I'm trying to tell you something
by ninemoons42

Summary

Arthur reads too many books for his own good, to drown his sorrows, and just because he wants to. He meets someone who is just as big a reader as he is - and he also meets Eames.
Arthur opened his eyes.

*I'm in bed,* he thought. *At home. It's summer. I don't have to go to school today.*

"Nyao?"

"Amy?" And he woke up all the way. Pushed the book off his chest and pulled his red bicolor cat close, letting her nuzzle and nip along his chin. "Morning, you," he said, and dug his fingers into the scruff of her neck. Amy gurgled happily and butted up into his hand.

"Good morning to you too, dearest," and Arthur sat up, still with the cat in his arms, as the door creaked gently open and Mallorie walked in. She set the laundry basket down next to his desk and sat down at the foot of his bed. "Have a good night's sleep? Mind you, I would never have recommended Kafka as bedtime reading material."

Arthur grinned and offered up his cheeks for his cousin to kiss. "Well, you knew I was going to jump right into it when you offered it to me yesterday."

"Silly me," and Mallorie ruffled his hair affectionately.

Dark curls that brushed his collar. He had been thinking about cutting it short, but every time he'd voiced the idea she had protested vigorously. So now he was stuck with waiting on it to grow long enough to tie back.

"I'd have thought you were smarter than that. Did you dream of absurdities and cockroaches, then?"

"Eww, Mal," and Arthur reluctantly rolled out of bed, depositing Amy on his pillows, where she purred happily and then curled up into a sleepy circle. "That's just plain wrong."

"That, I believe, is called 'asking for it'. Now come and have breakfast, I'm running late and you're to deliver Papa's lunch to him today."

"Okay," and as Mal closed the door behind her Arthur changed into his favorite Black Watch tartan shirt and a pair of beat-up jeans with the knees gone almost white. Bookbag by the door, into which he dropped the Kafka, and in a few more minutes he was wolfing down a bowl of cereal and some Gouda on toast.

Mal watched him eat as she sipped her coffee and nibbled on some pound cake. "Any other plans for today? And no, dearest, the library doesn't count."

Arthur pulled a horrible face into his cereal.

Mal pulled one right back at him.

Arthur laughed. "I'm going to be meeting Ariadne and Robert. I kind of got dragooned into another one of their sketching expeditions. I think they said we were going to run around near the river. Robert's bringing the food."
"Good, good, get some sun for a change. Seriously, it wouldn't kill you to do some of your reading outside. What with it being summer and all."

"I sit near the windows in the library, Mal."

"Psh."

They washed the dishes in companionable silence, and Arthur heaved Amy out the window for her daily run - she went, scrabbling clumsily - before clattering out to his beat-up bike with his uncle's lunch. "Have a good day researching, Mal," he said as he watched his cousin lock up the house behind them. "And if you're meeting Dom don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"That depends on whether you can imagine such things," Mal sniped back, affectionately. "Be safe, and have fun."

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Arthur hummed absently as he negotiated the hills leading up to the public library where his Uncle Miles, Mal's father, worked as one of the head librarians. He had always rather been fond of the various sounds the bike made, from the creak in its joints when he was going uphill to the loud, steady, happy whine it made when he was speeding down a slope or a straight stretch of road.

"Hello, Arthur," Miles said, head and shoulders in a dusty bookshelf, "will you steady the ladder for me?"

Arthur squinted up at the numbers of the books on the shelves - 561 to 569 - and raised his eyebrows. He hadn't known that the library carried any materials on paleontology and paleozoology. But then, he hadn't known that the library existed for the first ten years of his life, and it was a major public and research facility, and he hadn't yet gotten around to exploring all six floors of it, not to mention the two underground levels.

"Anything recommended in this aisle?" he asked, when Miles was back on the floor and peering curiously into his lunch box.

"Dunkinfield Henry Scott would be a good place to start, I suppose," Miles said as they walked back to the main floor of the library. "He's very arcane, rather dense, but he does know how to lay the groundwork for the subject. Are you going to be staying here today?"

"Not really."

Miles peered at him kindly from behind his bifocals. "How are you feeling?"

Arthur smiled. He liked it when Miles looked at him like that. It reminded him of his father, although he had not exactly been the type to inquire after his offspring's well-being on a daily basis. "I'm doing fine."

He felt a heavy, warm hand come down onto his shoulder and he instinctively stepped closer to his uncle. "Good, now, go on out there, don't waste these days. Get lots of sun."

"I will. See you later."

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"Oi, you! Arthur!"
Arthur braked, hard, and only the ease of long practice - and the bike that was nearly as old as he was - kept him from pitching headfirst over the handlebars.

Leaning the bike on a nearby tree, he crossed his arms and glared at the boy in the neon-green shirt, black shorts, and knee-high white socks. A shoulder-high fence separated them. "What do you want, Eames?"

Eames showed him a very strange smile then, something that was equal parts pleading, embarrassed, and unhappy. "I couldn't ask you to do me a tiny favor? I only want you to pitch that bag, which you have actually just run over with your bike...."

Arthur looked over his shoulder. There was, indeed, a large tan rucksack under the front wheel of the bike.

"...over to me," Eames went on, "because if I go over this fence again Yusuf is going to, his exact words, kick my arse up between my shoulders, not to mention Coach Saito will be very unhappy with me."

Arthur rolled his eyes and threw up his hands and went to get the bag anyway. "I do not want to know, jeez, soccer players."

"Foot. Ball," Eames said, and watched both Arthur and the bag as it came sailing at him from several feet away. "At least do me the honour of saying the proper word."

"Bite me," Arthur growled, and hopped back onto the bike.

He looked back, though, once, and Eames was already dropping the bag near the bleachers and diving right back into the practice match.

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"Hey, I saw you talking to Eames," were the first words out of Robert's mouth when Arthur found him loitering outside the building that housed the school library. He seemed rather amused, and dwarfed by the picnic basket at his feet. "What did he want from you?"

"Thinks he can ask me to do things for him or something," Arthur groused, although there was no heat in his voice. "Just, well, I'll never understand why he's here, of all the places; he's not exactly going to be picked for MLS if he's here in some dinky little suburbia."

Ariadne popped up next to them, and said, "Who knows; he's British."

"It's as good an explanation as any - mad dogs and Englishmen," Robert said, grinning a little.

"Exactly. And lest we forget - Eames is not even his real name," Arthur said, and he led them up the steps into the library. "Mr. Browning?"

Sound of someone shuffling through the aisles, and they all smiled politely when the white-haired school librarian squinted at them. "Ariadne Mann. Robert Fischer. Arthur Hardy. I really don't know what you're doing here in the dead of summer."

"Just here to return some books, and to borrow some new ones," Arthur said, and emptied his bookbag onto the nearest table. He carried the leatherbound copies of *A Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Silmarillion* over to Browning's desk, and presented his ID and library card.

"And what are you checking out? Hurry, hurry, I've got to go out to lunch."
Arthur darted into the stacks and found the three titles he'd already shortlisted the last time he was here - *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, *The Hunt for Red October*, and *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* - and presented them to the librarian to be checked out.

Ariadne and Robert watched Arthur fill out the book cards, but it was Browning who said, "Hmm, I hadn't known there was someone else in the school with the same read-everything-he-can-get-his-hands-on eclectic tastes as you - any one of you three know some kid named Stuart Robin Ferguson?"

Arthur, Ariadne, and Robert all shook their heads.

"Well here he is on all three of the books, and - look at that, he's on the others too," and Browning offered Arthur five book cards. Sure enough, Arthur's and Stuart's names were on all of the cards, sometimes next to each other, sometimes separated by other borrowers' names. In the case of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, Stuart's name appeared no less than three times on the card.

"He really likes Oscar Wilde, I'm guessing," Ariadne deadpanned, and Robert and Arthur exchanged glances and snickered.

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"What is it with you and these books, Arthur?" Ariadne asked, and followed that up with a peremptory, "Move your mouth only when you answer."

"Yeah, it's not like you're reading because there's a specific subject you're interested in, or because there's something that you want to know." Robert was sprawled out on his stomach, chin braced on his forearms. The three of them were sitting in one of their favorite spots along the river, a long, meandering curve with a thickly overgrown bank. They had long since jumped into the contents of the picnic basket, and Arthur, as always, had claimed all of the peanut butter and cheese sandwiches.

Arthur watched as Robert picked a long blade of grass and stuck the torn end in his mouth. To Ariadne, he said, "Is there really something strange about wanting to, basically, read everything? I've been a bookworm since I moved here; you guys met me reading on the steps outside the school, for crying out loud. It's just who I am."

"Okay, it's what you are, but some people might find it, I don't know, weird. I mean, it's not strange if you're planning to go on *Jeopardy!* or be like that guy who read the Encyclopaedia Britannica," Ariadne said, charcoal pencil scritching softly as she sketched Arthur. "But then you'd be SOL if you wanted to be that guy precisely because he did it already."

Arthur bit his lip, and Ariadne rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll stop sketching you. Robert?"

"Yeah, sure."

As Ariadne and Robert settled in for the next round of portraits, Arthur opened his bookbag again, looked contemplatively at the titles he was carrying around. In addition to the three books he'd borrowed and the Kafka, there was one more book, way down in the bottom of the bag.

*Pride and Prejudice*.

Written on the inside cover were his mother's initials.

She had taught him to read, and she had shared her all-consuming love of books with him; he had distant memories of her voice, rising and falling softly as she read to him.
He remembered the kind look in Miles's eyes at the library, knew that he and Mal had been acting especially solicitous these days because the truth was, Arthur disliked summer.

His parents and his sister had died in the summer.

Arthur still didn't know why he'd been spared.

The book had been the only other thing they'd recovered from the crash.

He had been carrying it around with him ever since, and he'd been trying to lose himself in books, any book he could lay his hands on. Reading to himself, trying to recover the memory of his mother and of the comfort he'd taken from her stories, from the books she'd read to him.

Arthur snapped the bag shut and dropped back into the grass, absently nibbling at the last of his sandwiches. The sounds of the river and of Ariadne and Robert in conversation washed over him.

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Later at home, after a dinner of Mal's beef bourguignon and Miles laughingly opening a bottle of beer for him, Arthur wandered back into his room and dug his day's haul out of his bookbag, carefully leaving the Jane Austen in its usual position.

Amy climbed onto the bed next to him, and he let her lie down on his stomach with only a small grunt of protest.

Slowly, his thoughts drifted away, and finally caught on the name on the book cards.

Who was Stuart Robin Ferguson?

Arthur sat up, ignoring Amy's protesting nyao, and pulled the book cards out again, fanned them out on his pillow.

Stuart's handwriting was all slanted lines and angles. Left-handed, too, probably, since the letters were all tipped backwards, more exaggerated than Arthur's own cramped scrawl.

Arthur tried to think back to the books he'd borrowed before A Pilgrim's Progress and The Silmarillion, found himself going back to Les Miserables and Climbing Mount Improbable and Lizard.

Yes, he did vaguely remember thinking that there had been something strangely familiar in the book cards. Arthur remembered being startled, and somewhat scandalized, but most of all pleasantly shocked that the school library actually had a few Banana Yoshimoto titles, and had eagerly checked out Lizard - and now he could see that book card, plain as day in his mind.

Only one other person had borrowed the book, and he remembered wondering about him, about this Stuart Robin Ferguson. Who was he and which of the stories had he liked best?

Arthur had actually found himself literally dreaming the story "A Strange Tale from Down by the River" after he'd devoured the book in one sitting.

How had Stuart been introduced to Yoshimoto? What else had he liked?

Apparently, the answer to that was, "Everything."

Just the same way Arthur did.
Arthur allowed himself a happy little smile when he saw that his usual spot in the public library was vacant. He usually sat at one end of a long table, right where the glass walls of the second floor met at a corner and gave him a marvelous view over the city and its rolling hills, the river snaking languidly through it.

It was only after he'd pulled down another series of selections from the stacks and settled in, with the library's own copy of Asleep on top - he was looking forward to rereading it today - that he noticed the smaller pile of books at the other end of the table.

He forgot all about it, though, as soon as he opened Asleep.

Arthur sniffled, quietly, as he read the final paragraphs of the first story, "Night and Night's Travelers", and he was patting down his pockets for a tissue when someone cleared his throat nearby and offered him a plain white handkerchief.

"Um, no, thanks," Arthur said, politely, and he finally managed to dig a wad of crumpled, but clean, tissues from the bottom of his backpack. He wiped his streaming eyes and blew his nose, softly.

"That must have been quite some story," someone muttered, and there was something incredibly familiar about the voice.

Arthur looked up, looked around wildly - and felt his eyes widen, almost comically, when he finally noticed who was sitting at the other end of the table.

Eames was out of his soccer - football - kit and he was sitting, silently absorbed, in a battered hardbound copy of Carl Sagan's The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.

Arthur knew he was being very rude, could almost feel Miles's and Mal's disapproving looks on the back of his neck, but he couldn't stop looking.

There was Eames, his mouth moving a little as he turned the pages. Every so often he'd stop and put down the book and scribble rapidly in a small blue notebook, left-handed. He would stop to look over what he'd written, checking it against what he had been reading, then pick up the book again and get back to the science.

It took a long time before Arthur shook himself out of his daze - but at that point he was more than grateful to have a book to hide behind, and he sheepishly put Asleep in his "to borrow" pile and picked up the next one in his stack, Mario Vargas Llosa's Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter.

Arthur had to be particularly careful with the copy because the binding was starting to go to pieces, and he looked at the librarian's notations in the pocket for the book card and knew them well enough to mean that the copy was already scheduled to be temporarily taken out of the collections.

When he called it a day, he was three-quarters of the way through the book - and Eames was still there, preoccupied with his notebook this time.

Arthur sneaked another peek at the movements of his pen. He can't be writing, Arthur thought. Too many curves and long lines. He's drawing?

"All done, then?" Eames asked suddenly.

Arthur looked up in surprise. Eames's pen was still moving, but Eames's eyes were fixed on him, with a strangely quiet expression. "Yes," he said, after a short pause.
"Good. Hope you enjoyed what you were reading."

"Not actually, not yet," Arthur found himself saying, as he put his books back together and looked around for a shelving cart. "These characters are a bit too odd for me. Maybe because I knew coming in that they're thinly fictionalized. I keep crossing what I know about the actual author with how his character acts in the book."

"I've had that happen to me before," Eames mused.

They walked on together, chatting companionably about books, and they got in line to borrow the Yoshimoto and the Sagan.

If he thought it was a little odd that Eames was completely hunched over his library and book cards while filling them out, Arthur never gave it a second thought, because then they were sitting in a sunny corner table of the library's cafeteria.

"You're a little early to be doing homework," Arthur said as he watched Eames alternate between bites of his roast beef sandwich and the pages of the Sagan.

"'S not for me," was the amused answer. "I'm doing this for my da."

"You couldn't just...oh, I don't know, buy him a copy?" Arthur said, genuinely curious.

Fortunately for him Eames didn't take it wrongly. "I've said as much," he chuckled, warm in the air around them. "I'm not sure it took."

"You're weird," Arthur said.

"My family is very weird," Eames agreed.

Arthur smirked and finished off his spaghetti bolognese and opened Asleep again.

"You're fast," Eames observed, suddenly, and Arthur jerked up, suddenly swept out of the world of the second story. "Are you actually trying to speed-read that or something? Seems like a waste, isn't it?"

"Oh," and Arthur checked the book. He had already made it halfway through the story while Eames was finishing his snack. "Um, no. It's, it's just something I do. No one ever taught me to speed-read."

"I was going to ask you a rude question, but fortunately your reaction tells me everything I need to know." And then Eames was getting up from the table, smiling, and did he actually look regretful? "But now I must dash. Footy's on in a few minutes, and I have to pick up my gear before I play. Pleasure spending time with you, Mr. Hardy."

Arthur stared, and managed a faint, "Bye, Eames," and was left wondering, Now how does he know my name?

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Arthur fell asleep that night with his own copy of the Sagan book still open on his chest.

This time, the memory of the name Stuart Robert Ferguson was mixed in his mind with the memory of Eames and his note-taking, his hands around the pen and around his sandwich.

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A few days later, when Eames waved at him from the football huddle, Arthur shrugged and waved back a little.

"That was quick, recently you had nothing but complaints about him, and now you're actually talking to each other?" Robert asked. He and Arthur were sitting on the grassy knoll adjoining the pitch, waiting for Ariadne to arrive.

"Pass the chips," Arthur said, and lay back down in the grass. He put Asleep on his chest, looked up at the clouds drifting in the summer-blue sky. "Would you believe me if I told you that I'd never actually had a conversation with him before this summer?"

He watched as Robert leaned over him, blue eyes dancing curiously. "Are you going to hit me if I say no?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll say I believe you, but you know what my real answer is."

Arthur grinned, and got up, and cuffed Robert lightly on the back of his head.

Robert laughed - and promptly smacked him back.

They were just in the process of rolling around on the grass when someone coughed, extremely amused, behind them. Arthur looked up from where he had just finished putting Robert in a light chokehold; Robert squinted and just barely turned his head to spit out a mouthful of grass.

"Boys," Ariadne groaned, and rolled her eyes.

Before either of them could move she had raised the camera in her hands and snapped off several shots.

"And if you don't behave yourselves and come along right now," Ariadne went on, "I'm going to spread these photos out all over the school, and you won't want that!"

Arthur released Robert, who threw a handful of leaves at him; then he got up, dusted himself off, and stuck out his tongue at Ariadne.

As they walked off in the general direction of Robert's family's house, Arthur shot one long look over his shoulder, at the football pitch.

If he had been asked why he had done that, he wouldn't have known what to say.

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"Arthur! It's raining! Help me take in the laundry!"

He roused all the way to both Mal's shout and Amy's indignant yowl.

He watched his cat skitter under his bed, heard her huffing irritably, and he threw her the catnip mouse he'd been saving for just a day like this.

The world was thundering and gray outside the windows.

Arthur bolted out of bed and spent several breathless moments hauling in the sheets and the clean laundry.
When he had a moment to catch his breath he took one long look at his cousin, her curls plastered down and rain dripping audibly off her hands and onto the kitchen floor, and he turned away and clapped his hands to his mouth and started to laugh.

"Why you -!" Mal shrieked, all mock-anger, and she promptly tackled him to the floor.

"No no no stop Mal!" Arthur yelled, shaking and twisting under her as she tickled him.

Afterwards, breathless and grinning, Arthur got shakily to his feet and offered her a towel, poured her some coffee, and got his own breakfast, all the while looking out the window. He felt the smile fall off his face. "Did Miles have an umbrella when he left?"

"Non," Mal said, and he felt her rather than saw her when she went to stand next to him, hands curved delicately around her coffee mug. "I can bring it to him if you were planning to stay home today."

"No, I'll take it, I have to go to school anyway. Books to return."

"All right. No biking, okay?"

"Okay, Mal," and Arthur turned and kissed his cousin's cheek.

Back in his room, he looked once more out his window, and heaved a sigh.

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By the time he arrived at the school library Arthur's shoes had been soaked completely through, and he couldn't stop grimacing with every step as his socks squelched unhappily. It was all he could to stop looking over his shoulder, fearful that he might be leaving a trail of wet footprints past Mr. Browning's desk.

The downpour was getting even worse as he stepped out of the building - but that wasn't what caught his attention.

There was someone sitting, all hunched shoulders and annoyed sighs, on the steps.

Arthur's eyebrows rose nearly into his damp hairline.

Mud-splattered neon-green shirt. Dirty, wet, black shorts.

The boy turned around.

"Oh, it's you," Eames said, and turned back to his task. He finished toeing off his soccer shoes, then started to peel his near-translucent white socks, the heavy shin armor, away from his legs.

Arthur looked away, hurriedly, but not before his traitorous mind had catalogued the pale legs, the powerful muscles.

"No umbrella?" he said, then, and immediately hated himself.

"Nope. Well, normally, we are not unaccustomed to playing football even in a pouring stink like this," Eames said as he put his gear away, "but apparently some people do not share that inclination."

When Eames hooked his hands into the waistband of his shorts Arthur forced himself to turn away completely, this time, but all he got from that was a quiet huff of a laugh.
"Oi, you, you've definitely not spent time around people like me," Eames said. "I'm actually decent. Come and turn back around; it's rude to carry on a conversation when one of us has his back turned."

Arthur gulped and looked over his shoulder.

He immediately wished he hadn't.

Because yes, Eames was wearing another pair of shorts underneath the muddy ones - but these shorts clung to pretty much every inch of him, as fitted as though he'd deliberately gotten them wet in the downpour.

It was perhaps all for the best for Arthur that Eames chuckled darkly and pulled a pair of dark jeans on.

"Okay, now I'm dressed is there anything else I can do for you?"

Arthur gulped again, and held out his umbrella. "You're not seriously going out in the rain without something like this."

"I said I haven't got any," Eames said, patiently. "I was actually just planning to walk home. It's not far."

"If it's not far then come on," Arthur said. "You can share my umbrella."

He thought there was a warm, gentle expression in the other boy's eyes, for a moment, before Eames tilted his head, all roguish and amused again. "If I'd known you were going to actually talk to me instead of snark at me, why, I'd have done this weeks ago. And wished for a lot of rain."

"Anything to end this summer," Arthur said, mostly to himself, and looked away.

But Eames came along quietly and if that warm look was back in his eyes as they walked out the school gate, Arthur pretended that he hadn't noticed.

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"Looks like Mrs. Takahashi's not in yet," Eames said as he wrestled open the door to the apartment.
"Come in for some tea?"

"I really should be going; Mallorie'll kill me," Arthur said, edging out the door.

"I can't let you leave without at least saying thank you for doing me that favor."

"It's hardly the only one you've asked me for," Arthur said, shrugging.

Eames slanted an unreadable look at him - and then bodily hauled him into the apartment.

Arthur yelped, and glared, and sat down sulkily at the kitchen table, eyes looking everywhere except Eames.

"Okay, I admit that wasn't exactly a smart thing to do," Eames said as he dug a tea canister out of the kitchen cabinets, "but really, what does a bloke have to do to get you to notice him, other than come across him completely unaware and reading?"

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "How about being polite? Like you were at the library? And no, inviting me in for tea and then yanking me in when I said no does not count."
Eames had the good sense to look contrite. "I am sorry, then," he said. "If I'm really making you feel that bad, maybe you should go home. Seeing as you've an umbrella and all."

Arthur looked at that hangdog expression and cursed himself mentally. "I'll stay for the tea. All right?"

"Yes." The kettle whistled then and Arthur watched as Eames counted exactly thirty seconds after turning the stove off, and then he dropped the tea bags into the mugs with a flourish and poured the hot water in.

Arthur sniffed the air appreciatively. *Mugicha.* He put his hands around his mug and drank in small sips, blowing quietly onto the tea to help cool it.

"Good?" Eames asked.

Arthur allowed himself a tiny grin. "It certainly goes a long way towards making me feel more charitable towards you."

"Well then, if that's what it takes." Eames smiled now, letting it actually reach his eyes. "That and maybe a ton of books."

After a while Arthur got up and, still cradling his mug, started to walk around the kitchen. There were a couple of books piled next to the stove; he tilted his head to read the spines. *Anthony Bourdain's Les Halles Cookbook, The New Settlement Cookbook.* "Anyone here Jewish?"

"Are you?"

"No."

"Pity," Eames chuckled, and went to refresh his tea. "Actually one of the other people staying here is. You know Nash?"

"Yeah. I didn't know that. Does he keep kosher?"

"He eats cheeseburgers. And bacon. Terrible habits, really."

"I guess not then," Arthur said.

The third book in the kitchen had familiar markings along its spine.

Arthur put his mug down and opened the book. Banana Yoshimoto, *Goodbye Tsugumi.* He smiled, mostly to himself, and mostly bittersweet, and leafed idly through the pages.

"It's a good book, yeah?" Eames said from somewhere behind him.

"Yes." Arthur flipped all the way to the back, to the book card, and huffed out a tiny laugh when he saw his own name. He remembered smiling when he'd seen it, new and freshly catalogued, on the school library's shelves.

His smile quickly fell off his face when he spotted the next name on the card.

Stuart Robin Ferguson.

"Eames."

"Arthur."
"Is that your real name or is it a nickname?"

Pause. "It looks like you've found out my secret."

Arthur carefully put the book back down where he'd found it, and then turned around to look at Eames, who was now standing an arm's length away.

"Your name, Eames. Your real name."

Eames put out a hand. "Hello, Arthur Hardy. My name is Stuart Robin Ferguson. Eames is my mother's maiden name. You wouldn't have known; we're not in the same class."

Arthur stared at Eames, stared at his outstretched hand. "And why didn't you tell me your name?" He looked away, then, down at his shoes. "Why didn't I ask?"

"Arthur...."

And with that, as though his name was the shot fired to start the race, Arthur pushed past Eames and fled, running through the apartment, stopping only long enough to pick up his bookbag and he was out the door, out into the pouring rain.

If he heard Eames shouting his name, shouting about his umbrella, he was too far away by then to do anything about it.

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"Arthur...."

"Go away, Mal. Please."

"I will," his cousin said quietly, "but you'll have to ask about them."

And Arthur lifted his head from his pillows, swiped at the stiff tear-tracks along his cheeks, as the door into his room opened all the way and there stood Ariadne and Robert, with Amy in the other boy's arms.

"Guys," Arthur said, woodenly, and fell back into bed, on his back this time.

"Arthur," Ariadne said, and he felt the bed dip near his feet, felt Amy walk up from his toes to his chest and then settle down atop him, in her usual place on his chest. "How are you feeling?"

"No fever."

"That's not what she's asking about - and you know it," Robert said.

"All we know is that you visited the school library the other day and then, suddenly, you've taken the day off, you're ignoring all our calls, you're not even online - and you look like shit, Arthur," Ariadne said. "Can you tell us what happened? Please?"

"I found out who Stuart Robin Ferguson was," Arthur muttered, and put his arm over his eyes.

"Yes?" Robert prompted.

"It's Eames. It's been Eames all along. And when I found out about it I...I think I may have overreacted. I ran away from him."
"Arthur," Ariadne said, and he felt her hand close around his.

On his other side, he felt Robert gently pry away the arm he'd put over his eyes, felt him take his other hand.

"Tell me, tell me the truth. Why did you run away from him?"


"Really not sure she cares about that right now," Robert said.

Pause. Pause. He tried to collect his thoughts. "I ran away because, because I had wanted Stuart Robin Ferguson to be a nice person. To be a friend. To be someone...." He ran out of words, and he shrugged. "Instead I got Eames."

"Arthur?" Ariadne said, after a few moments.

"Yes."

"That has got to be the rudest thing I've ever heard you say."

"Agreed," Robert said. "He hasn't really done anything wrong to you. As far as we know, you've only interacted with him in terms of snark and general rudeness. Okay, you're an irascible little shit normally, we all are, but still."

"You're going to have to swallow that pride of yours," Ariadne said, very gently, "and at the very least you're going to have to really apologize to him. Unless he actually did do something wrong to you?"

"Only got me all twisted up in a knot, so I can't tell whether I actually like him or not, Arthur thought. Out loud, he said, "No. Not really. There was the time we ran into each other at the public library, and he...he was a nice guy, then. We read at the same table."

"Then that's it," she said.

After they'd gone, leaving Amy snoozing across Arthur's chest, he carded his hands through the cat's soft fur, thinking, conflictedly, of Eames and of the library books, the chase across the book cards.

///

"Arthur, Dom is here, don't wait up for me - eh? Yes, can I help you?"

Arthur walked out into the foyer just as Mal moved aside - and there was Eames standing right on the doorstep.

"He says you know him from school, Arthur?" Mal asked, with just the right intonation that meant If he's not it'll be my pleasure to kick him right out.

"He's right," Arthur said, shortly. "Have fun on your date."

"See you tomorrow," Mal said. "Let's have waffles in the morning?"

"Yes, please."

And then the door closed behind her, and Eames was standing on the welcome mat.
"I came to return your umbrella," Eames said.

"Thank you," Arthur said. "Please, come in."

Arthur heard the footsteps following him, all the way to his bedroom; he left the door wide open, sat down on the foot of his bed and waved Eames in.

He watched as Eames sat down, carefully, at his desk.

Amy chose that moment to come in, and she nosed hopefully at Arthur's exposed foot before walking over to Eames and meowing loudly.

"Hello," the other boy said, and scratched her firmly behind her ears.

When Amy immediately camped out under the desk chair, Arthur shook his head fondly at her and said, softly, "Traitor."

"I'll answer to either one, you don't have to use both."

"All right, then, Eames. About the other day. What I said and did was rude, and I treated you very badly. I'm very sorry, and I hope that it might be possible for you to forgive me."

He knew he was looking away at the end. Arthur kicked himself mentally.

"Nope," Eames said.

"No?"

"Not unless," and Eames smiled, a little, the corner of his mouth quirking up, "not unless you tell me what is it with you and all these books. Because let me tell you, it has not been easy anticipating what you were going to check out next. I've pretty much read everything in the school library, and some of those books I gave to Mr. Browning myself."

Arthur stared, and stared, and tried to reboot his mind after he got somewhat hung up on the phrase it has not been easy anticipating what you were going to check out next.

He was pretty sure he hadn't meant to say it out loud when he said, "That is either the most stalkerrific thing I've ever heard of - or something so strangely romantic and grand that we're going to become the talk of the school, and I'm not even going to pretend that I care because I'd be too busy swooning."

"I'm glad you're giving me so much credit, darling," Eames said, grinning openly now. "Now, please tell me your story, and I'll tell you when I forgive you."

That stilled Arthur, and he felt himself wince and turn away, saw Eames's sudden concern out of the corner of his eye.

But he steeled himself to start and he reached for his bookbag, for Pride and Prejudice tucked away inside.

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On the first day of school Arthur rolled out of bed at four in the morning, shushing Amy as she
thumped back sleepily onto the floor.

He showered and dressed in the cool morning, gritting his teeth against the cold water, and piling on the layers - an undershirt, a shirt and a thick sweater vest. His best jeans, still freshly pressed and sharply creased.

His bookbag was almost empty today. Next to the Jane Austen he now kept a battered copy of *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. On the inside back cover were scrawled the initials SR[E]F.

As he wheeled the bike out and onto the sidewalk, Arthur took stock of what he was carrying - a thermos of hot *mugicha*, a thick jacket, his bookbag, and his backpack - and he jumped on, gears crunching and chain whining as he left at top speed.

Eames was going home. Home, he had explained, was Cardiff, all the way back across the Atlantic Ocean. His sister had fallen ill. He was wanted back at home to help look after her.

Arthur was going as fast as he could. Eames's flight would leave at half-past noon.

He braked with a soft screech, pulling up right onto the sidewalk, and looked up, at the window that he now knew was Eames's. There was a lit lamp, and the shadow of someone moving slowly.

Arthur whistled, once.

A hand brushed the curtain aside and there Eames was, looking disheveled, hair sticking up in all directions. Arthur watched the play of emotions across his face.

Eames was on the sidewalk a minute later, shivering in the morning breeze. He was wearing the shirt from his kit and a heavy, baggy pair of cargo pants.

"Put this on," Arthur said, briskly, and threw the jacket over the other boy's shoulders. "And come on, we haven't got a lot of time; I have to get to class and you have a flight to catch."

"Where are we going?" Eames asked as he climbed onto the back of the bike.

"You'll see."

It was a little more difficult with Eames as his passenger, but Arthur managed it, and it only took them fifteen minutes to get back down to the river, to the overgrown curve of river bank.

Arthur led Eames over the wet grass until they were just about next to the gurgling water, and stopped there, looking off into the distance.

"This is a very pretty place in the early morning," Eames joked, "if a bit nippy...."

Arthur took the hint, and pulled him closer, so they stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the grass. He opened the thermos, poured a steaming cupful of *mugicha*, pressed Eames's cold hands around it.

They passed the cup back and forth for a few moments, warm steam curling around their faces. Then:

"Eames?"

"Arthur?"

"Promise me you'll write."
"I've promised, haven't I? Besides, it's not as if we're going to be separated forever. I should be back for the holidays."

"Three months is still a long time."

He felt Eames go still beside him. "I know. But please believe in us."

Arthur turned to look at him then, and when he saw the fierce resolve in Eames's eyes, he had to nod, had to remember the long game of book card tag, and believe.

A faint line of light broke in the distance and then, suddenly, the September sun was struggling to rise, faint faraway warmth reaching out to their feet on the river bank.

"This is either way too early or an entire summer too late for me to be saying this," Eames said, suddenly, when the sun had just finished clearing the horizon, "but, Arthur?"

"Eames?"

"I really like you."

Arthur smiled, then, at the sun, and then at Eames. "I like you, too, very much."

He never knew which one of them made the first move. It had never mattered. Because Arthur's painful memories of summer began to stop hurting, that day on the river, when he threaded his hands into Eames's hair and kissed him, his first kiss, their first kiss.

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