lazy arc.

Last time he had seen it it had been buried in the hardwood floor inches away from his junk. Up close, personal and without being fucked-up on a syringe full of feel-goods he can see that it's a piece of shit. Stained with...something, nails hammered in at random, wood splintering.

"I dunno, kid. This really isn't doing anything for me. Maybe I have to hit something, huh? Is that how it works?"

There's no way for the kid to protect them all and he knows it. Or any of ’em really but he seems to know that less. He kicks hard at one of Steve's fancy sneakers to move his legs apart and the kid squawks in horror, ducking between them, arms spread like he's going to take a hit from a fucking nail-bat for Steve Harrington.

"Don't like that? Bet you little assholes all thought it was *hilarious* when it was me down there. Not funny anymore?"

The kid just stares at him, hyperventilating through his nose.

"You're right. No point. Wheeler got his balls in the divorce anyway," He strolls toward the girl and Byers, "How about Snow White? I gave her a chance to kill me. She tell you that?"

Doesn’t need the kid to answer, he already knows Wheeler tucked that memory away with whatever keeps her wet and warm at night and wasn't going to be sharing it. Probably couldn’t without remembering that crawling pink flush from when she had realized she wanted it- really fucking wanted it- that had made the crazy bitch the sexiest thing he had ever seen for exactly five seconds before she doused it.

"Little Miss Perfect almost went through with it too. Tease."

He wraps a companionable arm around the kid's shoulders and steers him with him. Feels the
muscles under his arm tense as the kid realizes how little control he has and how little difference he makes in the grand fucking scheme of whatever is going to happen in this kitchen.

Sinclair and Max are curled up next to each other, "Gotta give Sinclair credit, honestly thought the little bitch was a baby dyke. How about Sinclair?"

He hefts the bat for emphasis and the little asshole snaps out of it and shoves away from him. Goes back to his guardian routine even though he's empty handed 'cause the kid knows the score. Knows that the thing in his head is gonna tell him to raise this stupid bat high and bring it down and that he's going to do it.

Over and over and over and over again.

Because he's drowning in land-locked Hawkins, Indiana.

He knows how drowning feels- done it before. He had paddled out far enough into the Pacific that he couldn't hear the screaming, hysterical circus blaring of the carousel on the Santa Carla Pier or shake rattle and roll of the Big Dipper on it's track. He'd paddled out to find the wave with his name on it. 'Cause everyone has something with their name on it and Billy went looking for what had his like a moth to a bug zapper- hey, it might kill you, but at least you're in the game.

He'd charged it. Dropped into the barrel. Felt like King Billy for about forty seconds before the thing broke on top of him and crushed him like a bug. He'd been trapped in the hold down and dragged along the bottom, hitting rocks and reef in a beating that would have made Neil proud.

Drowned but hadn't died. Woke up on the shore, laughing and spitting bloody saltwater and went looking for something else with his name on it.

But now?

This whole town is a hold down with no way out.

He gives the bat another swing, kicks up some of the dark water from the kitchen floor.

_He_ has Harrington's name on him. Not some hallucination. Some Thing in his head. It was supposed to be him and Harrington in an unstoppable collision. The sting of split knuckles and that light in Harrington's eyes going on and whatever the hell this thing was finally leaving him alone and it would be his turn to reign. King through right of bloody combat.

_That_ was supposed to be what happened at the end. Not some stupid kid and sloppy fucking seconds.

He raises the bat, kid throws his hands up to try to protect his face, knocks his own stupid hat off.

"You know, I'm still just not _feeling_ it."

He brings it up over his head with both hands and slams it down into the kitchen counter beside the kid and a long, deep vertical crack splits it down the center.

The kid surges forward," No!"

He shoves him down onto Harrington. Another swing against the wall and a second crack chases the first. The third swing dents the fridge door and on the fourth the bat explodes into a shrapnel of wood splinters and nails like he'd just hit a grand slam home-run, right outta the park and the crowd goes wild- well, the crowd wails a stupid bleating wail as he tosses the remains of the grip onto the floor.
Looks real broken up about it, like he just slammed his puppy against the wall instead of a goddamn nail-bat. Might as well have buried the nails in Harrington's fucking skull with the way the kid is staring at him.

"Anything to say now, Slugger? Still feel brave?"

"I'm not gonna let you hurt them-"

"Yeah, yeah no passing. Alright, what the fuck is your name anyway?" He picks up the baseball cap from where it fell on the floor, spinning it on one finger before shoving it back down onto the kid's thatch of hair, makes him wince like he hit him and even though he's too scared to even look him in the eyes the kid still manages a choked and tearful mumble of what Billy's pretty sure is 'I'm not going to let you hurt them.'

You try to be nice.

The kid's eyes go wide as he grabs his face, fingers digging hard into the boy's cheeks.

"You have ten seconds to decide if you're King Whatever for the night and if this is going to be a real fight," The kid’s eyes flicker to Harrington, probably remembering what a real fight looks like- when Harrington's dumb-ass hero resolve broke along with the plate, the panicked desperate scramble of hands when Steve saw his eyes, King Steve with his strings cut and face bashed in on the floor or maybe laying in the mud, unraveling underneath him and desperate for air, “Or you can run. Understand?”

The kid nods slowly.

"Say 'yes, sí'."

"You know, I used to wonder why people like you do this," The kid interrupts him, this little asshole honest-to-God interrupts him, wearing the same determined, pissed-off expression as Harrington when he's about to get the shit kicked out of him. Fear yeah, but contempt behind it, like he wins before the first punch even gets thrown, "There must be a reason that some people with shitty lives turn out to be Max or Jonathan and some people turn out to be you. I think I’ve finally figured it out."

Something red and enraged finally flares inside him. Lights him up like a Molotov cocktail. Glass shards and flame but The Thing in his head is flagging like Harrington in the fourth quarter.

Fucked if he knows why. But it's tired and impatient. It's snapping against him and demanding he listen, demanding he does what it wants right now as It seeps between teeth and curdles his blood stream. The kid doesn't matter. Kill the special little-super-girl right now. Kill them all so they don't fucking stop the coronation of King Billy.

“Oh yeah?” He steps forward, arms spread wide, "Max says you little losers are smart, so why don't you enlighten me?"

“It's because you're a parasite that eats fear, exactly like the Aboleth if it had a stupid mullet and a mustache that looked like pubes. But I'm done with bullying douchebags. So fine, you know what, asshole? I'm King Dustin. I'm not going to let you hurt them." 

-It can just wait- rest of 'em sure as shit aren't going anywhere.

'Hey, Harrington you can hang tight while I kill your little buddy here, right, amigo?' We've got nothing but time. No one left to interrupt this little party.
The punch rocks the kid’s head back, splits open his lip. Leaves a familiar spray of spit and blood on his knuckles and there’s no doubt in his mind the kid’s never been hit by anyone other than grade-school assholes before. Never really taken his medicine and felt what it’s like to have an adult haul back and sock you in the teeth, ’cause he stumbles- only manages to stay upright ’cause his back catches the kitchen table and his eyes are big and round with shocked cosmic betrayal at just how much something can fucking hurt when someone so much bigger than you is doing it to you.

So this is how it feels to be Neil- must have knocked that dumb-ass, wide-eyed look off of his face more than once before it stopped being a surprise.

The kid sways forward again.

"You cannot-"

He hits him again. This time the kid can't stay vertical, lands on his hands and knees making a pathetic hiccuping sound as he tries to get himself together- figures that’s that but he comes back up holding the useless, splintered grip of the bat. Finds his feet and plants them.

"No matter what you do I’m not going to let you hurt my friends, you sonofabitch. You cannot pass.”

Jim Hopper thinks of black holes.

His life has been a slew of them.

The barrel of a gun.

The dark open doorway of his little girl’s empty room.

The mouth of a pill bottle.

The gate to another world.

But the one he’s thinking about now is a pit in a pumpkin field.

More specifically the struggle as one vine became two and two became ten and ten became an overwhelming, slithering mass. He’s thinking of his own panicking, desperate idiocy, begging the vines or hell, the universe to wait like he could call a goddamn time-out with the Ref even as he joined the corpses rotting in the mud. He’s thinking of the realization that the thing holding him was intelligent and actively malicious as it cut off his screaming by tightening nastily around throat and chest and crotch until every sound or attempt to break free meant he was swimming in pain and seeing hypoxic starbursts behind his eyes

He’s thinking of the moment he gave up and the knife five inches from his fingertips became a distant dream.

But even then after hours of being too hopeless and exhausted to fight he had still had his body. He had flexed his toes and the muscles of his calves, twitched his fingers in the mud. None of it helped his situation except to keep him sane in the dark, give him some tiny measure of defiance, ‘Fine, asshole, kill me but I can still move my goddamn pinky finger. Fuck you.’

But now-
Now.

He tries to flex his calves, twitch a finger.

And it doesn’t let him.

It feels like the vines are running through him now. Slithering past his muscles, wrapping around his tendons, twisting their way into his brain stem. If he could scream he would. If he could cry he would do it openly. He'd cling to Joyce like a child.

“Fight it, Hopper,” Joyce whispers, “Please, fight it, Jim.”

He doesn’t. Can’t. Wouldn’t even know how to start. Jane probably could but the idea of this ever happening to her is so repulsive he doesn't even let himself consider it but the thing in his head burbles with wordless happiness at his horror. Overflowing like a fountain. Makes him ride the emotion with it.

Take the gun, Joyce. Take it and shoot me. Don’t get cute and try to shoot me in the shoulder or the leg. It won’t care. Just aim for center mass. Shoot me and run.

Almost like she can hear him Joyce leans in slowly, deliberately, like an uncertain cat- eyes huge and dark and terrified.

"I love you, Jim." She whispers and for a terrible second he thinks that she's going to try to kiss him. Kiss him for the them of a hundred different dimensions that may or may not exist. For a Joyce Horowitz that didn't go to prom with Lonnie Byers, didn't end prom in the back of his Pontiac and didn't get knocked up and marry him and a Hopper that stayed with her instead of enlisting. For them now- the real them- the ones that missed a hundred chances and were never going to get them- kiss him like a princess in a fairytale to drive the wicked thing out of him.

But it's been a long, long time since Joyce Byers believed in fairytales- thank Christ- so she just slowly skins the gun from his holster before rocketing back against the passenger side door as far from him as she can get, holding the gun two handed, aimed straight at his heart because she might love him but that's not going to keep her from getting home to her boys and the kids- no matter what.

I'm so goddamn proud of you Joyce. Tell Jane I love her.

The Aboleth is good at keeping him still but less so at moving him or maybe it just doesn't care because one of his fingers peels away from the wheel and lacking any his brain's normal human fail-safes for how far the ligament should draw it back or how it moves the thing puppeting him breaks his own index finger with a sound like a snapping branch.

Joyce brings one hand up to her mouth to keep herself from screaming but her aim stays steady as a rock, somehow.

He sits still and silent, staring out the windshield at the shapes of people wandering through the darkness toward the quarry. He doesn't have a choice.

Second one and he can feel that it thinks it's funny. He feels absolute fucking glee that isn't his that Joyce is crying.

Now Joyce, please do it now. It doesn't have to be this slow. It can make me-

Headlights from a car behind them fill the cab of the Chevy as someone pulls up and stops and a dark, hysterical little part of him thinks that well, they’re just gonna have to wait until Joyce shoots
him and hauls his corpse out of the drivers side or pass 'em on the right.

And then...something changes.

It happens by inches. Jesus, actually he would have given anything for inches. It happens by centimeters. Something is unraveling the thing as the Aboleth tries to tighten it's hold and Jim Hopper finds himself the rope in the world's worst game of tug of war.

But he can move his eyes. He can blink.

"Jim?"

There's a sudden rush of madness and desperation and the purest sort of hatred that explodes like a supernova in his skull that blows every thought that's actually his out of his head and he hasn't exactly lived clean so for the briefest moment he thinks that he's going to get to experience the irony of having escaped the thing and Joyce not shooting him only to have a stroke.

But then It's gone. He instinctively draws his hand back to his chest and that's about all he can do before slumping sideways onto Joyce with a noise that doesn't manage to be anything else but a sob and the gun is on the dash and she's wrapping her arms around him.

"Oh my god. How?"

Jane. It had to have been Jane. She'd ignored him and taken the shit from her sister and realized he was in trouble and just this once he's going to let the 'friends don't lie, especially not about taking potentially dangerous drugs' discussion slide.

But he can't talk yet and has another problem- he manages to right himself, barely- fumbles frantically for the door handle with hands shaking and slings himself out onto the road just in time to start retching what feels like a gallon of pitch black water onto the asphalt and Joyce is out of the car and rubbing his back like it's the morning after a bender and not him throwing up some mysterious black shit from The Upside Down.

There are footsteps in front of him, heavy ones and boots appear in his field of vision. He follows them up blearily as a woman he's never seen before in his life squats down on her haunches to meet him halfway, bare wrist extended.

008

"Does this mean anything to you, Policeman?"

He manages a tight, humorless smile. Thinks he manages it at least.

"Bitchin."

The woman gestures and four punks that look like someone shook out CBGB at three in the morning pile out of the idling van and array themselves behind her, trying to look like hard-asses bust mostly looking curious as Joyce helps him to his knees and Eight stands back up.

"Jane called you?"

"She did. You," It takes both of them a second to realize she's talking to Joyce, "Put his handcuffs on him, please."

"Excuse me?" He doesn't turn around to see Joyce's face but he can tell by her voice that El's
extremely powerful murderous sister or not Joyce isn't having any, "Why in the hell would I-"

"I can clear it but The Intelligence is faster than I am," The woman's accented, sing-song voice is gentle but firm, "It won't indulge itself next time. He'll be dangerous in a car. We can remove them when we get where we're going."

"Oh, oh. Okay. Sure. He'll be dangerous?" Joyce jabs a finger at Eight, "What about you people?"

"We're Intelligence proof." The woman with the multi-color hair snaps her gum and grins proudly and the one with the Afro drops her face into her hands, shaking her head.

"She means Kal's immune and we mostly know when something's fucking with our heads. Been with her long enough that we got our Frankenstein inoculation."

*Frankenstein?*

Joyce crosses her arms over her chest, "And if it goes after me?"

"I think we can handle you if that happens, m'am." The big man with the braid smiles slightly, then has the good sense to at least look a little bit concerned when he snorts a laugh 'cause there are at least two inter-dimensional monsters that thought the exact same thing.

"Well, Policeman?"

"Hop?" Joyce sounds incredibly uncertain. Can't say he blames her, given the circumstances.

"Do it. People are walking to the quarry. We don't have time to dick around."

Joyce unhooks them from his belt and cuffs him behind his back, carefully avoiding his broken fingers and the punks are staring and black water is soaking into the knees of his pants and *Jesus*, this is about as far from how he pictured getting handcuffed by Joyce as it's possible to get and stay on planet earth.

"Happy?"

"Very. Where's Jane?"

"Safe."

*He hopes.*

"Don't be stupid. No one anywhere in this town is safe. Take me to her."

"No. Leave her out of it. She can't fight this thing- she already tried."

"Fight it?" The woman's brow furrows in confusion, "We aren't here to fight it. We're taking Jane and we're leaving."

There it is.

It isn't easy to get to your feet from kneeling while wearing handcuffs, but he manages. Less intimidating than he planned, because his legs still aren't reporting for duty and he staggers sideways like a drunk. It's only Joyce and the Chevy that keep him from going right over onto his ass.

"The hell you are."
The woman gestures to the blank-eyed people strolling past, "You'd prefer she die with the rest of you?"

Joyce scowls and squares up to the other woman and if he were capable of finding anything amusing right now the fact that Joyce actually gets to look down at someone over the age of thirteen would do it 'cause she must have three inches on Kali.

"Or you could help us?"

The woman matches her, stare down for stare down but doesn't raise her voice to match Joyce's.

"What makes you think I could give a single damn about a town that eats the young? Do you think I have some affection for this place?"

"Be pissed at the lab but these people didn't do anything."

"No they didn't. No one did."

"So, what?" He says and the girl's gaze swings to him, burning now, "You going to kidnap her like they did to you?"

Her face twists with disgust, "Of course not."

"Well, you better have brought a school bus along with your piece of shit van 'cause if you think she's leaving her friends behind you're goddamn crazy."

"I know she'll come with me."

"Okay, so you're goddamn crazy. Got it."

Woman doesn't dignify him with a response, just fishes into her bag, pulls out a little reel to reel tape recorder, presses play-

Only takes two words for him to recognize the piece of shit Judas on the recording and he knows that while it looks like a tape recorder she must be using her powers on it, 'cause what she's really got in her hands is a live grenade.

"You've gotta give me your word that no one is ever going to find out about this. And those other kids, those boys, you leave them alone. Then I'll tell you. I'll tell you where your little science experiment is."

And Brenner's.

"You have it."

Joyce is staring, wide eyed, as she listens to him sell his soul for her son, "Hopper-? Is that-"

No point in denying it, no point in excuses or counter-accusations or appeals- any of that would just be twisting on the woman's line. And the man on that tape doesn't deserve denials or excuses or counter-accusations or appeals. He had done his ruthless calculus with his eyes open and decided that a real child that could have already been dead was worth more than the broken, empty living girl in the Hawkins Middle School gymnasium.

"It's real. I traded her for a chance to get to Will," There's a strange metamorphosis as the steel goes out of Joyce's spine and she goes from unstoppable crusader to nervous wreck all at once. Her shoulders twist inward as she holds her elbows, murmuring a quiet oh god as the implications of
what he had done sink in, "I'll make a deal with you."

Kali raises an eyebrow, looks at him like something that needs to be scraped off of her boot.

"You seem fond of deals, policeman."

"I take you to her now, I'm out of the picture but you're still going to have the same problem you started with. As long as they're in danger she's not going to leave her friends and she's sure as shit not skipping town with you, but you help us stop this thing and after this is over and she's safe I'll take you to her, hell I'll press the play button myself."

He loses another daughter that he loves and he could swear up down to himself that he'd stay on the straight and narrow after she's gone, after the rest of them can't look him in the face and he's back at square one but with dreams of vines and demodogs and syringes in interrogation rooms to join the one's of dead daughters and jungles and a siege that never ends- could swear it but the Tuinal Trolley has a bad habit of showing up at the damnedest times, like when things the darkest and quietest and emptiest.

But the life of a real child was worth more than the life a broken, empty man.

Kali looks at him with slightly less disdain than before and then at the crew behind her and if nothing else she must inspire a helluva lot of confidence or blind loyalty because they just shrug and wait for marching orders.

"Deal."

Billy killed Steve’s bat.

He *killed* Steve’s *bat*.

The bat that had fought the Demogorgon. The bat Steve had used to protect him from being eaten by Demodogs. The bat that had totally let Dustin be Steve’s hero for ten seconds when he brought it back to him when he was grounded ’cause he’s pretty sure it was also the bat that made Steve feel less terrified of everything they have to deal with every year.

And it’s dead.

And so is he. Probably. But he's also *pissed*.

’Cause Steve is going to want his bat back when he wakes up.

*Because they're all going to wake up.*

Dustin wants to scream it in Billy's face ’cause then maybe the Aboleth will hear it too and know that it screwed up by sending Hargrove here. Screwed up by leaving him here without them. Because if they were all gone for good, trapped forever, sentence eaten- theoretically- no- *not* theoretically. Factually. One hundred percent guaranteed *fact*- it would have had no reason to have Hargrove kill them. But it was a bully and coward so it had sent Billy to cut off their escape route when they couldn't fight back.

But he *could.*
They were alive somewhere and he was going to get them back.

Assuming he doesn't die in the next five minutes.

’Cause Billy Hargrove is hauling him forward by the front of his shirt with both hands, just like he had with Steve right before he tossed him into the living room and started really kicking his ass, except Steve hadn’t had to stand on his toes to keep from being lifted off the ground and strangled by his own shirt, and whatever little bit of control Billy had been keeping over himself has obviously gone right out the window.

He tries not to think about how getting hit hurts way more than he expected because it’s not really a useful observation but considering the circumstances it’s a hard thought to shake. Honestly, he should get credit for being able to think about anything else besides that after getting punched- twice- in the face by Billy friggin’ Hargrove ‘cause he had thought that Troy and James and the Zimmerman’s shoving him around had sucked but Billy punches like he’s trying to knock your brain out through your ears. He probably has brain damage now.

And he’s about to be hit a lot more so the thought of how much it hurts is just right there, front and center: he's dead and it's gonna hurt.

But there’s no one else to protect them so he has to get his ass-kicked first and buy as much time as he can- maybe even until Hop and Joyce get back. And he knows that Billy isn’t going to get bored or tired-out but Dustin’s still gonna stand as long as he can stand because that’s what The Party do for each other.

It’s not a great plan but it’s the only one he has.

Billy begins to smile.

A person who had never seen Billy go insane might have thought it was a gentle smile- a friendly smile- but something about it is completely unhinged and his too-wide eyes light up the same way Lucas' do when he looks at Max except the only thing Billy Hargrove is in love with is beating the shit out of people. And the smile only gets bigger as he hauls him off of his feet and slams him against the kitchen door-frame. He's choking on his t-shirt and Billy is hauling back to smash his head onto the wood and the last thing he's ever going to see are the tick marks of how tall Jonathan and Will were on their birthday's in 1982.

Mom. Mom, I'm really sorry 'cause it's way easier to get to new cat than a new kid and actually I'm sorry about the cat too-

The older boy stops- distracted by something behind him even though no one is there, smile twisting into a furious scowl.

"Fuck you, Harrington, you don't get to tell me what to do-"

It's an opening. He doesn't know what to do with an opening besides try to punch Billy Hargrove which honestly, seems even more suicidal than just being punched by Billy Hargrove because he can't fight like Steve.

But maybe he shouldn't try to.

Because Billy is taller and way stronger and way, way more murderously psychotic but he gets crazy when he fights which means that Dustin has one advantage- he's still thinking. It's like the time Bilfrick got separated from the party and ended up having to fight the eight-foot tall, Gnoll Bandit Captain by himself - he couldn't outfight it so he distracted it and tricked it into falling into a ravine.
First step, *evasive maneuvers*.

It occurs to him that physics-wise, standing on his toes to stay upright and in the ideal *Punch Dustin Henderson in the Face* position he's doing a lot of Billy's work for him because Billy might have leverage on his side but he can make him fight *gravity*.

He bounces once on his toes to maximize momentum before dropping down as dead weight. There's a split second when he can't breathe at all and it's up in the air if he just hung himself on his *Weis Earth Science Museum* t-shirt but Billy loses his grip on him and he hits the floor.

Next step *distraction and trickery*.

It's enough to end whatever argument Billy was having with the Aboleth and if he was confused by him dropping he's *really* confused by him lunging forward and bear-hugging his legs together because he's totally sure *Billy's* never seen *The Empire Strikes Back*. The older boy doesn't go right over like an AT-AT but he does stumble a step backward and that's all Dustin needs because Lucas's feet are stretched out behind him.

Dustin doesn't wait to watch Billy fall, though the crack his head makes against the kitchen table is impressively loud. He doesn't even bother standing back up, just scrambles frantically for Steve and grabs his lighter from out of his jean pocket before making a break for the living room because he needs Steve's backpack. He tears it open, upends it, and the realization that this entire plan and him not getting immediately murdered by Billy Hargrove hinges on Nancy's packing isn't as concerning as it should be because there's no way she would have forgotten it, even if they were rushing because she knows it's important-

Sure enough there are two cans of hairspray, wrapped discreetly in Steve's gym t-shirt-

A howl accompanies Billy as he explodes into the room behind him, blood in his hair from where it hit the table and running down his arm from where he landed on a nail and grinning a feverish grin that looks like someone stapled the corners of his mouth to his cheeks.

"*Yes!* Oh, oh kid. We're going to have *FUN* now."

Well, the plan had been to make him rage like the Hulk so mission accomplished, he guesses, but this was still going to *suck*-

Billy collides with his back, all muscle and momentum, slamming him forward against the living room wall hard enough that the air goes right out of his lungs and he barely avoids breaking his nose and Dustin wonders if something can both be a terrible plan and *work perfectly* because if nothing else he was too furious to notice that he was holding something that wasn't the splinter of bat.

Billy hauls him back, spins him around and slams him back against the wall so hard his dentures rattle and it's a watch the right-hand not left-hand situation so he brings a knee up between his legs-

The older boy curls up a little and huffs air in through his nose like a charging bull.

"*Jesus, you missed my dick. How do you even do that?*"

"*Dunno... seems statistically unlikely unless it's like, really small.*"

Billy tosses his head back and roars laughter at the ceiling.

"*Not bad, kid- seriously, you didn't do bad at all,*" His grin widens *somehow*, "*But you talk way too fucking much.*"
"I like to talk."

Billy's obviously completely unconcerned with him trying to hit him 'cause his arms are still free but he's got one hand dug into his hair 'cause he might have been crazy but he learned from the trick in the kitchen and the other is pulled back to bash his brains in-

"Okay then Slugger, you want to talk? Any last words?"

"Faberge Organics, dickhead."

"What the fuck is-?"

Billy's puzzled expression turns to shouts of inarticulate rage as the sudden gout of flame from his makeshift lighter-and-Farrah Fawcett Spray-based flame-thrower meet his midsection, catching on Billy's shiny, un-buttoned shirt. His polyester, shiny, unbuttoned shirt and Dustin knows from class that unlike normal cloth polyester is actually a plastic polymer and it doesn't really burn very well.

But it does melt.

The older boy lets go of him to start batting at it frantically and unsuccessfully, covering his chest and hands with more black inky drops of burning liquid as he laughs that you did good kid and he's gonna kill him, he's got fire after all and he's gonna fucking kill him-

And the last step is...well, toss him into a ravine but that's not really an option so Dustin clocks him in the jaw with the hair-spray can while he's distracted trying to put himself out.

When they wake up he's going to tell them that it was one hundred percent on purpose. He's going to tell them that he absolutely knew that you could knock someone out by hitting them in the jaw and that had been his intention and he hadn't meant to just hit him in the head but either way Billy Hargrove drops like a stone, one hand waving hazily in the air before dropping down onto his still slightly smoldering chest.

Dustin sits down hard on the floor. 'Cause he's going to rescue his friends, definitely, but everything hurts and he just...needs to just...take a second.

But only a second.

He levers himself back up using the couch and tries not to think about how much he'd just like to lay down on the couch because the party needs assistance. He can do this. He just won a fight with Billy Hargrove and he's going to remind Steve of this fact every day for the rest of their lives but he needs to get them back to do that.

The screen door is slamming against the frame in the wind and Billy was so certain that he wouldn't have any trouble that his Camaro is still growling on the lawn, keys in the ignition. Dustin looks out the window at the car, then down at its owner.

Sonofabitch.

He grabs Billy by the ankles and adds 'locking a douchebag in the trunk of his stupid car' as another thing that no one should have to do alone as he drags the unbelievably heavy boy down the hall.

But by the time that's done he almost wants to thank Billy 'cause he's made him realize that they've been thinking about this the wrong way. They'd thought that powering up El would be all it would take and she'd be able to win a mental slugging match with the Aboleth, just like she had with the Mind Flayer, but that was meeting it where it was strongest and it had kicked their asses twice. They
needed to exploit a weakness.
And Dustin knows exactly how.
He has a plan.

THERE IS NOTHING HERE

"Well," The man with the mohawk jerks a thumb at the white, spray-painted graffiti, mouth twisting downward, "That's gonna be a fucking lie."

Jim Hopper stands besides Jane's sister in the Gates of Hell.
He's pretty sure there's a really deep metaphor in there somewhere.

"-The fuck is wrong with this town anyway? You got mad scientists, zombies, Frankenstein's and gates to \textit{Hell}?"

"It's just a storm drain," Joyce lays a hand on the man's shoulder, startling him, and he's about as sharp edged and prickly as his hair so Hopper gets to watch in real time as the man's face runs the entire gamut from deciding to yell at Joyce that he doesn't need her mothering him to realizing that it's impossible to yell at Joyce to sort of just folding up a little sheepishly and accepting the situation. Of course that's Joyce's cue to add, "We closed our \textit{actual} gate to Hell in November."

The man squints at her like he's trying to figure out if she's joking. Finally figures she's not and tosses his duffel-bag- a bag that's \textit{apparently} filled with homemade thermite slugs just in case they decided to pay a visit to the lab on the way out of town which is the sort of preparation Jim Hopper can appreciate, given to the circumstances- over to Kali.

"I hate fuckin' suburbia, Kal."

The pipes are big-three standing adults across big- bigger than he had ever imagined a town like Hawkins would need for run off prior to this particular storm and had always figured some bastard in public works got a kick-back on 'em. As a teenager he'd loved them because they were isolated and adult and just dangerous enough to make the adventurous half of him feel like an explorer-venturing into uncharted territory - past the sump where no one else was brave enough to go. Other half of loved them because they helped him convince Chrissy Carpenter to let him put his hand up her skirt before Red Eye Joe got them, which he figured was it's own sort of exploration.

Soon as he was hired onto the force he'd started making yearly proposals to put a grate over the fucking things, even if it meant cleaning leaves out monthly because it was inevitable that some teenage idiot was going to drown climbing down past the sump trying to impress their air-head girlfriend in an attempt to get laid. He'd had to break up a office betting pool that had had Steve Harrington as the clear favorite.

Wonders what the odds would have been on him nearly getting killed by a monster and getting saved by grade-schoolers? Probably long.

He sweeps his flashlight over what looks like two trees worth of dead fall, a water-logged piece of what he's almost sure is Steve's jacket still clinging stubbornly to a branch like a drooping flag.
This is where they nearly died.

Where *Jane* nearly died.

He half expects the monster to be waiting for them on the other side of the deadfall like it had with the kids, but there's nothing but the slosh of water and the the echo of the pipes. He steps over punctures and scratches in the metal that he knows were made by Will Byers and a nail-bat, watches Joyce stop short.

"Joyce if you want to-"

"Don't Hop. The *kids* could be out there right now. We need to end this thing."

Joyce threads her fingers through his good hand and squeezes hard enough that it might not be his good hand for much longer and he lets her. Of course he let's her- he'd let her break every damn bone in his body if it made her less frightened as they walk side by side into the monster's lair.

"Sure we can't come with you?" The big man with the braid lays a hand on Kali's shoulder, voice surprisingly soft for someone that looks like they could lift a small truck.

"The more people I have to shield the faster I'll wear out. Stay here, make sure it doesn't send anyone in after us."

"We're meant to protect you, Kali."

Kali smiles the first smile he's seen from her. Small and quick and Hopper's pretty sure there's been a lot of hard living in the group and that everyone looks a few good- or rather a few real goddamn *bad*- years older than they actually are but he's almost certain the man is *actually* older than the rest, around his own age if he was going to hazard a guess and for all of the swaggering madness of the gang there's something bone deep familiar about the look the two of them exchange-  

"Protect me then."

Feels like it's a vote of confidence- or at least understanding- when the man slings the ax off of his shoulder and hands it over to him.

"Take it," The man's voice is a quiet rumble, "Don't let anything happen to her."

*This'll be you one day. One day you won't be able to protect her and she'll leave you behind to protect you. She'll go it alone and you'll have to let her.*

Jokes on him. Won't have the chance, not after that tape plays.

"Do my best."

He goes down the ladder down into the sump first, Kali behind him, Joyce taking up the rear.

Funny that Kali hadn't argued about Joyce going with them. And it had gone unsaid that she could have left him handcuffed in their van and taken two of her own people to find it and kill it if she had wanted to. He doesn't doubt that woman had done some ruthless calculus of her own- decided she'd rather risk her own life with strangers than her friend's under any circumstances.

Figures that means two things- one, that she's more human than she wants to let on and two that she's far less confident about her ability against the thing than she seems but she's going to give it a shot anyway.
Jane's sister alright.

He'd read the article Becky Ives had passed on to him. Knew that they'd taken her from London as a child, not raised her from birth. Girl had gone to lab after knowing how to talk, knowing loving parents, knowing how wrong what was being done to her was so he doubts that there'd be much overlap in their development, besides that they both went through hell but he still can't help but watch her as they splash through the pipe, try to catch out a movement or mannerism or expression the two of them share.

Jane's sister catches him looking, staring at him with the same young-old eyes as Jane- the ones that seem to peer into you as much as at you look into them and Hopper's never been one of those blowhards on the force with magic instincts- the one's where they brag that they looked into the suspects eyes and saw his fucking soul and knew that they were guilty regardless of if it was some idiot robbing a liquor store or Charlie Manson. Not to mention that it would be pretty goddamn simple in this case given that he already knows El's sister is a serial murderer so he wouldn't exactly be covering himself in glory in guessing that something's not right about her- but even so there's something a little unsettling about her gaze.

"What is it, Policeman? Why are you looking at me?"

"Got a question for you."

She shrugs one shoulder. No promises.

"This crusade that you want to recruit Jane into- when is it over? How many people die before you call it even?"

The woman's placid expression flickers and for a second he thinks he's going to get an illusion of his body parts disappearing or roaches crawling under his skin instead of an answer, but she just faces forward and keeps walking.

"Have you ever felt pain great enough that you must punish the world, Policeman? You think someday, someday it will be enough. Someday I'll have tipped the scales and on that day I can rest. But that day never comes and like the man that drinks the ocean to quench his thirst you have to keep going. Have you ever hated someone so much you would swallow poison if it meant killing them? Because if not you have no right to-"

"Yeah. I have."

The woman's mouth gets a nasty little disbelieving twist to it.

"Well- are they dead?"

"Nah, he's not dead yet," He shrugs, "But we'll see how the day goes."

She blinks at him in startled surprise, opens her mouth to say something but closes it again- obviously decides she doesn't want to know.

"Alright," The girl says, "My turn. Why do you want Jane?"

"Why do I-?"

"You sold her out and then you took her in. What's your endgame, Policeman? What do you get out of this?"
Word books and work books and mess and screaming fights. The pride in her face when she applies new concepts. The endless questions (What's an amoeba? What is the name of the space between the bits that stick out on a comb? Where do thoughts come from? Why does Max have red hair? What's cleidocranial dysplasia? How do fish breathe?) that have him diving into encyclopedias along with her for answers and the joy when she gets one that satisfies her. Watching the ABC movie and seeing her eyes go wide to drink every last new thing in and how she writes down the places she's going to go when she can leave the cabin (New York. Hollywood. Disneyland. A boat. Space (Hopper says that there is no air in space)). Bedtime stories and broken windows and the little smile she gets when she's ribbing him. A daughter.

"She's the reason I'm not dead yet. She saved me."

Seems involuntary when the woman jerks around to face him, flashlight beam nearly blinding him.

"If you're trying to play me for sympathy, Policeman-"

"Doubt you have any. You're all about death and destruction, right? Kali."

She snorts, "What do you know about the Vedas?"

"Used to smoke grass with a Hare Krishna neighbor in 1973?" Can't tell in the lowlight but he's pretty sure if the woman's eyes rolled any harder she'd roll 'em out of her head, "Am I wrong?"

"Kali is-"

The woman stops, face twisting in disgust and the smell hits him before he sees it. The rot smell. The Upside Down smell. Joyce makes a small, horrified sound in her throat as her flashlight scans the pipe, trying to find the source.

Black, hair-like fibers stretch up the walls, climbing and fanning away from a rotting, collapsing central mass like a slime mold or webbing-

"What-?" Kali murmurs, looking a little green because she might be a criminal and murderer but there's a helluva difference between a fresh corpse and whoever this had been.

"It's a body," Looks nearly identical to how Harrington and Byers found Greg Wilkes out in Flat Rock, approximately a hundred years ago. Wonders vaguely who it might have been, God knows there's not shortage of candidates on his desk, "Aboleth makes 'em rot alive."

There are two more farther up the pipe and the decomp smell is so strong he could chew it- feels it crawling into his nostrils like a obscene living thing.

"At least we know we're on the right track," Joyce's voice sounds vague and a little distant 'cause they've seen worse but not much worse but she's also the first one to step over it and press on, "C'mon."

Kali watches her go, blinking, expression unreadable.

"You alright?"

"This drain should be flooded, shouldn't it?"

"Don McCorkle flushed the Quarry runoff system, little over an hour ago, wiped out the whole trailer park. Didn't remember who told him to or why," The woman's thoughtful unhappy expression deepens, "It wants us to be able to get to it, doesn't it? It thinks it can beat you."
"Yes, probably."

"Can it?"

Kali doesn't answer as the three of them make their way out of pipe and into a tall, rounded cistern, just brings up a hand, curling it slowly into a fist and a presence in his mind that he didn't even know was there snuffs out like lighter.

"We'll see in a moment. We've found it."

Jim doesn't know what he had been expecting. Some Upside Down nightmare thing, sure. Something to turn around and spot them and scream a warbling screech as it's head opened.

He hadn't expected a cocoon.

Black...webbing- God, he's going to think of them as webbing, his mind can't process the alternative-oscillating under a force from the inside and he feels a swell of hope that they can kill it now before they ever have to see what it is but there's a wet, rotten ripping noise like the skin of fruit bursting as a black claw tears effortlessly through the material and the dark twisted form of the creature emerges in pieces-

The thing- expands.

Hopper thinks of flower petal heads that blossom into a tunnel of teeth except this time the whole of it is...unfolding. Multiplying itself from something the size of a man as it spreads indistinct, unjointed limbs that seem like they could bend a thousand times, a thousand ways- arms or legs or tentacles or tail- it was impossible to tell as it opened and opened into organic folds with slithering shapes twisting through its limbs, shuddering and twitching inside of it like something newly dead.

Jesus Christ.

Disorienting gusts of feeling come off of it like a smell, hatred and insane joy and hunger as the creature opens its mouth, bits of it curling backward to reveal something that's finally kinda horribly expected- a, concentric meat-grinder of teeth and something that's not- a sickly yellow brightness that some primal part of himself knows is meant to rip him right out of his own head and end this fight before it even begins.

It disappears as Kali redoubles her effort and the thing's maniacal joy turns sour, almost resigned. Fine, if you want to do this the hard way.

The Aboleth slumps and skitters its way into the black water of the cistern, protecting its body while searching appendages reach out for them.

Kali lets the duffel bag of thermite slugs slip from her shoulder, drops it at his feet. He reaches in, pulls out two pieces of pipe packed with powder and hopes that somebody gave Mohawk the Anarchists Cookbook for Christmas and he actually knew a damn thing about what he was doing as Joyce comes up beside him, his Colt at the ready, impossibly brave.

"I'll try to keep it distracted, you throw."

She fires, hits a appendage that was moving toward him at speed and nothing from the Upside Down has ever been particularly deterred by guns but it pulls away in surprise at least, like a child that touched a stove and suddenly understood that it was hot.

He lights the fuses on one of pipe pieces- a bit of what he's almost certain is a broken off 4th of July
sparkler- and hurls it toward the bulk of the thing in the water, manages not to blow his own hand off in the process as it ignites in mid-air, erupting and melting into liquid sparks so bright they light the entire cistern.

Alright, Mohawk. Not bad.

He'd had a sergeant once- real nasty burn-happy Bill Kilgore sonofabitch- that constantly bemoaned the air force switching to Napalm from thermite incendiary bombs 'cause Napalm, well, Napalm will stick to anything, burn on top of the water but goddamnit, thermite will burn under it. Thermite will burn until there's nothing left of it and good luck trying to stop it. The Aboleth sure as hell can't, because it surges forward toward him, new threat identified- gets two shots from Joyce as it's arms...appendages, ah, to hell with it- tentacles convulse

"Jim, light another. I saw something." She ducks down and grabs a slug for herself as he lights another one, fills the cistern with a flash as bright as a welding torch and Joyce starts moving around the cistern's edge toward the other side.

"Joyce, what are you-?"

"Policeman!"

The Aboleth hurls itself forward out of the water like an alligator lunging. He doesn't get out of the way in time but woman's yell mean's that it clips him instead of bowling him over and something- Jesus, a stinger- comes down just to the left of his head instead of in his skull and splatters black poison onto the cement. Black poison that's moving, sprouting needle hairs and wriggling toward him like tiny blind maggots.

Sound that he makes isn't manly and sure is hell isn't dignified as he scrambles to the side. The thing tracks him, rears back to strike again as his back hits the wall behind him. There's no escape-

"Hey!" The Aboleth actually seems to notice the shout and understand, swinging to the side to see Joyce, lighter and thermite slug raised, standing over... a clutch of familiar yellow veined eggs- "Get away from him."

The creature draws back.

There's nothing remotely human, hell, nothing remotely recognizable as being from planet earth about the thing but the way it scrambles and folds up a little- he's seen before. Seen that placating posture on drunks after bar fights as they pick up the other guy and brush him off, seen it on a man getting caught beating his wife as she stands behind him, holding her elbows- hey cop we were just playin' no reason to get serious.

It scuttles back, curling up in on itself and Kali's still blocking it but she's swaying a little, bleeding freely from her nose and a whiff of honest to god fear comes through from the thing. He reaches for where his lighter landed slowly, avoids the crawling black shit, thumbs the wheel. Just a little more and the Aboleth will be over the duffel bag- just a little more-

Joyce sees what he's going to try. Gives him a nod and they both know that the thing can understand her but Joyce doesn't say a word, just does what needs to be done as she lights the slug and drops it.

A wave of emotion so strong even Kali can't block it comes through and he almost misses his window as it hits him, unstoppable, terrible and above all utterly familiar. Loss. It screams an unholy, merciless scream of loss and then it's scrambling toward Joyce, scrambling toward its destroyed children, loss turning to blind, wild hate-
Hate.

HATE.

He tosses the lighter.

At first nothing happens and he thinks he somehow had the impossibly bad luck to miss every one of the remaining fuses but one, and then all of ‘em together and a gout of flame erupts under the thing’s abdomen. It scrambles, writhes, tosses itself into unnaturally dark water that looks like it’s getting darker by the second, even as it takes the fire with it.

He stands slowly, feels like an old man- too old for this shit, definitely, and barely manages to lunge forward to catch Kali before she gives one last sway and falls.

"Is it-?"

"No."

Steve's bike is way too big for Dustin and now he's the idiot that's trying not to die riding it in a lightning storm but any concern about that goes right out the window when he gets out of the woods and onto Cornwallis.

Blank faced and empty-eyed people are trickling out of their houses, all walking in the same direction like sleepwalkers except none of them respond when he shouts or shakes them and two terrible thoughts hit him at the same time. First that the Aboleth cast enslave on hundreds of people at once and it's still going- he sees Phil Callahan attempting to corral people, shouting into his radio for backup only to go silent himself and start walking. He see Jennifer Hayes' mom trying to snap her daughter out of it before dropping into step with her. And it's happening all over.

Second, his mom might be out here.

The third terrible thought comes right on the heels of that one- he doesn't have time to check because the plan just got way more essential because whatever the Aboleth is doing it's big.

He bikes furiously toward Mr. Clarke's house on Grant, tries not to consider that he might already be walking too because if he is everyone is totally, totally screwed but there are a half dozen people out on his block- half a dozen non-brainwashed people- and Dustin hears Mr. Clarke before he sees him, flashlight in hand, calling for someone named Jen at the top of his lungs.

"Mr. Clarke!" The bike practically slides out from under him as he skids to a stop.

"Dustin?" Mr. Clarke grabs him by both shoulders, shouting to be heard above the storm and the sirens, "Dustin, what happened to your face-?"

Oh. Right. His face. He brings his hand up to touch his lip and finds that it's still bleeding sluggishly and the area around it has that warm, aching soreness of a bruise.

"That's not important, Mr. Clarke-"

"Not- what are you doing alone? Where are the others? Are they-" He gestures helplessly with his flashlight to the people around them and Mr. Clarke's face slides from wide-open concern into abject
horror when he shakes his head no ’cause he knows that there's no way he'd be alone if there were any other possible option, "Oh god, Dustin what."

And he knows that they're alive somewhere but he can't actually trust himself to say that words 'the Aboleth got them' out-loud without wasting time they don't have by bursting into tears again so he changes the subject in the only way he knows is foolproof- asking questions.

"What's happening, Mr. Clarke?"

"I don't know- some...behavioral change. I think it’s acting directly like Gordian worms, or...or...cockroach wasps."

“Body snatchers.” He mummers, more frightened than enthusiastic about the science for once because all he knows about either of those things is that cockroach wasps sting roaches in the brain and then walk them around.

Mr. Clarke wipes rain out of his eyes-probably rain- and nods, "I just don't understand why- the energy costs of direct manipulation for parasites is immense-it has to have a reason- a plan to eat and then go into a long term hibernation in order to recuperate, maybe or it could be a push for-”

The man flinches like whatever idea he just had kicked him in the teeth.

"What, Mr. Clarke?"

"Nothing." But Mr. Clarke runs a hand over his mouth in a gesture that manages to look both miserable and nervous so he's lying and that's just...hugely concerning because Mr. Clarke never withholds information so whatever's behind this particular curiosity door is going to be incredibly ugly.

"Mr. Clarke-

"Reproduction. My guess would be it's part of it's reproductive cycle."

"Oh, shit," Under the circumstances Mr. Clarke seems content to let that one slide so he says it again, "Oh, shit."

"Dustin- I'm sorry but I have to find Jen, we can try to find your mother-"

Dustin grabs the back of Mr. Clarke's puffy red down vest and tries to sound calm because he definitely understands why he's freaking out right now but they have to keep clear heads because the Party and the town and Mr. Clarke's girlfriend and his mom all need assistance.

"It's alright, It's gonna be okay. I have a plan to save everyone but I need your help."

"A plan? Dustin, what could I possibly-?" His voice is shaking, despairing and so unlike Mr. Clarke that it gives Dustin chills, " I can hear it too, Dustin. It's quiet but it's been getting louder all morning and I think...it's only a matter of time."

"No. That's not going to happen, Mr. Clarke. Remember when I called you about sonar and radar and deep sea fish?"

Mr. Clarke nods- barely- attention still focused on his neighbors walking by, probably wondering how long it will take before he's one of them.

"We're going to blind it."
Mike wonders if maybe the Inbetween is worse than the Upside Down.

The only way to know for sure is to ask Will- which he will never do, ever- or Nancy who's busy trying to keep Steve from fading out of existence which obviously takes priority.

But still, he does wonder.

Because at least in the Upside Down there was *stuff*. Awful, toxic, terrible monstrous stuff, yeah but you could touch it or move it or hide behind it and it was wrong but familiar, at least. It wasn't just empty, eerie alien blackness where there's nothing at all but them and their reflections.

Maybe.

Mike's pretty sure there are *things* here in the same way he's sure there's extra-terrestrial life somewhere in the universe. It's infinite, right? So it would be crazy if human's were the only intelligent species and as far as he can tell their minds are in an equally infinite void in the space between dimensions and it *seems* like whatever is under the water is rock solid but he's pretty sure water striders think surface tension feels solid too, until a fish comes up below them and-

He curls up a little closer to El rests his chin on his knees.

"He was the farthest out...In... Almost gone," She's doing her best but she doesn't have the words and the rest of them don't really understand the concepts at play that come naturally to her so they've been going in frustrating circles where the only one thing is coming through loud and clear.

She could bring them back to their bodies, but she can't bring back Steve.

"The edge of herd," Steve says it like it's funny but it's really *not* and he looks like he's about to break down and cry as Nancy only grabs smoke when she tries and fails to take his hand.

"El, how do we...?" Nancy rounds on them so fast it kicks up black water and Mike can see the possibilities running through her head. Fix him? Heal him? Magic him? She gives up, "It's going to be *fine* Steve, we're going to figure this out. You're going to be alright.

"Nance, friend's don't-

"Die. Friends don't *fucking* die, okay, Steve?"

Steve snorts, "That a new rule?"

"Yeah," Jonathan says slowly, looking at the other boy so hard that Steve doesn't have a choice besides looking back, "Definitely a new rule. Hold on, Steve."

“Hold onto *what*? I can't- just- look, El’s the one with mind powers-right? I just don't know what you think I can *do-*”

There's almost no warning- just split second where the older boy goes wide-eyed before he drifts away into smoke.

It's so fast and unexpected that most of them are frozen- only Jonathan lunges forward, hands closing on the spot where Steve was half a second after he's gone like he can pull him back and Nancy's expression collapses into something terrible-mouth opening like she's about to scream but nothing
comes out. El closes her eyes, throws out a hand, taps borrowed power-

"-migodomigod!" Steve flails back into existence and wherever he had been and whatever he had seen must have been bad because his eyes are glassy and frightened as he babbles and grabs frantically for Nancy and Jonathan like he's drowning even though each swipe passes through them. He finally ends up laying on his back with his hands over his face-

"Steve- oh god-"

"It's okay," He mumbles through his fingers even though it obviously isn't. Nancy keeps trying to touch him, trying to find a place where he's real- figure it out- "...I'm... okay."

"I'm not okay," Nancy whispers.

"Jesus. No one is okay," Jonathan stays back, looking miserable, "Where did you-

"A bad place," El finishes for him because Steve can't. Can't do anything but nod, "Threads and light. You're almost too far."

"I still don't understand what that means, El."

But Mike thinks he does.

"El, can I borrow your hair tie?"

She slips the blue tie off her wrist without hesitation and he loops it over his index fingers.

"This finger is the Aboleth right?" He says indicating his right hand and El nods so hard her curls bounce, "And this finger is Steve's body in Will's kitchen? You said that he was the farthest out. El, is Steve like this?"

He pulls his hands apart, tugging the hair tie taught between them.

"Yes." El bites out the word with fierce relief, eyes bright with confidence that he understands

"And as the Aboleth moves between dimensions-?" El lays her hands over his and moves his hands closer together and draws them farther apart, making the tie stretch and spring back into place, "And if it was here with us Inbetween?"

She claps his hands together and the band falls to the base of his fingers. Back to normal.

Steve blinks at him, "I don't get it."

"Psychic drain. When it bit you in the Gates it must have sort of latched onto your consciousness. El was able to untangle us but part of you is still um, far-"

Lucas goes to lay a comforting hand on Steve's shoulder, realizes that he can't and shoves it into his pocket, "It means that you're officially a transdimensional being, Steve."

"Congratulations." Jonathan deadpans, "Bet you could get it in the yearbook."

Steve looks back and forth between them, obviously trying to decide if they're screwing with him, lets out a low moan when he decides that they aren't.

"Oh my god."
"What happens if the hair-tie...um Steve snaps?" Max asks quietly, obviously wishing she hadn't thought to.

El plucks the tie from off of his fingers and slips it carefully back onto her wrist, closing her hand around it protectively like it's actually Steve, "No."

For once it's Steve- kind-of-an-idiot Steve Harrington- who looks the hard truth in the face.

"If I go too far and you lose the connection I'm Gone, right? Gone gone. To where ever people go when it eats them-?"

"You won't." El says but can't look at him.

The way Mike figures it, you don't know silence until you hear it in the Inbetween because even normal silence has noise in it, a pipe squeaking or a car going by or air moving, but silence here is so complete that it feels like a living entity and the longer it goes on the harder it is to imagine fighting it off. Will does it though. He beats it back.

"We're together. I...would have given anything-" Mike sort of expects Will to curl up a little when everyone looks his way but he doesn't. He ducks out from Jonathan's arm and straightens up, looking at everyone but settling on him, "This time we're together. We can figure it out."

"Will's right, we're together." Mike can't help but wonder if Nancy was always secretly this cool or if they had all undergone some weird alchemy in 1983, because her brow furrows and her mouth goes tight and he somehow doesn't doubt her for a second when she says, "And we're going to kill it before that can happen."

"Yeah, no, you guys need to go back while you can- before the Lot Seven stuff wears off," Steve chokes a little on the words as he tells them to leave him completely alone in a dimension of infinite blackness, "You can figure something out from there but you have to go home."

"We kill it," Jonathan says quietly, wrapping one arm around his knee and the other around Nancy, "Screw this thing. You just started to be tolerable. It's not taking you."

"Don't be an idiot Byers, we don't have weapons. Your brother is here-"

"I vote kill it." Will smiles slightly, "And I've been trapped in another dimension before so my vote counts as nine."

"Shut up, mini-Byers this is a direct democracy-"

"I vote we kill it and save Steve's ass." Lucas grins, "Again."

"Again...Look there has been a totally reciprocal amount of ass-saving."

"Kill it," Max says so seriously that Lucas' grin drops and when she looks up she's not crying anymore, "We go home when it's dead."

Everyone is looking at him.

Steve is looking at him.

It's weird- it's really weird because with the cool hair and cool car and all the King Steve bullshit until the crown weighed too heavy and then the Very Responsible Adult and Self-Appointed
It had never been a question, an election, or a vote- ever since the first seed of the Party had been sown by two lonely children on a swingset there has been an unspoken agreement that Mike leads them. That they can trust him to lead them- lead them through fighting the demogorgon and CIA agents and tunnels filled with demodogs and somehow even though Nancy and Steve and Jonathan are all older and more badass they trust him to lead them, too.

"El...how long do you think we have until your powers fade away again?"

He feels El breathe deep and tense against him. He feels El kinda lie.

"A while."

She doesn't know.

Shit.

This wouldn't be happening if Dustin were here- not that Mike wants him to be stuck here with them in this shitty dimension- but Dustin and Steve are like... Frodo and Samwise (even though Dustin would probably object and say that there was no way Steve wasn't Aragorn 'cause Steve was royalty that showed up out of nowhere and saved their asses and Steve would object to being compared to some nerdy book with elves in it first and then once he knew what a hobbit was object to being called one on principle) but Mike's pretty sure that all that aside they are because Steve never stops moving forward and when everything is too heavy for Steve to carry, Dustin can carry Steve.

Dustin would know exactly what to do or what to say to fix this in a way even El's powers can't or maybe he wouldn't need to do or say anything at all because it wouldn't matter how far out Steve had been, he would sprint across the universe to get back to Dustin.

It's crazy that he had thought-

"You weren't dead."

"Mike-" Nancy bites his name out, eyes wide and Jonathan opens his mouth to say something but Steve just looks at him.

"Yeah, Wheeler?"

"I mean," He swallows hard, chews on his lip, "In the game. The Aboleth fight. I fudged the roll. It didn't do that much damage. Sir Steve should still be alive. I killed you on purpose."

Will is frowning uncertainly at him from under Jonathan's arm and Lucas looks up from where his head is buried in Max's hair.
"Seriously? Dick move, man."

Nancy's brows knit furiously, "Are you kidding me, Mike? You're worried about your stupid game?"

Steve is still focused on him, eyes wide with hurt and confusion at why he's telling him this right now when he might be actually dying or disappearing or discorporating or whatever you do in the Inbetween.

"That...sucks. Why would you do that?"

Rip the band-aid right off, "I figured if I killed your character you would quit playing."


"Oh," There's a lot in that oh. It's saving his sister from the demogorgon and risking his life for them over and over and driving them around and somehow always having quarters and protecting them from bullies for months and probably also all of Steve's asshole friends that used him and then crumpled him up and tossed him away, "You could have just told me you didn't want me around."

"No. No! I mean. So you would quit playing for a reason instead of playing for a while and disappearing when you realized you had better stuff to do than hang around with us. 'Cause Dustin was starting to get really attached and I figured the sooner you decided."

Steve blinks at him, realization dawning, "You thought I was going to hurt Dustin? Fuck off and leave him like his deadbeat dad?"

"Yeah. Yeah I really did. But now I know you're literally never going to do that because it's basically like...the universe forgot to make the two of you brothers and you guys decided to fix it so I just wanted to say sorry and that...Sir Steve- he- he never died. I still have your sheet if you want to play him when we get back. Will can use his scroll of resurrection."

"Thought you wanted to use that on a member of the Party?"

"You are a member of the Party."

It's a really big deal so it's no surprise when Steve immediately ruins the moment.

"Not a provisional member?"

"No."

"Does this mean I get a vote?"

"Yes, Steve. You get a vote."

"Great, I vote that you shitheads leave and get constant adult supervision for the rest of your lives."

"Too bad. I vote we kill it."

Steve's got one possibility left. He's known her the shortest amount of time, knows her the least-

"Supergirl, you don't want to risk your friends."

If he ever had a chance he screws it up by calling her Supergirl.

"Kill it."
"No one is going to leave you behind, Steve."

Steve looks at them, at all of them, expression settling in some strange land between gratitude, sadness, and joy and he swallows hard.

"O-okay, we’re killing it. C’mon dipshits... Let's hear some plans."

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. Look, we’re in the dimensional equivalent of the pink stuff between walls and I’m obviously losing my mind so I trust you little shits. This is ducks on the pond, bottom of the ninth, all hands on deck.”

Will blinks at Steve, “Ducks?”

“Bases loaded. Jesus Christ. That’s it. I’ve watched Star Wars with you little douchebags like, twenty five times. All of you are sitting down and watching the World Series with me this year.”

"I take my vote back. I say we leave him."

"No backsies, Wheeler."

"So, how do we get The Aboleth to come to us?"

El shakes her head.

"We don’t." She reaches out, lays her hand on Steve's arm. It shimmers slightly, like heat waves, but her hand doesn't pass through him, "It's already here."

"It's-?"

There’s a shape in the water

For a split second Mike’s not sure what he’s looking at- it’s kinda like someone flipping a flip book but missing sixty percent of the pages- it feels like his brain skips a beat-

And then it's an Aboleth.

"Screw the vote- send everyone else back. Send them back right now."

"Don't El."

"Nance are you insane we don't even have weapons-"

Of course, yeah, it’s the Aboleth. But it’s also unmistakably an Aboleth.

The same long, mostly submerged sea-green eel body, four writhing tentacles sprouting from behind it’s skull. The wide, round, tooth spiraling mouth of a lamprey and above it three, bright red eyes, stacked one over the other-

Nothing from there has eyes-

It’s completely, impossibly identical to the drawing in Dwellers of the Forbidden City- like it crawled right off the page.

Oh my god, some small hysterical part of him thinks wildly, I’m never running a tarrasque.
Its tentacles in the Gates the first time had been dark and heavy-nothing like the pale, slimey, nearly biofluorescent tendrils that it has now and it hadn’t had eyes- but this does- red rolling ones...

But back at the gate was before they’d all decided it was an Aboleth.

"Aboleth's have a CR of ten and a hundred and thirty five hit points. They're a large sized Aberration with a movement speed of forty feet swimming and ten feet on land but they can't stay on land long or else they dry out and enter a suspended state called long dreaming. They fear Illithids- "

"Mike what are you-"

"They're twenty feet long. Their Armor Class is seventeen." 

"Mike-" Nancy is looking at him like he's going crazy, which is possible.

"Guys- this thing. This place. This isn't real life. It usually works in it's favor because people are alone and it gets to pick what makes them most vulnerable but we're here together. We all think it's and Aboleth so it is an Aboleth."

"How is this a good thing?" Lucas squawks, eyes fixed on the monster, "Look at it!"

"An Aboleth has stats and if it has stats we can kill it."

Max seems to consider this theory very seriously, staring at the Aboleth crawling out of the water, "I think I have a rocket launcher."

No rocket launcher materializes out of the darkness. Steve heaves a sigh and steps in front of them-

"We're so fucking dead."

They're dead. They're so dead.

They really are.

But Steve's already been dead once today and this dickhead monster still has to go through him before it gets to them so he steps in front of Mike and twirls his...his bat.

He's holding his bat.

"Holy shit," Lucas whispers behind him, "Holy shit-"

It had just felt...natural- like muscle memory.. He hadn't considered that he didn't actually have his bat because he always had his bat. Monster about to kill them? Hit it with the bat. So of course he had it. And the bat feels good. The comforting weight of it, the sweat stained grip. It feels like it always does- right somehow-like the World Series and the end of the world.

"Steve. The Fighter." Mike says and he doesn't turn around to look but he can hear the grin in the kid's voice because there's no way Wheerler isn't going to be super smug about being right for a really unfair amount of time.

Nancy comes up at his side, eyes bright and determined and steady as a rock as she sights down the barrel of her gun at the thing coming toward them. He almost tells her to hang back, stay behind him
but doesn't, just gives her a nod that she returns with a small secret sort of smile that spins something in his chest like a tilt-a-whirl and lights him up like the Fourth of July.

"Hey Mike, I get a class?"

There's a pause as Wheeler thinks about it because there are no guns in Greyhawk and what he lands on feels right in a way that Steve doesn't quite understand.

"Nancy. The Gunslinger."

Jonathan grips his arm briefly and he's empty handed but he positions himself beside him like the three of them are an impenetrable wall that the thing will have to get through before it gets to the kids. Like the three of them are a set and are more powerful together than apart and that feels right too.

"Jonathan. The Monk."

Rubber stretches and Lucas steps up next to Jonathan, wrist rocket drawn with what Steve doesn't doubt for a second is the most perfect sling shot stone ever selected.

"Lucas. The Ranger."

It's baring down on them, huge and furious and obviously already wounded-

"Will the Wise," Will stays beside Mike and Max is bouncing on her toes-"Fine... Max. The Zoomer."

Max smirks as she stands next to Lucas.

"And Jane Eleanor Hopper."

El looks like she's going explode with pride, fighting side by side with them for the first time.

Steve checks his stance, get's ready-

The Bard. Dustin, this one's for you, buddy.

"Forgot yourself, Mike," Will says, "Paladin right?"

"No. Dungeon Master. Aboleth's have a CR of ten and a hundred and thirty five hit points. They're a large sized Aberration with a movement speed of forty feet swimming. On land they dry out and enter a suspended state called long dreaming. They fear Illithids-"

"Hell yeah," Lucas adds more draw to his wrist rocket, "The Aboleth is so screwed."

The Aboleth is huge and all he has is a baseball bat that isn't technically real but Steve doesn't think about physics or transfer of energy or any of the hundreds of other reasons that this can't possibly hurt it. He knows that it's going to work against the Aboleth with the same blind, leap of faith certainty that decides to run into a house empty handed and fight a Demogorgon and he figures that the fundamental laws of the universe if there are any in the Inbetween can just find a way to deal with it.

Because it's on them.
Nancy Wheeler shoots with her mind. She decides she never misses. She decides that she shoots silver bullets like a monster hunter from an old movie-

*She should wonder how this works.*

Analyze it. Make flash cards. Turn it around in her head until she talks herself out of it because it can't work. Guns are complex machines with moving parts and dangerous pitfalls not something you can make work by wishing or wanting.

*She looks to Jonathan as he rips a tentacle away from Steve's arm with his bare hands, watches him duck without a second thought as Steve swings at his head and clobbers the thing behind him in the mouth, tearing away a piece of rotten jaw and half a dozen teeth that were about to lodge themselves in Jonathan's skull. She saves both their asses when their eyes go blank and distant and she empties round after round into the thing's throat and they scramble back to her together to regroup, grinning.*

*She decides it works because it works.*

Jonathan Byers lays into the creature with his hands. He's never been able to fight for himself but he can fight for them-

*All it wants is to make them alone again, like in the Lab.*

*It knows that if anyone cocoons themselves in a protective blanket of solitude it's Jonathan Byers. He had been the only one of them that hadn't fought it, hadn't found his own way out of his nightmare because being alone had seemed more real than reality-*

Because reality is that Nancy Wheeler loves him. Reality is that he has his brother with him and Will's shouting encouragement at him as something cartilaginous breaks under his hand. Reality is grabbing Steve when the other boy falls- wrapping thin fingers around his wrist and hauling him out of the way of a thing's tail just like Steve had hauled him branch to branch in another life.

"*Holy shit, Byers-*"

"What, you thought I was just going to leave you?"

"No way," Steve grins, "Never."

Lucas Sinclair fires stone after stone. He believes completely and utterly in each and every one as they hit the target- leave holes in pale fishy skin-

*He believes in his wrist rocket, 'cause his father gave it to him. He believes in the stones because what good is a slingshot without the perfect sling bullet? He believes in Mike as he rattles off facts from the Monster Manuel because he's their leader and he hasn't steered them wrong once. He believes in Max and believes that he will love her until the day that he dies as she sprints past him to punch the Aboleth in the eye when it's attention is on Nancy. He believes that they're going to kill this sucker and go home heroes.*

*Because Will is right. They're together. And Lucas doesn't believe- he knows- that when they're together things seem to turn out right a really ridiculous amount of the time.*

Max Mayfield doesn't know what a Zoomer does when they don't have a car or a board but she sure
she's the one that sees that it's trying to get away, slip back into the water and escape them and she doesn't know what to do and everything is happening at once so she fucking zooms—g rabs a fast receding tentacle and digs in her heels.

"Get it out of the water! Don't let it escape!"

She doesn't know if El is saving her super powers or if she just isn't thinking about it when she grabs on behind her but the other girl is grinning at her as they pull like they're on the same team on Field Day. They pull together as the monster tries to run from THEM. The big, powerful, bully tries to turn tail and run from two little girls but they don't let it and Max screams defiance and El screams the same scream behind her and Max doesn't always feel like she fits in but she does right now.

Steve Harrington steps up to the plate-

"Hey, asshole! You think you're hot shit, right? Supreme ruler of the three whatever's-? You think you're King of our dimension? You're not even king of one crappy town in Indiana! You want to know why?"

Character is what you are in the dark, Steven.

God, his dad had loved proverbs and analogies and metaphors and bullshit. Character Is What You Are in The Dark Steven and most people's fails when the lights go out. He thinks it was supposed to be some kind of lesson about human nature. Who knows? Maybe it was just his dad trying to convince himself that most people were as shitty as he was.

Well, you don't get darker than the Inbetween. This is The Dark. And this is what they were.

And they wouldn't leave him behind.

Steve's bat collides with the Aboleth in an unstoppable swing that apparently spans three dimensions.

"Cause it's ours, shithead!"

"It's not dead, it's going to come back-

There's no question that brute forcing reality into place is taking it's toll. Kali's going to kill herself if she keeps it up and the only question is if he and Joyce die along with her when she runs out of power mid-fight.

Which really isn't a question at all.

Hopper picks up the big man's ax, "Take Joyce and go."

"I have more-" The girl tries to struggle out from under his arm, black blood or water or whatever the hell flowing freely from her nose and eyes and the corners of her mouth, leaving trails like some terrible harlequin make-up, "It's going to come back."

"Bullshit. You're burning out. Seen it before. Go. I'll hold it off."

The woman looks like she's waiting for him to elaborate on his plan. Scowls when he doesn't.

"You'll die, Policeman."
"Well, yeah. Pretty much what I'll hold 'em off always means." Better like this anyway he wants to say, but he also won't spend his last moments on earth as a self-pitying jack-ass so he doesn't. Does catch her arm as she starts to turn away "Jane- if she goes with you, she's got this word book. Try to make her keep up with doing a word a day, alright? It's really helping her vocabulary."

Kali blinks and nods slowly. "Alright," The whites of the woman's already dark eyes are black and it's eerie as hell, like a somewhat agreeable shark, "Do you want me to tell her that you-"

"Love her. Jesus, of course I do."

"No. Play her the tape."

Finally found something that surprises her, 'cause the mask she wears, even exhausted, crumbles into open shock.

"God. Why?"

"Won't waste time mourning me if she hates me, girl's had enough sadness in her life,"

The woman shifts uncertainly, looking like she might actually argue but he gives her an encouraging nudge, "Get going."

"Alright. Joyce, we're going-" Joyce's head snaps up ready to protest. Ready, probably, to plant her feet and insist but then she sees his face.

Jonathan. Will.

Mouths it at her, 'cause no one ever said that Jim Hopper didn't play dirty with the best of them and she let's Kali hook her hand in the crook of her elbow and drag her along in her wake 'cause it's easier to run when someone is making you. But she looks back over her shoulder at him the whole way, like she's trying to memorize the details his face.

He sticks out his tongue.

Hears something that's only half a laugh as they disappear into the pipes.

Nothing to do but wait in the dripping silence for the Aboleth to slip back into this dimension. He keeps himself ready, bounces on the balls of his feet but the silence stretches out- seconds tick by, long enough that he thinks the thing might have decided that with its eggs destroyed this dimension just wasn't worth the shit it was giving it and cut and run and he was standing here for no reason.

Almost runs after the others half a dozen times 'cause it's easy to be brave for other people. Harder to keep it up alone.

"You don't tug on Superman's cape.

You don't spit into the wind-"

His voice echoes in the cistern. Breaks the silence at least and almost on cue the curling, crawling filaments of motor-oil darkness start to spread across the water, clinging to the cement and brick and the animal impulse to just make a fucking run for it and take his chances that it won't come after him fights with the fact that his legs have turned to lead.

One of it's legs breaks through the dark, bleeding and broken, in worse shape than they left it which is strange as hell. Not that it'll matter 'cause with no Kali the thing won't have to fight him. Nah, soon
as it's through, it'll be visions and horrors and sucking his mind out like a chocolate egg cream.

Just gotta be entertaining enough to torture and eat that the others can get away. A second leg breaks the surface, plants itself on the other side, levering its twisted, writhing bulk out of the blackness with a sound like a sucking chest wound and he knows it's the worst thing he can be doing but he can't stop staring at the thing -

"You're a terrible singer, policeman."

The woman comes up even with him, hand already balled into a fist in front of her as the Aboleth rises.

"What the hell are you-?"

"Kali is a face of Parvati, the protective mother goddess and wife of Shiva," It takes him a moment to realize she's answering his question from earlier, "Men and gods were being terrorized by the demon Daruka and Parvati was tasked with liberating them but in doing so took poison and transformed herself into Kali. She is not just death and destruction. Kali is the the beauty of life and the reality of death, with the understanding that one cannot exist without the other."

"Jim. Short for James."

"I kn...Yes. Jim. Nice to meet you."

"You have to go."

"Too late, I'm afraid." The woman beside him focuses-expression pained, skin ashen, "As you said, Jane won't be safe until it's dead. Kill it fast. I don't have long."

The thing can't broadcast its feelings with Kali blocking it again but you don't exactly need to be a expert on the body language of shit from another world to understand that it's pissed off because it's not playing around anymore. It comes roaring towards them with single-minded hatred and he brings the ax around into one of it's legs with a two handed swing like a lumberjack trying to fell an oak tree and his broken fingers are screaming but to hell with 'em.

And it stumbles. A real catastrophic sort of stumble that knocks it onto it's side as it scrambles and slides in its own blue-black blood and Jim would never correct someone's impression that he's about as bad-ass as they come but he also knows in some essential way that he wasn't responsible for a fraction of the thing's reaction.

Someone else is fighting it with them.

Doesn't know how he knows, but as soon as he has the thought it's inescapable.

Jane?

He swings at the thing's exposed roiling segmented underbelly before it can right itself- feels it sink into sick, spongy rotten flesh that reminds him of nearly every organic thing he touched in the Upside Down and when he pulls it out something beside the wound bursts and it's belly opens up in a ragged increasingly large hole like a closely grouped gunshot wound.

First thought is that Kali figured out a way to multi-task and pulled out that detective special of hers but when he turns to look she's still standing still and concentrating.

Nancy?
The thing is frantic now and he's so focused on the fact that it's on its last legs that the tentacle wrapping around his leg takes him by surprise when it yanks and lands him flat on his back and hurtling toward the thing's meat grinder of a mouth. He tries not to panic, swings the ax up and over on the thick dark skin of the thing and again and again but it's not working and-

The tentacle breaks free. He yanks back and only loses a shoe to the thing instead of everything below the knee and scrambles to a safer distance, tugging the dead coiled remains of the tentacle off from around his thigh.

The end is perforated with holes.

The long ax wounds he made are joined by dozens of ragged nail sized holes and if he wasn't certain before he is now because there's no chance in hell they were made by anything other than Steve Harrington's bat.

What in the hell?

Later he's sure that whatever they're doing is going to get them a really spectacular shouting at but at the moment the fact that he's not fighting this thing alone...somehow... gives him a second wind. He dodges another tentacle- winds up for what looks like tendon in the twisting mess of the thing's leg-

There's a thump behind him. Quiet and unceremonious and he's riding so high he almost doesn't notice.

And then he does. All at once, because his mind floods with sudden, horrible joy.

He spins.

Kali is crumpled in a heap where she stood. Didn't make a fuss about burning her powers down to nothing- just dropped which means that he's-

A small hand closes around his. The ax slips from boneless fingers.

[Daddy? I missed you]

It takes every ounce of Scott's self-control not to drive himself and Dustin Henderson to Sattler's quarry.

He plays mental games with himself, tries to keep his mind busy and racing with puzzles, logic problems, riddles and tongue twisters.

*The big brown bear bit a big black bug and the big black bug bled blue-black blood -The big brown bear bit a big black bug and the big black bug bled blue-black blood -*

**SOMETHING'S BITING. TIME TO GO**

Which works for a while but the thought keeps coming through. Out of desperation he lifts a page from George Sanders in *The Village of the Damned* and pictures a brick wall. It works well enough to stall the intrusive thoughts that he can't help but wonder if the problem the military had with fighting things from the Upside Down was using weapons and training instead of cribbing from *Dungeons and Dragons* and old horror films.
And eighth grade Biology and Earth Sciences, apparently.

We blind it. *Like how you said tiger moths can jam bat sonar so it can’t find them to eat them,* Dustin had extrapolated on the drive over to Hawkins Middle, *If we were able to get a message through on it’s frequency with walkie talkies you can definitely build a a jammer that could block it all together.*

Under better circumstances he would have been flattered by the fact that Dustin didn’t ask if he *knows* how to build a radio frequency jammer from scratch, just assumed out of hand that he could. Under the current ones he just rolls up his sleeves and gets to work.

He needs the transformer from out of the communal class-room TV that’s *supposed* to be in here for safekeeping- which, well, hopefully Mrs. Ratliff will be *alive* to be angry that she can’t show her class *Wild America* on Monday because he puts a hammer right through the screen and fishes it out while Dustin watches with startled surprise.

“Dustin- I need the transistor, resistors and the heat sink from the Heathkit-”

The boy gets to work cannibalizing the thing, frowning a little as he pries the components out of the case. “The first one caught fire and we’re making this one into a monster jammer. Mr. Coleman definitely isn’t going to spring for another one.”

He almost wants to protest out of pure optimism but that's in short supply at the moment so he shakes his head instead. “Sorry Dustin. He’s *definitely* not.”

Dustin sighs and starts unscrewing the heat sink.

He passes wire through a couple of metal slinkies that he confiscated from Marty Bellerman during class last week and certainly hadn’t *planned* to use to help combat alien mind-control, tying them off to the Heathkit’s antenna tuner and threading them through the transom window to the gutter downspout and tries not to look at the shapes walking through the rain in the darkness.

The driver circuit starts to come together as Dustin hands the parts over- one by one. He works the coil out from the CRT transformer and starts in on winding a secondary coil for higher voltage. If a walkie talkie had been enough to significantly interfere with it this should be more than sufficient- but he sure as heck wasn't taking any chances.

“Do you need the Collins, Mr. Clarke?”

He nods and Dustin goes to dig the thing out of the supply closet.

The Collins had been old when Bob started the AV club, a great, hulking post-World War II model that had been as far as the teenager had managed to petition Mr. Cooper to stretch the budget. He’d originally saved it with a tech nerd’s natural hoarding impulse and the certainty that it would come in handy one day. After last year he’d saved it in-memoriam because of the graffiti scribbled on the back of the case-

*Bob the Brain Was Here- Hawkins AV Club Never Says Die!* with a doodle of Killroy underneath.

*I wish you were here Bob, this was always more your wheelhouse.*

“Mike said that Bob taught you everything you know about radios,” Dustin says quietly, as though he just realized that while springing the news about the Upside Down on him they had *also* informed him that his oldest friend had been torn apart by monsters.

"Pretty much,” He runs his thumb over the words one last time and uses the claw end of the hammer
to pry the chassis apart, “He certainly taught me how to make this. We used one to jam Mr. Cooper’s morning announcements and play old radio shows instead.”

“Seriously?” He doesn’t stop assembling the jammer to look at him but Dustin’s tone makes is abundantly clear that the idea of him and Bob Newby playing a prank on their High School Principle is considerably more surprising than the existence of monsters and multiple dimensions because no teacher, no matter how well liked, has ever been less than thirty five to their students.

Certainly never been sixteen. New to town, new to Indiana. Absolutely friendless. Picking the sad remains of the Empire transistor radio he had saved up a months worth of allowance to buy of the floor of the hall after it had been crushed by Dan Gilmore in retaliation for the twin crimes of being new and sitting quietly and minding his own business, with the flow of feet around him the only indicator that he wasn’t completely invisible until an upperclassman crouched down beside him to help.

That kid’s a piece of work. Hey, nice radio! I can fix it for you if you want? Or show you how?

And after that it was friendship through shared interest and shared history. When they realized that Bob had been born two towns away from Haven Village the other boy had beamed at him and said that it was obviously fate. He’d said he didn't believe in fate and Bob said he would believe in it for both of them.

“Yep. I wanted it to be The Strange Doctor Weird but he wanted Jack Parr. He absolutely hated anything spooky. I made him see Rosemary’s Baby with me and he didn't speak to me for three days.”

A car crash. That’s what everyone had been told. Horrific of course but the sort of thing that could happen to anyone. He had gone to the funeral and quoted Carl Sagan in his eulogy and mourned and done his best to comfort Joyce—which in hindsight must have been absolute torture for her knowing what had actually happened- and while Scott doesn’t believe that ignorance is bliss just this once...he would have preferred to let it rest at that, not knowing that he had died feeding monsters from this place.

And then Greg not far behind him.

And now Jen is out there.

There are kids out there- his class, his kids. He tries to calculate how long he has before the first wave of people reach the quarry edge from the nearest parts of town- thinks of average walking speeds and weather conditions and tries desperately not to think of Gordian worms infecting grasshoppers to make them drown themselves.

Tries not to think of the way Jen had scrunched her nose in disgust when he had described them to her while they were watching Shivers. She’d scowled and said they sounded cruel and he’d just shrugged blithely because nature was red in tooth and claw and there were endless cruel little ways that life evolved to preserve and propagate itself.

The jury is still out on insect intelligence anyway, Jen. The grasshopper probably doesn’t understand what’s happening to it.

Amazing how perspective shifts when you’re on the wrong end of the food chain.

TIME TO GO

How are they experiencing it, he wonders, are they locked in their own heads- perfectly terribly,
aware of each step that isn't their own as the creature pilots them or are they mindless drones, thinking nothing at all? He suspects almost everyone but Dustin would think that it's strange that he finds the second option far, far more terrifying.

He’s shaking so hard he nearly slices his thumb open as he strips the covering from the wire ends but Dustin’s a great kid and a kind one besides, so it’s no surprise at all when the boy lays a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re going to stop it, Mr. Clarke. Everyone is going to be okay.”

Scott certainly doesn't begrudge that Dustin is saying it for his own benefit as much as his and nods, “Have you ever heard of a karass, Dustin?”

The boy shakes his head, “Is that Buddhist?”

“Vonnegut, actually. Cat’s Cradle. It’s a group who are inexorably linked in a cosmically significant way.”

The boy's eyes go round and wide in recognition.

“A ragtag bunch of people, forming unlikely friendships, coming together to save the world, brought together by fate.”

“Pretty much. I can’t say I’ve ever been a big believer in fate but I do believe in you kids. I know you’ll stop this thing.”

"Thank you, m'lord," Dustin blinks rapidly and swallows hard, “And I'm...really sorry about your karass. Maybe you could be part of ours?”

"I...Thanks, Dustin." He busies himself with his work, because he has to get back to it. Right now.

A chair leg with a nail hammered through the top will work to draw the arcs- a chicken stick Bob used to call it. All in all it’s a wicked looking little rig- an exposed circuit radio jammer with the same voltage as the T’s electrified rail made out of spare parts. Dangerous, not to mention technically illegal according the regulations against malicious harmful radio interference, though he’s pretty sure FCC isn’t going to revoke his license for hijacking the subliminal mind control frequencies of a extra-dimensional creature. But needs must when the devil-

IT'S TIME TO GO YOU'RE ALREADY SIGNED UP.

drives

"M'lord?... Mr. Clarke?"

YOU DIDN'T FORGET DID YOU?

Dustin is grabbing at his sleeve for some reason, trying to drag him back into the chair but he doesn't have anything left to grade and AV club is in hiatus until after break-

"Mr. Clarke? No...No! Shit. SHIT. How do I finish it? Mr. Clarke quick, tell me before-"

He doesn't remember. But he knows that it's time to go-

You wire that to the HV return pin, Scott, easy peasy- oh, man do you remember how mad Cooper was? He never did figure it out, huh? He'd start reading off morning and announcements and then bam- half-way through - 'Look for the house on the on the other side of cemetery...the house of
Doctor Weird!’ First time it happened I almost got us caught because I was laughing so hard. Still think it should have been Jack Parr though. Now, wire that to the HV return pin and don't think about It -

It's not Bob. He knows it isn't because even with the revelations of the past month it being Bob would be opening a whole other metaphysical can of worms that he doesn't believe in and definitely can't deal with right now. It's some...mental fail-safe- an aural hallucination brought on by stress- so that he's cracking up in an equal and opposite direction. Because of all the people who could be involved in something like this-

Like something out of a comic or a movie, right? At least you like spooky stuff.

Because it isn't real. Because if the Crypt Keeper or Old Witch were pinned to the pages of EC comics and if The Thing was made by Rob Bottin out of bubblegum and melted plastic it meant that it wasn't real. It was explicable. It was an antidote to real life fears.

He's arguing. With himself.

"I'm...alright. I think. It passed, " Dustin, quite rightfully, looks dubious but nods anyway, "How are you holding up?"

"Scared."

"Likewise."

Home stretch, Scott. Connect the transformer to the circuit and the spark gap-

Dustin is already tuning his pocket radio to 14,873 MHz and it's noise like nothing he's ever heard. A cacophony of voices that don't start or end, just thousands of people thinking on top of each other.

"They're close to it," The boy's face is pale, wide-open horror, "People are really close to it, Mr. Clarke."

TI-I- can't believe you kept that old Collins this long. Jeez, we thought we were so cool when we finagled that thing out of Cooper. Now it belongs in a museum! Great movie right? See, there are some good movies that aren't scary -I mean, the second one, sure- I covered my eyes- transformer to the circuit Scott NOW!

He connects the transformer to the circuit and the spark gap-

"Plug it in, Dustin!"

If it doesn't work-

You'll figure out something else. The Hawkins AV Club -

The jammer comes to life with a whiff of ozone and a truly awful electrical whine as the current arcs across the spark gap but it's an awful electrical whine that's the most beautiful thing he's ever heard because it's being repeated by the signal on Dustin's radio as the screech of noise replaces the voices. Dustin let's out a sound like a steam whistle and catapults through the classroom door.

"Never says die. I wish you were real, Bob."

Nothing but a mostly expected silence answers him as he grabs his flashlight and follows Dustin, charging into the pounding rain, not caring about it in the slightest because the compulsion is gone
and it's still dark but the sun is out behind the still raging storm and everyone has stopped walking.

By some unspoken but unanimous agreement they sit down hard beside each other on the school steps, watching as baffled neighbors try to piece together why they're on the street in with no coats and wearing whatever they slept in and...he claps a hand down over Dustin's eyes as Marisa Moreno from the public library goes by in quite a rush before Al Kaminsky gallantly offers up his bathrobe.

"What? What? Is it the Aboleth?"

"Definitely not," He pulls his hand away when the coast is clear and Dustin is looking at him with a mix of suspicion and mild betrayal, "You kids do this...every year?"

Dustin shrugs both shoulders up to his ears, "I mean, different stuff. This was new."

They fall into silence again, listening to the suddenly beautiful sound of people shouting at each other about carbon monoxide and gas leaks and in a very loud and very adamant Phil Callahan's case-rocket labs.

"Hey, Mr. Clarke?"

"Yes, Dustin?"

"Can this count as extra credit? We never get anything when we save the town."

"It...really wouldn't be fair to the other students-" Oh, for god's sake, "Yes. Dustin, this can count as an extra credit assignment."

In a SCIF in Dayton, Ohio Sam Owens watches a clock ticking away seconds. He's been marking and mourning every last one of them for the last three hours as Art makes calls to AGAMEMNON and when that clock really starts to get down to the wire- to RAWHIDE and TIMBERWOLF.

Figures the man from the Shop is mocking him when he tugs Nancy Wheeler's copy of This Side of Paradise out of his bag and starts to read to pass the time like he's waiting for the subway instead of waiting to annihilate a small Midwestern town. Squeeze. Squeeze.

"I don't know what you're expecting to happen, Doctor Owens."

"I'm a cynical idealist." When the man looks nonplussed Sam doesn't bother to tell him it's from the book he's reading because the countdown timer just hit ten minutes and all he wants to say is sorry Chief-o, he tried.

"-Zzzttt- This is Juno. Do you copy-had some kind-malfunction-?"

Nine minutes and fifteen seconds, he grins. They would stop it with nine minutes on the clock and bum leg or no Sam Owens sprints to the phone to put the brakes on the destruction of Hawkins, Indiana.
In a storm drain under Hawkins, Kali Prasad watches as the image of a little blonde girl clutching Jim Hopper's hand blinks out of existence with no help from her gifts. Watches as the Aboleth staggers and searches and waves its tentacles wildly, and for the first time since crossing into the town she can no longer feel its presence caressing her mind. Watches the man, clear-eyed, reach for where the illusion of the girl had been, hands closing on empty air like if he tries he can call it back even though he knows that it was false, even though he knows it would have led him to his death. He looks at the place where she had been with the desperate love a moth has for the candle flame.

Kali Prasad has seen the girl's face before. She reaches into her coat and ejects a cassette tape from its player as the man picks up the fire ax.

She crushes it under her boot as the man raises the ax high and buries it in the twitching creature's skull with finality. The blackness closes around it- carries it away.

He looks at the broken tape with curious exhaustion and confusion when he comes back to her. He does not thank her. The understanding they come to is one-sided but silent.

The man sinks to the ground beside her, lips a cigarette out of his pack and then passes them over to her.

"Is it dead?"

"I...don't know."

In the darkness of the Inbetween, eight children fight a creature that has eaten worlds. They haul and drag the wounded thing out of the black water with the merciless determination of a fisherman landing the big one as Mike Wheeler talks reality into place. Its exposed skin goes hard and cracks into chasms and it bleeds sickly light from them until suddenly it doesn't. They all feel the moment that something essential changes. Feel the moment that there's no more resistance from the thing (Steve knows that whatever play just gave them the win was Dustin's doing somehow. Knows it with a certainty that fire wouldn't burn out of him) and they go flying backwards as the winners of the tug-of-war- landing the thing on the black obsidian surface of the Inbetween like a beached whale.

For a moment there is silence in the black void.

And then the Aboleth speaks.

"Why do you struggle? You are lucky you are our harvest now thank us"

Over the walkie-talkie it had sounded weird, horrific, but still like something that could exist. Here- Yellow, Will thinks, It sounds yellow. Yellow like rotting wallpaper paste, festering yellow, pus yellow and bruise yellow, the yellow of fat and hair clogging a drain.

"Thank you?" Lucas scowls, "Yeah, thanks for trying to eat us, shithead."

"It is us or the ONE ABOVE they leave nothing in their ruined worlds but the shadows
we save preserve create singularity out of many we leave the inconsequential flesh rotten and starve the one above's children while your minds live on forever you are my food and we are your salvation the light in the dark face it with a grin

"Yeah, well not anymore. You're done."

"Silly DELAY you have had not saved not preserved you have broken pieces off but you have failed we are threefold and there was a hole here. It's gone now we go below where you can not follow we feed reassess it is inconsequential- our eggs destroyed perhaps we will wait and allow you to breed before we return and you will watch us devour your children before we take you"

"You can't kill it everywhere so you can't kill it," Nancy whispers, horrified realization dawning.

"What? What is it, Nance?"

"It's not dying, it's-"

"Collapsing." Lucas finishes for her, "Collapsing into one dimension- into the Upside Down."

The thing has stopped making any real noise but Will can feel that the Aboleth is laughing at them, laughing with mad scarlet joy as they work it out- as Steve realizes he's not rescued and that it was for nothing and once it goes so does he. It laughs when he whispers that they tried like that makes it better somehow and Nancy’s face falls catastrophically. It laughs as all of them realize that they’ve lived their last happy day because the rest of their lives will be nothing but a sword suspended above their heads as they wait for it to come back and eat their world. That nothing they do, no one they love will ever matter because the Aboleth will eventually turn it all to dust with endless hunger.

Will knows how it feels- the waiting-he's felt it for two years.

It's crushing, hopeless, it grinds your soul to powder as you wake up every day and you brush your teeth and put on socks and kiss your mom and go to class and wonder if this is going to be the day that something comes back and takes you. Will it be El and Mike's day six hundred? Will it be Nancy and Jonathan's wedding? Will it be some random day when they all manage to pretend to be happy or truly let themselves forget-

He loves them. He won't let them feel like he does.

He's not a fighter, not like Lucas and Max and he's not a leader like Mike. He's Will the Afraid. Will the Rescued. Will the Always Running and Trapped. But Will thinks that for them he can be brave, that he can be true, that he can be wise.

Wise enough to know that another name for Illithids is Mind-Flayers.

Wise enough to know what he has to do and he's terrified by the fact but also wise enough to know that being scared doesn't mean he doesn't have to do it, regardless, because they've saved him over and over and if it meant saving even one of them he would throw himself into the Upside Down. For all of them he doesn't even think about it.

He tries to remember the smell, the awful sick smell and use that memory to paint a picture in his mind, like drawing. Tries to picture himself back there in a place he never wants to be again.

"Jonathan? Mike? Guys?"

"Will-?"
"I'm sorry, I love you."

Will the Wise casts True Sight and drifts away into smoke.

Dustin bikes back to the Byers’ house at light speed. The storm doesn’t matter. The lightning doesn’t matter. He’s going to make the ride there in less than twelve parsecs. Because they’re all going to be awake and now that the Aboleth is blind they can figure out a way to fight it, once and for all-

It had taken a lot of convincing for Mr. Clarke to let him go alone but he’d reminded him that he had to go find Jen - who he can’t wait to tell The Party is Jen Dean the incredibly hot fifth grade English teacher that Lucas spent the entire year writing secret admirer love notes that stank of his dad’s cologne to and which totally means that there’s hope for Dustin yet, romantically- but the man had finally extracted a promise from him that he wouldn't leave the Byers house alone again (wouldn't have to, since they're all going to be awake!) and finally relented when he started asking questions about him and Miss. Dean (He's not sure why Mr. Clarke had turned red when he asked if Miss. Dean was dating him because she liked his mustache. It was a totally valid question. Girls like Steve's hair, after all. And it's a pretty cool mustache) and promised to come by as soon as he found her.

Dustin dumps Steve's bike on the lawn. Pounds up the steps so fast he has to hold his hat on- ignores the shouting and banging from the trunk of Billy's Camaro- which in hindsight he probably should have put a 'Do Not Open' note on- and hurdles down the hall into the kitchen shouting for them- and freezes.

Nothing's changed.

They're not awake. He'd been wrong. His one hundred percent fact was wrong.

They were gone.

Joyce and Hopper still aren't back.

He's still all alone.

Dustin doesn't cry. He thinks maybe he doesn't have any tears left.

He wanders into the living room, curls up on the couch, and pulls a macrame blanket that sort of smells like Will up over him, holds the broken hilt of Steve's bat to his chest.

He's not giving up. He's not. He just...

He's just...

Will opens his eyes in a nightmare; a livid, necrotic infection of a place.

Panic floods him, the kind that takes away all the air in the lungs so he can’t even cry for his mom and he just lays in bed on his back, gasping like the Shadow monster is taking him again. This was an insane idea. He can’t be brave-not here-
But he still knows what he needs to do.

He follows a trail of blood and burnt flesh, holding his elbows and making himself small as he creeps, listens for the screeching howl of demodogs. The demogorgon's scream. The-

No. He can't think about him right now.

He creeps forward like a mouse. Small, and quiet and afraid-

*How do you call among you the little mouse, the mouse that jumps?*

No. He creeps forward like the desert mouse, small, quiet and clever. Like in the books that Dustin him lent him when he was in the hospital and he knows he *has* to be able to get back because he hasn't returned the third one yet-

*We call that one muad'dib*

The thing he finds at the end of the trail doesn't look like either Aboleth he's seen- this is twisted limbs and writhing flesh that seems to move independently of the rest of it. Blood that hits the ground and skitters away like mercury.

"*you you follow Y O U*"

He can't think of what to say because it's not attacking, just curled up, a long wet thing that he's pretty sure is it's tongue licking at it's wounds.

"Yeah. Me. Sorry." *Omigod.*

“you follow you think y o u aren’t af ra id anymore little puppet thing little d o l l of A B O V E”

“No. Of course I'm afraid,” The thing shifts. Bob had told him to face his fears and that had been wrong- at least wrong against the Mind-Flayer because some things don't care if you faced them or not any more than they cared if you feared them or not because they were *domination,* but the Aboleth was *all fear,* "But I'm here to stop you anyway."

*I must not fear, fear is the mind-killer."

“I’m *going* to stop you.” He can do this. He can do this. He can do this. Stick to the plan. Just a little longer.

“what w i l l you do you cheated t o get here left y o u r flesh behind you,  you are  u n w r a p p e d r u n”

“Nothing.”

He stands his ground as the thing presses forward, towers over him but doesn’t attack, seems frustrated that he refuses to budge.

*I will permit it to pass over and through me.*

“You know what I think?” His voice shakes and cracks when he says it, “You want me to leave so bad but you won’t attack me, like in the Gates. You want to hurt me, but you don’t. And you wouldn't attack my house or my friends until El was too powerful to ignore as a threat. I think you’re scared of *me.*”

“S C A R E D WE LIVED AND DREAMED A COSMOS WHERE THE STARS HAD LONG
“None.” Will swallows hard, feels blood where his finger nails are digging crescents into his palms, “You might be really old and strong but Mr. Clarke said you’re still just a parasite. You take and take and you hide what you’re doing from the hive like a coward. And you ARE scared because that hive watches me. So I don’t have to hurt you.”

Will Byers takes a step forward and then another and the Aboleth’s body draws back, ever so slightly, away from him.

“I just had to distract you until HE noticed me.”

The massive shadow falls over them, blotting it all out. The boy, the monster, and the thing that both of them fear more than anything.

His mind floods with uncontrolled worldless alarm, like a scream, as the Aboleth scrambles, a blur of tentacles and tendrils and teeth as the Mind Flayer, slow, deliberate, certain in its supremacy seems to unfold. A vast, ancient, slow thinking thing and the proximity of it is like someone pulling the stitches on a bleeding crevice in his soul, even with it distracted, its attention fixed on something other than him. He wants to cry.

Smoke, splotches of dark matter descending. Chittering and roaring screams in the red flickering darkness. Shapes, dozens upon dozens of shapes of various sizes racing past like someone rang a dinner bell.

Will Byers runs while he has the chance, rejects the possibility that the Mind Flayer is too close, that he won’t be able to shake off the True Sight-

He’s not trapped. He’s not trapped.

And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.

He risks a look over his shoulder because the screaming horror and worldless blame in his head hasn’t stopped.

Black crawling smoke pins it, demodogs and Demogorgon die ripping it apart and get immediately replaced, the Aboleth tries to wrap it’s tendrils around the sequoia sized limb of the Mind Flayer, the earth shakes as the thing actually manages to unbalance one of its legs.

Something terrible is happening behind him. This time he doesn’t look, because he has a feeling that if he did whatever he would see would be so wrong that there wouldn’t be anything to see, just a blind spot in the universe where his mind rejects whatever he’s supposed to see and he knows, just knows, through whatever tiny germ of a connection that he still shares with the thing in the sky that the Mind Flayer is about to open it’s head.

And that no matter what he has to be gone when that happens.

Where the fear has gone, there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

Will blinks.

He’s warm. Well, still cold, but warm-cold. A he's laying in his flooded kitchen in winter cold that’s
still has the promise that it’ll eventually be warm— not like the Upside-Down where there’s nothing else and never will be.

Everyone is sitting up around him. Everyone.

Jonathan’s hug is so crushing that it knocks the air out of him and Mike’s not far behind, repeating the process each time he thinks he can start to say something other than ‘oof’.

Mike has his thin arms wrapped around Will’s neck and he can feel the shape of his grin on his shoulder.

“You party-splitting douchebag.”

“Sorry,” He lets his head rest against Mike’s, “No way would you guys have let me if I told you-”

“Let you go after the Aboleth alone? No shit we wouldn’t have let you.”

Steve blinks at them like he might be dreaming but seems to decide that they're all real when Nancy pulls him tight against her. He mumbles what Will is almost certain is thank you guys over and over into her sweater and when Jonathan drifts to them Steve grabs him and yanks him wordlessly into the huddle.

There’s a noise from the living room, footsteps pounding down the hall and Dustin swings himself around the door frame at top speed making a wordless, joyful sound before he tosses himself at them, wrapping his arms around him and Mike and Lucas like he’s never going to let go again.

"Omigod, omigod, omigod. You're alive. I knew you were alive."

"Dustin!"

"You guys- you guys- you are never going to believe-"

"We're never going to believe? You're never going to believe-"

"We were in another dimension-"

"It sucked-"

"We fought the Aboleth with Dungeons and Dragons-"

"It tried to turn everyone into a zombie army but me and Mr. Clarke blinded it with a radio and saved the town-"

"Jesus, dude, what happened to your lip?"

But he does let go. Of course he does.

Dustin tackle hugs Steve so hard it knocks the older boy out of Nancy's and Jonathan's arms, flat on his back and buries his head in his chest.

"Hey, man. Hey it's okay," Steve rests a hand on Dustin's hat, "No seriously though- did somebody hit you-?"

Dustin's voice is tearful and muffled against Steve's shirt, "I won a fight with Billy."

"Wait. What? Billy Hargrove?"
"I kicked his ass. He's locked in the trunk of his car."

There's a long silence as everyone tries to work out if he's joking or not. Max scrambles to her feet and sprints for the living room window, comes back wide-eyed which is all the confirmation that they need.

"Holy shit."

"I'm going to fucking kill him-" Steve tries to get up but Dustin is still clinging to him and there's another mumble from the vicinity of Steve's ribcage.

"He killed your bat. I'm sorry. I couldn't stop him."

"My-?" Dustin reaches into the back pocket of his jeans and pulls out a piece of the knobby part of a baseball bat, "Jesus Christ, Dustin- who gives a shit? You got hit in the face by Billy Hargrove. Let me see your pupils you could have a concussion."

“What do we do now?” Lucas asks, “Where's the Aboleth?”

“It’s gone.” El says, kneeling next to him, “Gone in the Inbetween. Gone in the right-side up. Gone in the Upside Down”

“What do you mean gone?"

“Gone gone? Like, dead? Will killed it?”

“Steve? Do you still feel it?”

“It’s stone. Fucking. Dead. I felt it go.” Steve’s shaky, muffled voice comes from where he’s hugging Dustin, “What’d...what’d you do, Will?”

“I uh...dropped a horse on it. Sort of.”

There’s an even longer silence as everyone tries to decide if he’s joking or not.

“See, Wheeler. Works every time.”

Chapter End Notes

**Mr. Clarke's Curiosity Voyage**

Sorry Club, it's been a week.

Let's talk about RF jamming.

Radio Frequency jamming works when someone transmits a high power signal on the same frequency of another broadcast. In effect, the jamming device creates a competing signal that collides with and basically cancels out the original with whatever the higher powered signal wants to put on the air.

Don't try to build a spark jammer at home kids...unless everyone is going to die.

As absurdly spacious as they seem, The Gates Of Hell are based on a real storm drain
system of the same name in Clifton, NJ. The author was definitely not stupid enough to ever play around in there.
Afterward

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Shooting at the walls of heartache**  
*Bang, bang!  
I am the warrior*  

-Patti Smyth

The place where you made your stand never mattered. Only that you were there...and still on your feet.

-Stephen King, *The Stand*

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At nine-fifty in the morning a monster dies in the Upside Down and the worst storm Hawkins has ever seen finally breaks. It doesn't peter out or dissipate into drizzles like it's meant to- it simply stops all at once, like a curtain coming down on the last act of a play. Baffled meteorologists in Fort Wayne and Indianapolis start drinking early.

At nine-fifty three a man who had once been Laurence Washington - now called Funshine with various degrees of seriousness- disregards direct orders, plowing through knee-high water beside Joyce Byers, a flickering flashlight and Joyce's sense of direction the only guide. It doesn't matter- once the woman had burst from the Gates, shouting that Hopper and Kali needed help Fun would have followed if it had meant swimming there in pitch blackness. The others had argued- said that Kali had given them orders and knew better and running in could put her in worse danger and...all that might be true but he doesn't care. Because where the others see a leader, a mother - maybe even a goddess, though they'd never admit it- Fun still sees a quiet runaway, sharing an archway in Redmont Park with a homeless ex-con with no reason to live. The girl that gave him one.

They find them half-way, Chief Hopper limping, one-booted and exhausted, Kali, stumbling in his grip and burned out. Joyce takes more of the man's weight than seems physically possible and when he takes Kali he can feel her smile against his side in spite of herself.

"Big softie."

Neither suggest that they switch.

At five past ten, Mayor Larry Kline decides what he'll say to the Herald- maybe even the Journal Gazette and Sun-Times- when they come calling. The damage to the Starcourt construction site will have been minimal, which was a weight off of everyone's shoulders. Shame about the trailer park, of course. A real *tragedy*. He certainly *won't* say that anyone being honest with themselves would admit that the place had been a bit of an eyesore that attracted all the wrong sort of people to town. He also *won't* outright say- though he will heavily imply- that the blame for *that* monumental screw up rests squarely on a hysterical Don McCorkle who couldn't be more convenient if he tried. He'll promise to call on the IURC to investigate the working conditions that would leave a good man over-worked and over-tired enough to make such a terrible, tragic mistake. He decides that if he plays it right and he can lay the whole thing at State's feet- shove Bob Orr's nose in it and come up smelling like roses. Go out there, move some fallen branches around for the Networks, HERO MAYOR
HELPS TOWN THROUGH WORST STORM IN HAWKIN'S HISTORY do a half-dozen interviews about how he won't rest until every last person is accounted for and no one will even think to ask who's responsible for the mess up by Cherry.

At ten past ten James Harrington listens to Patricia's repeated, increasingly desperate litany that Steven will be be okay, won't he? Steven will be fine? and tries not to think of Steven's face when he shouted that he'd destroyed her. For a brief moment James Harrington considers telling his wife to stay with their son and thinks that perhaps if she does something could be repaired. Instead he suggests that she take a Dexamyl for her nerves and tells her that Steven simply doesn't understand the real world. That he'd had fallen in with a bad crowd and they'd filled his head with idealistic nonsense. Whistle-blowers and agitators and junkies like Jim Hopper - the sort of people Spiro Agnew had called the hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history - and Steven, god love him, sways in the wind like a field of corn.

He fishes out the number given to him by General Hollister, salvaged from the scattered remains of his Rolodex - the one that he was meant to call if he ran into any sort of trouble with the Arrowhead Project. They'll drive to Indianapolis International and one Mr. John Rainbird will ensure that that they disappear - maybe summer in Switzerland and winter in the Bahamas or possibly the Cayman's until everything blows over and Steven realizes that he simply can't make it on his own. By ten thirty they're in the car and Patty has quieted down. After all, Steven would be fine, he always was.

At a quarter past ten Jen Dean sits, tea in hand and towel-wrapped on her couch and feels steady for the first time since a profoundly relieved Scott found her sitting on the roundabout in McCarren park, one of the hundreds of suddenly awakened, equally baffled sleep-walkers.

When Scott sits beside her she asks him what on earth could have caused it and waits for him to spring up from the couch, grab half-a-dozen books on carbon monoxide leaks and ergot poisoning and mass-delusions - dancing plagues or laughter epidemics or fainting school-girls or hysterical nuns - because a dozen scientific journals and Fate magazine would all probably be equally interested in a whole town sleep-walking at once when they hadn't been asleep in the first place and knowing Scott he'd be thrilled to be published in either. But he doesn't move, doesn't even speculate, just keeps his chin resting on the top of her head and when he hums into her hair that he has no idea and leaves it at that she almost makes a joke about the Curiosity Train leaving the station without him. It dies in her throat when he holds her a little tighter and Jen realizes all at once that Scott's not speculating on what could have happened because he somehow already knows.

She doesn't press, knows that he would tell her if he could, but she does worry. Scott never liked traveling alone.

At half past ten in the morning nine kids sit in the Byers house trying to decide what you do on the day when the world doesn't end, again.

Up until now there have been two constants every time Steve found himself fighting shit from the Upside Down.

Number one: Everything goes back to normal.

You clean yourself up and the man with the suit and the stack of papers politely threatens you into doing your duty as a patriot by signing them and after he leaves you sit on the couch forty feet and one dimension away from where Barb Holland died and watch three episodes of Night Court 'cause no matter what you do the the world keeps turning just like it had before you fought a Demogorgon or demodogs. You realize it doesn't care if you're a hero or a coward or if you have
nightmares every night for the rest of your life, you can be normal too or get crushed as it turns.

The first time had been the sort of sequence of events that didn't really have an off-ramp. Fight a monster, drive Nance and Jonathan Byers to the middle school where secret agents were apparently trying to kill her brother and his friends, then straight to the hospital because while the secret agents had failed to kill her brother Will Byers had come back from the dead.

At the hospital he'd sat in a corner next to Ted Wheeler- possibly as some kind of subconscious attempt to keep punishing himself for that afternoon- and received a heroic dose of Normal. He'd tried to listen to the man who didn't know anything about monsters make small talk to him about the Phillies versus Orioles game while waiting for Hopper or Joyce or Jonathan or someone who did know to tell him that he didn't belong there with them. That they knew he didn't really give a shit about a kid that he hadn't talked to since the boy was peddling around on a big-wheel and whose apparent death he had used as a lever to get his brother to punch him in the face. He'd waited for someone to take him aside and tell him that he wasn't one of them, just an unwelcome stranger and a selfish asshole that was intruding on their grief just because he was too afraid to go home.

But no one ever had. They'd let him sit with them in mostly silence. Dustin had even included him in candy distribution after he returned from a vending machine run- tossed a Cherry Mash onto his lap and proudly informed him that it had fondant (like anyone on earth had ever been excited for fondant) which was almost as good as nougat (ditto) and that he figured he needed it because he fought a monster and that has to burn, like, a lot of calories, which should have been an early indicator that Dustin Henderson was the best, weirdest little nerd alive.

A couple of hours later Will Byers was awake and everyone's grief turned into joy that Steve had even less of a right to participate in. He'd snuck away and gone back to his house, praying that his parents had somehow come home from Vail early and knowing that they hadn't. He'd spent the rest of the night after the Demogorgon died awake on his couch, Jonathan's nail bat leaning against the coffee table, pretty certain that he would never sleep again.

Afterward he'd thrown parties 'till he was exhausted -because he'd wanted to get back to normal, he'd told himself at the time, not because he couldn't stand his house being empty or having enough silence to sit and think in for long stretches- and waited for Nancy Wheeler to finally show up at one. They had gotten back together in time for Christmas and he had thought that that was the last piece of the puzzle and everything could truly go back to like it was Before the Demogorgon if they worked hard enough at it.

'Cause he was an idiot.

The second time had been Billy. Demodogs. Frozen peas. November sixth and shitty hospital food and the same empty house except this time he knew that Nance wouldn't be getting back together with him. Afterward Steve had still tried to slip on what was left of his old self like a coat, over the scars and broken bones, then he'd tried to make a new self from scratch- Goodbye, King Steve. Hello, Steve the Damn Good Babysitter.

This time nothing was going to go back to normal. It couldn't. He'd nuked normal from orbit. He can't leave here and go back to his house and throw stupid parties or feel sorry for himself alone on his couch if he wanted to, a fact which really should be scaring the shit out of him and kinda is if he actually lets himself think about it. But he's definitely not letting himself think about it because thinking about it means he has to picture the monster standing in their hallway crying which wouldn't be so bad except his asshole brain keeps betraying him and suddenly the monster is super-imposed with dad. Dad sticking a pair of Micky ears on his head and shouting for a photo or pulling a fake-miserable face at him between the headrests when mom banishes him
from map reading duty on a road trip 'cause she was wearing a mini-skirt and dad kept getting
distracted or reading *Where the Wild Things Are* to him when he was sick and doing a different voice
for each Wild Thing, roaring *We'll eat you up, we love you so-

Yeah, that was how dad loved things alright.

-And every *other* happy memory of his father that he hasn't actually thought about since he was
thirteen years old but that are apparently vitally important right now for some reason. So he's not
thinking about it. Just trying to remember that when this day is finally over he's still going to be here,
in this house, 'cause it's definitely not normal and because of-

*Constant Number Two:* He always ends up alone.

Steve had thought that he knew what 'important' was. It was being presumptive King of the School
by freshmen year so you were always surrounded by *someone.* It was getting round the bases with
Becky McKenna when he was thirteen and all the girls after and always being *wanted.* It was a gym
full of people screaming *your* name as you made the game-winning, Hail-Mary buzzer-beater from
full-court in the *one* game that your parents had actually bothered to show up for.

And yeah, maybe those things meant something too, once. Maybe not, in the long run. But there was
nothing, *nothing,* that could touch the feeling of being here and alive in *this* room with these
shitheads who wouldn't leave him behind.

"The girls should get to use the shower first."

"Will should get it first, he was in the Upside Down. That's got to be gross."

"Just his mind. The rest of him is just soggy."

"It's also, you know, *his* house."

"Steve, can El borrow a t-shirt?"

Mike doesn't wait for his answer, just grabs one from the pile.

"...Is this a *crop top?*

He snatches the shirt away, tossing it over to a confused looking El as Mike grins at him like this was
reason enough not to let the Aboleth eat him and Max insists that it probably looks cool before
holding up the long sleeved, cropped football shirt and conceding nope, definitely *not* cool and what
are you even *doing* Steve.

"It's for sleeping, gremlins. Stop getting Inbetween water on all of my stuff."

This is what he's been desperately chasing for the last two years. The stuff that he always misses.
The stuff that reminds you of *why* you try to save the world, besides just to keep existing in it.

Sure, it's *not* normal by any standards but their's to be arguing about if water from another dimension
will give them superpowers if they drink it (*You're not drinking it, hear me dipshits? Don't test me, Henderson*) and if there's any chance they can un-wreck the kitchen before Joyce gets back because
her house always gets trashed when monsters try to kill everyone and it's not really fair and if you
can return a rented ShopVac after using it to clean up Inbetween water or if it's like, a biohazard. But
it feels a hell of a lot more normal being here with them- friends, family, people he loves- talking
about insane interdimensional shit than trying to break himself back into the mold of everyone *else's*
normal.
The rest of the Party steal his dry clothes and cannibalize their fort so that they can re-distribute the towels and blankets to be used as actual towels and blankets before piling up on either side of him on the couch in a still pretty damp huddle. Dustin takes up the spot under his left arm, settling into his side and squawking an annoyed hey at him when he tugs his hat brim up so he can see his pupils.

"Who's the president?"

"Reagan. You know you're only supposed to do this every hour Steve, not every ten minutes?"

"Shut up, dipshit, just do it again. What's your middle name?"

"Edwin."

Max snorts, "God, your mom really wanted to make sure you were a massive nerd."

"For the last time, it's a family name."

"What's the formula for benzene?"

"That's not even a concussion question. And you don't know what the formula for benzene is. We've already established this."

"Yeah, but I kinda want to now. For next time a mind-control monster tries to take over our town."

Dustin blinks like he's about to argue that maybe there won't be a next time, but he can recognize patterns so he just shrugs.

"C6H6."

Dustin only leaves his side long enough herd the rest of the Party into the kitchen to perform dramatic reenactment of his fight with Billy Hargrove and it's probably a good thing that Jonathan watches all the time because when he hears Dustin crow that that's when Billy punched him in the face (twice!) Byers and Nance just barely manage to wrestle him back onto the couch and sit on him before he gets the chance to go outside and commit homicide. He kinda wants to hate them for it because the window where he can blame a murder on an transdimensional mind-control monster is rapidly closing but he can't 'cause Jonathan is smiling...well, the smile that just seems to be how Byers smiles at him now, new and old and familiar at the same time and Nancy's smile is the one that he could live in, grow old in, and die in.

And when she smiles that smile at both of them he somehow doesn't feel the old desperate longing for her to be his or the bitter certainty that her casual affection leads to a miserable Dead End sign, or even the panicky impulse to see if Byers is watching him be in love with her. He just feels good and he wonders if maybe Jonathan was right about them 'cause Steve might not be from Mars but maybe he was sort of an astronaut who had found himself shipwrecked there and ended up going native with the Martians, like in Forbidden Planet or something.

There's a shout from the hall as the kids come pounding back into the room, trying to catch the waffles that are zipping past them like doughy flying saucers, a beaming El hand in hand with Mike and Will, dragging them along like the tail of a kite before practically slinging Max and Lucas and a protesting Dustin up with them like a reverse game of red-rover where the line comes to you because he's pretty sure El doesn't have enough hands for all the people she wants to hold onto at once.

Steve knows the feeling.

"Your powers are back, Supergirl?"
A half-frozen waffle clocks him in the forehead, which is pretty much confirmation enough but El grins a victorious and slightly ferocious grin.

"Mine." She bites out the word and looks better than she has in a month because the Aboleth is dead and whatever monster kryptonite was stopping her is gone and if she wants to celebrate that by bouncing breakfast foods off of him he's not gonna complain. Not even when she puts on a stern expression and jabs a finger into his ribs, "Eat your Eggo."

Figures that it's somewhere between El's idea of the greatest gift a friend can bestow and partial bribery to ignore the fact that she actually celebrates by looping an arm around Mike's neck and laying one on him- quick, but just as fierce as that grin and Steve becomes very, very preoccupied with trying to chew through a cold freezer waffle and pretending not to notice.

Steve thought he knew what important was.

He hadn't, but he does now.

It's holding onto each other at the end of everything. It's having something that will hurt to lose and wanting it anyway. It's knowing that everything wasn't just going to go back to the way it was before, because the world might not care, but they do.

Dustin shoos a bemused Nance out of what is apparently 'his proprietary spot on Will's couch' that just happens to be next to him, bouncing down onto the cushions and grinning a wide, goofy grin.

"Hey Steve, have you ever heard of a karass?"

The worst part of the end of the world is the clean-up.

Because it's one thing to fight a monster and know that there's a cold beer and a good night's sleep at the end of it. It's another to be driving through Hawkins- past downed power lines and fallen trees and flooded houses and oh, yeah, hundreds maybe thousands of disoriented people- and knowing that you're gonna have to put your cop hat back on the second you can and get out there and try to fix it.

Flo isn't trying to get him on the horn at least, which means normal operations haven't resumed and no one's going to miss him-yet-but going anywhere but straight to the station feels like dereliction of duty as desperate frightened people keep trying to flag him down until he finally puts on the siren, which at least makes 'em think that he's on his way to another emergency besides theirs. Also means he's giving an obvious police escort to a van that probably has an APB on it in a dozen states straight to the Byers house and Jane, which would be a thing to worry about if anyone in town gave a damn about anything right now besides why they're outside and getting home.

Joyce spends the ride back to the house staring out the window of the cruiser, searching for the kids' faces in the crowd and not finding them there, both of them uncertain if that's good or bad because they know that they did something to help them and the possibility that they actually stayed put is vanishingly small.

But at least they're-

There's a blue Camaro on the lawn of the Byers house and the door is off the hinge.

Ladybird ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire the children are gone-
Cold horror hits him and the Chevy isn't at full stop before he's out the door and breaking into a loping, limping run because suddenly all he can think about is Edna Pinbacker and her ax and Joyce lighting up the monster's eggs and the unspeakable possibility that the Aboleth left them one last parting gift, courtesy of Billy Hargrove.

'We can deal with a prick like Hargrove'

That's what he'd said to Steve Harrington nearly two months ago, not fully convinced himself but saying it anyway because he thought it would keep Jane safe. And the kid had looked at him with miserable eyes that still had blood in them and agreed not to press charges and that yeah, sure, they could handle Hargrove even though he hadn't believed it for a second.

If they're...it's his own fault.

Kali calls out his name from behind him as the gang piles out of the van, half-curious, half-alarmed, aware that there's danger but not from where and Joyce is beside and past him in a blink. He almost calls for her to stop, to let him go in first and see... whatever there is to see (Nothing. They're safe, they're safe. Harrington wouldn't let anything happen to the kids and Nancy wouldn't let anything happen to Harrington and Jonathan wouldn't-) but he knows it would be wasted breath as she sprints through the broken door, shouting for her sons without the slightest concern that Hargrove could still be in there.

They're alright. He felt them fighting with him, somehow. They had to be-

He swings himself around the door-frame into the hall so fast that his twisted ankle nearly goes out from under him, charges for the living room where... Joyce is kneeling, one arm around a slightly surprised but completely unharmed Will as her other hand grips Jonathan's wrist to tug him down to them. The kids are all wet-haired and wide-eyed and wrapped in towels and blankets, looking more like someone threw an impromptu pool party while they were out than like they were in any sort of danger.

"Hop?" Jane says uncertainly, as though they were the ones that should be worrying about him, "You're okay?"

The overwhelming rush of relief takes his breath away and turns his legs to jelly and thin arms wrapping around his neck are the only way that he knows that he'd ended up on the floor somehow. He fumbles to pull Jane to him, burying his face in her hair.

"You're okay?" She says again, more insistently and more concerned, "Hopper."

He manages a nod, "Don't know what the hell you did, kid, but you did it."

And never do it again.

"We did." El says into his shirt, "It's dead. We-"

He feels her straighten and stiffen in his grip, gaze suddenly fixed over his shoulder.

"Kali?"

"Hello, Jane." The woman's voice is strangely hesitant, almost shy- different from the clipped, no-nonsense staccato that he's heard from her up 'till now.

Back in the Gates he had looked for similarities between the two of 'em, hoping that whatever he found would be some kinda key or code to unlock them, solve a mystery. He hadn't found it then but
now with the two sisters face to face, beaming identical, beautiful grins at each other-

God, when they smile.

"You came."

"You called."

The room is so quiet when Jane hugs Kali that he's almost certain that he hears the woman's breath catch in her throat before she tentatively returns it. Kali's gang hover in the doorway, looking uncertain and out of place as they take in the scene and the house and the kids, shifting in the long silence until the woman with the afro clears her throat apologetically and jerks a thumb back toward the lawn.

"Hey, there's a dude in the trunk of that car."

Kali wonders if you can unhaunt a place.

Jane seems to know the trick of it.

Watching her it's as though this town had no ghosts at all, just the friends who she introduces to them with formal seriousness (except for Mike Wheeler who stands hand-in-hand beside her and who turns the color of a tomato when he's introduced only as 'My Mike') and the little family that Jane attempts to fold her into with startling speed.

_They have a cabin. It belonged to Hopper's granddad so it's old, but it's still good so it's a classic, like Hopper. If she stays she can show her her room and the booby-traps to keep the bad-men away and her word book. She can sleep over and Hopper can make them an Eggo stack that's going to blow her mind and they're reading A Little Princess this week._

Kali tells herself that she's just getting some fresh air when she sneaks out of the house when Jane is distracted by Joyce splinting Jim's broken fingers and trying to explain to them how they somehow fought the monster in the Void.

Fresh air. That's a laugh.

They say memory is closely tied to smell. When they were hunting the monster she hadn't had time to consider that the lab was so fucking close that she thinks she can practically smell the ammonia on the breeze. Now she remembers that the air here always feels wrong- somehow rancid and oily in a way that the air in the small town surrounded by forest had no right to be. Kali'd rather be standing beside a bum's barrel fire in an alley in Chicago than breathing the fresh, clean air of Hawkins.

She lights a cigarette to cover it as she looks toward the others gathered in self-imposed exile around the van.

An exhausted Jim had tossed Mick the keys to his police car and his handcuffs, told the gang that they were officially deputized for the next ten minutes and they'd gone to fish whoever it was out of the trunk, obviously grateful to have something to do that utilized their particular skill set. The boy had exploded out in a rage, tire iron in hand and howling- expecting to hit one policeman or a bunch of children, perhaps. He had wilted rather spectacularly when Fun had caught the iron mid-swing.

And bent it.
"Hey, look, I wasn't seriously- that kid-

"Sit your ass back down, Tuff Turf. Chief Bacon didn't say shit about how many pieces of you to put in his car."

"You're under arrest, honey. Wait, Mick- don't we gotta read him his rights? Like to remain silent or whatever?"

"Yeah. He's got the right to let us put these hand-cuffs on him or go back in the fuckin' trunk."

Afterward she was the only one to go back inside.

Weird Frankenstein vibes, Dottie had said with a shrug, holding onto the fuzzy sweater that Joyce had lent her, radiating the thought that her birth mother had had the same one or something like it that smelled of the same fabric softener. Too many kids, had been Mick's excuse as she pretended not to picture the little brother she hasn't seen in years every time she looks at Jane's friend Lucas. Fuckin' hate suburbia, Kal, Axel cried with feigned disgust, obviously not at all pleased by an almost insolently beautiful boy asking him what kind of hair-spray he used.

Fun hadn't bothered to put on a show of hating the peaceful domesticity of Joyce's house. He simply knew that she needs to go, now, because Jane may be able to unhaunt Hawkins but Kali has ghosts enough for the both of them. Dead sisters and friends and the memory of the one man she knows isn't a ghost yet but haunts the place, nonetheless.

The children are preoccupied with each other, no one will even realize when they go-

"Leaving already? Jane's going to be pissed if you don't say goodbye."


She taps her ashes off into a heavy, homemade clay ashtray covered in the tiny preserved fingerprints of one of Joyce Byers sons.

"She wants me to sleep over at your cabin, see her room," The corner of Jim's mustache twitches upward in a smile of unguarded happiness. It's a child's request - a normal child's request- which is what the man wants Jane to be very badly indeed, "She says that there's a deer."

"Yeah, old taxidermied deer head. Pretty bitchin', huh?"

She snorts, "Absolutely not."

The man brings his splinted fingers up to his collar in prim mock offense.

Kali should hate him a little for his confidence, hate him for how much he reminds her of the people she lost, hate him for how much his death will hurt Jane when it comes and how he doesn’t even see how inevitable it is, hate him for his absurd hubris, thinking he can keep Jane safe with some bear-traps and trip-wires, gone to ground a few miles from the lab.

The problem with being able to see into people's minds, even if it's just the shallow skim her gifts provide, is that it's rather hard to hate the good ones, even when you wish to.

She watches the policeman wrestle with sense and lose, "Look, if you want you could stick around for a couple of."
"Brenner will kill them all to find her, you know." Jim is a smart man, deceptively so, so Kali suspects that he does know, even as the man's expression goes side-ways, "Being children won't protect them from him. Being family won't protect them. It will only be something for him to use. Do you understand what that will look like, Jim?"

The man's fingers tighten on the banister, knuckles whitening, and she knows that he doesn't need her gifts to visualize what Brenner will do to them. She gives him credit for looking straight at the fact, long and deep before answering.

"Jane said that you had family, after the lab. That what happened to them?"

_They'd stayed on the road. Ken had said it would be safer._

_They'd tried to make a home of their van. Hung a calendar next to a push-pinned chore sheet with Ken and Gloria and Kali- written on it in Ken's messy handwriting. Hung floral curtains over the windows to make the place more homey and keep out prying eyes. There were always at least two week's worth of non-perishable food in the van- placed carefully in bins with the date labeled on them in case they couldn't stop driving. There was a little pine tree air-freshener that Gloria and Ken thought hid the skunky smell of the weed they would smoke at night to take the edge off the stress when they figured she was asleep in the back. A picture of Terry Ives hugging Andrew Rich as he flashed his fingers in a 'V' at the camera was wedged into the rear-view mirror, there was a hula girl on the dashboard and a seemingly endless supply of Gloria's comics._

_She doesn't know if they got careless or if they had never had a chance at all. In her darkest moments she thinks Brenner had known where they were all the time and that it was all some sort of extended experiment- Observe How Subject Eight Reacts to Hope._

_They had stopped for a couple of days on a reservation called Wide Ruin for a break from the road. She had gone to the local grocery to refill their two-weeks worth of food and when she'd gotten back she'd found what the men left of Gloria in their motel room, tied to a chair. It was reported later in the Arizona Republic as a drug deal gone wrong. She'd never found Ken at all._

"Yes, it is."

"Kali-"

"What you asked in the Gates- I'm not going to stop. Do you understand me, Jim? I will not stop."

She needs him to understand. There will never be sticking around, never be sleep-overs with her sister or seeing the girl's room or visits on special occasions. They will never be a strange, cautious little family. She will not grow soft and kind or let her love for Jane break the wheel of her hatred. She will drink an ocean of poison and die on this path if it means that Brenner dies with her.

And he should thank his lucky stars for it.

"Yeah...I understand."

He does, his eyes are sad.

"Good-bye, Kali."

Her hand practically disappears in his when they shake on it.

"Good-bye, Jim."
Feels like an ending when the woman goes. Jane's terrifying, avenging guardian angel.

It's over.

Sure, there's going to be that clean-up. Going to be a helluva lot of missing people to dredge out of the Gates and a lot of mourning to do for them. There's going to be rebuilding and the inevitability of Owens and his people rolling into town to wallpaper over what really happened with some palatable lie and Jane being truly stuck inside and pissed at him until they clear out again. There's going to be all the detritus the Upside Down leaves behind it.

But it's over.

It seems impossible.

Jane isn't exhausted and bleeding from burning herself out. Will Byers is surrounded by his friends and grinning a grin he hasn't seen on the kid in two years. Joyce is relaxed and steady and goddamn gorgeous as she hands the kids mops and tells them to get to it because no, she's not asking Donald for a ShopVac to clean up water from another dimension even if -in Henderson's words- it only violates the spirit of the rental agreement and not the letter of it. Jesus, even Harrington is in one piece even if he looks a little like the proverbial long tailed cat in the room full of rocking chairs for some reason.

They're safe. Every single one of them.

He lets his forehead clunk against the wood beam of the porch because he can rest now- if just for a little while.

Figures it's Jane looking for her sister when footsteps come up behind him.

"Hey Jane, she-"

"Hopper."

It's Harrington, like he summoned him by thinking about him and the kid is...no- Steve's a kid most of the time but right now he's straight-backed and serious, every inch of him channeling the man he's going to turn out to be someday, wearing a expression that's half-regret and half-stony resignation.

"I need to talk to you."

Hawkins, Indiana

March, 1985

Sam Owens can't say he's been having a good year but, hey, it could have been worse - he could be standing in a crater right now on one leg instead of a road on the way into Hawkins on two. He could be tasked with sending his guys to face down an nigh unstoppable inter-dimensional intelligence instead of squaring off to the Misters and their people in ridiculously suspicious vans, all ready to roll in for a black-bag-job and - knowing how The Shop operates - an illegal disappearing act for a specific few people currently under his-

Protection
-Jurisdiction and who were probably planning on respecting his much less suspicious blockade of I&M vans for exactly as long as it took the two of them to measure authorizations.

"Hey Mac, communications up and running?"

"You betcha, sir."

"How's the bundle of joy?"

The man grins, wide and proud, tugging out a wallet full of photos of his new baby girl, "Margret, Sir. The Mrs. keeps callin' her Peggy but I think she looks like a Maisie what do you think, Sir?"

"Looks like a left fielder to me, Mac. Mind putting a call through to AGAMEMNON? See if he sent in the clowns?"

"No problem, sir."

Fact that Sam Owens is sporting a brand new black eye is not helping him project an air of control.

Up until now he hadn't had the honor of experiencing what some of his men had christened the Jim Hopper Special -namely getting cold-cocked in the face by a fist the approximate size of a honey baked ham and sweated for information - hadn't really been sure what had earned him the honor until an irate Jim had hoisted him up by the sweater and shoved him against his office wall and asked him if he knew .

Doctor Sam Owens knew a lot of things. It was in the job description- Help Wanted: Polymathic, multi-doctorate with CIA Black Ops Experience needed to know things that no sane person would want to know and eat the sins of Martin Brenner. Must work well with others. Good sense of humor a plus.

Hopper had obviously had something new to lay on the man's coffin and he prided himself on being ready for anything, had gotten ready to add it to the pile of Abundant Mistakes .

This. This he wasn't ready for.

It shouldn't have made a difference- none of the histories of Brenner's girls or his Delta-subjects paint a pretty or ethical picture- fact that it did make a difference only confirmed that he was compromised beyond belief as far as the little gang of misfits in Hawkins went, as if Will Byers and Jane and the Intelligence hadn't confirmed it already. But that was the funny, wonderful thing about human beings. You see a stranger hit by a bus, sure, you get a shock but you go home, talk to your shrink and eventually forget about it for the rest of your life. You talk to that same fella at the bus stop for twenty minutes and when that bus rolls around you might jump out in front of it for him.

Samuel Owens likes feeling like a human being. He had always sort of hopped that when the Mad Science chips were down he was more of a Gene Wilder sort of Doctor Frahnkahnstein than Frankenstein- hell, he always did prefer a dance number to an angry mob.

And even for a professional sin-eater some sins are just too big to swallow.

"Mr. Cuff. Mr. Bates. What are you doing here, exactly?"

"Doctor Owens. Nice shiner." Mr. Cuff steps forward to shake his hand smiling a bland, friendly smile, " Here to do some clean-up related to ARIEL."

"And have a chat with some people about the Situation up at McMannis," The man flips open a little
black note-book, because of course he didn't even bother to learn their names, " James Hopper and Steven Harrington to start-
"

"Well fellas, sorry to be the barer of bad news but this is one of those embarrassing departmental overlaps the Taxpayers are always complaining about. Everyone that needs to be *chatted* with has been. By *us* ."

"We only have a *couple* of questions-" Cuff tries to sound like a person but Bates can't help himself.

"Though from what we've heard about Mr. Hopper we *might* have to ask them a few times over, rather emphatically." Bad enough The Shop sent their people into his territory, they had to send one that thought he was *funny*. White Coats? Funny guys. Counterintelligence Interrogation Technicians? Never funny- there just wasn't a lot of material for a tight-five in the *KUBARK* manuals .

"Not going to happen. You can request our transcripts through the proper channels. Start the paperwork now, you might be reading them before next winter."

Any attempt at keeping up the 'See, the CIA and DSI can *get along*' bullshit disappears with that, both men dropping immediately into open hostility. Bate's mouth twitches nastily downward and Cuff studies him with cold calculation that makes it clear that this is no longer a conversation between Samuel Owens and Mr. [No First Name Given] Cuff. Mr. Cuff has vacated the premises. This is the Shop itself starring out from the man's eyes.

"I don't know who you think you *are* but FIREBREAK should have gone to *us* in the first place. Not some *nobody* from that joke of a project in Fort Mead. Your handling of the situation proves that. You should have been removed last year-
"

Bates puts an arresting hand on the man's shoulder.

"Look, we know you're a Company man, Sam but do you *really* want to start a jurisdictional dick-measuring contest over this?* Sam now, my, my they are becoming chummy. Christ, he'd prefer the c.Raffelisia chewing through his femoral artery to having to listen to these two doing their good black-ops, bad black-ops routine, "Thought we'd work together, save you the trouble of sending this up the chain-"

Two days ago he'd sat across from Jim Hopper at the man's desk, holding an ice-pack to his eye, brought to him by a long-suffering but unsurprised looking dispatcher. He'd told Jim that, no, he had had no idea that his daughter was alive. That the girl in all of his documentation was a precog purportedly from Vermont and that Brenner's reports never included so much as a single order for Cytarabine or Methotrexate or Mercaptopurine or anything else involved in Leukemia treatment except for predisone through any official channels. Told him that he would bring him to Wright-Patterson and personally yell at anyone that needed yelling at, up to and including Ronald Reagan to get him clearance to look at the autopsy report for the girl he understood to be Subject Six, including pictures of someone who was entirely the wrong age to be Sara Hopper.

He'd told the Chief that FIREBREAK wasn't going to be decommissioned until they found his daughter safe and sound and Jim Hopper had believed him. He'd like to say it was the bond of friendship and trust they've formed but he's almost certain that it's because he just sounded so exhausted, worn out and down by someone laying one more little girl with a ruined life at his feet to clean up. One more family broken apart. He probably sounded like a man that had finally started to truly regret the path his life had taken.

"But if you *insist* on withholding assets-"
Doesn't get to enjoy more of pair's routine, because Mac appears at his side with all the subtlety and grace of a Minnesotan Radar O'Reilly.

"Got through sir-"

"Let me use my newly developed psychic power to guess what AGAMEMNON said. Bullshit overreach?"

"Yessir."

"Right, well, nice to see you fellas. Looking forward to reading the piece that Murray Bauman does about your project, sure it's going to be a real page turner."

Longer they go in pointless circles of vying protocol the more he's certain that it's not just his patience they're testing, because there's the distinct sensation of being on the wrong side of the one-way glass window with no idea who's wielding the clip-board on the other one and he can't help but feel like the two men finally leaving (with only a desultory amount of 'you haven't heard the last of us-ing') is because they've collected the data they needed.

Doesn't help the crawling paranoia when he thinks he catches a glimpse of a third figure in the seat behind Bates and Cuff as the final black van finally pulls away. Tells himself the shock of a white was a reflection, a trick of the light, definitely not one last ghost haunting Hawkins, Indiana. Tells himself that he hasn't just made a whole host of enemies at the goddamn Shop that you really, really don't want to make. Tells himself that he won't wake up with John Rainbird standing at the end of his bed with a silenced pistol-

Well, that last one was probably true since in anyone in any scenario involving John Rainbird wouldn't be waking up at all.

He could call AGAMEMNON and decom FIREBREAK and himself and retire with a bum leg and a broken, nearly-impossible promise to find a lost girl. Disappear somewhere warm with umbrella drinks or somewhere cold as kindly ol' Doc Owens and wash his hands completely of Brenner's legacy and this town.

Could do that, sure, if he wasn't hopelessly compromised.

"C'mon Mac, let's get to work."

The weeks after Hopper finds out are bad ones.

It's Jane and Joyce that get him through.

Part of him had felt like he was going insane, truly insane, afterward. It was a miracle. A resurrection. His daughter was alive somewhere for chrissake, a thing any grieving parent, himself included, would sell their fucking soul for and he'd barely been able to function- utter joy and abject horror colliding in some terrible slurry that shut him down out of self-preservation.

If anyone understood it was Joyce. No matter how certain, how terrifyingly determined she had been that Will was alive she said that there had been times when doubt had crept in with cold grasping fingers and she had to crush the possibility that she really was crazy and her son really was dead on a slab. There were times that she believed it, no matter how briefly, and some coldly sane part of herself told her over and over again that she would never hear his voice or see him smile, ever again for the rest of her life.
Joyce knows what it's like to have a child come back from the dead.

So she held him silently for hours as he wept tears that he could barely understand, 'cause they weren't joy and they weren't grief, just overwhelming and endless.

It felt like pouring his mourning back into the universe.

Hopper used to think sometimes that his daughter was born to live in a different world. A perfect world. A world where men are just and kind, a world of firefly glow and fairy tales, not a too-small apartment in Fear City, right on the borderlands of the too-Upper Upper East side. But somehow she'd been born into this one, this miracle given to him of all people and he'd decided that he'd make that world for her- the one she was meant for- make it safe and sound, personally scrub the graffiti off of the IRT if it meant her never having to see anything ugly.

After Sara... died... the thought that the world could be beautiful had collapsed along with everything else, into the singularity that was Jim Hopper.

They'd fallen into a dead-eyed routine, Diane and him. That's how you tell one day from another-the routine- when it seem like there's nothing left in the world except loss. Going back to work would have helped- Delgado had refused a new partner for almost two months, convinced he'd come back to the City, that even Iowa Jim ('Indiana.' "Wherever the corn lives, Hopper. What the hell do I know? I'm from Cuba." "You're from Queens, Delgado." Christ, that old joke. She was the last one at the station that would joke with him, after everything) wouldn't stay out in the middle of nowhere indefinitely. But it wasn't long before he mailed in his resignation. Ignored her calls until she finally gave up on him, just like he wanted. Never went back to New York or the precinct. Never said goodbye. Couldn't stand to let the friends who knew the man he was in the summer see the walking corpse that fall and winter made.

Diane had wanted to go back. Back to somewhere familiar. She said that they never should have come out here, not even on the promise of a doctor who knew a doctor who knew a doctor who worked miracles-

Not the lie they thought it was- but they'd met the carnival barker meant to draw in the rubes. The miracle worker worked his wonders in the dark.

Over the past two weeks he must have picked up the phone a dozen times, dialed up to the 212 a half-dozen more before hanging up. Managed to get the full number out and ringing twice. Listened to Diane's increasingly concerned 'hellos' and ignored her attempt to *69 him after he hung up without saying a word-

And once, once he was brave enough to speak. Croaked out a casual greeting, like they were meeting again after so many years in the dairy isle at the supermarket and Diane had immediately started to cry. Said she thought that had been a goodbye when he called her in '83 but afterward no one had gotten in touch and she had been too afraid to confirm it either way.

That's how they'd ended it, after all. She'd come home to him passed out in the bathroom next to an empty pill bottle that had been full two hours before and but for the grace of somehow ending up on his side instead of his back and vomiting up a dozen half-digested sleeping-pills went he. Afterward he'd lied through his teeth. Told her that it was an accident because everyone knows that the only thing that seems like a good idea while you're popping Tuinal is taking more Tuinal and he'd just over-done it, even though the dose he'd taken would have been deemed lunatic by Hunter S. Thompson's standards. He'd tried his damnedest to reassure her that she'd married a worthless junkie, not a potential suicide.
She'd left him a month later—she couldn't watch him die too, couldn't be the one to find him like that—not after Sara—and he didn't blame her. When she'd offered to sell their apartment and send him half he'd told her keep it. Keep the seven tick marks on the kitchen door frame and the drawing of a unicorn crayoned behind the couch and the dark, empty second bedroom.

*Sara never died. Our daughter is alive. It was all for nothing. Everything could have been different. Our lives could have been-

But then there had been the tinny, distant voice of a little girl calling for her mother. Bill's even more garbled assurance that he has her.

"Just wanted to say hello."

"Are you alright, Jim?"

*Our daughter is alive. We've lost seven years.*

"Fair to middling. I just... thought we could catch up."

They'd made twenty minutes worth of small-talk about New York (getting the first blooms in the park, early) and Hawkins (she'd heard about the storm and the freak gas-leak on the news and worried for him). And that had been that.

*If-when-* they find her he'll find a way to tell her.

Jane strips off her blindfold, lips pressed flat and brow furrowed with frustration as she lets go of Sara's hair-tie. Look on her face means that he doesn't have to ask but he does it anyway, one leg jittering up and down with nerves.

"Did you-?"

Jane shakes her head, "I saw her but she saw me watching. Disappeared."

"You *saw* her this time?" He swallows hard, drives his nails into his palm to center himself, "Did she... seem alright?"

"Safe." The girl pulls herself up onto the couch beside him, looking thoughtful, "She's pretty."

"Figured she was going to take after Diane."

"You too."

"Yeah? I'm pretty too? Wow, first Joyce now-"

Jane snorts and pokes his shoulder, "*Stubborn.*"

"Sounds about right. Must be where you get it." He expects a laugh, a smile at least, definitely not the sudden blank unhappiness that closes down the girl's expression as she sinks back into the couch and away from him, "*Hey, what's wrong, kid?"

"That's not how it works."

"No?"

Jane shakes her head, not looking at him even as he tries to catch her eye.
"She's real. I'm..." The girl trails off with a shrug, hugging her elbows.

Jane also came to him as a miracle from another world but hers was of dark corners, antiseptic, and florescent light. Jane would never believe in a perfect, fairy-tale firefly glow world or that all men were just or kind. That bird had flown- for both of them - because Hopper knows now that he can't scrub everything clean for her no matter how much he wishes he could, even almost accepts the idea that there are going to be things too big and too powerful and too ugly for him to keep her safe from forever.

But together they can still find the beautiful things. The black hole can't take everything.

He levers himself off the couch, Jane watching him with furrowed brow like she thinks she might have said something wrong.

'Hopper?'

He digs the envelope out of it's box. Figured at the time that it was safer, smarter, to keep it locked away and out of sight. Thinks now that he'll frame it. Put it on the wall.

He smooths the folds out of Jane's birth certificate.

"What's that say, kid?"

"Jane Eleanor Hopper."

"Nothing will ever change that. You're... you're my girl, okay?"

"Okay," He watches Jane sit quietly, chewing her lip in concentration as she works something out in her head, "You're my... dad."

He'd never pressed, for both of their sake. Figured that her relationship with the concept of fathers was complicated enough already thanks to that sadistic fuck Brenner and that dad was far too close to Papa for comfort. Hell, for a while he hadn't even been sure that he could handle hearing it from another little girl.

They sit in silence in the aftermath of the word, waiting to see if the sky comes falling down.

Jane smiles first and smiles wider when he reaches over to ruffle her hair.

"Sure am."

- - - - -

"Perhaps there is a language which is not made of words and everything in the world understands it- You're gonna fall asleep on the couch, kid."

Hopper starts to close the book, goes to put it on the stack with her word book and work books and the trapper keeper with Jane's Curiosity Voyage stenciled on it in big letters filled with custom worksheets, courtesy of Scott Clarke, but a sleepily uncoordinated hand catches his.

"No I won't. Keep reading."

"Perhaps there is a soul hidden in everything and it can always speak, without even making a sound, to another soul—"

Pounding on the door startles a nodding Jane so badly she nearly falls off of the couch and he
drops *The Little Princess* and scrambles for his holster. Doesn't make much sense- anyone who went out of their way to avoid setting off the traps and got to the cabin in silence wouldn't knock, even a knock that sounded like a raid- they'd take advantage of their surprise and breach the door before they could react. Whoever this was-

The pounding stops as suddenly as it started. Turns into a messy, still frantic version of the secret knock that doesn't do much to set his mind at ease.

"Hopper! It's Steve. Please-"

"Harrington?"

He hadn't spoken to Harrington since the day that he had told him about Sara. Not since he had taken the boy with him to his house to arrest his own father on the flimsy pretense that Steve might need something that didn't fit in a hastily packed back-pack when he'd actually at least hoped that he wasn't capable of killing a man in cold blood in front of his own son.

Probably better for everyone that he didn't get to test it.

The house had been dark and empty by the time they pulled into the drive way. Steve had looked like he was walking over his own grave as he trailed along behind him, through halls and rooms that felt half-way to being a museum. Past an office that looked like a tornado hit it, papers scattered out into the hallway.

By the time they got to the second floor Hopper had resigned himself to the fact that they were gone. Not long gone but gone. Might as well have been on the moon for all he could do anything about it, 'cause he didn't doubt for a second that James Harrington had enough money off-shored to see him through. Didn't doubt for a second the man who had helped kidnap his daughter was sipping champagne on the Concord jet, going where ever untouchable men go.

Harrington had made a bee-line for his parent's room, face set hard with determination just like it had been when they'd been getting ready to face down an army of demodogs. All he faced down this time was an dark bedroom, drawers pulled out from the dresser, mirror-glass closet doors slid open and empty. Jewelry box ransacked and still playing a plinking rendition of *Moon River* to no one. They'd been so thorough that Hopper was half-surprised that James didn't strip the sheets.

Steve hadn't said anything, just turned on his heel and made for his own room down the hall, came back out carrying nothing but a black dress sock that he proceeded to toss in the kitchen trash.

*Can you take me home?*

Those had been the last words he'd heard from Harrington as the kid stood in the middle of his own living room, hugging himself uncertainly.

*Can you take me home?*

He's seen the kid around since then- hard not to with him staying at Joyce's place- seemed fine but managed a pretty impressive disappearing act whenever he came around. If he were a better man he would have sought him out, sat him down, explained to him that he had *nothing* to do with what his dad and the Lab did. Nothing to do with Sara. That the sins of the father aren't the sins of the son.

It was just...he looks so much like James.

So he hadn't. He'd let the boy twist in the wind.
Doesn’t take a cop’s deductive reasoning to know that something is seriously wrong. The kid must have come straight from bed because he’s wearing a coat over a pair of striped pajama bottoms and a faded Hawkins Tigers t-shirt and Hopper's pretty sure Steve's never touched him before but the minute the door is open he’s grabbing hard at his arms and shoulders, scrambling at him like an animal trying to climb away from danger. Kid is in a full on panic.

“Hop- you gotta-”

“Jesus-kid- kid, hold up-” Harrington is such a jittery bundle of limbs that he barely manages to steer him off the porch, finally ends up just tossing an arm around his shoulders and pulling him in against his chest, “Okay, c’mon. Let’s just get you inside.”

He manages to maneuver the hyperventilating kid into the living room and dump him onto the couch- thinks he does at least until he tries to stand and one of Harrington’s hand is still white knuckling his collar to the point that he would probably have to break his fingers to pry it off

“It's okay- I've got you.”

“Steve?” The word is part of a yawn but sleepiness turns into immediate wide-awake concern when she sees the two of them, “What’s wrong?”

When Steve doesn’t answer- hell, doesn’t even look at her- she turns to him, eyes narrowed like whatever it is might be his fault, “What’s wrong with Steve?”

“Dunno, kid. Why don’t you give us some space for now?”

“No- what’s wrong with-”

“Hey, Supergirl. Heya, I just need to talk to Hop.” The boy’s words are shaky, but careful in the over-enunciated way he associates with drunks even though he's certain Harrington is stone-sober, “Okay?”

Jane looks dubious but gives them both a nod, “Shout if you need me.”

“Will do, Kid.”

The minute the door closes whatever by-a-thread normalcy Harrington had managed disappears completely. Kid starts shaking as his breathing goes bad and the hand that’s twisted up in his collar tightens spasmodically.

“Harrington, what's happening?”

Steve blinks owlishly before burying his face in one hand.

“It's not dead.”

Ah, well, now he can fucking sympathize ‘cause his own lungs seem to squeeze the air out.

“What?”

“I didn’t tell anyone last time and it hurt El. I had to-I had to tell you. It's not gone. She’s in danger. They're all in danger. We have to stop it.”

He reaches out, grips the kid’s forearm, trying to steady him, “I need you to focus for me Steve, what did you see and when?”
“I didn’t…” The kid swallows hard, waves a hand like he’s summing himself up, “Look- it’s the psychic drain, right? It’s still- this shit is still happening. It’s not dead. It’s not-”

“Okay, it’s okay. Explain.”

“I started getting these things- right before the Aboleth showed up. I’d have these nightmares and freak outs...and I... I couldn't breathe and I felt like I was going to die- like really about to die- and sometimes it makes me see shit when I’m awake- just like at the Labs. I’ll see the tunnels or the monsters and it’s like I’m there. It’s not dead.”

"But have you seen it?"

"No but-"

“Harrington…” He says carefully, ‘cause the kid looks like he’s ready to bolt, “Are you sure that this is being caused by the Aboleth?”

The kid’s panic gives way to mildly indignant confusion, “What the hell else would it be, Hop?”

Ah, Christ.

“Jane?” He knows she already had her ear at the door - hell, way she’s gotten at Watching she might have technically already been in the room. Either way Jane cracks the bedroom door open, “You still feel the Aboleth?”

Her eyes flicker to Steve, then back to him again and she gives him a very, very serious shake of her head- obviously doesn’t want to accuse Harrington of lying, since they’re friends and all- before mouthing ‘gone’ and pattering back into the room.

Phone ringing gives him a reprieve, temporary as it might be. Doesn't doubt for a second that it's going to be be Joyce on the other end ‘cause it's ten at night and she's missing a teenager.

"Jane, could you get that? Tell Joyce that he's here and in one piece."

"Two minutes?"

"Yeah, two minutes."

The girl nods and Harrington’s face falls even farther, like he just remembered that people give a damn about where he is now.

"Oh. Shit. Uh, tell her sorry."

Sure, he’d had an idea that Harrington was having trouble. Easy to spot when you’ve been through it yourself. And sure, he’d thought it might be a good idea to have a chat with the kid about it at some point. And sure, he’d pushed that at some point off because he hadn’t had any sage advice for coping besides ‘don’t treat it with beer and barbiturates at 9 a.m’ which seemed more likely to give the kid ideas than help—but it had somehow never occurred to him that Harrington had no idea what he was even fighting against. Jesus, why would he? Before two years ago the worst thing he ever faced was the stress of winning the big game or passing a Chem test. Kid thinks he's a cross-section of every boy that ever ran, fell, got up and ran again. Thinks he's Indiana summers and a fizzed over black cherry soda and truth, justice and the American way and never sitting still, never stopping. Just going forever. He sometimes forgets that Harrington is appallingly young.

"Steve."
"What?"

"You ever hear of flashbacks?"

"I don't do acid, Hop. It's 1985 not 1968."

Right.

"Okay, how about PTSD?"

The blank, confused look says it all, "Um...I think Ben Schultz gave one to Marlanne Hansen? Why, Hop?"

Sometimes with Harrington you don’t know whether to laugh or cry. It's a difficult choice to have because whichever you pick the kid loses. Might as well toss a coin.

"I'm getting a beer. You want a beer?"

Harrington looks confused, then Harrington looks pissed.

"I'm sorry, am I speaking a different language here? The Aboleth is back. El is in danger- the kids are in danger and you're just getting a fucking beer-"

He cracks two beers. Puts one in front of Harrington and watches eighteen-year-old instinct to drink free beer that he's technically not allowed to have take over from the anger as the kid grabs it and takes a pull.

"Hop- I swear, I'm not lying-"

"How about shell shock? Ever hear of that?"

Harrington’s eyes light up with proud comprehension, like he was about to pass a pop-quiz, “Oh. Yeah. That was- it was a thing that soldiers used to get, right? I did an essay once about my grandad in World War II- what does that have to do with-"

Light goes out of them immediately as he slumps back into the corner of the couch like he's trying to bury himself in the over-stuffed, lumpy cushions.

"I'm not a soldier, Hop."

Christ, he wishes that were true.

"How many times have you almost died in the past three years, Harrington?"

Fact that the kid has to stop and think about it says it all. Steve seems to realize the absurdity of the distinction too, 'cause he just chews his lip like he's trying to work through it.

"Okay...right," The boy says thoughtfully and mostly to himself before turning to him looking surprisingly cheerful like he might have found a silver lining and Hopper feels his stomach sink with concern 'cause that's not the face of understanding, "So, if I'm just sick it has to go away soon, right? It can't last much longer, it's already been months."

"It...could go away, yeah."

Brave, Jim, real goddamn brave.
It passes the Jane Test, at least, 'cause it's not a lie but Steve blinks at him with sudden well-earned suspicion.

"Or it...could not? Is that what you're saying Hop."

"Yeah," He drags a miserable hand down over his mouth as Harrington's face falls, "Yeah kid, that's what I'm saying."

"That's not... that's not fair," Harrington says it slowly, expression mildly wondering- like trying to process how unfair it is a trick in itself- before twisting into a cosmically-betrayed anger that was probably the most wholly genuine expression he's ever seen Steve display, "So that's it? Seriously? 'Congratulations idiot, you helped save the world from the Upside Down, your prize is being fucked up forever'?

Hopper doesn't know how to respond, 'cause it sure as hell isn't fair, but he has to say something. "Steve-"

"That's bullshit. It's bullshit. We killed the monster, Hop. It was supposed to stop after we killed the monster. Dustin said-" Doesn't know if Harrington's attempt to convince himself runs out of steam at that point or if he realizes that a thirteen year old- no matter how smart- might not know every single thing in the world.

"Fuck."

You said it, kid.

"We could talk to Owens about setting something up. He was helping out Will-" No surprise though that Steve is already shaking his head no as he curls up, chin resting on his knees.

"Can't you just...tell me that everything is gonna be fine?"

"Think there's a rule about that."

"Do it anyway."

Hopper tries, gives it his all, really reaches for the part of him that believes that Kali will find and kill Brenner before any of them ever have to deal with the man again, that the Aboleth was the last monster from the Upside Down that any of them will ever face, that he'll find Sara and no one will ever come after Jane ever again for the rest of her life, that they'll all start to sleep soundly again, someday. That spring will be endless and they'll all live forever, every one of 'em. He reaches for the part of him that wants to lie to himself just as much as Steve wants to be lied to and that truly believes that, yeah, everything will eventually be fine.

He lays a comforting hand on the slope of Steve's back.

"It's going to be fine, Steve."

His eyes catch Jane's as she slips back into the room and the girl doesn't hesitate to fold herself up on the couch in the hollow between them. Actually manages to make the boy smile a little.

"What do you think, Supergirl? Lie?"

Jane shrugs both shoulders and turns to him, "What's the word for something...maybe true but maybe a lie that you want to be true?"
"Think what you're looking for there is 'hope' kid."

She nods, obviously satisfied with the answer as she looks back to Steve, "Hope."

"Right."

Can tell by Steve's face that it's not much, but it's something.

"Look, it's late. Joyce knows you're here now- why don't you just stay the night? We can talk about this if you want or if you don't... think I have a ISPD manual kicking around somewhere we could look over. Start to get you fast tracked-"

"Wait." Vague glassy unhappiness transitions to an unguarded look of surprised disbelief and at this point Hopper will honestly take anything that isn't despondent misery, "You still want-? You can't have a cop with some...weird freak-out disease."

"Harrington, I don't give a damn. Every time you've needed to step up, you've done it. I told you I wanted a damn good kid on my team? A good man is even better and that's what you're gonna be. Now, let me find that manual, you can bring it home-"

Harrington doesn't know what to say to that, looks a little stunned by it actually, but he does unfold a little.

He makes popcorn, digs out the ISPD manual and puts on a record that isn't going to make anyone think he's cool but that he knows is the right one when he comes back from the kitchen and the second round of popcorn popping to Steve moving the needle on the record player to Father and Son for the third time in a row.

They talk. Talk about everything and nothing and things that make Steve nervous and defensive, like there's some limit to how much any individual can give a shit about him that he's not allowed to reach. They talk until Jane starts snoring quietly and Steve follows close behind her, nodding off mid-sentence into sleep so deep it was like someone flipping a light-switch.

Knows that he's going to have to move them but lets them rest for now 'cause he can't make sure that there will never be another monster, human or otherwise, but he can give them the sleeping soundly part, if only for a little while, since Jane rarely does and according to Joyce Harrington hasn't been since the Inbetween. Hell, probably hasn't been since 1983. Only mildly regrets the choice when their shifting somehow ends up with him trapped- Jane nestled under his arm and Harrington peacefully drooling onto his shoulder and after figuring out that there's pretty much no escape that wouldn't wake 'em Jim Hopper gives himself up for stuck, leaning his head back on the couch and listening to the music play.

-Bring tea for the Tillerman
Steak for the Sun
Wine for the woman who made the rain come.
Seagulls sing your hearts away
'Cause while the sinners sin
The children play
Oh Lord, how they play and play
For that happy day
For that happy day-
Three kids, survivors of the winter, the storm, and the dark are climbing to Mars-

"Okay Nance, now put your foot-Holy shit!"

"I got you."

"-Anywhere but on that branch."

"Nice recovery."

"Why was this easier when we were nine?"

"No sense of self-preservation."

"Wow. Glad we grew out of that."

-Or at least as close as they can get in Hawkins, Indiana.

At each new height they pass marks made by two little boys, SH JB SH JB SH JB, carved into the bark to prove that they were explorers together once, until there aren't anymore and SH JB's finally becomes a lonely 'J', half-formed and abandoned at the last climbable branch of the Old Sanders Oak. Steve traces his fingers over it, surprised.

'Oh. You...?'

A knife is required. Steve's is in his bag at the base of the tree. Jonathan's is in the car. Steve, age eighteen and Jonathan, age seventeen, argue like kids about which of them is the worse boy-scout as they empty pockets to try to figure out if they have anything that can make a mark.

Nancy, aged seventeen and always prepared, has remembered hers and declares herself to be the best boy-scout of them all as she carves careful letters into the bark at the top of the oak. Steve leans hard into his, pressing them into the wood, indelible until the tree falls- remember me, Hawkins, remember me - and Jonathan' finishes what he started, spiky and sharp edged but overlapping both of them.

SH JB NW

The ghosts of two little kids, Steven age nine and a half and Jonathan age nine, stir one last time. Steven who would fall off of rocks that were maybe rocks and maybe alligators and maybe portals to another world and laugh afterward, every time. Jonathan, face burning with the sun and love he didn't understand, clothes threadbare, tennis shoes ancient but ready to run and pull up the pavement behind them to make sure that the world couldn't follow.

Two little ghosts, both murdered by time and replaced by King Steve and Freaky Johnathan Byers finally lock hands and rest easy.

And Nancy is alive, here and now. She loved, she's been loved, she loves, she can't stop. She can hear their twin hearts beating in each ear, the third pounding in her chest as she and Jonathan open old wounds and Steve opens a new one, wincing as blood seeps between his fingers.

Nancy reaches over and takes Jonathan's hand, eye's on the sunset, legs swinging slightly in the open air below them.

And she keeps staring straight ahead at the horizon as she takes Steve's hand too, fingers intertwining, blood-mingling, back straight in mild defiance to the yet-to-be spoken protest that this
could be a really terrible idea. That people don't do this sort of thing and that it can't last.

Three kids wait for someone else to say it first. No one does.

"So what do we do now?"

"The world's not going to end if we just sit for a while."

"Are you sure about-"

"It's. Not."

Far below them bikes rattle and creak and announce themselves with the ticktickticktickticktick of a Tops card pinned to a spoke by Steve Harrington and made sacrosanct by Dustin Henderson even though he has no idea who Kirk Gibson is as five kids skid to a stop below the Old Sanders Oak and begin the debate of if their siblings (and Steve)... their siblings... have finally lost their minds. A debate soon ended as Will Byers, utterly fearless or maybe a little afraid and doing it anyway grabs a branch and climbs for the top. Steve wraps his arms around Jonathan when he moves to help him because Will is brave and true and wise and Will can climb a fucking tree by himself. Soon five kids are hauling each other from branch to branch yelling, shouting, plunging upward into spring.

"Why are we doing this, exactly?"

"Because it's the highest point where you can still see the town."

"Follow up question, why do we want to see the town?"

"Because it's ours, remember?."

Because they've fought monsters and secret agents and saved a strange, shitty, beautiful town and saved each other, over and over again. And at this point they're pretty sure that they aren't going to stay saved forever, not in Hawkins, but they're saved today.

And they can make today last, as long as it will.

Well, I am the warrior
And heart to heart you'll win
If you survive.

- The Warrior

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note (No, seriously, it's really me this time):

So. How does one end up writing a 400+ page Stranger Things novel-length fic?

To the surprise of probably *no one that's read this far* it's all because a tiny detail - Steve Harrington's car.

I wish I was joking.
Steve drives a 1981-82ish BMW 733i throughout the show. He was 17 in '83 so it makes sense that he got it more or less when he was 16 either brand new or handed down from his dad (who would have had it at most 1-2 years at that point). This car cost somewhere around low to mid-30k *in the early 1980's* or nearly 90k in today's money. Steve is driving something that costs above the average yearly household income of someone in the early 1980's as his FIRST CAR.

I found this super fascinating- how does the rich kid driving something almost as expensive as a Jaguar F Type R would be today in *suburban Indiana* end up like Steve?

Toss in some Stephen King, a passion for horror films and four hundred + pages later-

Thank you everyone that's read and commented- I've been absolutely floored by the amazing feedback, I can't even begin to say how much it's meant to me. You guys are all incredible.

I'm mrs-evadne-cake on Tumblr - I do not know how to Tumblr but come say hi!

Some paddles for one last Curiosity Voyage:

**The Soundtrack:** Mostly the diagetic music in order, but it includes some of the more important quote songs as a bonus. It's bitchin' if I do say so myself. Also a non-Spotify version was requested so YouTube Playlist!

**TVTropes:** IT HAS A TVTROPES PAGE, GUYS. This is all I've ever wanted. Trope my face off.

**Recommendations:**

*Butterfly in the sky-y, I can go twice as high. Take a look, it's in a book, a reading rainbow:*

  _mjolnirbreaker_- Extraordinary author with absolutely spot on characterization. Every single fic they put out is my new favorite ST fic until they write another one. Their work was a huge inspiration and what I turned to whenever I felt like I was losing the grip on the character voices.

  _stillusesapencil_: Beautiful character studies. Just gorgeous writing.

  *Let's be real, you've already read everything Sholio wrote. It's a good time to re-read everything Sholio wrote.*

Likewise with:

  _Glorious Spoon’s amazing Nancy/Jonathan/Steve fics.*

But don't take MY word for it.

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