The (Bad) Husband's Handbook
by SnitchesAndTalkers

Summary

With their marriage in the kind of critical failure that should come with a couple dozen red lights and maybe a nuclear fallout siren, Patrick can't believe he's about to inherit the family predisposition towards divorce. Surely this is the kind of thing that skips a generation?

Pete has ten chances to save their relationship. Can he turn it around?

Notes

I have no one to thank (and, simultaneously blame) for this but the_chaotic_panda who, unwisely, began talking about fics filled with established relationships and tired marriages and then permitted me to grab that with both hands and produce this.

Now I am completely buried alive in this story and I'm not sure how I'm going to escape. So, I figured, why not drag along whoever wants to take the ride through married life, children and learning how to make one another happy again?

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

The word divorce does not exist in the vocabulary of Patrick Martin Stump-Wentz. If he were to analyze it (which he does not) he would probably draw this conclusion: He is second generation. His parents are natives of Divorce and, like the children of so many natives of this place no one wants to visit — the place talked about in hushed tones around small ears — Patrick does not want to examine his lineage particularly closely.

Divorce, put simply, is not a heritage to be proud of.

So, Patrick pretends he doesn’t speak the language he heard shouted in the living room late at night. He fakes like the grudge matches pitched during family barbecues, vacations and Christmases have nothing to do with him. He’s not a native of Divorce, you see. He was just an unwilling tourist once. It’s his parent’s homeland. Not his.

Besides, Divorce isn’t the sort of place people visit on a whim. There’s planning involved for the trip. Baggage collected in the form of sad-eyed children, couple’s therapy and drawn-out, acrimonious arguments about how to split the record collection. Willie Nelson said it best when he said ‘who gets the family vinyl?’ or, like, something like that. There’s every possibility that’s a misquote.

If the opening scenes of Hallmark movies have taught Patrick anything at all – and seriously, he hopes he’s picked up very few life lessons from daytime TV – it’s that Divorce takes down marriages like a homing missile. They end in a blaze of glory, they go down like the Titanic, metaphorical guts torn out down the seams and spilling out into an ocean of apathetic dislike, tossing kids and hearts into the water when there aren’t enough emotional life rafts to go around. It’s dramatic, is what he’s saying, it’s two people colliding; the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object.

It doesn’t sneak up in the produce aisle of the Whole Foods in Northbrook at 9:37am on a Wednesday morning like some kind of marital sniper hiding amongst the organic zucchini. Which, coincidentally, is where Patrick finds himself at this particular moment, considering the relative merits of courgetti versus squoodles. Grocery stores, it seems, are not happy unless they’re using a clever portmanteau to pretend there’s no difference at all between delicious carbohydrates and tasteless misery vegetables.

“Orange or green?” he asks, holding up each pack in turn. Two pairs of eyes – one deep, serious amber, the other bright, slightly squinted sea-green – blink back at him solemnly.

“Yuck,” says Harper, owner of the amber eyes and verbal skills that she uses, frequently, to demonstrate her dislike of vegetables generally and Patrick’s cooking specifically. “Hate veggies.”

Avery, blue-eyed and still constrained vocally on account of being only ten months old, says “Blegh,” and then she spits up her oatmeal all over Patrick’s shirt. Which seems unanimous.

“Cool,” says Patrick, swiping a baby wipe out of the pocket on the ass of her papoose and conducting a clean-up job British Petroleum could learn a lot from. “Squoodles it is.”

He snaps a picture of grocery cart, selects a filter, sends it flying through the ether via the medium of Instagram. An older lady with a basket brimmed with premium cat food stares at him; only lunatics take photographs of shopping carts.
Not that it matters, but Patrick has this blog. A parenting blog that he named Dad on Arrival. This is clever because it contains twelve letters which means Patrick can run through the pride flag colors twice in the lettering. Plus, you know, Dad on Arrival. It’s clever. He likes it.

It is, to all intents and purposes, a successful blog. It generates him an income, has provided his family with free vacations, free car seats and, memorably, a selection of free sex toys because goddammit, Love Honey know their audience and it certainly isn’t young couples in the first flush of lust.

The blog began when Pete was ‘just’ a journalist – a good one, a talented one – and Patrick was ‘just’ a stay at home dad, finding his feet with their eldest daughter, Caitlyn. Pete snapped a picture on the ludicrously expensive camera he ‘liberated’ from work, black and white, Patrick smiling open-mouthed and shining, his cap tilted low and his guitar in his lap, Caitlyn, six months old and beautiful with chubby fists and marshmallow dimples on her knees, reaching out to brush the strings. Pete ran it as the cover image alongside a fluff piece about same gender parents in Chicago and the Internet exploded.

Patrick remembers the conversation over a bottle of wine, Pete’s eyes amber in the glow of the shitty three-bar electric heater in their run-down apartment in Roscoe Village. He started the blog the next day, nervous, running each entry by Pete on the couch over cartons of takeout from the Korean place across the street.

“You need to dream big,” Pete told him with concentrated earnestness. “You need to find your niche and celebrate it.”

So, he dreamt as big as he could between naps and feeds and pre-school and second children (then third, then fourth). Now Patrick has 120,000 page views a month and is, apparently, the kind of man who takes photographs of his groceries. He hands a pack of organic, yogurt-coated raisins to Harper and prays that the Gods of Holistic Parenting don’t smite him.

Patrick has given up on dreaming.

He remembers when he used to do it; when he dreamt in songs about growing up and they became songs about falling in love and they became songs about soulmates but, at some point, the needle lifted from the record of his life and now there’s nothing but the crackle of static. This might be because it’s been at least ten years since Patrick heard the words “sleep well” as anything more than a vague threat. It’s hard to dream when your body defies every critical study on sleep cycles and drops straight from ‘horizontal’ into ‘stupor’.

So, it’s not like he can claim Pete is interrupting anything when he shakes him abruptly by the ankle and hisses, “Patrick? Patrick, wake up.”

“Mm?” says Patrick, because this is the sort of thing people say when they’re woken from the kind of slumber second only to a medical coma. “‘S’a’matter? ‘S’it Avery?”

No one would describe Patrick as verbose when he staggers back into consciousness, least of all Patrick himself. He remembers that drooling in his sleep is one of his top ten pastimes after eating cold leftovers straight from the fridge and wipes at his chin. He hopes he wasn’t snoring.

“You were asleep,” says Pete and then he adds helpfully, “on the couch.”

Patrick avoids barking ‘no fucking shit, Sherlock’. This, he decides, is a testament to his character.
“Was I? I just — I was just watching…” he points vaguely in the direction of the TV. The screen has dimmed, ‘are you still watching You?’ asks Netflix, helpfully, and Patrick supposes that yes, in a roundabout way, he is. The dark screen gives a wonderful mirror view of him, an empty pint of ice cream balanced between his crotch and the accusatory mound of his stomach under his cardigan. It makes him look like the reflection in a funhouse mirror next to Pete, trim and fit and beautiful in his work suit. “Never mind.”

He sucks in his stomach and wonders if it’s possible for someone to carry baby weight when they’ve never actually been pregnant. It must be a thing? The calories ooze in via the oxytocin that comes — everyone knows — from sniffing the ripe strawberry sweetness of a newborn’s fuzzy warm crown. That explains the way his jeans stopped fitting right around the time they brought Harper home from the hospital. He prefers this explanation to ‘donuts for breakfast’. He gives up sucking in his paunch when it starts to make his lungs hurt.

“Just watching,” Pete repeats. He looks around the living room and, okay, yes, Patrick is the first to admit that there are crumbs under the coffee table and toys out of the basket and Penny’s dog bed is kicking off the stench of rain-damp pomeranian. “Did you think about just vacuuming?”

“I thought about it, thinks Patrick, cattily, and then I thought about sleeping and did that instead. “The kids,” he explains, vaguely. It means the kids, the mealtimes, the school run, the daycare, the laundry, the homework, the extracurriculars, the dentist appointments. You know, the kids. “I can fix it tomorrow when Harper’s at daycare.”

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“I hate daycare,” Harper tells him. She tells him it fiercely and passionately and, he’s certain, there’s a surefire career in politics stretching ahead of her. For now, he bops her nose and grabs a bag of fun-size apples. Fun-size, he supposes, because they require half the eating time of a regular apple which shaves a good two minutes off the time before the eater can begin looking for candy.

You may assume that Patrick means his kids. There is a family-size bag of almond Snickers hidden on the top shelf of the pantry that proves he does not.

“You do not. You love daycare. Daycare is like Disneyland.” Harper is young enough not to be able to argue this point as she, unlike her older siblings, has never actually been to Disneyland. Or indeed on any family vacation as her other father no longer believes in wasting his vacation days on his family when he could spend them on ‘team-building’ trips to Vegas. Patrick swears he is not bitter. “Only better, because you get to take fun-size apples for snack time. Isn’t that awesome?”

“No. You’re dumb.”

Well, like, she’s not wrong. There’s nothing fun about apples, regardless of their size or the presence of anthropomorphized fruit on packaging.

Once upon a college-dating, Pete used to call Patrick fun-size. When he’d pretend he had to stoop to press kisses to his forehead, when he’d strain up on his tiptoes to use Patrick as an armrest. Faking like the two inches between them granted him, all towering five-feet-and-six-inches of him, the status of anything other than slightly below average on a very loose scale. Now, it’s been a long time since Pete called him anything at all aside from ‘Patrick’ with that particular, vicious eye-roll inflection.

(You know the one, the stress equal on each syllable: ‘Not right now, Patrick’; ‘Can’t this wait, Patrick’; ‘Uh, I don’t know, Patrick, what do you think of the tensions in Syria’. Like that. He shakes out of it, tipping his head from side to side like he can dislodge it, a broken Etch-a-Sketch that won’t quite clear.)
“Don’t call daddy dumb, sweetie,” he says vaguely, checking expiration dates in lieu of actively parenting. Good parents, he decides, do not feed their offspring out of date okra and not poisoning his progeny is way more important than actively scolding them. “That’s not—”

His phone begins to vibrate in his pocket, Life On Mars projected around the aisle where the acoustics are awesome but the other weekday morning shoppers don’t seem to appreciate it.

INCOMING CALL PETE.

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There is a dust bunny staring directly into Patrick’s eyes from beneath the couch and it looks unimpressed. In fact, there’s the ensemble cast of Watership Down clustered under there, reproducing like their namesakes and, honestly, at this point, Patrick is beginning to feel guilty about sending them to meet El-ahrairah.

Pete doesn’t reply but he does drink aggressively from the bottle of IPA he’s extracted from the fridge. For the sake of marital harmony, Patrick says, “Good day at work?”

Pete grunts and launches into a lengthy monologue about office politics that Patrick doesn’t understand because Pete rarely mentions the same name twice. Aside from Mikey. When he’s done explaining something incomprehensible about circulation numbers and competition with online content — a competition Pete is, apparently, winning hands down — Pete offers an afterthought, “And you?”

“Oh, it was fine, you know? Joe came over, he brought—”

“Joe.” Pete says and it rhymes with ‘asshole’ and he collapses on the couch opposite. Patrick wishes that he wouldn’t make it quite so clear that he hates the only adult Patrick really interacts with outside of the checkout staff at Whole Foods and the members of the Westbrook Elementary School PTA. “Always hanging out with Joe, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” says Patrick. If he has developed a tiny crush on Joe — handsome, funny, a dab hand with diapers — well, he’s admitting nothing out loud. “Joe. And his kids. And two of our kids. Is that a problem?”

Pete smiles. At least, Pete’s teeth appear, white and savage. He spits, “Don’t you think you’re making it painfully obvious?”

“Making what obvious?” Patrick asks. His stomach has skipped over butterflies and is instead providing sanctuary for a whole flock of vultures, tearing into the soft, red depths of him.

Pete’s laugh is brittle, “Oh, I think you know.”

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Patrick thumbs over the green button, “Hi, hon. I’m just at Whole Foods, can I grab you—”

“Hey.” There’s no misnomer, no honey or sweetheart, just ‘hey’. Patrick isn’t letting this get to him today. “So, we have a problem.”

“We do?” Patrick asks cautiously.

The thing about Pete is, when he says ‘we’ he usually means ‘Patrick’. We are in the middle of sleep training. We are looking into middle schools. We’ve done a lot of research and we really think
Montessori is the way forward. When pushed in the car on the way home, Pete irritably admitted that he thought Montessori might be a brand of car seat. So, when Pete says ‘we have a problem’ he means, presumably, that Patrick has a problem. He wonders if Penny got sick on the rug and Pete stepped in it; he’s got 99 problems, please don’t let the bitch be one.

“The fucking washing machine is busted – again.”

Okay, so it’s a step up from dog puke but a step down from being part of a reasonable, cooperative partnership.

“It’s not busted,” Patrick objects, because it’s not, Pete just has no idea how to operate a single appliance in the home he keeps stuffing full of appliances he doesn’t want to learn how to operate. “I keep telling you, you can’t force the AddWash door when it’s over, like, a hundred and twenty degrees or something. If you read the instructions—”

“Well, if you remembered to put my favorite shirt into the machine like I asked you to do…”

Patrick suspects that Pete wouldn’t know his favorite shirt if it stood up in the closet and offered to suck his dick. It’s a moot point that pretty much every shirt Patrick owns is stained with things he’d rather not think about. However, Patrick does know Pete’s preference in shirts, and could probably rank a greatest hits list from one to ten. This means he knows that Pete’s favorite shirt is black and is currently rotating in a washing machine of hot water with 90% of Avery’s organic, expensive diapers.

“Wait, you just tossed your shirt in there?”

“Isn’t that basically why you made me buy that piece of shit in the first place? So we could toss things straight in there?”

The fact that Patrick did not, in fact, make Pete buy that piece of shit in the first place is not the hill he’s choosing to die on. He has another, far more pressing hill on which he intends to meet his maker.

“Pete, the machine is filled with diapers! And Caitlyn’s gi! Are you kidding me right now?”

“So?” Pete has that aggressive edge to his voice, the one that says Patrick’s making him feel like an idiot, that he’s looking for a fight. “And why are you putting diapers in the washing machine? I know your fucking homemade, organic, knit your own yogurt blog buddies have some pretty dumb ideas but shitty diapers go in the goddamn trash. Wait, is that why it’s broken? Because you stuffed it full of Huggies?”

“She wears reusable diapers, you know this! And they are – were – white. Only now they’re gonna be gray, along with Caitlyn’s gi. For Christ’s sake, I don’t have time for this.”

“What else do you have to do, exactly?” Pete asks and, if they were in the same room Patrick would cheerfully strangle him. “God, does it matter if her dance costume isn’t perfect?”

Caitlyn does not dance. She hasn’t danced since she was a toddler and she bit the coach. Patrick does not have the mental resilience to deal with that conversation right now.

“Don’t start with me, okay. Just — not right now.”

That he needs to make a stop off at the sporting goods store to buy a new gi with a baby and nap-deprived toddler in tow goes unsaid. Pete has never dealt with a hungry baby and ornery toddler so bringing it up is entirely moot. On the end of the line Pete’s sigh crackles, staticky and irritated.
Then Pete says eight words. They are not particularly important words, they hold no special weight and they’re not the worst he’s ever said by a considerable margin. But he says them and, somehow, in Whole Foods in Northbrook at 9:37am on a Wednesday morning, they become significant.

“You’re gonna have to call the repair guy.”

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The thing about wedding bands is that they sit on the finger, snugly, left hand, tucked between the pinky and the middle. They’re — biologically speaking — in a different planetary orbit to the heart, the lungs and the fun stuff that goes along with it. So, then, why does Patrick’s feel as though it’s choking him? He tugs at it gently, pulls it tight against his knuckle and breathes out slowly.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Oh, am I? Whatever you say, sweetie.”

And Patrick? He thinks about arguing, thinks about pointing out that Pete is the one with a terminal case of Mikey mentionitis. He wants to say that he hasn’t had a solid night’s sleep since Avery was born ten months ago and how he’s willing to trade the functional use of his penis — which is redundant anyway as they haven’t had sex in months — for one, uninterrupted eight-hour stretch of blissful unconsciousness. He would like to make it clear that he and the kids are here waiting, every night, for Pete to arrive home on time and tuck them in while Pete works late and sinks beers with his buddies.

Also, Pete last referred to him as ‘sweetie’ — unironically — at least forty pounds ago.

Instead, Patrick shrugs and watches Pete’s throat contract as he takes down another measure of the contents of his one green bottle. Then he rises to his feet, dusts off the crumbs and mutters, “Yeah, whatever. I’m going to bed. G’night.”

He doesn’t say ‘love you’, not because he doesn’t, but because he’s waiting for Pete to say it first.

Pete grunts. He shoves one hand down the front of his pants — under the zipper, over the shorts — grabs the remote with the other and and hits ‘no’.

Patrick goes to bed, alone.

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Patrick opens his mouth and then finds he has nothing at all to say. He takes a deep breath and tries again, buying time with filler.

“I have to… what?”

“Call. The. Repair. Guy,” Pete says, enunciating each word like Patrick is hard of hearing rather than out of patience. “Could you do it, you know, quickly? I need that shirt for work.”

“Pete, he says softly, because he’s the kind of asshole who wants to hand his husband an out, even in the face of obscene levels of marital misconsideration. “Do you think maybe you could call the repair guy yourself? Since you’re at home and I’m in Whole Foods?”

“Babe, I don’t have time to call the repair guy. That’s your job.”

Patrick’s patience frays, gives, snaps, his temper crashing to the floor to join the milk Harper tips
onto the tiles. It oozes out like a bloodstain, like the aisle is a murder scene which, he supposes it sort of is, the death of his marriage outlined in chalk around the puddle of one-percent splashing over his shoes.

He says, quietly, “My job? You think that’s my job?”

See, it’s not about the shirt, not really. It’s not about the diapers or the gi or the fact that Pete has never taken Noah to a single ballet lesson so that Patrick doesn’t have to schlep four kids from one side of town to another in an MPV that smells of sour milk and cheeto dust. Pete’s car smells of regular valets and clean leather. But it’s not about that either. It’s like that bit in 500 Days of Summer where Summer breaks up with Tom only Patrick can’t figure out if he’s Joseph Gordon-Levitt or Zooey Deschanel. He bites his lip and stares at the milk.

“Patrick?” says Pete, annoyed. “Are you listening to me?”

Patrick came in here for groceries. He wanted to buy milk and vegetables and complain online about supermarkets that play bad Whitesnake covers to apathetic suburban shoppers on weekday mornings. No one warned him about the possibility of ending his twelve-year, it’s-totally-okay-seriously-it’s-fine marriage in the middle of fucking Whole Foods to a soundtrack of piped eighties soft rock. Someone who is not David Coverdale is declaring ‘here I go again on my own’ so at least it’s sort of fitting.

“I want you to pack a bag and get out of my house,” Patrick says softly. He cannot begin to explain how done with everything he currently is, how this was manageable until suddenly it is so very not. How every Billboard 100 love song is entirely incorrect and love is not forever, not selfless and altruistic but agonizingly selfish. “Go to your mom’s, go to a hotel, just… go. Before I get back. I can’t do this anymore.”

There is no reply from the end of the line for a long moment. Patrick can hear his breath in the speaker like he can hear his heartbeat in his ears, taste it vibrating against the tip of his tongue. Pete says, “I — What?”

Remember how Patrick believed he was second generation Divorcé? Well, it turns out that he’s been lying to himself all along. Divorce was built into his DNA after all, twisted up and caught in a helix like an extra chromosome. It’s like he’s spent his adult life convincing himself he can’t speak Russian, then he arrives in Vnukovo, opens his mouth at passport control and says ‘Мне нечего декларировать’. The words don’t feel foreign, he knows them all, his heart shaped around the grammar and syntax as he touches a hand to Avery’s warm, soft head.

“I want a divorce.”

Just like that.

He hits the end call button and he grabs Harper out of the shopping cart and he leaves it there, half-full and it’s a metaphor for his life if ever there was one; veggies no one likes and a growing puddle of sad, one-percent milk. Avery strains in the papoose and fills her diaper — her white, pristine, reusable diaper — with organic, preservative-free baby shit.

His mouth tastes of ash and bile and the bitterness of the words he’s just articulated, the ones he’s crushed down a thousand times before. They’re sour, these words, the ones he’s mouthed silently in their dark bedroom when Pete is sleeping and Patrick is pacing the floor with one of the living, breathing humans that make up the ‘big family’ Pete said he wanted but doesn’t want to care for. The sad thing is, he means it. The sad thing is, its reached this point.
The sad thing is, Pete doesn’t call him back.
This whole thing is bound to be a tempest in a teacup; a blip; a minor hiccup; a bump on the otherwise well-surfaced road of a twelve-year marriage in which Patrick has, so far, sensibly offered his support in the pursuit of Pete’s happiness. Their marriage is, essentially, constitutional. Everyone knows you cannot fuck with the constitution.

This is what Pete thinks as he sits in the driver’s seat of his car, in the dark, watching shadows move behind the drapes of his house. He’s not outside of his house, he’s four doors down, parked at the end of the Hurleys’ driveway, listening to the metallic plinkplinkplink of the engine cooling in the bay.

“He’s never asked for a divorce before,” Pete says out loud, to no one in particular because the car is empty. Completely empty. There are no car seats, no stray teddy bears, no organic vegetable puffs ground into the upholstery by shoes approved by paediatric chiropodists as a collective and disliked by Pete’s credit card as a singular. He supposes, technically, he could be talking to the low hum of night-time talk radio but they’re debating the rise in pothole damage claims and not the state of Pete’s marriage.

(He files it away though – the potholes – as a possible filler piece to run in the Tribune in the next couple of days if nothing more interesting shows up. Chicago, this beautifully flawed, breathtakingly
captivating metropolis of politics and drug deals and art and gun crime, is bound to throw up something more satisfying. Still, nothing seems to please commuters more than bitching about potholes. It is, after all, the Great Equalizer amongst races, religions and political affiliations.)

He probably could have talked it over with someone in the bar after work where he drank beer and faked like he was interested in the waitress’s tits. But who wants to be that guy? The one who pisses on the parade of colleague camaraderie to talk about his husband pitching a bitch fit over reusable diapers? He already lies, tells them he’s ‘open to suggestions’ when it comes to his sexuality, inferring without saying it that he’s not the only lonely gay in an office where heteronormativity beats beneath the floorboards like a tell-tale heart.

He thinks about calling the talk show, just for something to do. He’s an editor, after all, they’d be thrilled to get his input and then he has an excuse to sit in the car, watching his fingers turn blue as the heaters stop heating. He reaches for his phone.

There’s a sharp knock at his window: He shrieks.

“Everything okay there, buddy?” asks Andy Hurley, chairperson of the local Neighborhood Watch and apparently someone who takes his role very seriously. He’s wearing shorts with flipflops even though the thermometer in Pete’s car says it’s thirty degrees out. “You’ve been sitting here a while.”

Pete nods, smiling and dropping the defensive stance he learnt from watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, “Oh, sure. Just… waiting.”

“Uhuh,” Andy pauses and looks back towards his own house where his wife and son are no doubt wondering why their neighbour is parked at the end of their driveway. “Is there a reason you can’t wait on your own driveway?”

“I’m not on your driveway,” Pete points out because technically, he’s not.

Andy doesn’t blink. It’s very unnerving. “Do you want to move it along?” Although it’s phrased as a question, Pete gets the feeling it’s very much an instruction. “We’re expecting guests.”

“At nine on a Tuesday?” Pete says doubtfully: Andy isn’t expecting guests, he just wants Pete to stop hanging around at the end of his driveway. Pete knows this. Pete knows that Andy knows that he knows this. “A little late, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I mean, most people are usually home by now, right? Putting their kids to bed, watching TV with their spouse?”

Spouse. Is there judgement caught in a noun? Unspoken acknowledgement that Pete is different to the other dads on the block because, in his house, there are two of them? Although he can’t technically issue ‘take my wife’ jokes, he’s always willing to give it the old college try.

“I dunno, man,” he tries gamely, the way he does with the guys from the office, “she’s in a bitch of a mood tonight – must be that time of the month, am I right? You know how it goes.”

Andy doesn’t laugh. Instead, he pats the edge of the window frame, his fingers blue-pale with cold, his breath fogging. “Go home, Pete. It’s late, Patrick’s probably wondering where you are.”

He’s probably not, Pete thinks childishy, he probably hopes I’ve driven the car off of a bridge. Andy keeps staring at him.

He always assumed he liked Andy, sharing camaraderie over barbecue tongs at neighborhood cookouts. Manly men in their polo shirts and chino shorts, kings of all laid out before them in the
shape of the women — and Patrick — corralling the kids into games of touch football. Now, he’s not so sure. He shifts the car into drive, Andy steps back politely and, without another word, he rolls forward and towards the house. Patrick’s minivan squats on the driveway, sad and unwashed. Pete’s Audi is sleek, clean. Is it really beyond Patrick to toss a bucket of water over his car once in a while?

Pete gathers his laptop case, his phone and his keys, he takes his coat from passenger seat and runs his fingers through his hair. Then, he crosses the front lawn, up the steps to the porch and considers his reflection in the window by the front door.

“He doesn’t want a divorce,” he says, under his breath, juggling his keys from his pocket.

When he says it out loud it sounds ludicrous that he believed it at all. Patrick is allergic to the word, he itches uncomfortably on the couch if someone says it on TV. There is, he’s sure, not a single divorce lawyer in the Chicagoland area who has cited ‘gray diapers’ in the petition before a judge. This is something that can be solved with a shoulder rub and the well-timed offer of a post-shower blowjob. By this time tomorrow, Patrick will remember that it’s super unlikely he’s going to do any better than Pete.

Not without a gym membership.

Pete opens the door and hopes the gum he chewed on the drive home will be enough to hide the microbrew he drank at the bar. “Honey,” he calls out, full of cheery bonhomie and with his face arranged into his best fuck-me smile. “I’m home.”

There’s a bag in the hallway. His overnighter, the one he takes on business trips out of the city. It’s full. It is very hard to fully compute the ramifications of this with his hands full but it would seem that Patrick may not be immediately receptive to the suggestion of mutual oral sex.

From the floor, pulling the zipper home, Patrick looks up. He looks pale and so very, very tired.

“No,” he says quietly. “You’re not.”

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Pete has a black Samsonite overnight bag that he takes with him on business trips out of the city. He takes a lot of them; Patrick’s never really counted them up but like, yeah, it’s a lot.

There’s a pocket in the bag, hidden away inside and no doubt designed to stow passports and tickets. Pete keeps a three pack of Trojans in there alongside a couple of travel sachets of lube. Patrick knows this because he found them six months ago, searching for Pete’s missing driving licence. The expiration date never changes and the seal is never broken on the pack but they stay there, reminding him, rendering it perfectly clear that, at some point, Pete stood in CVS and thought about fucking someone else with enough clarity that he wanted to be prepared, like an adulterous fucking Boy Scout.

The past six months have been a terrifying, white-knuckle drop every time Patrick checked the pocket.

Today he realizes the depths to which their marriage has sunk. Just like the Titanic he needs a deep-sea exploration vehicle and a James Cameron movie to attempt a resurrection. Patrick pours a glass of wine and puts a record on the turntable, the room is filled with Bowie’s voice just like Pete’s overnight bag is filled with shirts, underwear, his phone charger and condoms he’ll use someday on someone who isn’t his husband.

It is with cinematic timing that Pete’s key slides home as Patrick zips the bag closed. He doesn’t look
at Patrick as he comes inside, kicks off his shoes and abandons them in the center of the hallway alongside his laptop bag, drops his coat over the stairs instead of hanging it in the closet, tosses his keys across the kitchen table where he will claim in the morning that woodsprites have spirited them from the hook by the front door. Patrick’s pulse gallops in his temples, his throat, a kickdrum against his lungs.

“Honey, I’m home,” Pete declares, like he’s Robert Reed and Patrick is Florence Henderson. God knows, they’re close to having enough children to stage a Brady Bunch resurrection but this is not the time.

“No,” says Patrick. “You’re not.”

Pete looks at him and the look is not a happy one. His mouth opens like he has something to say, syllables and sentences he can spin like card tricks to make everything okay again. Instead, he snaps his mouth closed, changes direction and heads to the kitchen. He opens the fridge, he cracks a beer.

“Should you be drinking that?” Patrick asks. He doesn’t move the shoes or the coat because they both know Pete will need them again imminently. “When you have to drive, I mean.”

“Babe,” says Pete. Babe, like they’re a partnership. Babe, like this is still college and Patrick is still young and stupid and malleable as bubblegum.

“Babe?”

“Babe, what’s this about? Come on.” He pats the Pier 1 barstool that Patrick bought when they moved out to Glenview from Roscoe right before Noah was born. “Talk to me, who upset you?”

You, Patrick thinks hysterically because isn’t this the classic definition of deflection? Who really made him mad? It must have been someone on the PTA, the kids, the asshole in the Acura who cut him up in the drive thru line at Starbucks. It is never, could never, be the fault of Pete Wentz.

(Just Wentz. Because he didn’t want to hyphenate his name, something to do with his byline and established presence in the journalistic community, and Patrick is realizing, for the first time, how much he resents that.)

He sits down carefully, takes his glass deliberately, and takes a long sip. Then he says, “We need to talk.”

Pete’s eyes shift with the passing headlights of a car outside. He clearly knows but he’s not going to admit it yet. There’s a difference between ‘need’ and ‘want’ and want is the boyfriend who wants to rip your fucking underwear with his teeth because it’ll get his mouth closer, faster to the aching throb of the cock that’s wanted him all day. ‘Need’ is the soon to be ex husband drinking Merlot and shaping his mouth around words he needs to say.

“Is this about the washing machine?” Pete asks, unwilling to let Patrick have this moment even now, as the death march sounds for their marriage with the low hum of the dishwasher. “Because, honestly? I know you overreacted but, like, you don’t need to apologize or anything, just—”

“I don’t need to apologize?” Patrick repeats. He enunciates each syllable, rolls them around his mouth like white hot marbles and lets them fall onto the countertop between them. “I don’t need to apologize? To you?”

Pete nods. “That’s right.” He spreads his hands, magnanimous, granting absolution with a smile. “I forgive you.”
When Patrick laughs, it sounds hysterical. One thing that must be made entirely clear is this: Patrick does not want to end his marriage. Patrick loves his husband with deep and enduring familiarity, he knows the shape of Pete in the bed next to him, the feel of his hands, his voice, his ice-cold feet tucked to the back of Patrick’s calves in the winter. Their puzzle isn’t satisfying, it’s made of frayed edges with pieces missing but the picture is — to Patrick at least — still visible. His voice is rising as they teeter on this broken bone, jagged, scarring edge of their fucked marriage and Pete — he has the opportunity to apply the cast. This is Patrick presenting him with a one-night-only kick at the can to, for once, do the right thing, say the right thing and try to fix their marriage. Pete looks at him and it is painfully clear he doesn’t understand.

“It’s a couple of diapers,” Pete says airily, worrying his thumbnail under the label of his beer bottle. He shreds it away, brushes the pieces onto the floor with the effortless lack of care of a man who knows someone else will clean it up. “Just buy some more, Jesus Christ, does it matter?”

The molten core of Patrick’s fury breaks the surface. “Yes it fucking matters! You don’t get it, do you?”

“What’s to get? So a few diapers aren’t as white as they were — who the fuck cares?”

“I care, why can’t you just respect that these things are important to me?” Patrick, honestly, doesn’t feel like he’s asking for too much. “I just want to feel like you get it, like you don’t think everything that isn’t your career is my job.”

It’s so hard to put it into words, to explain the way every tiny decision about the kids exhausts him until he has no capacity at all to think about anything else. How their bedtime finds him huddled over the sink in the kitchen, scooping their leftovers into his mouth as he stares at his reflection in the window like he’s looking into the opposite of a magic mirror.

*Mirror, mirror in the glass, who has got the fattest ass?*

This is supposed to be the part where Pete grabs the good husband playbook, where he leafs through frantically to the page about reassurance and split duties and making things equal between the two of them. Patrick does not want him to fail.

Pete stares at him blankly, demonstrating that he doesn’t get it at all. “I — Are you on your period or something?”

That Patrick refrains from upending the beer over Pete’s head is his final love song for the relationship breathing its last on the granite between them. He takes off his wedding ring and places it down between the fruit bowl brimmed with the out-of-season, photo-ready components of tomorrow’s fresh fruit snack options blog post and the green glass of Pete’s IPA. His heart hurts, his pulse pounding down into the roots of his teeth, his tongue tingling as he raises his fingertip and leaves the neat gold band between them.

“You do not get to keep belittling my feelings like this,” he says, and his voice is flat like Lake Michigan and his hands itch as he pulls them back into his lap, his finger bare for the first time in over a decade. “You do not get to keep telling me I’m less than you. Even if you don’t respect me as your husband, I’m the father of our children—”

“Of one of the children,” Pete points out. His ire is rising now, fire in his eyes as he shoves the wedding ring back across the counter towards Patrick.

“Of all of our fucking children,” Patrick roars, because they are all his children, regardless of who masturbated into a cup at the fertility clinic. Penny creeps from under the kitchen table and slinks into
the living room. “God, why do you do this? What the hell do you get out of seeing me like this? I’m not a free daycare worker, housekeeper and occasional provider of orgasms—”

“Very occasional.”

“Fuck you,” Patrick says, furious now but in a quiet way, his cheek aching where he’s gripped it between his molars to prevent him from saying something he’ll regret. “You don’t even want a husband, do you? You want a vacuum cleaner with a blowjob attachment.”

“I mean,” says Pete, asinine, grinning like all of this is hilarious. “Like — technically speaking — I think they already have one of those.”

They fall silent. The dishwasher hums on, oblivious. Patrick wonders if there’s enough water in there to drown himself, to excuse him from the excruciating, drawn-out burbling of blood in the throat of whatever it was they’ve had between them for the past few years. He sincerely doubts at this moment that Pete loves him anymore than he loves the dishwasher. They both provide a service that Pete doesn’t have to think about, that he benefits from but doesn’t appreciate because he’s not currently elbow-deep in soap suds at the sink. Or — you know — something like that.

“I’m telling you that our marriage is over,” Patrick says sadly, and he runs the tip of his finger around the rim of his wedding ring. “Doesn’t that make you feel… I don’t know, something? I feel like you should care.”

Pete, very deliberately, moves his beer bottle to the side. He stands and runs his fingers through his hair and he stretches languidly and then he says, “I’ll tell you what. You can sleep in the spare room tonight, get whatever this is out of your system. Then, in the morning, we’ll say no more about it. How does that sound?”

Patrick doesn’t think about how that sounds at all. This is because Patrick is on his feet, looming into Pete’s personal space as he braces against the countertop he shopped for, picked out and had fitted while Pete went and got wasted with his soccer buddies or did drinks after work or whatever the excuse was at the time. “It sounds like you don’t get it. Pete, listen to me: I do not want to be married to you anymore. I don’t know how to make that any clearer, I can’t keep living like this.”

“Living like what?” Pete swings an arm to encompass the room, the house, the kids upstairs. “Sitting on your ass all day watching Netflix and spending my salary? Sounds like a pretty fucking sweet deal to me. Hey, you want to pull a switch? You can go bust your balls every day at the office and I’ll stay here and babysit the damn kids.”

“It’s not babysitting, it’s parenting, asshole,” Patrick says, his voice increasing in volume as his hold on his temper slips away, “and I’d love to see you try! They don’t even know you! Avery barely recognizes you!”

Now Pete is shouting too, “I’m their goddamn father, of course they know me—”

“You contributed your DNA and called it quits, that doesn’t fucking count.”

“Yeah well, at least now they have a shot at making something of themselves. Imagine if you were their biological father. Poor fucking Avery, she doesn’t stand a chance!”

The air is sucked from the room. In the vacuum left behind, Patrick stares at Pete and Pete stares at the beer bottle on the counter. He is very red, flushed across his cheekbones as he tears, savage, into his bottom lip with his teeth. Patrick scrambles for something to say. Anything. This is a Pandora’s box he had no real intention of opening. He wanted Pete to apologize, to swear he’d do better and —
for once — to try. Instead, Pete refuses to look at him and that hurts just as much as the heat-seeking missile of an insult he just hurled into the center of their marriage.

There’s no fight left in Patrick, he is limp with ill-feeling, every scrap of stuffing knocked from him and left scattered across the bespoke kitchen floor. He covers his eyes with his hands and says, quietly, “Get the fuck out of my house, you selfish, spiteful, egocentric prick.”

Beneath his ribs, Patrick’s lungs and heart feel too big, slapping against bone and tissue as he digs his nails into the bridge of his nose. The world is expanding around him at a speed that suggests something has gone horribly wrong with the Hadron Collider. Patrick would like time to stop. Just for a moment, just enough to catch his breath.

For once, Pete doesn’t argue.

Fun fact: in the corner of the den, there is a guitar. It is, on the scale by which these things are recorded, a very nice guitar, liberated from his dad’s extensive collection before Patrick went to college. He restored it, rebuilt it, made it perfect in every possible way, and then he played it constantly. He wrote Caitlyn and Noah lullabies on that guitar, played dumb 80s power ballads to make Pete smile. There was a point in his life where his fingertips buzzed like a broken record unless they were pressed to the strings, like his heart required the hum of the music to keep rhythm.

He hasn’t touched the guitar in three years. Twice, he’s written out an eBay listing. He always pauses before he hits post because he knows, if he sells the guitar or stuffs it in a closet or climbs up into the attic and stores it carefully amongst their suitcases, he will never play guitar again. This is, he thinks, the best analogy for their marriage.

Patrick is not willing to spend however many years stretch out in front of them in a jail sentence, caught in a spiderweb of apathetic dislike, where he communicates with his husband via the medium of double-edged insults and irritated sighs. He can’t live his life in 20mg doses of fluoxetine. Pete’s Samsonite scrapes against the wall in the hallway, his shoes scuffing on the hardwood.

The house falls silent as Pete reaches the front door. Patrick looks up, because he’s stupid, and watches his (soon-to-be-ex-) husband reach for the handle.

“I didn’t want this,” Patrick croaks, his throat stinging and his eyes wetter than he’d like them to be. “Don’t you get that? This isn’t how I wanted it to turn out.”

Pete shrugs. He opens the door, steps through it and slams it, hard, behind him. He doesn’t say anything and he doesn’t look back and, somehow, that hurts more than an insult.

The Audi hums to life on the driveway, the headlights picking out shadows on the ceiling in the hallway as Pete reverses — aggressively, with grand and reckless fury — and then accelerates away down the street. Patrick would like to wake up from this nightmare, or else fall asleep and dream something sweeter. If there’s a convenient hole sited somewhere in the family room downstairs that Pete commandeered and turned into a man cave, then Patrick would like to know about it. And then he’ll climb inside of it and stay there until his chest stops hurting.

He moves from the kitchen to the hallway, his hand brushing over the wall. If he feels it cool and solid under his hand, then everything will be okay. He blinks and his cheeks feels hot and damp and why the fuck didn’t Pete fight? Patrick sobs, an unbidden and inelegant sound that hurts his throat.

From the top of the stairs, something scuffles. He swallows the hot rock lodged in his throat and
attempts to sound normal. “Caitlyn? Noah?” No one answers. “Come on, guys, I can see you up there.”

The kids slip out from the shadows. They are so like Pete; big eyes, big mouths, big, dark curls framing their ludicrously photogenic faces. Noah will, like, probably grow into the ears at some point. It’s cool. They stare at him, half guilty, half miserable, mouths turned down like the poster children for parental guilt.

“How much did you hear?” he asks and he is fucking bone weary, so tired of being the one to scoop up the pieces each time Pete fucks them over.

“Like, pretty much all of it,” says Caitlyn. She looks so young, so small in her Captain Marvel pajamas. She hugs her skinny knees and presses her cheek against the banister. “I don’t like it when you guys fight.”

“I’m never coming back?” Noah asks, his dark eyes huge and anxious. “He said you’re — we’re not your kids.”

“He means because they used a surrogate, idiot,” Caitlyn snaps, like she’s a leading expert in the field of fertility procedures and not an eleven-year-old child who received an age appropriate explanation about the various ways gay couples can conjure up a family less than a year ago. “And they fight all the time, you’re just too clueless to realize.”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Daddy, she says I’m too clueless to know you and dad are getting divorced!”

“No one is getting divorced!” He doesn’t mean to raise his voice and God knows he can be forgiven for the lie but they flinch and his stomach lurches hard to the left. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout.”

It’s 9:30 at night. Patrick doesn’t want to have this conversation right now. What Patrick would like is to fall into his bed and sleep until all of this drifts away into smoke and inconsequential nothingness. He wipes his face with both palms and takes a deep breath.

“Hey, come on.” Patrick climbs the stairs towards them. “Keep it down, you’re going to wake the babies and you know the rule.”

They chorus, together, “You wake ’em, you take ’em.”

“That’s right, come on, back to bed. It’s way too late for this nonsense from the two of you.”

He meets them at the top of the stairs. He wraps his arms around them and breathes in their scent. They lean right back into him, entirely trusting. They fill him up until he’s not quite as hollow as he was before and he pulls back and smiles and it almost feels natural.

“Daddy,” Caitlyn says, her lip wobbling; Patrick’s heart attempts to base jump into his shoes and he wonders; how can he love something so completely when it has the power to crush him entirely, “are you really getting divorced?”

“Sweetie,” he murmurs and he has to be strong and he doesn’t want to, he wants to cry until his throat bleeds and, right now, he hates Pete for doing this to him, “I don’t know what’s going to happen but the important thing is I love you, and your dad, well, he loves you too, and nothing on earth is going to change that, do you understand?”
She nods and Noah scuffs his toe against the rug. “I don’t want you to be sad.”

“I’m not sad.” He absolutely is, but he will rip out his own guts before he says that out loud in front of them. They look unconvinced. “I’m not! Don’t look at me like that, you don’t know when I’m sad.”

“It’s okay to be sad, daddy,” Caitlyn says and she pats his arm gently. He is both an excellent parent for instilling such a well-developed sense of empathy and a terrible one for causing her to use it on him.

“What?” he says. “Do you both want to come in with me tonight?”

They nod, eager, and tumble into his and Pete’s room — no, just his room. He bids farewell to the idea of sleeping without an ass in his face or a foot in his mouth and decides, in the cosmic balance of things, that he doesn’t care at all.

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He checks his phone at 11. He checks it again at 12, at 12:15, at 12:17 and 12:23.

Pete doesn’t text him and Patrick supposes he ought to be okay with that. By 1:03 he is furious, and not just about Noah’s toes jabbing him in the chin every time he moves. Noah moves frequently, so this happens every minute or so. He drafts a text and deletes it a dozen different times. He imagines Pete with Mikey-he’s-never-met, using condoms from the overnight bag and wishes he’d removed the lube. He bets Mikey doesn’t eat Ben and Jerry’s by the pint in front of endless reruns of Gilmore Girls. God, Patrick’s a heart attack away from getting a flavor named after him. Tubby hubby: vanilla ice cream swirled with disinterest and sprinkled with chunks of chocolatey loneliness. No wonder his husband can’t stand him.

He falls asleep at some point.

He doesn’t dream.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, comments and kudos are always appreciated :D

You can also find me on Tumblr here!

See you next week? Same time, same place, same channel!
You guys are all so awesome, honestly, I appreciate every single person who takes the time to read this. But, can I just say, my heart is breaking for the people who've said this resonates with them, either because they've been in Patrick's position, or the same position as the kids. Shitty relationships are like a nuclear blast; they burn up everything around them and they don't care if the people they hurt are innocent.

You'll all be okay in the end, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pete is not having a great day.

Actually, Pete is not having a great week. He blames Patrick; inwardly, outwardly and loudly to anyone who will take the time to listen. Sadly for Pete, this is mostly his mom whose sympathy quickly gave way to apathy and then hostility in an unfairly short length of time.

It went something like this:

“He kicked you out?” she asked, over cups of hot tea and homemade cookies in the kitchen of his childhood home. She sounded shocked, sympathetic, exactly how a mother is supposed to sound when her child arrives home with a Samsonite at 10 at night. “What on earth happened?”

Pete spent the drive from Glenview to Wilmette figuring this out and the conclusion he drew was this: Joseph Trohman was the kryptonite to his marriage, the Daniel Cleaver to his Mark Darcy, a cuckoo’s egg in his marital nest. “He’s cheating on me with one of his dad friends.”

He said it like Patrick has more than one.

His mom looked gratifyingly horrified: “Patrick? Is cheating on you? How do you know?”

“Well, I don’t know know, you know?” She raised her eyebrows like she did not. “I have a strong gut instinct.”

“A gut instinct? Didn’t your father and I spend many tens of thousands of dollars on a degree in investigative journalism? This sounds like the opposite of that.”

“English, ma. I majored in English.” He waved his hand then grabbed a cookie and bit into it, spraying crumbs when he spoke. “I’m calling it journalistic intuition. When am I ever wrong?”

She looked doubtful, like she might be compiling a list. She also swept the crumbs back onto the plate pointedly. “Um… So, has he been going out a lot?”

“Not exactly.”

“Leaving you with the kids?”

“No, it’s sort of like—”
“Not coming home at night?”

“What? No. He’s always home.” Like a loser. “He’s a hermit.”

“So, when is he finding the time to have an affair?”

Pete paused: it was a good point. He stammered, “Well. He has like, all day while I’m at work,” she looked as though she might be about to point out the absence of the presence of opportunity, given the absence of the presence of babysitters, so he rushed on, “And he has basically all night.”

She raised an eyebrow. It was not an encouraging gesture. “And where are you? At night?”

“Out,” he muttered at his mug. What was this? The Jamaican Inquisition? He was distantly thankful she had neither his aunts, nor his grandmother in support. “With friends. Or working! Sometimes... I’m working.”

Usually, he knew, he wasn’t working.

“I see,” she said, and she made her lips very thin and she snatched away the cookies and she withdrew her hand from the back of his. “Well, you know where the spare sheets are. Goodnight.”

And then, she went to bed. So much for maternal instincts. That was six days ago and she’s barely spoken to him since unless it’s to bark at him about forgetting to put his trash into the recycling or leaving his shoes in the hallway.

A medicine ball hits him in the chest with enough force to knock the maudlin from him. Along with the air in his lungs, which spasm, winded, as he scowls at Gabe. What the fuck, he wants to say, but can’t, because he can’t fucking breathe. He raises his middle finger instead.

“Pay attention,” says Gabe. “Or I’ll do it again.”

Gabe is Pete’s favorite friend. Pete has a favorite friend in the same way that he has a favorite way to be kicked in the balls, that is to say Gabe is the best of a very bad set of options, but he’s tenacious and Pete hasn’t been able to shake him off since freshman year of college. Gabe owns a gym (like he’s owned a coffee shop, a bar and, unforgettably, a sex shop) the kind of gym with no real equipment and bare brick walls and monthly membership fees that run into triple figures. He’s being paid to train Pete and, apparently, he takes this role extremely seriously, unlike literally every other thing he’s done in his life.

There’s probably a reason Pete keeps him around. He can’t think of that reason right now.

The ball hits him in the face this time and Gabe repeats, “Pete! Pay attention.”

“Fuck you!” Pete wheezes, braced over on his knees. He is unsurprised, but still pissed off, when the ball hits him a third time, this time under the chin. “I swear to God, Gabriel, I will shove that thing up your ass if you don’t knock it off. You know I’m not kidding, I’ve got extensive prior experience in shoving things up asses, just try me.”

There is a growing tension knot the size of Pangea between Pete’s shoulders, at direct odds with his diminishing reserve of patience and goodwill for his fellow man. This is because Pete spent last night on the back seat of his car. Not because of fun, below the belt reasons like in college, but because he went to a bar and got wasted and his mom locked the door at 10:30 and then refused to open it. With his keys in his pocket and the Audi on the driveway — not to mention the neighbors watching him from behind twitching curtains — he had very little in the way of alternative temporary housing options aside from digging out a shelter under the porch and now his spine hates him. He is,
evidently, far too old to sleep in a car.

A nagging voice at the back of his head points out that Patrick never locked him out.

“So,” says Gabe, putting the ball back onto the rack and tossing Pete his towel, “would it be fair to say you’re not really in the mood for a round of burpees?”

“I’ll kill you. No one will find the body. I won’t feel remorse.”

“I would pay actual cash money to see you try,” Gabe says. “But for now, you can pay actual cash money to buy me a beer.”

“I like this idea,” says Pete, whose liver protests strongly as he grabs his kit bag. It’s joined swiftly by his stomach, his spine and his throbbing, sleep-sore brain. “I like it a lot.”

They reconvene at the Irish bar they’ve been drinking in since college. It’s familiar in that the decor hasn’t changed in two decades and neither has the clientele. Pete is sure the dust clinging to the ceilings was probably part of the original lease. Gabe raises his beer and clinks it against Pete’s.

“Here’s to heart attacks in your forties because you refuse to work out in your thirties, but also refuse to stop drinking.”

“I’m a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a burgeoning alcohol problem,” says Pete, knocking back half his beer in one long swallow. He elects not to point out the ten mile run Gabe dragged him on two days ago, or the crossfit set they did the day before. “Jesus fucking Christ, what a week.”

“Is there a reason,” Gabe begins, leaning back against the bar and assessing Pete carefully, “that there’s a big old ‘I literally lifted this shirt out of the packaging in the bathroom’ crease across your stomach, chest and arms right now?”

“That would be because I literally lifted this shirt out of the packaging in the bathroom at work this morning,” Pete confirms. “I’m really living the young, single lifestyle. My shirts all stink, no one is sucking my dick and my mom locks me out of the house if I’m not home by curfew.”

His life is a mess, his room is a mess, his car is a mess and his mom refuses to wash his shirts for him unless he places them into the hamper. This became apparent this morning when he discovered them, in a wrinkled, sauce-and-sweat-stained pile at the side of his bed and was forced to take an early morning detour to TJMaxx for a replacement on his way into the office. He’s wistful for Patrick, who sought them out like a shirt-seeking missile and returned them, pressed and smelling of fabric softener, to his side of the closet without complaint.

Gabe doesn’t look sympathetic. “I’m not sympathetic,” he says, Pete feigns surprise. “Honestly, you should just go home, idiot. You’ve been with Patrick for forever—”

“Don’t I know it,” he mutters into his beer.

“You guys have, like kids and stuff. Actual tiny people, even tinier than you.”

“So do you,” Pete snaps. “Don’t judge me, plenty of dads go way longer without seeing their children. Like, forces dads and dads who work away from home. The kids turn out fine.”

Gabe’s lifts his eyebrows as Pete’s stomach drops; this is an unpleasant demonstration of Newton’s third law. “You haven’t seen your kids?”

Pete shakes his head and takes down the rest of his beer. He hasn’t seen the kids because Patrick
hasn’t asked him to see the kids. At this point, it feels like a battle in a war that he’s still not sure will turn into a treaty called divorce and he doesn’t want to concede an inch. Honestly, he’s hoping the divorce thing won’t happen. His dad keeps informing him — cheerfully and with alarming frequency — that divorces are expensive.

He also keeps asking, in this weirdly ominous tone, if Patrick has a lawyer yet. Pete has resolved to keep Patrick away from his misery-mongering, matrimonial attorney father in law for as long as possible.

“He hasn’t asked!” Pete objects, because Gabe is looking at him like he just announced he enjoys kicking puppies as a hobby. “Isn’t he — Shouldn’t he ask for my help?”

“You want him to ask you to spend time with your children? Huh. Interesting.”

When Gabe phrases it like that, with that judgemental inflection and quirk of an eyebrow, it’s possible to make anything sound half a step away from international terrorism.

Pete says, defensively, “I just think my help should be appreciated, you know? I put a lot into my marriage, I’m the reason we have the house, why he gets to sit on his not-insubstantial ass all day and do nothing constructive. Would it kill him to say thank you once in a while?”

They drink in silence. Pete’s not sure if he should be pissed off that Gabe doesn’t seem more on his side, or concerned that no one, so far, has confirmed he’s absolutely right about this. He signals for a second beer and checks his watch: he’s going to have to get a cab back from the station in Wilmette and he’s going to have to hurry if he doesn’t want to get locked out.

“When I was twelve, I kinda thought being an adult would be pretty awesome. Now I’m there, and somehow, I have the mortgage and the curfew. It’s like I got all of the crappy parts of both sides of the deal — horrendous financial responsibility and no actual freedom. Plus, I haven’t had sex in like — months. Many, many months. A depressing number of months.”

“Are you, you know, propositioning me?” Gabe asks, as though he’s in some way opposed to dealing with dick. “Because Will and I are very happy, and like, he might be open to a threesome but probably not without written notice. And definitely not before the kids are asleep.”

Pete expresses his distaste for hearing about Gabe’s handsome, successful, accommodating husband by slamming his head into the bar until his ears ring. “Fuck my life.”

“Look, do you want him back?” asks Gabe.

This gives Pete a moment of pause: Does he want him back? He supposes he wants Patrick back in the way he wants his car back when it goes in for a service. That is, he’s familiar with his car and the loaner is never quite as good as his own, doesn’t have all of the upgrades, the seats are in the wrong position and the radio is always set to a country station. Plus, it rarely comes with rear parking cameras. He misses his creature comforts, is what he’s trying to say. Setting up the entertainment system on a new model sounds like a lot of work, if he may be permitted to continue making car references. He nods.

“Oh, okay,” Gabe pauses in a way that could be dramatic or could be because he doesn’t know what he’s going to say next, “okay, here’s the thing. You need to make a gesture and it needs to be like — huge.”

“Huge,” Pete repeats, nodding, because right now he’ll do anything to sleep in a bed with a pocket sprung mattress and not the rocks-wrapped-in-straw his parents purchased for him in his teens. Gabe
nods, but doesn’t say anything else. It’s clear he thinks his work here is done. “Uh... Such as?”

“Oh,” Gabe gestures vaguely at the wall, “I don’t know. I kind of thought you’d have that part covered.”

They both stare down at their drinks like bottles of Goose served by hipsters in matching scruffy beards and man buns — a look Pete refuses to judge as he’s currently sporting both — can be read like Romany tea leaves. The beer stares back morosely. Pete has honestly no idea what he can do to coax Patrick back. He’s already provided the income, the house, the good-looking children (well, three out of four ain’t bad and Avery will probably be fine when she shapeshifts from an amorphous, red-headed blob into an actual human), he’s handsome and he has, not to brag, a pretty good body for a dude his age. Patrick should be counting his blessings, not tossing him out with nothing but a handful of shirts and his gym kit.

“God,” he says, “this fucking sucks ass.”

“You would know,” says Gabe goodnaturedly, bringing their shoulders together.

“So would you.”

They have been friends for over two decades now. Their friendship has hit adulthood disgracefully, is old enough to be halfway through a college degree and, in just a few months, it will be legally old enough to drink, vote and hire a car. This means that Gabe knows him better than almost anyone else in the tri-state area. He motions for the bartender and orders shots. “I think we should get wasted.”

“I have a curfew,” Pete sighs. This is the most depressing thing that a man who will turn forty on his next birthday can say out loud in an establishment licenced to serve intoxicating liquor.

Gabe slides the shot into his hand and sing-songs, “Not at my place.”

Pete grins and knocks back the tequila, wincing at the burn. “Well,” he says, already slurring. “Why didn’t you fucking say so? Barkeep? Line ’em up!”

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Pete met Patrick in the library of Northwestern, a golden-haired kid hunched over music theory textbooks like they actually meant something. That Patrick ignored him — Him! Dirty-glorious, dressed in eyeliner and girls jeans! — only made him more desirable. It took three weeks of staking out his study spots, his band practice, his bleary-eyed shuffle to the cafeteria every morning to collect his university-mandated slices of regulation wholemeal toast and individual pats of pre-wrapped spread.

Twenty-one days, but Patrick broke, huffing gruffly into his hands, “The fuck do you want, asshole? The toast is over there.”

He smelt so impossibly of boy, on his breath, his skin, clinging to the sweaty curls of hair behind his ears and at the nape of his neck. Pete fell in love so easily, so utterly and completely and so breathtakingly quickly. He touched the back of Patrick’s arm lightly.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked and it was still semi-cautious. Because Pete had been burnt before. He’d felt a fist or a headbutt from some overzealous, homophobic dudebro more than once. If this went south, he already had a half-baked suggestion about starting a band but Patrick, with his breath fresh with toothpaste and gold as fucking sunshine, huffed a laugh.

“I’m pretending it’s not, but that’s because you’re like… a solid nine. Nine and a half. I kind of don’t
want to look like a dumbass, here.”

And Pete? He laughed and said, “That’s pretty cold, coming from a ten. You busy tonight?”

Patrick cut his toast in half, pushed a share onto Pete’s empty plate and sat back, “Sounds like I am now.”

Pete fell. He kept falling and waiting and holding his breath because falling in love like this, this completely, this utterly, was like plunging to the bottom of the Mariana Trench. At some point, he had to suffocate, to be torn apart by the sheer weight of it, he had to drag Patrick down with him. Stars are swallowed by black holes. Pete took gold and turned it to trash with the kind of regularity and casual flair that would amaze most alchemists, even if they didn’t understand it. It turned out, though, that Patrick was some kind wizard himself, able to share his starlight as easily as he shared his toast, his humor, his satin smooth laugh.

Of course, Pete married him. That’s what you do when you catch a butterfly so rare, you choke it up with formaldehyde and you pin it to a corkboard and you hide it away, somewhere only you know. Pete drove in every pin himself, framed Patrick up on the wall and admired him every single day.

Until he stopped. Until the butterfly in the box case was no longer exotic and beautiful and rare and was just a thing on the wall, part of the landscape of Pete’s domesticity, held in place by pins the same shape as the kids they shared. Until Pete stopped admiring, stopped being amazed, stopped caring.

Pete touched the bottom of the ocean and then, quietly, he drowned them both.

***

Patrick wakes at two in the morning to the sound of his phone ringing.

He, in order, slams open his eyes, lunges for his phone, slips and then falls out of bed, the phone skidding away from him and joining the assorted detritus of missing socks and charger cables cluttering the underside of his bed. “Shit,” he hisses, fumbling blindly as the phone vibrates against the hardwood. There are no good reasons for phone calls at two in the morning. Someone is obviously dead and Patrick is mentally cataloging his elderly relatives and trying to weigh up who he’d miss the least. Please not Gam Gam. The phone goes silent. Unlike Avery, who begins to wail in her crib. “Shit, shit, shitt! Pete, could you—”

He bites that off. Pete isn’t there and, realistically, wouldn’t help even if he was. Instead of doing the thing he’s been doing sporadically for the past week or so and staring contemplatively at the wall whilst imagining their last conversation and replacing all of the things he actually said with things that are far more witty and cutting, he stretches a little farther and grasps the edge of the phone. “Daddy’s coming,” he assures Avery, struggling to his feet and slipping on his glasses. “Just — Give me a second, sweetie, I think Gam Gam might be dead.”

Avery looks as though this bothers her very little as she pulls herself to her feet against the railings and glares at him, chewing on her fist. The phone flashes with a missed call notification — Pete — Patrick’s blood pressure dips in relief, then rockets once more in fury. Is it possible to get whiplash of the vascular system?

He shoves the phone into the pocket of his pajama pants and turns his attention to Avery. “Alright, well. Shall we get you back to sleep?” She looks at him and babbles a long, intellectual-sounding stream of nonsense. He assumes this means ‘no’. “Not tired, huh? Daddy is tired. Daddy is so, so —
Goddammit, Peter.”

The phone is ringing once more and, although he would love to ignore it, to shut it onto silent and, like, toss it out of the window or something, there’s a possibility that something serious has happened. Patrick might be angry, he might be Googling divorce lawyers fifteen times a day, he might be giving himself Erin Brockovich pep talks on the regular but he doesn’t want to be the guy who ignores the phone when his husband’s in the hospital. If nothing else, he’s pretty sure he still has the legal right to switch off the life support machine.

(This is a joke. Sort of. It’s mostly a joke.)

With the phone jammed against his shoulder, he scoops up Avery and barks into the receiver, “What do you want, Pete? It’s two in the morning.” He censors the expletives he wants to add: Little pitchers have big ears.

“Patrick?” says Pete, slurring softly, clearly drunk. “’S’at you?”

“No, it’s your other husband who kicked you out a week ago and is currently dealing with four kids who want to know where the hell you are.”

“Currently?”

“Not currently currently because, as we just discussed, it’s two in the morning. Generally. I am generally dealing with the kids who want to know where you are.”

Pete laughs and sounds utterly, blissfully relaxed. There are two or three plump, angry-looking veins in Patrick’s temple that seem on the verge of rupture. Pete says, “You’re cute when you’re mad.”

Patrick wants to point out that, because he generally has four children to take care of, he has spent the past six days allotting himself thirty minute slots in which to cry. His new schedule involves putting the kids to bed, washing the dishes (as this gives him sufficient time to be sure they’ve gone to sleep and won’t overhear him) and then sobbing until his throat hurts through one (1) episode of Modern Family. He grants himself a half hour because, he knows, if he were to indulge himself in the kind of emotional outpouring of which he wants to partake, he probably wouldn’t stop. He suspects Pete wouldn’t care.

“I am neither cute, nor mad,” Patrick informs him and, collapsing onto the bed, he covers Avery’s ears. “I am, in fact, fucking furious with you. Where the fuck have you been? Before you answer, I want to make it very clear that the only acceptable excuse is that you’ve just this second woken up from a coma because that would explain the slurring and the absence. Otherwise I’m going to assume alcohol and apathy.”

What he means is, I assume you’ve been fucking someone else.

There is a very long pause at the end of the line, Pete’s breath huffing beatifically. Patrick has every intention of hanging up and then Pete declares, “I can’t confirm or deny that.”

“Of course.” Patrick collapses back into the pillows then immediately lurches upright and snags Avery by the butt of her sleepsuit to stop her plummeting headfirst over the side of the bed. When Pete doesn’t say anything, he snaps, “What do you want?”

“Well…” Pete trails off and appears to give this deep thought. Patrick’s patience dwindles. “I want to babysit.”

Patrick stares at Avery. She, says, very softly, “Eeeba,” and blows a bubble of spit from her red,
shiny mouth.

“I’m sorry, you want to what now?” asks Patrick. There’s anger in his belly, rising up like a hot air balloon. One of those dangerous ones that are about to crash and send a dozen middle-aged Midwestern couples celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary plummeting to their deaths. “It sounded like you said babysit when you actually mean parenting. I’m willing to give you an out and pretend you’re still drunk and you just said ‘rabies shit’. You want to rabies shit.”

“That,” Pete says, sounding a lot more sober than he did two minutes ago, “doesn’t make sense. And I think the words you’re looking for are thank you.”

They both fall silent. Pete’s holds the kind of self-righteous indignation reserved for the mortally offended. He’s like a Justin Bieber song transposed into a phone call: whiny, self-absorbed, confused about the basic principles of moral obligation. Patrick’s is sort of sweaty and hot, like the room just drew in a breath and now he’s trapped in a vacuum, a deer in the headlights of Pete’s vacuous bullshit.

“I believe the words I’m looking for are ‘go fuck yourself’,” he hisses and Avery shrieks, hysterically amused by daddy’s angry, round, red face looming over her like a pissed off reimagining of Goodnight Moon. Goodnight Daddy’s last frayed thread of patience. “You don’t — I don’t need your help, I need another parent for our children, weren’t you listening to me last week?”

“I’m offering to help, aren’t I? Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, at least a little grateful?”

Patrick pauses and takes a very long, very deep breath, designed to slow his heart rate from the immediate threat of cardiac arrest and into ‘just jogged up four flights of stairs’ territory. Instead of saying the many inflammatory things rattling around at the back of his throat, he counts back from ten and, softly, he says, “Are you grateful when I do it?”

This does, at least, pull Pete up short. He sounds bewildered, like a giraffe faced with a tiger when its only seen lions. It knows whatever is happening probably isn’t good, it just has no frame of reference for precisely how bad things are about to get. He stammers a few conversational openers such as ‘I…’ and ‘uh…’ and ‘but…’ and Patrick lets him. He stares himself in the eye in the mirror over the dresser and dares himself not to interrupt, not to hand Pete the linguistic mountaineering gear with which to extract himself from the hole he just keeps making deeper and deeper.

Pete climbs into his verbal submarine, and, with no concern for the stability of their vessel, begins to descend. “But,” he declares, like he’s making a very intelligent point that Patrick clearly hasn’t thought of, “you wanted to do it.”

And Patrick, like this conversation is a game of chess, slides his queen to F7 and says, “Are you saying you don’t want to spend time with your kids?”

“Ooo,” says Avery, appropriately. Then she grabs her ankle and begins casually chewing on her toes through her sleepsuit.

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” Pete objects sullenly. It takes tremendous strength of will not to point out that Pete put them there himself. “That’s not fair.”

Six days.

It’s been six days since Pete aggressively revved his car out of the driveway and just as long since he bothered to pick up his phone and let Patrick know he’s not actually dead in a ditch, upside down with the wheels still spinning. Okay, so Patrick assumes that someone probably would have told him
by now, but still. It would’ve been nice to be afforded at least a moment of consideration. It
would’ve been nice to know Pete cares.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he admits finally. “Are you asking me for permission to see the kids? Because you know I’d never stop you.”

Pete has no idea when he’s onto a good thing and ruins the potential for a truce immediately.

“You can’t stop me,” he says. “I’m their biological father, I could — I could take them myself. Yeah, it’s my house, my kids, why don’t you sleep in the car and I’ll play Suzy Homemaker?”

There’s… a lot to unpack, right there. Patrick asks, “You’re sleeping in your car?” And then he remembers the first thing Pete said and laughs viciously. “Wait, your kids? You really think so, huh?”

If this were any other situation, and Pete were any other man, Patrick might be offended. Hell, in a completely different situation with an actual father — do not think about Joseph Trohman right now — he might even be worried. Instead, Patrick is amused. He is also faintly antagonistic and waiting for Pete to bite. Which he will, because Pete is nothing if not competitive; in work; in sport; in misery.

Like a circling alligator, he spies the weak ripple in the water and darts forward, all teeth. “You bet your ass. I have a lawyer working on it right now.”

“Is that so,” Patrick makes another lunge for Avery as she once again attempts to base jump from the edge of the bed, “tell me, Peter, how do you intend to assume full time care of the kids when you can’t even get them to school?”

“I can get them to school,” Pete insists sharply. “I have a car, I’m not an idiot.”

“Excellent,” says Patrick. “You can take them tomorrow morning, I’ll see you at eight.”

Pete appears to realize he has walked himself directly into jail, do not pass go, do not collect $200. “Wait,” he says quickly. “Wait, no, I — I need, like, notice and — Wait. I have work.”

“Take a personal day, call in sick, I really don’t care.”

“I — I’m supposed to be at the office in, like, seven hours, Patrick.”

“But, Pete,” Patrick’s voice is syrup and sweetness, “how are you gonna take the kids away from me if you can’t even get them to school one time?”

The silence is… gratifying. Pete’s internal conflict transcribed in short, panicky breaths on the other end of the line. Patrick fist bumps Avery in victory and waits for the inevitable excuse. Avery grabs his hand and mauls at his fingers.

“Fine,” Pete says.

It seems he’s almost as full of surprises as he is full of bullshit. Patrick chokingly.

“You — You will?”

“I will,” Pete confirms grandly.

“Excellent,” Patrick says weakly. He was not expecting this. Avery farts an explosive 21 gun salute into her sad, gray diaper that Patrick has yet to replace. “I have, uh, a thing tomorrow,” he does not,
but he’s willing to spend the day sitting in Starbucks if he has to, “So, you can take the big ones to school and then hang out with Harper and Avery until I get home.”

“Nnnn-gurrrrr!” Avery snarls into her wet toes. “Dada!”

“Sure thing,” says Pete and then, like an idiot, he adds, “how hard can it be?”

Patrick laughs. It’s not a pleasant sound. “Oh, you'll see, superdad. I'm hanging up now.”

“Patrick, wait!” Pete yelps. Patrick pauses but doesn’t say anything else. Neither does Pete.

Patrick studies the pattern on the comforter and bites his lip. Pete is infuriating, unreliable, has been looking for a replacement mom since the second he set foot on the Northwestern campus half of his lifetime ago. Patrick has spent the best part of a week examining the way Pete makes him feel and asking himself, Marie Kondo style, does his husband spark joy? He has been forced to draw the depressing conclusion that he does not. Still, Pete doesn’t say a word.

He sighs. “Goodnight, Pete.”

Then, he hangs up, switches off the phone and tosses it onto the nightstand. In the center of the bed, Avery sits and stares at him seriously.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he tells her. She babbles something that sounds vaguely disapproving. “What do you know? You’re ten months old, you don’t get to judge me.” She looks distinctly judgemental. “Okay, that’s quite enough from you, young lady. Time to go to sleep.”

“Ba!” she declares decisively. “Bababa!”

“You’re not going to sleep, are you?”

“Bleh!”

“I could put you in a cardboard box with a ‘free to loving home’ sign around your neck,” he tells her, “people do it to puppies all the time.”

Avery looks as though she thinks she’d like to see him try. He brushes a hand over her scalp and feels the familiar rush of panicky guilt when he touches her wispy copper hair. The parenting websites assure him it’s totally normal for babies to remain bald at her age. It’s definitely not genetics.

“Avery,” he says, and she looks at him, her head tilted to one side. “I do still love him, you know. Like, I know he’s a d— an idiot. But, we had fun once. I’m just… do you think it’s possible to fall back in love with the idea of someone when that someone has spent five years systematically destroying it?”

She slaps her fat little fists onto the sheets and babbles a string of nonsense. “You’re probably right. Who can figure this out at 2:15? We should get some sleep.”

She crawls towards him and smacks him with a drooly open palm. He grimaces. If Pete were here, he wouldn’t be conducting this conversation with an infant. He wonders if this sort of thing is developmentally inappropriate, if the outpouring of parental woe will somehow offset the Baby Einstein tracks he used to play to her while she slept. She continues to babble in his ear.

“Are you going to sleep or not?”
“Aboo,” she says decisively.

She’s right; sleep is overrated.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, comments and kudos are always appreciated :D

You can also find me on Tumblr [here!](http://example.com)

Next week... How will Pete cope with "babysitting" his kids? It's one school run, right? How bad can it be?
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Welcome back!
Okay, so, raise your hands if you believe Pete's "babysitting" can possibly turn out the way he thinks it will? Anyone? Anyone at all...?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pete had no idea that a hangover could feel this agonizing. His brain is a bottle rocket, his skull the facilitatory chute inside of which the projectile has been jammed. It is only a matter of time before it blows free. He cups his throbbing temples in both hands and groans.

“I think I’m dying.”

It all seemed like an excellent idea last night in the bar, in a club and, messily, the living room of Gabe’s rambling, falling-down, perpetual project Greystone in Logan Square. Now, it seems like the worst idea in the history of horrible ideas with the sunlight burning his retinas through the drapes. He’s almost certain he’s safe to drive from a toxicology point of view, but whether or not he can pull it off without barfing all over the steering wheel and, by extension his lap, remains to be seen. It’s clear he doesn’t handle alcohol in quite the same way he did when he was 21.

“You want a bagel?” asks Will, with all of the aggression of a man woken by a one in the morning rendition of Don’t Stop Believing. He holds out a plate on which sits a solitary burnt bagel with overripe avocado and under-cooked egg. It looks like it was put together with margarine and spite. He can’t believe it’s not botulism.

Pete’s stomach lurches threateningly. There is every possibility last night’s tequila is about to make an exciting comeback.

He swallows, hard. “No thank you.”

The only consolation — and seriously, there is nothing else positive about this morning — is that Gabe looks just as gray and tired and close to blowing chunks as Pete. They huddle over their mugs, old men with no business attempting to recreate their misspent youth, and gulp their coffee like it’s an elixir.

“I am never drinking again,” Gabe declares. Will snorts derisively and bangs a cabinet door closed with — Pete feels — more force and volume than is strictly necessary. It’s clear Gabe is joining him in the doghouse of matrimonial disharmony. “Don’t be mad at me. Pete’s marriage is failing, I was being a good friend.”

“Hey! My marriage isn’t failing, it’s just—”

“By pouring grain alcohol down his throat until he passed out on the couch?” Will sounds unconvinced by Gabe’s methods. Pete agrees with this assessment.

“No,” insists Gabe, “that’s not all I did, I did other things, too. I offered sound and sensible relationship advice before he passed out.”
Pete nods, “I vaguely recall that. That sounds — My brain is telling me that’s probably a thing that happened.”

Will pauses, head cocked, then says, “You took relationship advice? From him?”

“To be fair,” Pete interjects, “I don’t remember any of it. I can’t say I actually acted on it.”

“Hey!” Gabe says, clearly more affronted than he has any right to be. “I give excellent relationship advice!”

“Name one bit,” demands Will.

“I advised you to get into a relationship with me, didn’t I?”

Will looks at him, dark eyes impassive. “Name. One. Bit.”

Their wide-eyed baby is balanced on Gabe’s hip, their scruffy-haired toddler clinging to his leg. Matias and Angel respectively. ‘Two for the price of one’, Gabe calls them affectionately. The toddler — Angel — creeps towards Pete and he stiffens in that instinctive way he has around kids who haven’t worked out how to articulate their thoughts or control their bladders yet. She pauses, then smears her toast against his knee.

“Angel,” says Will. “Don’t decorate Uncle Pete with that. That’s artisan butter, if you’re going to cover him in anything, use the cheap stuff.”

Will is looking good in a very Will way, dressed in an outfit that makes him look something like a cross between a middle school English teacher and a pirate. Pete’s asked many times what it is that Will does for a living and, many times, he’s been unable to figure out the explanation. Usually, Will just sighs and says ‘Real estate. It’s sort of — We can just call it real estate’. Real estate clearly pays well, since they’re constantly in the middle of one project or another in this endless house of impossible projects and Gabe, it seems, is free to fuck around avoiding adulthood indefinitely.

It’s not that Pete’s jealous, per se, but… He’s absolutely jealous.

Pete sighs and dusts the crumbs from his pants. “I should get back to my mom’s.”

“You’re still not allowed home?” Will asks, pouring more coffee into each gratefully proffered mug and grimacing as Pete adds his own body weight in creamer and sugar. “You’re a godless heathen.”

“I’m choosing not to go home,” Pete insists and it’s clear from the look Will and Gabe share over the scarred kitchen table that they do not believe him. “Seriously — This is my decision.”

Will looks him up and down slowly. It’s a look that says Pete isn’t the catch he thinks he is, which is unfair as Pete slept in his shirt last night and hasn’t had a shower so he’s hardly looking his best. And then he says, slowly, “Aaaa-ha.”

“I’m totally eligible,” Pete mutters. “Who wouldn’t be missing all of this?”

“You smell of sweat and desperation, you’re not a catch, you’re the thing they toss right back into the ocean,” Will says, propping himself against the countertop on a lean, angular hip. “I’m going to offer you some relationship advice, and trust me when I say it’s better than my husband’s.”

“You don’t know that,” Gabe mutters. “Like, how can you quantifiably say that without knowing exactly what my advice was? My advice was killer. Probably.”
“I’ve got ten years of lived experience that says otherwise.”

“Oh yeah? You know you love me.”

Pete is getting sick of sitting in the middle of this tennis match of fond-eyed browbeating. He clears his throat, but this does absolutely nothing, the pair of them bouncing back and forth like a gayer, better dressed episode of Married with Children. He’s Bud Bundy, waiting to be fed his line as he stares down at his coffee cup, to learn the life lesson and listen to the audience say ‘awww’. They continue to flirt through insults and ignore him and his very pressing marital issues.

“Not to interrupt,” says Pete. “But, like, I think you had some advice?”

Will pauses — for dramatic effect, presumably — and ruffles a hand through his hair. “You’ve messed up, Pete.”

“I have not!” Pete insists, because he didn’t. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t you think that might be the problem?” Will asks. “Like, maybe if you’d done more, your marriage wouldn’t be on the rocks? Patrick adores you, has done since the second he laid eyes on you. If Patrick has gotten tired of you, then you’ve messed up severely.”

“Patrick is being a whiny little bitch,” Pete says acidly, in the way he can with Will because, honestly, when you’ve puked in someone’s shower and they’ve pissed on your lawn, it invokes a special kind of bond. Across the kitchen, Gabe clamps his hands over Angel’s ears. “Did you have some advice or not? Because I am, apparently, taking my kids to school in an hour and I still have to get home and change so, you know, make it quick.”

Will appears to give this immense thought as he bites into his bagel. Pete notes that Will’s bagel looks delicious. The look he gives Pete is both speculative and uncomplimentary. Pete now has 58 minutes to catch the piss trolley to Wilmette, change into clothes that don’t smell of ass and then collect his kids from the house he’s no longer welcome in.

“No,” says Will eventually, ominously and with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I don’t have any advice for you at all.”

“Great,” says Pete, grabbing for his car keys and his laptop bag. “Thanks for the couch. Time to go show my husband what he’s missing out on.”

He can’t be sure, but he thinks he hears Will mutter ‘I can’t possibly imagine,’ in the second before the door closes behind him.

***

When Pete arrives at the door of his house — the house for which the mortgage company debited his checking account just yesterday — he hasn’t had time to change so he’s dressed in last night’s shirt and this morning’s irritation from lack of sleep. He is deeply, desperately spoiling for a fight. He doesn’t even think about knocking and, instead, walks straight inside and dares Patrick to object. He can take it. It’s a good day to die.

“I didn’t knock,” he tells his husband airily. “It’s my house too, and—”

“Good morning,” says Patrick formally, hurrying past without really looking at him, two backpacks in one hand and Avery in the other. “You’re late,” Pete was hoping that wouldn’t come up, “also, you look like someone who hasn’t made a correct decision in several days. If you wanted to grab a passing kid and shove on a pair of shoes that looks roughly the right size, that would be super
helpful. Caitlyn! I keep telling you that this isn’t the time to start your homework!”

“Oh.” Apparently discharged, Pete looks around the hallway and finds Harper chewing on the ear of a stuffed beagle. There is no way that any of this can possibly be as difficult as Patrick pretends it is. He crouches down. “I think I’m supposed to help you with your shoes.”

“I’ll bite you,” she tells him, perfectly sincere and not at all confrontational.

He blinks. “I’m sorry, what?” She gnashes her teeth in apparent demonstration. They’re a lot like his teeth, white and bright and way too big for her mouth. “Honestly? I’d rather you didn’t. Come here.”

Harper considers him carefully, so he arranges his face into a look of stern, fatherly command. She takes half a step towards him and, internally, he wonders why Patrick ever complained that this was difficult. This is task number one and, already, he’s killing it. Then she stops, tilts her pretty little face towards him and says, “No.”

Pete is… not expecting to have his authority so summarily dismissed quite so quickly. He frowns: She is three and he is her father. How hard can this possibly be?

“Harper, come here right now and put on your shoes.”

Because Harper is… he hesitates to think ‘a dick’ because she’s three, but honestly, she’s kind of acting like a dick right now… anyway, because she’s determined to make him look like a terrible father, she darts away and towards the living room. She laughs as she does it. Now, Pete is crouching in the hallway, alone, staring at the place her braids disappeared around the door. This is bullshit. He grabs a pair of baby blue converse that look too small to be Caitlyn’s and too big to be Avery’s and gives chase.

“Harper, get your butt back here right now!”

“Butt!” she shrieks. Seriously, he needs to have a long discussion with Patrick about the lack of basic discipline taking place in the house. Apparently, he’s supposed to find her using echolocation because there is no fucking sign of her in the living room. “Butt! Butt! Butt! Dad’s a butt! Butt face!”

He uses the stream of sass mouth to locate her, half under the couch and half behind the curtains. True to her word, as he slings her under his arm and marches her back to the hallway, she sinks her teeth into the back of his hand. There is no one around to offer him the kind of praise he believes he deserves when he refrains from a) cursing colorfully and b) dropping her.

“That,” he tells her when he finally wrestles her onto the bottom step and nurses the savage tooth marks scarred into the tender skin of his hand, “was not very nice, Harper! Why the f— Why would you do that?”

Instead of providing a satisfactory answer, a display of contrition or even the slightest bit of concern about the furiously red imprint of her dental records imprinted into her father’s actual skin like Play-doh, she shrugs breezily and says, “Daddy sings the shoelace song.”

There must be another Pete in another universe who would nod knowledgeably at that. This Pete, however, knows all of those words but has no idea what they mean collected together into that sentence. Behind his eyes, a low, slow tension headache begins to throb.

“What the fuck, he thinks, is the fucking shoelace song?

“Okay,” Patrick is back and gesturing at him with the baby, “I have to get going, I left the car seats in the garage so, like... Good luck, slugger!”
Patrick kisses the baby then presses her onto Pete and she smiles. At least, she scrunches up her round little face and shows the tips of brilliant white teeth set into her wet, red maw. “Blah!” she declares, and shoves her spit-wet fingers into his mouth. He spits them right back out. Patrick leans around him and kisses Harper on the forehead, relaxed and casual. The lack of kiss offered to Pete is pointed.

“Wait!” Pete declares desperately, still clutching a shoe and attempting to box in Harper like a physics equation, Avery slithering from his grasp and towards the floor. He has no idea what he wants Patrick to do beyond change his mind entirely, stay home and show Pete what the fuck, exactly, he’s supposed to do. Better yet, he would like to assume a supervisory role whilst Patrick does it for him. Patrick pauses at the door, car keys in hand and raises his eyebrows quizzically. There is no way on earth Pete is going to vocalize any of that. “Nothing.”

Patrick smiles. It’s this slow, beatific smile, that slips across his mouth like molten honey, the kind of smile worn by someone who is completely and totally at peace. He reaches for the door like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “Okay gang, be good for your dad, I’ll see you guys later, love you all,” and to Pete he says, simply, “have fun,” and then he closes the door and the house is endlessly silent.

“So,” starts Pete, but he doesn’t get to say anything else because both Harper and Avery burst into loud, wet, snotty tears right there on the hallway floor. “Oh God.”

Pete opens and closes his mouth a few times but nothing useful or helpful or even coherent comes out. Before he can join them — and God knows, he wants to join them — Caitlyn appears at the top of the stairs looking bored and apathetic and deeply, reassuringly confident.

“Dad,” she says, descending the stairs in her flannel shirt and ripped up jeans, a vision of 90s grunge in a pre-teen package, “you’re like, seriously awful at this.”

She plucks Avery from his arms and Pete considers weeping with gratitude.

He snaps, “I’m not awful, I’m doing fine.”

“Butt,” says Harper tearily, from her position on the step. “Dad’s a butt.”

He is, quite clearly, not doing fine.

“Daaad!” Noah greets him from the kitchen. He is the first to sound delighted to see Pete and, against every rule in the parenting handbook, Pete decides immediately that he has a favorite child. “Do you think we could get a beaver? You know, as a pet? They’re so cool and I think we have room in the backyard. Oh! You need to come look at my Mario Kart score and watch this, I can do orange justice, and hype, check it out, it’s so amazing. What’s your favorite Fortnite dance? I bet you can dab, do you want me to teach you? It’s so easy, just, like this, see? You know first person shooters? That’s like what we can see for real, but second person is—”

“Noah, please,” Pete begs. “You’re — That’s just a wall of sound, I can’t — Oh! You got her shoes on? That’s awesome,” Pete beams at Caitlyn and once again reorders his favorites list. Caitlyn rolls her eyes at him and he adjusts it once more. Avery is still crying. “How the hell does your dad do this every single morning?”

“He’s a pro,” Caitlyn informs him drily. “We really need to get going if we’re not going to be late for school.”

Pete nods. He’s pretty sure this can’t possibly get worse.
On the driveway, he discovers that not only can it get worse, but that there are several descending circles of worse waiting to open up beneath him. If this was Dante’s Inferno then the little incident in the hallway was merely purgatory. Right now, he’s pretty sure he’s in the fourth or fifth circle of Hell, staring at the mess of straps, clips and buckles that make up Avery’s car seat.

“Dad,” says Caitlyn doubtfully. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

She is holding Avery while Harper and Noah compete for who is going to kill themselves first in their attempt to scale the willow oak in the front yard. Pete gave up shouting approximately three minutes after he started shouting because, he realized, they had no intention of paying any attention to him at all. He figures they might be easier to control if they’re in traction.

(He’s almost certain he doesn’t actually mean this.)

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” he insists irritably, glaring between the diagram on his phone and the tangle of seatbelt jammed inside the inner workings of the car seat. Advanced shibari is probably simpler than this. He doesn’t say this out loud. “These things are supposed to be simple!”

“Dad,” says Caitlyn in this long-suffering, Patrick voice. “We’re going to be late for school.”

“There is no way that’s going to happen,” Pete says, his teeth gritted, half-blind with sweat running into his eyes. His skin is molten, dripping, wrapping him in his own panic. He takes a deep breath and, with a determined snarl, he shoves the car seat across the back of the car. “The damn thing clearly doesn’t fit in my car! Okay, this is fine, we’re not going to be late, I…” he trails off and casts a desperate look along the street. At the end of the block is a bench and a signpost that says, quite simply, BUS STOP. He smiles. “I have an idea.”

“Oh God,” says Caitlyn.

***

“He’s taking them to school :) Dam will keep eyes open 4 this on the nws. Ru 2 figurin stuff out…?

Patrick pauses, his thumb hovering over the screen.

No. We still good for next week?

U knw it bby yoga dadz 4 lyfe

You are SO not cool.
He puts down his phone and tries to type.

Immediately, he begins to worry about Pete. It’s not that he could smell alcohol on him in the hallway — Patrick is not desperate enough to prove a point that he would endanger his children — but it’s clear that Pete is not recovering well from another night spent chasing the bottom of a (many) bottle(s). Not that Pete is an alcoholic, no, it’s not quite there yet.

Still, Patrick checks the signal on his phone, just in case. Then he stares out of the window and hopes, privately, that Avery throws up on Pete’s expensive shoes.

***

“This is fun, right?” Pete says brightly. The brightness is camouflaging the way he actually wants to run away and never, ever come back. He would give every penny in his checking account, his car and both of his testicles to be sitting in a business meeting right now. There is, summarily, nothing easy about taking care of the kids.

Noah dabs enthusiastically, Pete assumes this is a yes, Harper hums and drums her heels against the seat, Avery says, very seriously, ‘gah’, which Pete is counting as a win. If Caitlyn sinks any lower into the hood of her coat, or strains any further away from him, he assumes she will cease to exist on the physical plane.

“I hate you,” she says with deep and enduring vehemence.

“Good,” he says beatifically, staring out of the window. His bus timetable, called up on his phone, informs him that they will only be fifty minutes late for school. This is barely worth mentioning at all.

“Daaad,” says Noah, bouncing in his seat in a way that makes Pete feel car sick. “Today is the bake sale.”

Pete looks at him, “Oh. Do you need, like… cash?”

“No,” says Caitlyn’s hood. “He needs, like, cake.”

Pete’s yoyo-ing blood pressure crests a particularly large wave once more. He has the unnerving sense that Patrick has set him up but knows that there is no way in hell he’s going to succumb. He bites his lip and looks out of the window and sees both an upcoming bus stop and a 7-Eleven attached to a gas station. He has An Idea.

“Everyone off the bus.”

***

“Can I get you something else?” asks the waitress. Her name badge says Audrey. Patrick feels a wonderful sense of bonhomie towards her, like the sunshine is spilling out of him and flooding gold and luminous across the coffee shop floor.

He nods and rolls his shoulders. No one has spoken to him this politely since Avery was born.

“Another coffee would be great, thank you. And do you have any of those cinnamon rolls the size of my face?”

“Coming right up.”

Ordered a cinnamon roll. Feeling decadent.
Patrick blinks at the phone. He feels very warm suddenly and blames the spring sunlight streaming through the cafe window. It’s just a typo. Definitely just a typo.

As long as Patrick doesn’t think about the unholy mess of his marriage, he could almost be happy. If he doesn’t consider the inevitability of custody disagreements, alimony warfare and the horrifying concept of dating sites, then everything is fine.

He does miss the kids, though.

***

“Oh, dad,” Caitlyn says. She sounds the opposite of encouraging. “Today is the bake sale.”

“For which I have provided baked goods,” Pete makes an all-encompassing hand gesture above the box of prepackaged cupcakes. He nearly drops Avery and resolves not to do that again. “See? Bakes, to be sold.”

“Uh…” Noah says, his backpack on both shoulders. When Pete was a kid, that was social suicide. He assumes Noah has picked up this trait from Patrick. “But dad, those are store cupcakes.”

At this, Pete nods earnestly. They are store bought. Noah was with him in the store when he bought them. He wonders if the public school system in Glenview is all it’s cracked up to be then remembers Patrick and assumes it’s not. Then, he wonders if maybe he’s hallucinating from stress and he’s actually holding, like, an inflatable pineapple or something. Honestly, this whole morning has felt farcical enough that nothing would surprise him at this point. The dude getting on the bus is actually Elvis? Pete wouldn’t turn a fucking hair. That is how unacceptably out of step his day has been so far.

He peers at the carton. They definitely look like cupcakes, the icing is so pink with additives that Pete can see the hyperactivity hazing above them like nuclear waste.

“Yes,” he says confidently, “cupcakes.” The wheels on the bus go round and round and apparently, Avery gets motion sickness. She brings up her breakfast all over his knee and left hand. “Oh, Jesus…”

“Jesus,” says Harper softly. Before he can tell her that this is a bad word — at least in this context, although the stance of organized religion towards his sexuality makes him think of it as a bad word in general — she continues. Loudly. “Daddy, is asshole a bad word?” This, he decides, is worse.

“Yes! Who taught you…” There are, officially, way too many parenting plates currently in the air for him to have a hope in hell of keeping them spinning. He looks for something to wipe off his hand and wonders, for a brief and desperate moment, if anyone would judge him for using Noah’s jacket. Like he can sense the path of his father’s thought process, Noah subtly edges away. “Uh…”

“Daddy brings spit-up cloths,” Noah informs him. This is unhelpful when they’re several miles and two city buses away from the diaper bag. Pete grunts and wipes his hand on the leg of his already trashed pants. He is hot all over, like every part of him is made of sour, panicky sweat. Male pride be damned, he would trade everything he owns for the papoose right now.

“Okay,” says Caitlyn wearily, clearly entirely done with his inadequacy. “So, here’s the thing, you can’t bring store cupcakes to the bake sale.”

When he trusts himself to speak, Pete’s voice is tight, “Why not? A cake is a cake, right?”
“Except it’s not when you buy them from a gas station. Look, no one brings store cake, alright? Daddy always makes them himself, and he puts in little flags with all of the ingredients and the flavors and to let anyone know if there’s nuts or—”

“Daddy,” he emphasizes the word with air quotes, well, a single air quote since he can’t let go of Avery in case she makes another misguided attempt to throw herself to her death or, at the very least, a severe tetanus on the floor of the bus, “didn’t make any cupcakes this time. So, it’s store bought or nothing, does Noah want to take nothing, Caitlyn? Is that what the two of you want? There’s an ingredients list right on the pack, and anyway, who even has a nut allergy, let’s be real. Okay, does anyone else have anything to say about daddy?”

Caitlyn and Noah share a look. It’s clearly about Pete and it’s obviously far from complimentary. Avery stares at him, wide-eyed and unblinking and so very like Patrick it’s startling. She says, “Egboo,” which Pete thinks is encouraging. He nods at her sagely. At least this one loves him, even if babies are basically a lot like puppies in that they love whoever feeds them.

Harper sighs wistfully, “I miss daddy.”

The other two look as though they agree, but they’re both too polite to say it. The middle school looms just beyond the next stop. It is 10:13am. Pete feels as though he has been travelling to school for the past four years.

“We made it,” he says fervently as they descend the bus steps: Pete in last night’s clothes, a baby in one hand, a toddler gripping the other, the older two edging away like they don’t want to be seen in public with him. “I got you to school. Do you need me to sign a late slip or something? I can say you had a dentist appointment.”

Caitlyn looks him up and down dubiously. She says, “Honestly, it’s fine. We’ll risk the detention.”

At her side, Noah shoots him a thumbs up. “I missed math,” he says gleefully. “This is the single greatest day of my life.”

They walk away from him without looking back. He shouts after them, “Have a great day! I love you! Wait! You forgot the cupcakes!”

They don’t look back.

“All of this, this whole shooting match made up of children and toddlers and babies and conflicting and competing needs, all of it is supposed to be easy. That is what he’s told himself every single day in his corner office overlooking the park and the lake and clear blue sky stretching endless out towards New York. Patrick has the easy job and Pete — with his meetings and deadlines and coffee breaks and lunches at the Greek place on the corner — had it so much harder. His planets are entirely realigned by the devastating knowledge that he barely managed to get the kids to school. He feels more failure than man, a dying star folding in on itself as the world and Chicago and Westbrook Elementary School goes on around him.

Pete dumps the cupcakes into the trash, then he crosses the street with the kids and waits at the bus...
stop. This did not go according to plan.

***

Four bedtimes later, Patrick descends the stairs and wonders if the carry out in the fridge is likely to give him salmonella. Ordering more is a possibility but he has no idea what, if any, financial contribution Pete intends to make to the household moving forward so he probably shouldn’t be profligate. Still, there’s a couple tubs of Phish Food in the freezer. Top it with blueberries and he probably won’t succumb to scurvy.

He screams, terrified, when he finds a human-shaped shadow sitting at his kitchen table then calms, embarrassed, when he realizes that the shadow is Pete. “What the hell are you doing hiding in the dark?” he demands, not unreasonably. “I thought you left when I took the kids up.”

Pete blinks owlishly in the glow of the overhead lights. He’s still wearing his stained shirt, his eyes are bloodshot and his skin is sallow. Somehow, he remains the most impossibly handsome man Patrick has ever laid eyes on.

He lifts his shoulders and says, “I don’t want to get divorced.”

Patrick hasn’t allowed himself to say, or even think, the D-word in a week. Aside from ‘dickead’ and ‘douchebag’, he’s been thinking about those d-words a lot. He’s been talking in double meanings to his mom, to Joe, to the kids, using phrasebook lexicon like ‘trial separation’ and ‘living apart’. Divorce is a dirty word. Hearing Pete say it out loud punches all of the air from Patrick’s lungs. He wants to disappear, to slip down a crack in the universe and never stop falling. Anything to avoid crash landing into a land called Divorce. He doesn’t say this.

Instead, he leans against the counter and takes a deep breath and says, “I didn’t either.”

“Didn’t?” Pete repeats. He doesn’t sparkle like he used to, he’s dull, buried somewhere in the catacombs of financial obligation and apathetic dislike. When did they stop making one another happy? “But you do now.”

“I already told you,” Patrick says, “I’m done with being something that makes your life easier while you make mine harder. I’m not your — your fucking emotional support roomba. I care about you, Pete. God knows, I probably always will, but I’m not...”

Not in love with you, he thinks. I am not in love with my husband. He doesn’t say it out loud.

“What if I could make it good again?” Pete asks quickly, the words tripping over one another. It’s far more painful to watch Pete attempt to resurrect their marriage on the gurney of their own mutual indifference than it would be if he just didn’t pretend to care. He’s doing this because he’s embarrassed, Patrick reminds himself, he’s doing this because he doesn’t want to tell anyone that he’s getting a divorce, not because he wants to remain married.

“This isn’t a game. We have kids to think about, they need—”

“Two parents,” Pete points out. “There’s been a ton of studies that shows kids do better in life when they have two parents at home. Even if you won’t do it for me, you should do it for them.”

“Emotional manipulation involving our children? Is that really the level you want to sink to?”

“I just want my family back together! You — I feel like you owe me a shot at this, we’ve been married for twelve years, Patrick.”
“And what do you owe me?”

Aggressively, Patrick yanks open the refrigerator door and extracts the leftovers. He tears into them, hearty and savage and refusing to take the time to heat them in the microwave, E. Coli be damned. He does not offer Pete a share.

“You went to Moon Pie without me?” Pete asks, and it’s ridiculous that he should sound so hurt about a visit to a restaurant when he’s never sounded remotely apologetic about missing dance recitals or soccer games or trips to the doctors office. For this reason, Patrick only grunts and takes another bite. “Look, just give me a chance! I swear I’ll actually try!”

Patrick slams the pizza box down onto the counter. It doesn’t bang in a satisfying way, instead it makes a soft, wet flump. He glares at Pete like he is solely responsible. “Why now? Why has it taken you this long to give a shit? Is it because you want to change, or because you want things to go back to the way they were before?”

For a rare and beautiful moment, Pete is silent. He has nothing to say because Patrick is right and, for once, he is robbed of a comeback. Patrick scowls at his stupid, handsome profile and Pete glares at the Moon Pie box on the counter and it seems like they may be frozen this way forever. Maybe someone will turn them into an art exhibit, affix a little white card to the corner of the breakfast island that says ‘Marriage in Breakdown - 2019’ and couples will stand at velvet ropes and stare and swear they won’t end up the same.

Then, Pete breaks the silence. He says, “Ten dates.”

“Ten dates?” Patrick repeats, like he can’t count or speak English. “What do you mean?”

“I mean let me take you on ten dates. Let me try to fix this.”

“You think you can fix this with ten fucking dates?”

“Give me that. If you still don’t want to be married to me, I’ll sign the divorce papers, I’ll agree to whatever you want. Just give me ten dates.”

Sometimes, Patrick imagines the Hollywood adaptation of his life. He scrolls the internal Rolodex of never-ending music in the dark recesses of his gray matter and pulls together soundtracks for driving the kids to school or going for coffee with the PTA moms. Right now, he imagines Pete would be played by Vince Vaughn, he would be Jason Bateman and somehow, this would become an unconventional, kooky romcom with a Taylor Swift soundtrack. He takes a deep breath and thinks of his children upstairs in their beds. He does not want his life passport stamped with Divorce. He nods, because he knows Pete will fail but this way, he can say he provided him with just enough rope to hang himself.

“Ten dates?” he clarifies; Pete nods. “You know — You know you can’t actually fix this with, like, a couple of dinner dates and a movie, don’t you?”

“Let me try.” Pete says, rising to his feet. He looks older, far more tired than Patrick ever remembers seeing him. “Please.”


Pete is animated once more, attempting to hug him but Patrick stiffens. He isn’t ready for physical contact quite yet. Pete gets the hint and backs away and Patrick is more grateful than Pete deserves, more grateful than he ought to be.
“You won’t regret this,” he assures Patrick, scrambling into his jacket and fumbling for his car keys. Honestly, this is moot because Patrick already is regretting this with every fiber of his being that can experience regret. “I’ll text you later! I — Thank you for this. I swear you won’t regret it. I can do this, okay? I can do this and everything, uh — everything will be absolutely fine and you will not regret it.”

Patrick watches him leave and then looks at Penny, sniffing hopefully around his feet.

“Pen,” he says softly, she cocks her head and looks at him from bright button eyes. “What the fuck did I just agree to?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, comments and kudos are always appreciated :D

You can also find me on Tumblr here!

Coming up next week... The first date. I mean, Pete can’t possibly mess that up. Can he?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is, Pete decides, vaguely insulting that Patrick isn’t more enamoured by his Grand Romantic Gesture.

Honestly, Pete thought it was pretty Jude Law of him, throwing himself out there like that and making a dramatic offer in the heat of the moment. It deserved at least a ‘wow’. It deserved, he thinks, something more than a ‘whatever’ and then three days of radio silence. Pete is bad with silence because he doesn’t know if he’s supposed to fill it with banal small talk about the kids and the house and the fact the roof needs repointing at some point or if he’s supposed to pretend they’ve just met and this is a do-over.

(He suspects he shouldn’t lead with mentioning the roof repairs. Apparently being asked to liaise with repairmen is a trigger point for Patrick and he’s hoping to avoid a repeat of what he’s privately named The Big Gay Diaper Disaster.)

Still, he has high hopes for his frankly brilliant plan. Even Will agreed it wasn’t a bad idea, which is the closest Will’s ever come to calling an idea of Pete’s good.

Pete has actually put a reasonable amount of thought into this date, by the metrics with which the effort he generally places into social interactions with his husband can be measured. Not that he usually half-asses things but they haven’t organized a babysitter and been on an actual date since… Well, the exact date and time is lost but Pete is pretty sure the Obama administration was in its first term. So, it’s been a while and this necessitates some kind of quantifiable effort.

This time, standing on the front porch, he feels self-conscious enough to raise his hand and knock. Not because he thinks he should, but because he thinks it might possibly add a couple of points to his shockingly low scorecard if he does. He waits.

“Where are we going?” Patrick asks, the second he opens the door, in lieu of all other appropriately husband-y greetings like ‘I missed you’, or ‘how have you been’, or ‘hi’. Pete blinks at him with exaggerated slowness and then Patrick seems to get it. “Oh, like, hello and all, but I sort of need to know because I don’t know if I need a jacket or a coat, or what.”

“We’re going bowling,” Pete beams at him and waits for the congratulations, for the disbelief that he remembered.

Instead, Patrick looks… disappointed. “Oh,” he says, “bowling.”

Bowling is, in fact, a stroke of genius on Pete’s part. He remembers taking Patrick bowling on their first date and he remembers Patrick’s mouth tasting of cotton candy and root beer on the steps of the bowling alley and he remembers Patrick looking at him like he’d hung the moon and the stars and every other heavenly body in the sky above them. So, really, it would be nice if Patrick could also remember and act suitably impressed.

“Oh, bowling?” Pete repeats, turning it into a question. “You don’t like bowling now?”

“I like bowling!” Noah informs them both, barreling in from the living room, his socks skidding on the hardwood. He slides to an inelegant halt against the refrigerator and says, around a hailstorm of falling alphabet magnets, “Are we going bowling? We’re going bowling!”
“Well...” says Patrick.

“No,” says Pete.

They stare at one another and then at Noah and then Patrick sighs, “Look, this is sort of a thing just for dad and I, but maybe at the weekend…”

“Oh,” says Noah. He looks hurt but then he brightens. “Does that mean Joe is sitting with us?”

“Joe?” asks Pete lightly. It doesn’t work, he sounds furious, suspicious, many words that end with -ious.

“Joe.” Patrick repeats, with such finality that Pete can hear the period. He shakes his head and ushers Noah out of the room. Pete is about to take a breath but then Caitlyn walks in, like an extra on the set of an episode of Friends. She has Avery on her hip and Harper by the hand.

“We’re going bowling?” she asks. “Now? But they’re in pajamas...”

“No,” Patrick repeats, pinching the bridge of his nose and gesturing into the hallway. “You are going to brush your teeth and get ready for bed so that we can pretend to Uncle Joe that you’re nice, well-behaved children and not basically feral. I am, apparently, going bowling.”

It’s annoying that Patrick doesn’t sound remotely thrilled to spend the evening in Pete’s company. In fact, more to the point, he sounds resentful, like he can think of a dozen or more different things he would rather do with many other people than spend it at a bowling alley with his husband. Pete would like to bet, based purely on the inflection of his voice, that many of those things involve Joe.

“Uncle Joe?” Pete says sarcastically. “I didn’t realize the two of you were related. Can’t Caitlyn look after the younger ones?”

“Yes,” says Caitlyn emphatically.

“No,” says Patrick just as firmly. “Absolutely not.”

“Thank you, dad,” she says. “I am eleven years old; I do not need a sitter!”

Pete is floored by how very like him she is, this passionate little thing — all fire and fury — with her chin tilted up and her curls a cloud around her face. It makes him proud and protective and terrified all at once. He wants to tell her to take on the world whilst simultaneously dragging her away from it so he can keep her safe from the boys she’ll meet just like him and the people who’ll take advantage of her until the fire bleeds out of her just like Patrick. It’s... confusing.

This is, Pete thinks, his chance to demonstrate his suitability as a partner and a parent, to show Patrick that he’s capable of taking the initiative in family-related incidents and taking control. He says, “Next time—”

“Next time,” Patrick cuts him off, “how about you organize the sitter? Hmm?”

Pete decides that this is probably his cue to stop talking about sitters if he wants this whole ‘ten dates’ thing to progress beyond trading insults in the kitchen. “Okay, so. Bowling.” He claps his hands together in a demonstration of enthusiastic anticipation, hoping that this might giddy Patrick along a little. Patrick blinks at the tasteful chandelier over their heads and avoids eye contact. “Are you stoked?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Patrick says vaguely as the girls wander away, clearly bored. “No. It’ll be nice. Fun.”
“I brought you flowers,” Pete says grandly. He holds them up in demonstration then thrusts them forward into Patrick’s arms.

Patrick takes them, but not gratefully, not really. Instead, his already weak smile uncurls a little, his mouth going flat and hard as he holds them at arm’s length, like an IED. “Oh,” he says, eventually. “Thanks.”

“You’re saying ‘oh’ like, a lot,” he points out, “Way, way more than you would usually say it.”


Then, he shuffles across the kitchen and dumps the flowers in the sink and he splutters, coughs and sucks deeply on the inhaler he liberates from the medicine cabinet. God, Patrick needs to work out more, it’s like he gets out of breath grating cheese. Pete is about to suggest their second date (and probably third through tenth and significantly beyond) should take place at Gabe’s gym.

Patrick huffs, “Sorry. I mean, it was a nice gesture, but lilies irritate my asthma.”

“Oh,” says Pete, because apparently the interjection is contagious. “I would’ve brought candy, but…”

What Pete means is but **I thought the flowers looked better; but they cost a ton of cash at the florist by the office and I live for big-money gestures; but I figured the kids would eat the candy and you wouldn’t actually get any. Of course, Patrick sets about misinterpreting it immediately.**

“But you think I’m fat,” he says. He says it so evenly and with such matter-of-fact certainty that Pete is momentarily thrown. Because Pete does think Patrick is fat but he’s never actually said that out loud.

“That’s not what I meant,” Pete insists. He is terrible at admitting when he’s being an asshole but being accused of it when he’s not is particularly galling.

“I know you think I’m fat,” says Patrick, his voice and eyes entirely flat. “Because if you didn’t think I was fat, you wouldn’t have bought me bathroom scales for my birthday.”

Pete flinches. That was not supposed to be an insult. Patrick kept saying he wanted to lose weight, Pete only intended to provide some positive reinforcement, a little bit of quantifiable encouragement. They were good scales, too. He researched them for hours. They were the kind that digitally analyze body fat, the kind that plot weight loss charts and hooks up to a smart watch. They cost more than a decent pair of limited-edition sneakers. He still has no idea why Patrick excused himself to the bathroom and cried for forty minutes.

He tries not to think about the times he’s found Patrick in front of the bathroom mirror since then, pinching at the swell of pale flesh over the band of his boxers. He tries — and fails — not to think about how thoroughly miserable Patrick looks in those moments. He reassures himself that it is definitely not his fault that Patrick has a few body issues.

“I didn’t — I thought you liked flowers. I got your favorites.”

“My favorites are lilacs, I’ve been allergic to lilies since I was three,” Patrick bites out. “I think it’s come up during the fifteen years we’ve been together. You know how my mom loves that story: It starts with ‘remember when we went to your cousin’s wedding’ and it ends with ‘and that’s how you almost died on Gam Gam’s lap’. Remember?”

It’s implicit in Patrick’s tone that he knows Pete does not, in fact, remember the near-death
experience at Patrick’s cousin’s wedding. He stares at the floor as the silence throbs on around them; it seems there’s an awful lot that Pete doesn’t know about his husband. Finally, he addresses the toes of his shoes.

“Do you still want to go out with me? Or not?”

Patrick sighs and shoves his glasses up his nose. He looks slightly further from impending respiratory collapse than he did when he was within two feet of the fucking lilies. He shakes his head and sighs. “Okay, let’s go.”

He doesn’t actually say ‘and get this over with’, but Pete hears it anyway. Somehow, he doesn’t snarl at Joe when he arrives, biting down on his tongue until it burns to stop himself from demanding to know when, exactly, he started fucking his husband. Joe is handsome, it pains him to admit, taller and good-looking and effortlessly dad-ish with Pete’s kids tumbling around him like puppies. Those traitors seem demonstrably more excited to spend an evening in with Joe Trohman that they seemed about the mistaken prospect of a night at the bowling alley with their father. Something is dramatically wrong here; Pete just can’t work out how to blame Patrick. Yet.

“Thanks for doing this,” Patrick says to Joe as Pete hovers by the door. He hopes his body language makes it clear how violently opposed he is to having this man on his couch, with his kids. Is he too old to mark his territory by pissing on the kitchen floor?

“Hey, watching your four is a piece of cake, you should have the twins sometime. Go on, have fun.” Then he squeezes Patrick’s shoulder. Pete can taste something bitter at the back of his tongue. He slams outside without saying goodbye and waits on the porch steps, breathing deeply.

“That was rude,” Patrick says, joining him with fogging breath and raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, well,” says Pete. So is fucking someone else’s husband before his side of the bed has gone cold. “I don’t like him.”

“And yet he speaks so highly of you,” Patrick squints towards the driveway, “Where’s your car?”

“I got an Uber.”

“We spent a lot of money on your car,” Patrick says. This is true, the car was expensive but Pete’s salary pays for it and it’s not like he’s ever questioned how much Patrick spends on kids’ shoes. “What with this and the bus incident, I’m wondering if that’s money well-spent.”

“The car seats don’t fit in my car,” Pete points out. “That’s not my fault.”

“That’s why I bought a practical car. Because we have children, who require car seats.”

“Do you want a beer when we get there?” Pete asks, changing the subject smoothly as they stand on the driveway. Patrick pauses and sighs and reaches into his pocket. He unlocks the minivan without a word and climbs into the driver’s side. Free to partake of that beer himself, and safe in the knowledge that he doesn’t have to spend money on another Uber, Pete beams at him. “Awesome, thanks!”

The car ride is awkward. It’s not that Pete expected everything to click back into place right away but he assumed — stupidly — that it would be easier than it currently is. He’s caught between desperation and cold, blue waves of irritation that Patrick is, for some reason, refusing to just play along and make this straightforward. Every conversational jump board that Pete provides is knocked back, every observation about the subdivision, the town, the encroaching city sprawl of Chicago creeping along the freeway, is rebuffed with agrunt of ‘that happened years ago, Pete, you didn’t
bother to come with me to the planning meeting’.

“Here we are,” Pete says pointlessly, as they pull up in the parking lot of the bowling alley. It was an independent when they first came here, now it’s a Lucky Strike, plastic and neon and painfully artificial. There’s a metaphor buried in there somewhere, under the layers of blue and red tube lighting and glossy posters advertising midweek specials. He keeps the observation to himself: There is no doubt in his mind that Patrick will not only find the metaphor but deliver it as sharply as possible. “Did you want something to eat before we go inside?”

This, it turns out, is not the right thing to say to someone who believes they were called fat thirty minutes previously. Patrick climbs out of the car without a word and slams the door. Assessing him from behind, his ass under his jeans, the soft little muffin top visible under his cardigan, Pete thinks that this is probably for the best. He follows him inside.

The bowling shoes are too tight, damp and sticky with the sweat of whoever wore them before Pete. A cursory blast of antibacterial toe-jam remover never seems to be enough to purge the knowledge that many someone else’s calluses, blisters and, probably, fungal nail infections were shoved into these shoes before Pete has been handed them. He ties the laces and promises himself he won’t think about it. He orders that beer while Patrick, with a completely unnecessary eye roll, orders a Diet Coke.

They walk to their lane without touching. It’s like Patrick has triggered a forcefield of Arthur C. Clarke proportions around himself. Whenever Pete strays within a two-foot radius he is burnt with the irradiating heat of barely contained dislike. This is ridiculous. Patrick is his husband. He’s held his hand and seen him naked and sucked him off behind the dumpsters of this very bowling alley (because he was an extremely classy dude at the age of 25). He moves to touch the small of Patrick’s back; Patrick hangs back to check the league table just long enough that Pete misses entirely, his hand hanging limp and useless between them. The motion is casual enough that Pete has no grounds on which to object, yet obvious enough that it was entirely intentional. He tucks his hands into his pockets and stares at the lurid carpet until they reach their lane.

“So...” he says, laboriously entering their details into the electronic scorecard. Then he pauses. He has absolutely nothing else to say. That in mind, he collects his bowling ball from the ball return and resolves to impress Patrick with his athletic prowess. “Watch and learn, Rickster.”

Patrick grips the edge of the bench in both hands and smiles vaguely at his rental shoes. He shrugs and says flatly, “Yeah.” Pete loses his tenuous hold on his patience.

“Right. Well. You could at least pretend you want to be here.”

Patrick says nothing, which in fact says it all.

Pete wants to point out that no one actively coerced Patrick into being here. He wants to say that he’s actually trying, as requested: This is where they had their first fucking date, for god’s sake, how much more romance does Patrick want from him? Mostly, he wants to tell him to try fucking smiling for once in his miserable, pedestrian, boring life. But he doesn’t. Because none of those things seem particularly conducive to getting Pete back into his own house in the foreseeable future.

(It’s not that Pete actually believes Patrick will divorce him. Men like Patrick do not divorce men like Pete and, God knows, Pete could probably write a list of potential replacements. But it would be nice if Patrick could make the whole ‘reconciliation’ nonsense a little bit easier on the both of them).

Instead of saying anything at all, Pete grabs a ball from the return, takes a short run up and hurls it as hard and as fast as he can in the direction of the pins. They burst apart like they’ve been detonated,
ricoeheting against the alley. Strike. He picks up a second without even trying and then, grinning, he turns to back to Patrick.

“Fuck yeah!” he declares (if he fist pumps, he demands that no one judges him for it.) “Fucking beat that, Stump-Wentz. Go ahead. Come at me.”

Pete is expecting some kind of reaction; a hug, a kiss, a fucking high five, he doesn’t care. Just some kind of acknowledgement of his superior bowling skills. If Pete were a caveman, this would prove his indisputable ability to keep a whole bunch of useless, hungry mouths sufficiently sustained on mammoth steaks. He waits, jubilant.

Patrick climbs to his feet. He examines the scoreboard for a second and then stares down at the inner workings of the ball return. He shrugs and then he jerks his thumb back over his shoulder. “I’m going to the bathroom. You can take my turn, I don’t mind.”

He doesn’t look impressed at all.

***

Look, the thing is, Patrick prepared for this date with the kind of grim determination reserved for military operations. He created a playlist that he blasted while he showered and it was constructed of Go Fuck Yourself anthems featuring such well-known classics as I Hate You So Much Right Now, Stronger (both Britney and Kelly Clarkson) and, gloriously, We Are Never, Ever Getting Back Together. It’s notable, he thinks, that the best songs about terrible men are written by heterosexual women.

He towelled off angrily, brushed his teeth angrily, he dressed angrily and he only stopped feeling angry when he descended the stairs and found the kids splitting a Tupperware of chocolate and peanut butter cookies he made as an apology for the bake sale debacle. Then, he began feeling guilty instead which, it transpired, was not much of an improvement.

Honestly, though? Watching Pete nail strike after strike is doing very little for his rapidly diminishing love for his husband, or his libido. It would be sexier, he decides, to watch Pete do literally anything at all that isn’t crashing a fourteen-pound ball through a stack of wooden pins and then smirking smugly at the up-tick of his score on the screen over their heads. Patrick includes watching Pete down raw eggs mixed with protein powder in this list. He includes watching Pete trim his toenails in this list.

And yes, okay, Patrick understands why Pete chose this particular venue as the first point in his ten-step quest of seduction. He hasn’t forgotten their first date (which, coincidentally, became the anniversary of their first kiss, their first eager fumble in an alleyway and their first fuck because, goddammit, Pete was charming once) but it seems as though Pete has. Patrick remembers Pete tugging up the barriers, carefully talking Patrick through technique and form. He remembers Pete pressing up close behind him, whispering into his ear like he was doing anything but using it as an excuse to cop a feel through their clothes. They laughed until Patrick’s stomach hurt, until his eyes streamed and his cheeks felt raw with smiling. Patrick fell in love with that Pete.

This Pete just wants to show much better he is at downing both bowling pins and overpriced beer and Patrick is not remotely impressed by the display of fragile masculinity. His ball skids into the gutter once more and Pete cat-calls from the bench.

“Come on, you’re not even trying!”

“Says you,” Patrick mutters under his breath. As if the reason they’re here is for a bit of non-
threatening competition, as if their marriage hasn’t taken a battering on par with the pins at the end of the alley, as if Patrick isn’t glancing at his watch and wondering how soon is too soon to just call it a night and head home. “Oh, look. You won.”

Pete grins, victorious, like not-winning was ever an option. “I did. Do I get a celebratory make out?” He reaches out to grasp Patrick by the belt loops. “C’mere, Stump-Wentz, make like Joe Elliott and pour some sugar on me.”

Patrick steps back, alarmed at both the suggestion and the unsolicited Def Leppard reference. “Oh. Like. Maybe later? There’s — We’re in public.”

It’s not normal, is it, to feel panicked when your spouse wants to kiss you?

Pete’s got crow’s feet instead of eyeliner this time around. There are lines around his brow, his mouth, that pop when he frowns and that’s okay, because Patrick has them, too. Laughter lines, allegedly, although Patrick doesn’t feel like he’s done much laughing in the past four years or so. It’s clear that Pete is thinking you kissed me last time. It’s obvious he’s struggling not to say I pushed you up against that arcade machine right there, and maybe it was Dance Party instead of Forza and maybe the carpet was stickier and we were younger but you let me and you kissed me back and you loved me.

“I’m your husband,” Pete says, very quietly, his eyes on the pale divot where Patrick’s wedding ring once sat, like their marriage is a legally binding contract that entitles him to touch when he wants to.

Actually, Patrick supposes, it probably is.

Patrick has been trying so hard to hold everything together. He’s been suspended, the mosquito in amber. He’s filled with something dangerous and dark just waiting for the wrong person to attempt to extract it. There is, apparently, so much ugly waiting inside of him, so much pain he wants to inflict on the idiot who splits him open carelessly. Pete is still staring at him, hands still half-outstretched like he thinks Patrick will give in and step back between them just because it’s what Pete wants. He bites his lip and takes a very deep breath and promises himself that the moment isn’t now.

“It’s getting late,” he says instead, gesturing to his watch. It’s barely 10:30, but that is late for a man with small children who believe that sleeping past 6am is a sign of weak moral fibre. “I — Avery wakes up pretty early.”

Pete nods. Then he says, “I don’t feel like we’ve talked that much. Was this how you imagined it was going to be? I thought it would be… different, I guess. I thought we’d talk.”

Patrick is unlacing his shoes. Without looking up, he snaps, “Then maybe you should’ve picked a spot where we could talk, rather than one where we could listen to bowling pins and the sound of your ego expanding right alongside your score.”

“And that’s it.

“I have never,” Patrick points out, “asked for *your* salary to fund luxuries for myself. My t-shirts are held together by baby puke stains. My sneakers have velcro straps — Do you know how cheap
velcro sneakers from Target are, Peter? I ask you to share your salary with me and, by extension, our children, because we stood in front of our friends and family twelve years ago and we told them we intended to love, honor and respect one another for richer, for poorer, asshole.”

This is probably the part where Patrick should stop. They’re beginning to attract a small crowd of interested bystanders and, honestly, this is not the sort of conversation he wants to have with the population of the Chicagoland area hanging on his every word. Instead, he finds he can no longer hold back, caught in the riptide of one his rare — but fun — rants.

“Do you have any idea how selfish you are?” he asks. The question is entirely rhetorical because Pete, flushed and staring at his feet, clearly has no intention of offering an answer. “Honestly, I don’t know how much clearer I can make it for you. I can’t — I don’t know how to spell it out for you, do you need it in another language? No puedo hacer esto, Pedro. Tu m’as cassé, Pierre. Fuck you,” he stamps his foot, and it thumps pathetically because he’s only wearing socks and the carpet is a little sticky and damp with spilled soda, “just… fuck you.”

He is crying, which is horrifyingly embarrassing. He yanks down the cuffs of his cardigan and paws messily at his eyes, his glasses shoved up into his hair. Pete takes half an uncertain step towards him and Patrick holds up his hand. “Don’t. Just — fucking don’t.”

The middle-aged guy in the league shirt at the alley next to theirs looks Pete up and down. He turns to Patrick, 250 pounds of Midwest middle management knight in a polyester suit of armor with a name tag that says Mitch, and he says, “Is this punk bothering you?”

Patrick hasn’t been rescued by a bear since the nightclub bathroom incident of 2012 — an incident about which he and Will are both comrades in silence. It’s amazing the kind of scrapes a guy can get into with a bleach job, tight jeans and a propensity for accepting free drinks. He makes an inelegant, strangled sound, half a laugh, half a sob, both halves bitter and shakes his head. He looks at Pete when he answers.

“No,” he says, “he’s not bothering me at all. Not anymore.”

Then, he grabs his rental shoes and his car keys and he strides off to the front desk as fast as his unfeasibly short legs can carry him. There is every possibility Pete watches him leave. Then again, there’s every possibility he doesn’t — Patrick has no idea, because Patrick is, resolutely, not looking back. He exchanges the bowling shoes for his battered sneakers and sits at the bench breathing heavily and wondering if he’s actually pissed off enough to leave Pete to find his own way home.

There’s an equation somewhere, he decides, some mixture of fractions and percentages that would allow him to calculate the square root of his raw fury and multiply it to the power of the way Pete used to make his insides feel like melting ice cream and come up with a mathematically viable solution that makes their marriage work. He’s a horrible mathematician, though, and Pete is a terrible pariah because instead of staying the required ten feet away from Patrick at all times, he appears, crouched down on his heels and peering at Patrick from under his brows.

“You want me to walk home?”

They are twelve miles from ‘home’, even further from Pete’s parent’s place. Not to mention the fact that Pete has the Uber app on his phone and enough cash in his wallet to pay for a cab. Patrick shakes his head. “No. But that’s because I’m a good person and not because you don’t deserve it, God knows, you don’t deserve the self-righteous martyr rights.” He takes a long, shaky breath. “And I’m still mad at you, so don’t start with the Ross Gellar bullshit.”

Pete reaches out and, unadvisedly, tweaks the shoulder of Patrick’s cardigan. Patrick resists the urge
to slam his knee up into Pete’s crotch but it is a remarkably close-run thing. Pete toys with his wallet for a moment, rubbing his thumb along the edge of a couple of fifties and then he says, “Would you punch me if I handed you these and told you to buy yourself something nice?”

Patrick has no polite answer. So, he stands and walks to the car.

They drive back to the suburbs in tense silence. The air between them is filled with static, Patrick’s pulse is a sneaking, insidious gas leak. One wrong word will provide the spark that ignites the car and burns them both to the ground in a fiery ball of gasoline and antagonism. He stares at the road with his hands at 10 and 2 precisely and Pete glares out of the passenger window.

“Look,” says Pete, when they pull up just down the block from his parent’s house. Patrick has parked strategically; they don’t need to crown their evening out with your soon-to-be-ex-husband with a one night only audience made up of the Wentzs or any of their elderly neighbors. “Patrick, come on, just look at me.”

When Patrick turns his head, he reminds himself that Pete is the possessor of a pair of particularly beguiling puppy dog eyes. He reminds himself that Pete is not above manipulation and he tells himself, succinctly and repeatedly in this two-second turn of muscle and sinew, that he is not going to succumb. Pete makes this infinitely easier than he needs to because, instead of eyes, Patrick is met with lips, with teeth and Pete’s eager, inquisitive tongue against, inside of, his mouth.

It has been so long since Patrick’s been kissed like this. So, he does something stupid and he ignores the whirring siren, the pulsing red lights firing warning signals around the dark depths behind his closed eyes. Instead, he lets Pete make fists of the front of his cardigan, lets him lick, interested, into his mouth and murmur to his tonsils, “Fuck, we haven’t done this in a while.”

He gives himself permission to feel good and he doesn’t want to remind himself that Pete is spectacularly talented at making him feel bad. Maybe — maybe — if he just lets this go, if he lets Pete touch him with greedy, eager hands like he’s a debauched, red-mouthed, tousle-haired 20-year-old, then everything that’s soured up their insides might turn sweet once more. He promised Pete a shot, didn’t he? How can he say he’s fulfilling that obligation if he doesn’t offer up his body as well as his time?

Plus, like, the bowling was sweet, right? It was a nice idea, if poorly thought out and terribly executed. Pete tried in ways he hasn’t tried in such a very long time and Patrick is — God, he’s so embarrassingly touch-starved that half-assed trying is better than committed indifference. “You’re so fucking...” Pete tells the corner of Patrick’s mouth, biting into his lip until it’s swollen up and blood hot, “God, look at you, you should — you should—”

Once, Patrick would’ve been hard by now. Once, Pete could get him halfway to getting off just by doing this. Right now, his dick is soft between his legs, barely plumped up, his stomach twisting uncomfortably as Pete digs a hand into the soft flesh of his side and twists the other into his hair. He’s convinced he can do this until Pete begins tugging him down with pointed little jerks of his wrist. Patrick ignores them so Pete upgrades to cupping the back of his skull in his palm, urging, pushing, shoving.

Patrick pulls back; he is so done. “Are you trying to shove me onto your dick?” he asks, dangerously conversational. In the electric hum of the streetlights, Pete avoids eye contact carefully. “Everything I’ve said, everything you’ve done, and you’re angling for a blowjob? Are you fucking serious right now?”

“I just thought…” Pete begins then trails off. He looks up and to the right and Patrick read somewhere once that this is a sign of an impending lie. He braces himself. “I mean, I was going to
suck your dick, afterwards. If you wanted me to.”

At this, Patrick grabs Pete by the wrist and pushes him, startled, until his palm is pressed to the very not hard, very uninterested softness under his zipper. “Does that seem like something I want?”

Pete looks as though he doesn’t understand, his mouth still swollen up and raw from kissing, his eyes glazed, his dick still inappropriately erect and obvious in his jeans. Patrick wastes no time at all in explaining it to him.

“Do you know what’s wrong with our sex life, Pete? Why I go to bed before you, or pretend I’m asleep when you follow me?” he asks as Pete slowly peels his hand from Patrick’s zipper. Pete shakes his head mutely and then opens his mouth to offer, what? Objection? Justification? Patrick continues before he can, the words, the kiss, tasting of rust and mold and broken things. “You don’t give a shit if I get off or not. You got this idea into your head that sex means penetration and you got this notion that you’re too important to be penetrated yourself and, honestly, you have deprived yourself of so many orgasms by not… touching me. When was the last time you just touched me?”

“I touch you!” Pete objects. “You’re never into it!”

“Two tugs on my dick and a quick rub at my asshole doesn’t count, idiot. You’re bad in bed, Pete, like… so fucking terrible. And you never used to be, so not satisfying me is a conscious decision you’ve made at some point.”

“You get off, don’t you?”

“Honestly, no, you haven’t made me come in months.”

“I don’t understand,” says Pete, very small, like this is the worst thing to have happened to him in the past couple weeks. Like being kicked out of the house where his kids live, relegated to the Star Wars comforter on his childhood bed, all of that is nothing compared to hearing that he doesn’t satisfy his fat, plain, boring husband in bed. “You — You used to love—”

“You used to care,” Patrick shrugs, like he can roll the words away with the movement of his shoulders. “You used to take your time and it used to be so good and then, after Harper was born, you stopped trying. I think I deserve good sex, I really do. And you can’t provide it.”

They sit in silence. The bulge at Pete’s crotch, the rigid evidence of his eagerness to resolve everything with his come spilled down Patrick’s throat, between his thighs, into his body, recedes rapidly. Once more, Patrick stares at the road and Pete looks out of the window and then, without another word, he opens the door and climbs out.

“I’m...” he starts and then pauses, staring down at his shoes, he continues quietly, “I didn’t realize you felt that way.”

There are tears at the back of Patrick’s throat, full and taut with his sadness. He swallows heavily and mutters at the steering wheel. “I do, and I don’t know how you can fix it,” he mutters. “I think I’m done for tonight. I’m tired.”

Pete digs his fingers into the window frame until his nail beds throb white under pink. They share a curious moment of watching this happen together; possibly, Patrick thinks, the first shared thought they’ve had in years. Slowly, Pete uncurls his hand. He steps back away from the car and glances up the street, towards his parent’s house. When he looks back his eyes are wide and drowning in hesitation.

Patrick sighs. “Goodnight.”
“Night,” Pete says. He looks as though he might walk away but then he pauses, faltering a little over the unfamiliar shape of the words in his mouth. “I… I’m sorry.”

Patrick drives away. It was not a good first date, on the scale with which first dates can be empirically recorded and rated. It’s only when he’s a couple of blocks away, safely blocked from view by intersections and traffic signals that he mutters under his breath.

“So am I.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr here!

Coming up next week... Pete has a lot to think about if he wants date number two to go better than his disastrous first attempt.

Have an awesome week!
Chapter 6

Okay, so far, the Ten Date Plan isn’t working out quite as brilliantly as Pete assumed it might. The good news is that he’s a professional journalist; his very particular set of skills includes an ability to think on his feet, to adapt to change and ensure that the deadline is met every time. He knows this is the case because it’s written in calibri font on a copy of his resumé stored away in a digital file in the cavernous folder on the Tribune servers labeled ‘Human Resources’.

Clearly, the problem is not with him. He’s handsome, charming, a fantastic provider and, with the rose-tinted glasses of hindsight firmly in place, an effective and adaptive father in challenging circumstances. When was the last time Patrick took the kids on a cross-town sightseeing tour on their way to school? That was a life lesson, a learning exercise, and the kind of thing the kids will look back on fondly when they’re richly nuanced, impossibly capable adults.

Patrick just loads them into the minivan — in which the car seats actually fit — and calls it a day. The minivan that, Pete distantly recalls, has entertainment screens in the headrests and enough crumbs between the seats to nutritionally sustain the kids and a wide selection of their friends and classmates for a cross-country roadtrip. Pete is certain that all of this makes him the superior parent.

Anyway, if Pete is the personification of Good Husband Material and, honestly, the reflection in his dark computer screen tells him that he absolutely is, then clearly the problem lies with Patrick and his inability to appreciate Pete’s particular brand of awesome. He’s decided not to dwell on the whole bad in bed… thing. He has a long list of satisfied customers dating back into the 1990s, a lengthy roster of tried and tested carnal tricks up his sleeve that have never failed to impress. Scientific data is scientific data and one bad review is hardly enough to pull down his average.

So maybe he laid in bed the whole night recounting every sexual encounter they’ve had for the past year or so instead of doing something productive, like sleeping. It was a depressingly quick playthrough because, he’s pretty sure, they’ve only had sex about six times since Avery was born. (This is if Pete includes handjobs. If he removes them, the number plummets drastically. If he sticks to penetration only, the number of times is once.) If, in retrospect, Patrick seemed a little quiet during those encounters, a little on edge, a little too eager to keep the lights off and the covers yanked up to his chin then, again, Pete’s not sure how that could possibly be his problem. He provided the dick — and it’s a… he’s not bragging or anything, but it’s a decent dick — all Patrick had to do was participate. God knows, Patrick should be glad to participate.

“Got the copy for you.”

Pete jumps and knocks his mouse, the screen springing back to life and demanding his password like a nasty little tattle-tale. Mikey — reporter, handsome, interesting — leans against his desk and happily chooses not to comment on the fact that this means Pete has been staring at a blank screen for at least ten minutes. Fat-fingered, Pete fumbles with his password, locking himself out once, twice, nearly a third time and a call to IT but, mercifully, he manages and his email springs to life in front of him.

Right now, Pete should comment on the email from Mikey, right at the top of his inbox.

Pete says, “How often do you and your wife have sex?”

Mikey looks both disconcerted and confused, which is an adorable look for him.

“Is this… part of my job?” he asks warily, adjusting his tie. “Some kind of… article research?”
Pete stops staring at stupid, handsome Mikey and instead starts staring at stupid, handsome Patrick via the medium of the framed family photograph on his desk. They hired a professional photographer just after Harper was born. Now, the five of them smile from his desk in bright shirts and no shoes. This was a different breed of husband; one who went to yoga three times a week, who wore the same size jeans as Pete and, God, used to ride him through the fucking mattress on a regular basis. Then, Patrick decided to bury himself in the frozen desserts section of Whole Foods and start ignoring his gym membership.

Anyway.

“Technically, no. I’m just… personally curious. But it might make an interesting thought piece, don’t you think?”

Mikey looks no less bewildered. “I’m not sure I personally have to share that information with you.”

“Right,” Pete nods carefully. “But, like, once every… Two monnn—” Mikey smirks. Pete begins adjusting the parameters of his data collection. “Two weeeeee—” Mikey makes a hand gesture that suggests Pete should round it down, “... days? Once every two days? Are you fucking kidding me, right now?”

“More like every day, unless we’re busy,” Mikey says and examines his very shiny shoes. Pete’s shoes look like he found his way to work along the shore of the lake.

Pete stares very hard at Patrick-in-the-photograph. Patrick’s smile seems less amused now. He looks like he’s pissed off that Pete is discussing the details of their sex life with someone he’s only met in passing. Pete lets out a long breath and remains thankful that he can no longer see himself in the computer screen. He suspects the expression on his face is as jealous as it is unattractive.

“Holy shit,” he says.

“I mean,” Mikey shrugs, as though he hasn’t just dropped a nuclear warhead directly into the center of Pete’s morning and, by extension, rocked the foundations of What Pete Wentz Believes About Married Sex, “we don’t have kids and you have like… many. You have many kids. Way more kids than most normal people want to be responsible for.”

Instead of replying right away, Pete is dwelling on an incident not too long ago in which he purred into Patrick’s ear What’s your favorite position in bed? as he packed up lunches for the kids. Patrick pondered this for a moment before he said, The one with an extra pillow between my knees when I sleep on my side, it really helps with my back. It was not, Pete thinks, a particularly sexy response.

“Yeah, ton of kids,” he agrees absently. Is that it? The center of this virtuous Hellraiser puzzle box contains nothing more than a photograph of his kids and a note that says better luck next time, blue balls. “I mean… I don’t feel like they affect my desire to… desire, I guess. I still want to — You know?”

“Well, yeah,” Mikey scratches the back of his head and shrugs like the answer is obvious, “but you’re here, in the office, right?”

Pete’s head jerks up so fast he risks whiplash. Hearing that is something like drifting in and out of a whispered conversation and catching his name towards the end. I’m here, he thinks desperately, and Patrick isn’t. There’s definite significance in there but pinning it down is like looking for a pebble at the bottom of the lake; the harder he searches, the more mud and murk he stirs up until it’s impossible to see anything beneath the surface at all.
He opens his mouth to interrogate Mikey — who he suspects might be a relationship guru — and gets as far as “Wait, what do you—” before he’s cut off from the doorway.

“The hell are you homos talking about?”

Internally, Pete sighs.

Alright, so Pete is not at the top of the tree when it comes to office hierarchy. Pete is painfully far from the top of the tree, although it pains him to admit it because he quite likes telling himself he’s sort of a big deal. He’s middle branches at best, and there are many metaphorical dicks to suck and toes to trample all over if he ever wants to get significantly higher. Unfortunately for him, and to stretch the tree analogy as far as he possibly can before it snaps like a figurative bough, the person on the branch above him is Bradley ‘Call Me Butch’ Walker.

And Butch Walker is an ass.

“Pete’s talking about running a thought piece on sex after marriage,” Mikey says, sliding onto the edge of Pete’s desk. This conversation would be so much more productive if Mikey’s pert little ass wasn’t six inches from Pete’s husband and children’s smiling faces. Pete is awfully close to crossing the streams. “Who’s getting it, who’s not, that sort of thing.”

Butch grimaces. “Is this fucking Cosmo?”

Pete shakes his head; it is incontrovertibly clear that the newsfloor is nothing like Cosmo. Their floor is dominated by alpha males flexing their egos and swinging their dicks. Pete suspects the bathrooms at Cosmo probably smell nicer.

“No, it was just… I don’t know, just passing interest, I guess,” Pete struggles wildly for reasoning that will not lead Butch to the obvious and humiliating conclusion. “Everyone’s into shit like that these days, we’ve got to branch out, stay relevant. Even if we bury it with the online content, it’s something for chicks to read and if it’s in the Tribune, they don’t even have to pretend to be embarrassed about it.”

Butch leers. It’s very, very obvious that he doesn’t believe Pete at all.

“The wifey not putting out, Petey-Pie, that it?” Butch, it seems, is a sniper using insults for ammunition. “I thought gay guys were like, fucking insatiable or something. I figured getting your dick sucked on the regular by someone who knows their way around it was the trade-off for taking it up the ass?”

Pete lifts one shoulder and pretends his computer is extremely interesting. “You know how it is, Bradley, he can’t keep up.” He taps a few times on his keyboard to demonstrate how busy he is.

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“Whatever.” Butch is not only grinning but attracting a crowd of interested reporters; Pete wonders how hard he’d have to football tackle him to send him crashing through the window behind him and onto the city streets below. “Can’t keep his dick hard, is that it? Damn, do fat dudes fuck like fat chicks? Because fat chicks are the fucking best, so… eager to please. Desperate to have something in their mouth, am I right? They’re a lot like scooters, though — fun to ride, but you wouldn’t want your friends to see, know what I mean?”

It turns out that Pete doesn’t enjoy hearing these things about Patrick from someone else.

Mikey is laughing. It is impossible to tell if he is genuinely amused or silently wishing Butch would fuck off. Pete hopes his own smile is half as convincing. In the hope that Butch, like a tyrannosaurus, has vision that is based on movement, Pete sits very still and fixes his gaze on a promotional email
from Dominos like it’s the most interesting thing he’s seen in his life. Unfortunately, Butch does not have jurassic era optical impairments but he does have the sense of humor of a Republican dinosaur circa 1976 and demonstrates this by launching into a pornographic representation of, Pete thinks, anal fingering.

It’s that or he’s demonstrating how he gets the last stick of gum from the back of the glove compartment. Pete feels an immense wave of pity for both Butch’s wife and, by extension, any other woman who has been unlucky enough to have sex with him.

“Oh yeah, baby, that’s it,” he moans, eyes rolled back as his hips rock in time with his wrist. “Yeah, right there, fuck me with your big gay dick. Is that how you do it, Wentz? Which one of you is the chick and who’s the dude?”

Idly, Pete thinks that Butch’s wristwork could use a little focus but suspects that pointing that out to his direct superior probably won’t help him secure that corner office. There’s a sour, curdled milk feeling in the pit of Pete’s gut as a thought creeps in: two tugs on my dick and a quick rub at my asshole. Oh God. No. No, this can’t be what Patrick imagines when he thinks about Pete fucking him.

Pete’s mouth opens and promptly runs away with him: “Go fuck yourself, you homophobic prick.”

The office falls immediately and painfully silent. Only the voices, though. There’s still a low humming throb that could be the heating system, or the fan on Pete’s computer, or his pulse rich and ripe in his ears. Pete carries in his chest a heavy fury that he sink into the clamp of his teeth to his bottom lip; he can’t let himself breathe another word, he can’t show weakness. This office is a wolf pack and they circle, eyes bright with vicious intent, waiting for the first sign of an exposed jugular to pounce and tear the weak one apart.

Butch smiles, wide and predatory and not at all embarrassed, and when he speaks his voice is bright with cruel amusement, “Ooh, did I touch a nerve there, buddy? Why so serious — you on your period?”

In another moment, Pete might appreciate the irony of hearing his own words echoed back at him by someone he’s supposed to respect. There’s a beautiful, poetic symmetry to it, he’s sure. Of course, it’s different for him; he’s currently being belittled in front of his whole team. This is not light hearted banter between spouses when one of them — the lazy one — hasn’t moved his ass from the couch all day. There are, like, rights and legal issues associated with making fun of someone for their sexuality in the workplace. This is serious. This is the kind of thing he could feasibly take to a lawyer.

(That his inevitable divorce will also involve a lawyer — probably Pete’s own father — is, he feels, a moot point he can examine later.)

Every eye in the office is trained on them, unmoving, sharks waiting for the iron-bright tang of blood in the water. This wouldn’t be the first time two editors have come to blows on the newsfloor. It wouldn’t even be the first time this month. There’s no professional or personal reason that Pete shouldn’t stand up, raise his fists and walk away from this with blood on his teeth and his knuckles. A pointless, peacock display of toxic masculinity for the amusement of the reporters watching them eagerly, silently placing bets on who’s more likely to walk away with a black eye: the fifty-something or the faggot.

Fact: Pete knows what they call him behind his back. He’s invited them into his home for poker nights, barbecues, been polite to their pedestrian, boring wives whilst they’re equally courteous to his husband and pretended they’re friends. None of that matters because Pete will always be The Other.
They will *always* say he got his job due to equal rights and representation figures at the Tribune. He will never stop attempting to prove them wrong.

He uncoils his fists, one finger at a time, and takes a deep, calming breath. Today will not be the day he takes a swing at Chicago’s answer to Bernard Manning. He will not grant him the satisfaction of a bloody nose or, worse, give him the opening to make a ‘punches like a girl’ joke.

He smiles, tight and painful and vicious, and says, “Maybe I am, want to help me deal with the cramps?”

It works; the news team lose interest and turn back to their computers, the hum of background conversation, phone calls and keys rattling with tomorrow’s press pieces filling the space. Pete can no longer hear his pulse, but he thinks he can feel it in the roots of his teeth. He keeps smiling.

“So fucking gay,” Butch mutters. “So fucking gay.”

He turns away and takes the malice with him. Pete is a pliant dog on its back with its throat bared, tail tucked between his legs. For today, he’s submissive, but he’s allowed to get back up. This is life in this toxic stew of heterosexual maleness that stinks so badly he swears he can smell it on his shirts some days.

“See you at soccer?” Pete calls to Butch’s back. He’s already planning on stepping on his leg with his cleats.

“You know it!”

His life outside of Patrick, away from the safety of their mutual friends who don’t see them as some kind of freak show, has never looked less appealing. For the first time in two weeks, the first time since Patrick handed him his overnight bag and told him to get the fuck out of the house, Pete thinks he might be beginning to panic. In lieu of any constructive output for this newfound and unwelcome sensation of prickling anxiety that stirs the hair at the nape of his neck, he turns to google.

If he can’t win Patrick back with nostalgia, he’ll do it with cash.

***

Patrick has never been a fan of overblown romantic gestures.

There’s nothing more excruciating than performative public demonstrations of affection when, like, pizza and a movie on the couch would woo him just as well. So, he admits to feeling a hint of trepidation when Pete texts him – a clear week after their disastrous first date and just as long since he’s acknowledged either Patrick or the kids – and tells him to dress up and prepare to be amazed.

The last time Pete told him to brace himself for a date, they both wound up spending the night in a holding cell for trespassing on private land. This was only because no one was around to make the public indecency charge stick. It’s not an experience Patrick is eager to repeat in his thirties.

Still, he showers and shaves, puts on a suit that *almost* fits — if he doesn’t button the jacket — and wears a tie and cologne. He combs his hair and digs out the glasses that Avery hasn’t tossed across the hardwood floor so many times that they’re held together by glue and good will. By his current standards this is a Big Deal.

(For reference, Patrick’s day to day dress code lingers somewhere between *comfortable* and *nightwear*. He’s admitting nothing out loud but he has questioned on more than one occasion, if there’s really any difference between pajamas and sweatpants. This is not due to an empty checking
account but rather a strong and lingering aversion to spending any more time in front of a changing room mirror than is absolutely necessary. Plus, his blog revolves around pictures of his perfectly photogenic kids in his beautifully put together home. No one cares what the dude behind the camera looks like.)

“Daddy,” says Caitlyn, sitting on his bed — their bed, Pete’s bed — with her reading practise and her wide brown eyes. “I need to talk to you.”

“Of course, sweetie, what’s bothering you,” he asks, adjusting his cufflinks whilst wondering if cufflinks are too much.

“It’s about dad,” she says.

“Oh?” he mutters absently. “Well, I think he’s going to spend some time with you this week, so…”

“I want you to know, if he’s making you unhappy, you don’t have to take him back.”

Patrick pauses. It feels — uncomfortable, to hear his daughter acknowledge the thing he’s been coaching himself on over and over again. He looks at her in the mirror and says, “I — What?”

“You and dad,” she continues earnestly. “I mean, I love him and everything, but if you don’t? That’s cool. Well, it’s not cool, but — I don’t… You shouldn’t be sad to make him happy.”

There is a slippery, greasy eel in Patrick’s guts. This is not the conversation he imagined having with an 11-year-old who can, apparently, see the wood amongst the trees while Patrick gropes, half-blind. He’s trying so hard to hold it all together, to love these kids enough for two parents. He collapses onto the edge of the bed, pulls her close and kisses the curls on the top of her head.

“Caitlyn,” he begins, very seriously, because he owes her his utmost sincerity, “I would do anything to make you guys happy. But even I know that taking your dad back if I don’t really want him here wouldn’t make anyone happy. I can’t make you any guarantees, that’s how it is to be a grown up, but I can promise you that I would never do anything that would risk your happiness. Okay?”

The problem is — and it’s taken every ounce of self-restraint that Patrick has not to rant about this on his blog — no one really cares about the parent left behind to deal with the emotional fallout of a broken home. Pretending that everything is okay is draining every ounce of emotional resilience Patrick has. He hurts down to his marrow every time Noah asks when dad is coming home. They say time’s supposed to heal all wounds and Patrick is willing the days away.

“I’m fine,” he reassures her, when she doesn’t speak. “I’m fine, and we’re fine and everything is going to carry on being absolutely fine, no matter what happens. Okay?”

Beside him, Caitlyn sighs, “Okay, but just… be careful.” She reaches over and tweaks his tie, brushes her fingers through his hair and pats it into place. “Oh, and dad? You look, like, super handsome.”

The compliment is sweet but Patrick can see the tubby, awkward man in the mirror. He says thank you anyway. She doesn’t need to inherit his hangups. He’s so tired of feeling unlovable.

So, when Patrick trips his way across the restaurant thirty minutes later and collapses into the chair opposite Pete’s? When Pete looks at him from those wide brown eyes with his full mouth tipped up at the corners like Patrick is Pogo the fucking clown with his suit that doesn’t fit and his big, red face? Patrick is not in the fucking mood to humor him.

“What?” he snaps. “What are you laughing at?”
To the untrained eye of a casual onlooker this might seem a little harsh but, reminder, Patrick has seen neither hide nor hair of this man with whom he shares a home loan, a checking account and a fucking name, for the better part of a week, again. The older kids are starting to ask questions like Is dad dead? and Did you murder him last week and dump him in the lake? Patrick thinks he’s earned this.

“I’m not laughing,” says Pete defensively. “You look… good. That’s all. I’m not used to you making an—”

Patrick shoots him a look so withering that Pete snaps his mouth shut with an audible click of his teeth. It is imperative for the safety of their already-floundering marriage and the continued enjoyment of the diners around them that Pete does not finish that sentence.

“So,” Pete tries again gamely. “How are you?”

“Great,” Patrick says, the sarcasm a living thing writhing on the table between them. “Never better. My husband moved out two weeks ago and he’s seen his children precisely twice since then. I’d worry about the effect it’s having on them but, to be honest, I feel like fifty-percent of them haven’t actually noticed he’s missing.” He grabs a bread roll from the basket on the table and tears into it with visceral savagery; Pete looks visibly alarmed and leans back in his seat. “You?”

From this position, Patrick swears he can see the cogs slowly rotating in Pete’s head, his internal rolodex cycling through index cards until he reaches ‘K is for Kids’ and his eyes widen with theatrical slowness. He opens his mouth, his damp pink tongue resting on his teeth as he frantically flicks his gaze left and right and back again and then he says, very softly, “Oh. About that.”

“Yes,” Patrick repeats around a mouthful of carbohydrates he probably shouldn’t be eating, “about that.”

“The thing is,” Pete begins cautiously, reaching for a roll as though they can bond over baked goods, “you seem to have the whole parenting... thing? Sort of… cornered? Plus, you know, you sort of… kicked me out? Which makes me feel like I probably shouldn’t impose?”

If there was any available right now, Patrick would be pouring anti-anxiety medication into his mouth and crunching it up dry with the bread, take one per day be damned. Like Joey Ramone, he wants to be sedated and, so help him, he is perilously close to lobotomizing himself with the butter knife. It seems that Pete is an unending carousel of doesn’t get it, a blazing sun of unconcerned apathy, unaware of the planets orbiting him, dependent on him. Also, Patrick may murder him if he doesn’t stop talking in questions. He will not talk his way out of this with High Rise Terminal.

“Peter,” Patrick enunciates every syllable with as much clarity as he can muster, leaning forward earnestly into his husband’s space, “they are your children. For the love of — Imposition is not a stage that we’re at! You’re not a maiden aunt angling for an invitation to thanksgiving dinner! You’re their dad. You should want to be around them all the time, I can’t — I don’t understand why you don’t want to be around them all the time.”

Patrick can’t comprehend a reality in which he doesn’t see his children for over a week and is okay with it. He could do without the repeated reminders that Pete can and does function without them without turning a hair. Fuck, he wants to go home.

“I do,” Pete insists, “but you’re there being super dad and there’s no — there’s no place for me to fit in anymore! They don’t need me because they only want you!”

There’s an uncomfortable possibility that this is true, that somehow, Patrick hauled up the portcullis
behind him and the kids and left Pete outside. Still, it’s not like Pete has made any particular effort to breach the gates.

“And whose fault is that, exactly?” he snaps.

“Look, I’m trying my best here, okay?” Pete rakes a hand through his hair, which draws attention to the gray peppering his undercut. “I’ve never been on the brink of a fucking divorce before so excuse me if I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do!”

Patrick is thisfuckingclose to slamming his head into his bread plate. “You could try listening to the things I’ve been saying to you for years, maybe spending a little time with your kids as an actual parent rather than staggering through every interaction with them like it’s some kind of medieval torture.”

“Well, I’m sorry I don’t match up to your social media-friendly, Martha Stewart without the felony, homemaker skills,” Pete snaps. “Could you at least humor me and pretend to enjoy my company for twenty minutes? We can go back to fighting as soon as we’re done with the soup.”

As he collapses back into his seat and snatches the wine list from the table, Patrick is struck suddenly by how tired Pete looks right now. There are dark shadows under his eyes, his shirt collar a little loose around his throat; from poor laundry or poor eating remains unclear. Within Patrick’s chest, something uncurls and stretches lazily, that same cold, dread feeling that seeps through him when one of the kids gets sick. It is, Patrick thinks, extremely inconvenient that he still cares about this idiot. He is imbued with the urge to reach across the table and swipe a hand through Pete’s hair, to tweak at the badly tied knot of his tie. He can’t do either of those things, so instead he speaks sharply, like Pete is a particularly annoying brand of yappy lapdog.

“I don’t know why I’m even here.”

It’s an inauspicious launching point for their night of conversation and reconciliation and, across three feet of white linen and an improbable number of knives and forks for the amount of food coming out of the kitchen, Pete raises his eyebrows. Then, he says, “Well, I thought maybe you’d want to start by ordering something to drink and we could take it from there. Unless you meant in a more cosmic sense, in which case I’m happy to debate quantum theory, if you think it’ll help.”

He is trying to be charming, his smile easy and relaxed as he lounges into his seat, louche and sexy, and goes back to consulting the wine list. Patrick blurts out, “I don’t know why you make me so angry. Just looking at you is enough to make me want to start punching walls.”

“Is that a step up from you wanting to punch me?” Pete asks lightly. It’s an ill-advised joke.

“None of this is funny,” Patrick tells him. The sommelier approaches — because of course Pete booked a restaurant that requires an entirely separate member of staff to dispense its wine — and he bites his lip and his tongue.

They drink barolo in uncomfortable silence, which is a shame as Patrick wants to comment that it’s fucking fantastic. Their entreé arrives and they eat tiny portions of fussy, over-sauced food without speaking. The table is cleared and the quiet echoes on. It’s slipped from merely awkward and into competitive, an unspoken contest of who will cave first. Finally, as the second bottle of wine arrives along with their main course, Pete breaks.

“You know,” he says, “we were good together, once.”

Patrick considers his answer over a mouthful of duck. Last night, Avery reacted so violently to
spinach casserole that her diaper — along with Patrick’s tears — overflowed in the middle of the night. He woke Harper in his quest for clean sheets. Neither one of them would go back to sleep in their own beds. They curled in his bed and spent the rest of the so-called silent watches of the night giggle and poking one another, and him, in the face. He’s running on two hours sleep and unreasonable, unfeasible, quantities of caffeine and energy pills that were licensed by no pharmacist ever. Right now, he does not need to walk down memory lane. Right now, he needs someone to take over and tell him, after eleven goddamn years, that tonight, just tonight, he can sleep.

Of course, Patrick knows that’s not going to happen. Tonight, Pete will go back to his mom’s place and Patrick will go back to their not-so-marital home and he’ll deal with every night-feed and nightmare while Pete sleeps the quiet sleep of the unencumbered. It is so, so unfair.

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Maybe once. There’s kind of a lot of toxic water under that particular bridge right now.”

“Do you think—” Pete starts, bites it off and then starts again. “Do you think maybe we could get back to that? I mean, you did love me once.”

_I still love you now_, Patrick thinks, _I don’t want to, but I do and I can’t help it and it terrifies me._

“Do you love me?” he asks. The prospect of Pete answering is terrifying.

Pete looks both affronted and baffled. “What? Like — you even need to ask?” Patrick glares at him, it is a look, he hopes, that says he absolutely does. “Of course I love you!”

“Then why don’t I feel it anymore?” he whispers.

“Because — we’ve just,” Pete pauses and thinks and furrows his brow, “we’ve just lost sight of us. What we need is to just… get back to us.”

Patrick massages his temples. “It’s not just about me and you anymore,” he sighs wearily. “We have kids and you don’t seem to give a shit about them. They were hardly accidental pregnancies, you asked for those kids, you wanted them and we paid an insane amount of money to get them. When we brought them home you loved them so much. I need — What the hell changed?”

There’s an ache in his chest like glass; brilliantly bright and shining but sharp at the edges, slicing through his veins until the hurt aches through him. He takes a defiant mouthful of his wine and dares Pete to explain himself.

“I do want the kids!” Pete snaps. “I always wanted the kids, I used to drive Caitlyn and Noah around for hours when they were babies and—”

“And now you haven’t changed a single one of Avery’s diapers.” Patrick wipes his mouth on his napkin and tosses it down onto the table between them. “Don’t tell me about the things you used to do, they don’t carry forward, this isn’t a greatest hits album of fatherhood. Tell me one thing you’ve done for them recently?”

“Look, just because I can’t get to Caitlyn’s dance recitals or Noah’s soccer games doesn’t mean—”

“Karate and ballet,” Patrick snaps. Pete looks bewildered, then pissed off.

“Okay, fine, whatever, he does karate.”

“No,” Patrick says, very carefully, because he doesn’t trust himself to say too much. “Caitlyn does karate. Noah does ballet.”
“Ballet?” Pete repeats acerbically. “Isn’t that a little—”

Patrick’s head snaps up. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence. Don’t you goddamn dare.”

There is a tension headache pooling in the base of Patrick’s skull. He decides, at this point, to take advantage of the analgesic properties of alcohol and downs the wine in his glass.

“So I don’t know every little thing about them,” Pete mutters. “I’m at work, I don’t always—”

“What belt is Caitlyn?” Patrick asks lightly. Pete doesn’t answer. “What grade is Noah? Tell me the name of Harper’s daycare teacher. How many ounces of formula does Avery have in her nighttime bottle?” Pete steeps his hands and rests his forehead against them lightly, it’s clear he doesn’t know. It’s a sucker punch, a one-two blow to the ribs as Patrick reels back in his seat. “Jesus Christ. I’d worked out that you’re a shitty husband but — Fuck, I didn’t realize you’re an awful father, too.”

This is all going swimmingly. Patrick’s guts cramp for a moment, spinning in freefall and waiting, waiting, waiting to hit the ground. They glare at one another. Patrick wants to extend his middle finger and smear it into Pete’s face until he performs a passable impersonation of someone who understands and appreciates the damage he’s caused. He wants Pete to understand.

Pete says, “You don’t want to be a single father,” because Pete is an idiot.

“I already am a single father,” Patrick barks. “I’ve been a single father since Harper was born. If this is your plan, to wear me down and scare me and belittle me for ten dates until I give in and take you back because I can’t do any better—”

“That’s not my plan,” Pete says, shakily though. Patrick suspects it absolutely was his plan. “Listen, we were so much more than lovers at one point. You were my best friend, but then the kids took over and — I get that, honestly I do. But you never came back to me, not really. When did you decide to shut me out?”

Patrick considers his answer over a sip from his glass. “Honestly? I didn’t mean to. You walked away half a step at a time and I left the door propped open for you for so long because I figured you’d always come back. It took a broken washing machine for me to realize your home wasn’t with me anymore, regardless of the address you have on your driver’s licence.”

“This is fucking stupid,” Pete opines. “Just let me come home, we can’t figure things out from different houses. I’ll try, I swear I will.”

They are so far from trying that it’s laughable. They left behind trying years ago. On the table between them, Patrick’s phone rings, an incoming call from the babysitter. There’s a sudden drop of panic in his gut, his heart accelerating as the world slows down. He’s imagining dead kids, injured kids, broken bones and flashing blue lights.

“Ignore it,” Pete says. “Patrick, please.”

Patrick elects not to reply, swiping accept and taking the call. “Hello?”

“Mr Stump-Wentz?” the babysitter says, reassuringly calm and capable. “I’m so sorry to disturb you but Avery is—”

Meningitis, he thinks, bound to be. “Oh God, is she—” Dead? Dying? Coated entirely in an unidentified and life-threatening rash?
“She’s okay,” she reassures him quickly. Happily, Patrick’s heart slows from a flat gallop to a throbbing hum. “Don’t panic. It’s just she’s running a fever and she seems so unhappy. I thought I should let you know, just in case you wanted to come back and check on her.”

“Yes,” Patrick says, already fumbling to his feet. Across the table, Pete mouths ‘are you serious?’ — Patrick is deadly serious. “Of course, I — I’ll be right back. Like, give me thirty minutes.”

“There’s really no rush, Mr Stump.” He can hear Avery grizzling in the background, the low, long whimper of a child in pain. It twists his gut with paternal guilt. “It’s fine.”

“No, I’m coming, it’s okay, I’ll be there soon. Bye.”

He hangs up and slips the phone back into his pocket. Pete blinks up at him. “Where are you going?”

“Avery is sick, I need to go home.”

“For God’s sake, Patrick,” Pete snaps, “this is our fucking marriage on the line here, just get the babysitter to give her some Feverall and sit back down.”

Pete would do as well to ask Patrick to walk on water. To ask him to pull down the moon from the sky. There is no task he can think of that would be more impossible than ignoring their infant daughter when she’s sick. “She’s a baby, she needs me. What part of that don’t you understand?”

“I need you!” Pete bleats. When it becomes apparent that pleading won’t work, he huffs. “You know what? This is why our marriage is in trouble. You’re always putting me at the bottom of the fucking list, behind your blog, behind your friends, behind your goddamn baby.”

It’s a common tactic of the pulp fiction author to describe the moment all of the air leaves the room. This is not metaphorical. It turns out, as Patrick stares at Pete across the table, his hands loose at his sides and his lungs devoid entirely, that it is absolutely physically possible. Patrick can’t breathe. There is nothing in the room for him to draw into his lungs beyond burning disbelief. His hands are shaking, his lip trembling and his eyes stinging behind his glasses. This is so, so much worse than he ever imagined it could be, even though Pete is doing nothing more than voicing the thought Patrick’s had every day since Avery was born.

Probably, he should shout. Probably, he should grab Pete’s drink and toss it into his face. Probably, he should take a moment to explain to Pete how insanely, irrevocably fucked their relationship is and how beautifully he’s demonstrated that in a single sentence. That will have to wait for a time when he doesn’t have a sick child to attend to.

Quietly, he says, “Our baby, Pete. She’s our baby.”

“I know that,” Pete blusters, “I didn’t mean it like that. It was just a slip. Seriously, just sit down.”

Patrick doesn’t hear what else Pete has to say, because Patrick is already pushing his way back through the restaurant, collecting his coat from the maître d’ and stumbling out into the night in search of a cab. He thinks, as he collapses into a taxi, that he sees Pete through the window, staring down at the tablecloth, unmoving.

Your baby.

If that ain’t the goddamn truth.
The headliner of Pete’s car matches the soft gray paintwork of Westbrook Elementary School’s roof almost exactly. He knows this because he has been staring between the two for the past thirty minutes. The reason he makes sure his gaze is fixed very firmly on one or the other is because he’s almost certain that, if he glances even casually in the direction of the nearby schoolyard, an unholy terror of PTA mothers in shiny new SUVs will bring down a reckoning of self-righteous fury upon him without hesitation.

A non-white man in a big black car parked conspicuously on the edges of school property? This is exactly the kind of thing crime statistics and local news articles are made of.

Maybe, if he’d made more of an effort to take part in the stupid bake sales, or to hand out rations of weak Kool-Aid and stale Cheetos at end-of-semester dances, then this wouldn’t feel so awkward. This is a world he isn’t part of, halls he’s never walked and staff he doesn’t know. For fuck’s sake, he doesn’t even go to parent-teacher conferences.

(“Because, Patrick, it’s parent-teacher, not parents-teacher. Just take some notes and run them by me later, I’m sure they’re not about to tell you the kids are getting the Pulitzer.”)

He is beginning to realize that he could have made a little more effort with the kids. Sitting in the restaurant alone, finishing off the bottle of wine, he forced himself to recap every half-forgotten conversation of the past few weeks, months, years. Patrick is right. He doesn’t know shit about his children. Wouldn’t have the first clue about how to conduct their day to day lives if Patrick ran away and joined Cirque du Soleil. Didn’t care, until roughly 72 hours ago.

This dangerous carousel of self-blame cranks around in a wobbling, dizzying circle until Pete is forced to confront a further truth: He probably should have made more effort with Patrick. Unfortunately, by acknowledging this, Pete has also been forced to admit to himself in the darkness of guilt-induced insomnia that he has no idea how to fix it.

“Hi,” says Caitlyn, sliding into the passenger seat. “Just so you know, if I’m not back for class, it’ll take them, like… half a minute to issue an amber alert and daddy will probably kill you.”

Before Pete can process the accuracy of that statement – or check its validity via the glorious medium of Google – the back door opens and a whirlwind wrapped up in a GAP hoodie collapses onto the seat.

“Duh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh Dadman!”

“Whoa,” Pete looks at Noah and then at Caitlyn. “I didn’t realize this was a whole family event. I didn’t ask for you at the desk, you’re a non-requested child.” Noah looks devastated which makes Pete’s guts feel squirmy and uncomfortable, he rushes to correct himself. “A good non-request. A surprise. A bonus. Uh… How much trouble am I in right now? Is this kidnap? Oh God, I’m going to be on the news and your dad is going to murder me.”

“Probably,” Caitlyn says. “He followed me out of the lunchroom. Because he’s a total loser who doesn’t have any friends.”

Pete looks at Noah over the headrest. “Is that true? You have friends, right?”

It is suddenly immensely important that his son assures him he does, that he’s popular and bright and funny and all of the other kids see that, too. Pete feels it fiercely in his chest, this raw fury of
“Wakanda forever!” Noah declares dramatically instead of answering, his arms crossed over his chest. Pete boggles at him silently. “Dad,” he sighs, “you’re supposed to do it back.”

“Oh.” There is literally no way Pete is embarrassing himself by joining in with that. “I thought you did the whole… Fortnite thing? You know?”

He dabs in demonstration, because apparently that is less humiliating.

Caitlyn sighs. “He’s speaks many different dialects of dweeb.”

“Whatever, Caitlyn! Just because Jackson Parker told everyone he didn’t want to go out with you—”

“Shut up, fetus! Dad.”

His children have boy problems and social issues and personalities and lives he has never before considered. Until this moment they were like collectible Star Wars figures, preserved in the plastic wrapping of their cozy, suburban house. They were something he could pull out to impress his friends but not entirely separate entities, growing and learning and waiting to break free. Pete, it seems, has a habit of caging things for himself, a selfish desire not to share them with the world unless it benefits him.

He clears his throat vaguely. “Uh… maybe you’re too young for a boyfriend, Caity. I mean, we can talk it over with daddy, but…”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Noah points out. “Because Jackson thinks she looks like an alligator’s butthole.”

“You’re a butthole, washrag!”

Caitlyn launches herself at her little brother. It’s not unlike the monkey enclosure at Lincoln Park Zoo, which leads, in a roundabout way, to a nostalgic pang of rose-tinted wistfulness for summer afternoons in the city, walking around the enclosures with Caitlyn on his shoulders and Noah in the stroller, hand in hand with Patrick, matching cargo shorts and ice cream-flavored kisses.

There is an ominous, fleshy thump. Noah screeches.

If they continue to slap at one another through the headrests, there’s a possibility someone may lose an eye. The impromptu kidnapping of his own children from their educators is not something he wants to explain to their other father in the emergency room.

“Okay, that’s enough! Come on, knock it off!”

They don’t knock it off, because children are like that and his hand still bears a faint but noticeable impression of Harper’s teeth as a lasting reminder. Because he lacks a hosepipe to turn on them—which he thinks might actually be the recommended response to fighting cats, not kids—and because they clearly have no intention of listening to him of their own volition, he formulates a swift but formidable plan. Three taps on the screen of his iPhone and a twist of the dial in the center of the sound system on the dash and the two of them fall into stunned silence.

Which is great, because the acoustics lend a certain something-something to Pete’s off-key singing.

“I like big butts and I cannot lie, you other brothers can’t deny, when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist and a round thing in your face you get sprung—”
“Dad!” Caitlyn hisses, slamming down in her seat as though she can sink through it via the process of osmosis. “Shut up! And stop playing your — your old person music!”

“What’s that?” he asks innocently. Shouts, really, to be heard over the speakers. There are kids outside who are beginning to stare. “You want me to wind down the windows so all of your friends can hear you listening to Baby Got Back in the car with your father? Is that what you want me to do?”

“If you don’t switch that off right now,” Caitlyn says. “I’m calling Child Protective Services and daddy and grandma.”

Noah vibrates into a body pop across the backseat. “I like it!”

“Noah likes it,” Pete confirms. “Don’t knock it til you’ve tried it, Cait.”

He is, visibly, not a dancer, but he joins in anyway because Caitlyn looks so much like Patrick when she’s outraged. Until he remembers that the lyrics get a little, well, racy, and he hits the mute button. He’d rather curtail his fun than explain to Noah why Sir Mix-a-Lot takes a sharp right turn and begins talking about anacondas. Kids are smart these days, he doubts either of them would believe that formative hip-hop artists had a strong interest in herpetology.

“Thank you,” says Caitlyn emphatically. “Okay, is there, like, a reason you’ve pulled us out of school or did you just want to destroy my social life?”

“You’re eleven,” he points out, “you’re still in grade school. You don’t have anything that’s even loosely similar to a social life. You have, like, playdates, at best. Anyway, I need your help.”

Caitlyn smiles at him, wide enough to show every brilliant white Wentz tooth. It is so dazzling that it’s almost possible to miss the sharp, vicious shape of it until she says, “You probably should’ve thought about that before you humiliated and insulted me. I’m going back to class.”

She means it, too. He hits the central lock button. “Wait! I will pay you ten US dollars if you stay and help me.”

From the backseat, Noah asks, “Do I get ten dollars, too?”

“No,” Pete says, shaking his head like it’s very obvious. Which it sort of is — to him at least — because he knows he only has one ten dollar bill in his wallet. “Because you didn’t threaten to run away. Your negotiation skills need improvement and this is a life lesson that you’re totally going to thank me for one day.”

“I’ll leave,” Noah threatens.

“You’re locked in,” Pete points out.

“That,” says Noah, “is totally not cool.”

“I can offer you,” Pete rummages for a moment, “a granola bar and... and half a bottle of room temperature iced tea.”

Noah narrows his eyes then beams. “Sold!” Pete hands over the spoils and watches him tear into them with vigor. He sprays crumbs across the upholstery that immediately wedge their way down into every conceivable crevice. “Thanks, dad, you’re the best!”

Faced with the prospect of getting one over on her younger brother, Caitlyn collapses back into the
“Ten dollars?” she asks. Pete nods. This is a progression in his parenting skills which have moved from ‘wrangling cats’ to ‘bribery’ in a brilliantly short space of time. “Okay, fine. What do you need help with?”

Pete clears his throat. “I need you to tell me what to do to impress your dad. Uh, not me, your daddy. I know how to impress me. I’m actually, like, really easy to impress but he — is not.”

That probably covers all of the major plot points in this daytime drama so far.

“Wow.” Caitlyn manages to inject an awful lot of distaste into one syllable, spitting it out like she used to spit out strained peas. “You’re unbelievable.”

“You want to know what daddy likes?” Noah asks. “Uh, he liiikes — he likes us! He always says he does, he says we’re his favorite people in the world.”

It’s not an insult to come second best to their children, Pete realizes this — on an academic level, at least — however, he suspects he’s probably not even in Patrick’s top ten right now. He ruffles Noah’s hair and cups the smooth warmth of his cheek. He is struck, hard and right in the guts, with how long it’s been since he last looked at his kids. They’re growing so fast it chokes the air from him, a broken sound slipping past his lips. He coughs instead and when he speaks his voice is low, gruff. “I know you are, buddy. But, uh — I meant something I can do for daddy, you know? Something fun.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit weird that you’re asking your kids to fix this for you?” Caitlyn says, because Caitlyn is, apparently, very firmly entrenched in Team Patrick. “According to you, I’m not mature enough for a boyfriend, so how do you think I’m going to help you?”

Pete actually suspects that Caitlyn Stump-Wentz is not only mature enough to handle any boy in her peer group, she is probably mature enough to run for president.

“Can I level with you, Caity?” he asks. It’s mostly rhetorical, but she nods anyway so he continues. “Most adults have absolutely no idea what they’re doing most of the time. Seriously. We act like we have all the answers but… if you gave me a pop quiz on how to do basically anything that isn’t my job at the newspaper, I can guarantee you I’d fail it spectacularly. I’m a horrible adult. I’m the fu— I’m the worst, okay? But one thing I used to be really, really awesome at was making your daddy happy and, right now, I can’t seem to work out how to do that.”

“So, what you’re saying is that daddy can do better?” Now Caitlyn is the one kicking him in the crotch with rhetoric. “You shouldn’t come back if you can’t figure out how to make him happy without asking me. I’m in grade school, remember? What do I know.”

“That was mean of me, I apologize for that, but—”

“Unlock the door, dad,” she says decisively. “We’re going to be late for class.”

“But—”

“Now, dad.”

Between the seats, Noah extends his hand for a fist bump. Pete returns it solemnly, feeling too many things to really keep track of them. He croaks out weakly, “Hey, how about I pick you up from school one night this week? We can — I could take you to Moon Pie?”
“Awesome!” Noah declares and, for the first time in a long time, Pete feels like a parent, making plans with his kids and feeling that visceral tingle of excitement in the base of his spine. This is like being Noah’s age again, laid on the backseat of the car listening to his dad sing Build Me Up Buttercup.

“We’ve already been with daddy,” Caitlyn points out, but she’s wavering, Pete can feel it. He squeezes her shoulder, because she looks like she might murder him if he goes in for a hug. “But whatever, I guess. Will the babies be there?”

“Just the two of you,” Pete promises. “I swear.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll let you know if — if I’m not, you know, busy or anything.” She climbs out of the car and Noah is already spinning away towards the school entrance, his curls a blur around his face. There is something sharp and heavy in the center of Pete’s chest. He swallows around it as Caitlyn looks back over her shoulder and pauses, uncertain, the door still held open between them. “So, like, about daddy?” Pete nods eagerly. “I, uh — well, you probably know this but, like… He likes old movies, doesn’t he? Maybe — maybe you could take him to see Ghostbusters or something. He — I think he’d like that. A lot.”

She closes the door and is almost out of earshot before Pete regains control of his gross motor function, frozen in place in the driver’s seat as his heart hammers off-tune bass lines into his ribs. He fumbles to wind down the window and calls after her, her jean jacket retreating towards the front steps. “Caitlyn!” She looks back, eyebrows raised. “Thank you! And — and I love you, sweetheart. I really do.”

She smiles and turns away. Pete feels like a truly terrible father.

But, he supposes, this is an improvement on not feeling like a father at all.

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“Oh boooyys!”

There are three parenting truths that Patrick believes are universal. The first is that the number of children who ask for oatmeal at breakfast will be in converse correlation to the amount of milk remaining in the fridge. The second is that if he is in a hurry to leave the house, Avery will produce the kind of diaper that Satan himself would consider a bit much. The third is that nothing good ever comes of being shouted down on the front steps of the school by the chairperson of the PTA.

“Oh God,” he grumbles, “I’ve completed my civic duty. Shouldn’t I be free to drink tequila and let the baby play with bleach for the next few hours? Isn’t there an amendment that says so or do I have to petition my representative?”

“Run,” Joe hisses. “I’ll cover for you, just make a break for it. Once you’re under cover of the sycamores, you’ll be home free.”

Joe is a good friend in that he really wants what’s best for Patrick but a bad friend because he forgets the demonstration of Newton’s third law of motion that Patrick’s chest, ass and thighs provide when he accelerates beyond a gentle trot.

“That is… needlessly dramatic.” Patrick gestures to Avery, strapped to his chest. “Have you even heard of Shaken Baby Syndrome?”

“That sling probably cost more than my car, it’s got shock absorbers coming out the wazoo, just run! I’ll — Oh, I know! I’ll tell them you have diarrhea.”
“You’re making this more and more appealing with every word,” Patrick says. “Just — Could you stop? Before I’m forced to go hang out in Lowes and find other, better dad friends.”

“Yeah? They can build you a deck, but can they debate mid 80s metal albums for three hours?”

“You think that’s a plus point to our friendship?”

“No, the plus point is my awesome band, most of whom will happily debate old jazz albums with you instead,” Joe raises an eyebrow. “Which you’d know if you ever came along and jammed with us.”

“Your band,” and Patrick air quotes the word to demonstrate how not-jealous he is that Joe has something he gets to do every week, even if that something is standing on a six inch riser in a dive bar and playing Sweet Home Alabama, “is called The Dad Kennedys.”

“So?”

“I’m not joining a band called The Dad Kennedys!”

Avery grabs onto his chin with her red and white candy cane mouth and begins to suck aggressively. He has no idea if this is better or worse than pacifiers for her tiny, developing teeth and jaw. Maybe he’ll throw it out for debate on the blog, really get the bloodlust raging. His momentary lapse into parental contemplation is enough to give the chair — Bethany, owner of fifth grade Kamryn, a golden retriever named Sampson and the kind of lipstick that could kill a man at ten paces — enough time to catch up with them.

“Not thinking of running away from me I hope!” she says with a smile and a finger wag directly into Patrick’s personal space. “Patrick, honey, you look fabulous as always!”

The jacket from Old Navy and jeans that were washed a week ago are the antithesis of fabulous. What Bethany means is that he is gay and she is the kind of woman who seeks out the company of gay man in a vigorous demonstration of how incredibly woke and liberal she is. He is, to put not too fine a point on it, her very own Queer Pal for the Straight Gal.

Joe snickers, probably because he can see the puke stain spreading out like a flood map of the eastern seaboard across Patrick’s left shoulder. Bethany looks at him witheringly. “And — Wait, Jed, isn’t it?”

“That’s right!” Joe chirps sweetly. “If it has its roots in the Abrahamic religions and it starts with a J, I’ll probably answer to it!”

He has been called, throughout the course of one meeting, Joshua, Jacob, Joel and Jeremiah. If life is tough for Patrick as the resident gay parent of Westbrook Elementary School, it’s even more challenging for Joe, as no one seems capable of figuring out why he isn’t at work and allowing his wife to stay home with their adorable four-year-old twins.

Patrick suspects he ought to intervene before there are, like, juice cups at dawn or something. He doesn’t favor Joe’s chances in hand to hand combat.

“Sweetie, hi!” He pushes up his voice half an octave, because it’s what she wants him to do. Then, he tweaks the shoulder of her navy peacoat and says, “And this is just gorgeous, look at you! Is that couture?”

Note: he has no idea what that means.
“Oh, this?” she blushes prettily and her laugh is clear as a bell, ringing across the front of the building. “I just picked this up in TJMaxx but, shhh, don’t go giving away my secrets.”

“Me? Honey, I would never!”

Placated by a liberal dose of Patrick’s passable Jonathan Van Ness impersonation, she diverts her attention from glaring venomously at Joe’s beatifically smiling face. Instead, she turns her attention to Avery who, because she is fantastic at working the crowd, provides her with a sunny smile so wide, it’s almost possible for Patrick to believe that no one notices the drool stringing from his chin to her mouth. Living with Avery is a lot like living in a live-action remake of Aliens.

“Well hello, beautiful girl,” Bethany coos. Subtly, Avery slips her hand into the neckline of Patrick’s t-shirt and attempts to strangle him in an act of unprovoked patricide. “Aren’t you the most gorgeous little thing?”

“Ba,” says Avery cheerfully, with an eye-watering handful of Patrick’s chest hair twisted in her chubby little fist. She yanks aggressively: Patrick squeals. “Dada!”

“Ow! Avery, sweetie, that’s — come on, honey bear, that stings.” She examines her spoils, looks Patrick in the eye and then, very solemnly, she sprinkles it on top of his thinning hair. “I — okay, that’s fair.”

There is a short silence, assuming no one is counting the way Joe snorts unattractively into the sleeve of his windbreaker. He is immensely lucky that Patrick is such a forgiving friend. Eventually, though, the hum of the freeway half a block away becomes almost deafening in the endless void of non existent conversation and Patrick shuffles his feet, extracts his daughter’s hand from the depth of his armpit before she gets anymore ideas about impromptu hair removal and asks, “Was there — Uh, did you need something, Bethany?”

“I was just hoping we could count on you as a chaperone for the spring formal next week,” she asks brightly.

Patrick was honestly hoping to spend the rest of his Friday evenings from now until he atrophies, sprawled on the couch in front of the TV, drowning his sorrows in pillowcase-sized sacks of potato chips. Apparently, there is no sanctity in the Laws of the Sign Up Sheet, which he pointedly ignored on his way out of the meeting.

Tell her no, he instructs himself sharply, tell her you have other plans and move on; you do not owe anyone an explanation for how you wish to spend your time.

This memo does not make its way to Patrick’s mouth, which opens of its own accord and says, “Oh! Of course, I’d love to!” He looks at Joe as though this is all his fault. “That’s — Was there a sign up? Did I — I must have missed it.”

“Right by the door. I did mention it a couple times during the meeting…”

“Oh. Uh — My bad?” Patrick smiles sweetly and resolves to take Joe down with him. “I think Joe wants to do it, too!”

Joe looks as though he would rather be peeled and rolled in salt. “Who’s Joe? I’m Jed! And, actually —”

“Excellent, I’ll jot your names down!” Bethany claps her hands together like the whole messy business is all under control. “Okay, well, have a great day! Give my love to Pete!”
Maybe it’s the way she doesn’t enquire about Joe’s wife who *has* served her time at the coalface of school events when her work schedule allows it. Maybe it’s the fact that she *does* enquire about Pete who, like a vampire without an invitation, has never crossed the threshold of the school since his children were enrolled. Maybe it’s that Patrick is childishly tired of pretending he is a bank vault of Good Gay Feelings from which nothing unpleasant can escape. Whatever it is, it stirs ugly in the depths of his chest, rising up like gorge at the back of his throat, the unsettling urge to be the monster in the middle school tripping against his tongue.

“Actually,” he says lightly, the words humming through him like a pulled grenade that he tosses casually into the center of their conversation, “Pete left me two weeks ago. I’d love to pass on your love but, to be honest, I’ve barely seen him since he left. If you see him, could you let him know his kids would like to know he’s not dead?”

These are words he hasn’t said out loud to anyone who isn’t Joe or his mom. If he thought the previous silence was uncomfortable, it has nothing on the echoing chasm of stillness currently vibrating between the three of them. It rings in his ears, the aftermath of a nuclear blast, as Bethany’s smile slips from bright to baffled to utterly, terribly mortified. He imagines he might feel satisfaction, if he wasn’t too busy feeling nauseous. Because, it’s the truth, isn’t it? Regardless of who asked who to leave, Pete didn’t fight. His effort to return has been the cursory minimum. Pete *has* left him.

“He… left you?” she asks, thoroughly bewildered, as though divorce is The Big Bad and the suburbs are supposed to be an impenetrable safe haven. She pulls at her wedding ring and takes half a step back, like it might be contagious. “Seriously?”

Patrick assumes his least heterosexual pose, his hip cocked to the side, “Can you believe?”

Bethany may have been struck by lightning. She may be dead, so rictus is the grin on her face, so absolutely frozen in place, her car keys hanging loosely from her fist. It’s clear from the frantic swivel of her eyes towards the the parking lot that she wants nothing more than to run away from this conversation and never look back.

“Well,” she begins awkwardly. “I — I’m sorry to hear that. I should let you…”

She doesn’t finish her sentence before diving for the cover of her Honda. She does not look back, which is good, because Patrick suspects he may be tempted to shout ‘boo’ which is probably very childish. It turns out, he hasn’t got any of this as under control as he thought he did because, embarrassingly, his face is very damp and he’s hiccuping softly into the cuff of his jacket.

Joe slings an arm around him. “Hey, come on. This — this is all going to be fine, you know.”

“But what if it’s not?” he asks. There are only so many spins of the marital roulette wheel available to his jackass of a husband and he is running perilously thin on luck.

“Movie night,” says Joe with a particularly Joe brand of certainty. “Tonight, your place. I’ll bring the beer, you provide the playlist and the scintillating conversation.”

“No weed,” Patrick says seriously. “Last time I ate those hash brownies, I didn’t leave the bathroom for four hours. And I don’t mean because I was throwing up, if you get my meaning.”

“I like Housewife-Friendly, Performatively Homosexual Patrick,” Joe says wistfully. “He’s a way less gross than Regular Patrick.”

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“Grindr?” says Patrick dubiously, soundtracked by John Candy threatening Jay Underwood on
Pete’s expensive home cinema system. “I — that doesn’t — I mean, I don’t think I want to—”

“Come on,” Joe chides. “It’ll be fun! Think of it as Facebook for hot gay guys! You’re a hot gay guy, you can meet, like, other hot gay guys and then you can be hot and gay together!”

“Sweating more than any man my age feasibly should doesn’t make me hot,” Patrick snaps irritably. Joe, it seems, is not so much making a suggestion as committing to a pre-planned attack, the app already installed on his phone. “And do you have any idea how many dick pics there are floating around on that site?”

“Even better, you like dick, don’t you?”

Patrick elects not to answer beyond a grunt into his popcorn. He’s trying very hard not to focus on the fact that Joe just called him hot. He chews on salt and grease like it can distract him from the way Joe’s bottom lip is caught between his teeth. It doesn’t work, so he pinches deliberately into the generous padding on his upper thigh. Good friends do not stare hungrily at the mouths of their married best friend. That is, categorically, not a thing that good friends do.

“So, would you say your type was like, twunks? Or are you into bears? Wait, what are you again?”

“Very tired of this conversation,” Patrick bites out irritably. It doesn’t work; Joe laughs like he’s already high and crams in another mouthful of popcorn. “Can we just watch the movie?”

“We are watching the movie,” Joe objects. “Look, I’m not saying you have to fuck any of these dudes, or even date them, I’m just saying it might be fun to take a look! Hey, look, this guy’s pretty cute. Swole, I think is what the kids call it.”

“Whose kids say that?” Patrick sniffs, again, he chooses not to dwell on Joe rating the physical attractiveness of other men. In particular, he’s very pointedly not thinking about how Joe called him hot but this dude is just cute. “Not your kids. Or mine, for that matter.”

“Just look!”

He extends his phone screen in Patrick’s direction, revealing a man with the dead eyes of a serial killer and the waxed torso of a Ken doll. Apparently, his name is Jefferson and he enjoys lifting weights, action movies and tensing his weirdly shiny abs and pectorals for selfies.

“He looks like the example image of how not to use photoshop.”

Joe laughs like Patrick just said the funniest thing, his eyes twinkling as he looks directly at Patrick’s mouth. They’ve never talked at length about sexuality – Joe is into women as evidenced by the presence of a wife but there’s every possibility that there’s more to it than that. Sexuality is a sliding scale and, although he’s never sat Joe down and figured out his Kinsey score, he figures that everyone’s at least a little bit gay.

Forget Pete and his marriage and the crushing sense of self-doubt that threatens to drown him every time he’s alone and the house is quiet. Forget the way his heart aches every time he reaches over in bed and grabs nothing but sheets. Joe is handsome and he’s scrolling through Grindr like he’s hungry for it. Patrick is only a man and he wants so badly to feel wanted.

No. He needs to think unsexy thoughts. This is the beer slipping behind the wheel. Infidelity is never the answer and there’s a pack of Trojans in a Samsonite bag a suburb over that proves it. Patrick stares at his hands, the couch, the mismatched cotton of his socks, anything but Joe’s eyes, hands, mouth.
It’s impossible; Joe is so handsome with his arm tossed casually along the back of the sofa behind Patrick, with his bright blue eyes and his dark curls. There’s a dimple in his cheek when he smiles — which is often — and his mouth looks so pink in the glow of the television screen, so soft and warm. Behind his ribs, Patrick’s heart is a freight train. Joe’s lips are moving but all Patrick can hear, thrumming over and over like a litany is you’re hot, you’re hot, you’re hot.

Joe called him hot, and he has not quantified it in a friendly or brotherly way. Joe called him hot and it must mean something. Joe called him hot and Patrick feels like right now — three beers and his heart down — he’s almost, sort of brave enough to do something about it.

Decisively, he knocks back the lingering dregs at the bottom of his bottle and tells himself it’s Dutch courage. Then, before he can change his mind or think or breathe, he leans forward and crushes his mouth to Joe’s.

It turns out, he was right. Joe’s mouth is soft and it’s warm and it opens under the inquisitive sweep of Patrick’s tongue. For a brief second, Patrick is entirely elated because Joe’s lips are moving and he’s kissing Patrick back. He sings with it, leans forward eagerly and tastes alcohol, popcorn and Joe’s God-given fucking mouth.

It’s blissful until Patrick realizes that Joe is not leaning into him. In fact, Joe is pulling away and his mouth is moving because he’s saying, “What the fuck?” Only he’s failing because he’s trying to say it around a mouthful of Patrick’s stupid, idiotic, predatory gay tongue which he really ought to retract into his own mouth.

“Patrick — what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

That is a very good question. Unfortunately, Patrick can’t answer it because he’s too busy dying of horrified mortification and puke-inducing guilt. He removes his hands from the front of Joe’s Iron Maiden shirt, swipes frantically at his mouth with the back of his wrist and curls back into the corner of the couch like he can shrink down small enough to slip between the cushions and smother himself and, when that doesn’t work, he stammers. “Oh — Fuck, I — I’m so fucking sorry.”

There are many more things he would like to add but, unfortunately, it seems the part of his grey matter that deals with conversation has shut down. In its place is a temporary booth apparently devoted to suffocating him with thick, choking sobs. This isn’t fair, he knows it, he doesn’t deserve to divert attention away from the horrific invasion of Joe’s personal space, marriage and mouth he just staged, without warning, halfway through Uncle Buck. It turns out he has as much chance of controlling it as Canute had of turning away the tide. It floods through him, soaks through his hands and the cuffs of his cardigan and the front of his shirt. He is, apparently, constructed entirely of grief and snot.

“I—” he gasps insensibly. “I don’t — I’m so sorry! Don’t — please don’t tell Marie, I didn’t — I don’t. Pete, just—”

“Shit,” Joe mutters. He wraps Patrick in a hug he categorically does not deserve, and he murmurs into the sweaty curl of hair at his temple. “Okay, I’m pretty sure Marie wouldn’t approve of me like… running away with you, man. But I think she’d insist on this.”

Patrick cries. He cries until Joe’s shirt is hot and wet with his grief. He cries until he’s empty, until it feels like every drop of emotion has been wrung out of him and he’s limp and useless on the couch. He’s not sure he’ll ever be done apologizing. He’s not sure he’ll ever stop feeling ashamed.

“I don’t want to get divorced,” he tells Eddie the Head, because he can’t possibly look Joe in the eyes ever again. “I — I shouldn’t have made that your problem, though.”
Joe appears to give this great thought, his hand making slow circles in the small of Patrick’s back. “Pete is so lucky to have you,” he says eventually. “He has no idea, but he is. Listen, if I was gay and, you know, single…”

“Oh, god. Please don’t. You can go home, you know, I’m not — I’ll be fine.” Joe flicks at the wet spot on his shirt and gives Patrick a look that says this is demonstrably untrue. Patrick continues bitterly. “Seriously, this is just — this is how I am now. I’ll be okay.”

Before Joe can argue further, the room is filled with the sound of an auto tuned, five-way vocal harmony; every little thing I do, never seems enough for you, you don’t wanna lose it again, but I’m not like them.

Joe blinks. “Your ringtone is N*Sync?”

“Fuck,” Patrick struggles upright and discovers that it’s possible for his guilt to intensify to the point it feels as though it’s filling his throat, climbing up through his windpipe, choking him. “It’s — Pete set it. It was, like, a joke, I guess. I — I’ll call him back later.”

Joe presses the phone into his hand and reaches for his jacket. “Talk to him,” he says. “Tell him if he doesn’t try harder, your buddy Joe is going to find you the best guy on Grindr to replace him.”

Patrick smiles. He is so grateful that Joe is not going to make him feel like the Predatory Gay Friend. As he collects his keys and heads for the door, Patrick raises the phone to his ear. He is cautious, like he imagines it might explode at any moment. “Hello?”

“Patrick?” says Pete, and he sounds broken apart down the center, desperate, but mostly — worryingly — he sounds drunk. Again. “’S’mee, babe. ’S’just me.”

Patrick sighs and tucks his feet up onto the couch beneath him. Penny curls against him, soft under his hand. “You’re drunk.”

“Patrick, listen. Don’t hang up, babe, please — I — can we, uh, can we talk?”

It would be easy to refuse, half fury, half guilt inching Patrick’s thumb towards the big red button. It’s less a part of the phone and more a nuclear detonator, the devastating explosion that will tear their marriage apart beyond repair.

“Please?” Pete says again. “I spoke to the kids, babe. God, I — Fuck, I think… Maybe I get it.”

Does he want to be divorced? Alternate Christmases with the kids and splitting birthdays and vacations down the middle while Pete — Pete who is handsome, Pete who is charming when he needs to be, Pete who is interesting and well-travelled — moves on and Patrick is forced into an endless purgatory of dead-eyed Grindr dates? He clears his throat and looks at the family picture above the fireplace.

“Okay,” he says finally. “What is it you want to talk about?”
Pete is coming to terms with the idea that he might, possibly, be a horrible father and husband. Although it’s been several years since he picked up a fairytale, he knows now that he’s far less the handsome prince and way more the wicked stepmother who whisks in, fucks everything up and leaves the mess for someone else to clean up. That someone is invariably Patrick and there are perilously few petals left on loves-me-loves-me-not flower of their marriage.

He tries to make amends.

It starts slowly, and Pete is cautious, making phone calls to Patrick’s sleepy voice right before he rolls into the twin bed in his childhood bedroom. Patrick seems amenable to this, at least, sharing humdrum information about homework and ballet lessons — apparently Noah is good, so good, could make it pro one day — and anecdotes about Avery mastering the ability to pull herself up on the coffee table. She’s not walking, not yet, but Patrick feels like it could happen any day now. He sounds genuinely excited at the prospect.

There’s something irresistibly charming about the excitement in Patrick’s voice when he talks about the kids’ achievements. He’s jealous of that euphoria, but, curiously, not of the kids themselves. It’s no longer that he wants Patrick to speak about him in that reverent tone; he wants to use it for himself, to take joy in the idea of Harper writing her own name, of Caitlyn bringing him a good report card.
(He hopes it’s possible; that he’s not defective in this way, too. He thinks the Moon Pie Daddy Date went okay. He thinks — hopes — he can fake this til he makes it.)

Pete was even prepared to play nice with Joe at the house, to smile politely and make enquiries about his wife and children and remind himself that he’s been — is being — entirely paranoid. Irritatingly, Joe wasn’t there. Instead, it was Patrick’s sister who glared at him across the living room like he’d spent the past fifteen years systematically beating Patrick with a bag of blood oranges. He said it anyway — “No Joe?” — and he thinks his voice was bright and friendly and a decent demonstration of just how cool he can pretend to be with with Patrick’s handsome dad friend. Then Patrick joined in with the glaring and he decided it was probably best to keep his mouth shut around the emotional instability of the Stump siblings.

It’s hard to prove he’s experiencing an epiphany when no one is willing to let him break free and shine.

Right now, they’re chasing the sunset along the 120 and Patrick is staring out of the window at the flat, endless green of the Midwest in spring. Pete fidgets with the radio controls on the steering wheel, bouncing between stations until he hits Everybody Wants to Rule the World, halfway through the song. A natural-born lover of eighties hits, Patrick begins to drum his hands lightly against his knees and Pete is struck by how simple it would be to reach over the parking brake and take one, to tease his thumb along the hum of Patrick’s pulse in his wrist. There’s every possibility that Patrick would demand to be allowed to leave the car immediately, if Pete so much as thinks about touching him, so he resists the urge and watches the headlights moving back towards Chicago.

“What are you thinking?” he blurts it out without thinking. It’s a stupid question, really, Patrick is no doubt thinking about the many other places he would like to be right now that aren’t Pete’s car, on the way to another miserable attempt to rekindle their relationship. That is, definitely, not a thought Pete wants to hear about but post-separation Patrick is painfully honest so he braces for the worst.

He cocks his head and looks at Pete and says, seriously, “Do you think Roland and Curt are pissed that Mad World only broke the US when some asshole stripped away the synth and put a shitty vocal over the top?”

Patrick’s gaze is very gray behind his glasses, still and thoughtful, lake-like in its intensity. He is genuinely interested in hearing Pete’s input on this musical conundrum. Pete laughs, he can’t help it, it’s so gloriously Patrick — the person, not the father — that he snorts across the steering wheel and receives some serious side eye in return.

“What?” Patrick snaps — he’s blushing and it’s adorable. In all of the animosity and, before that, the wilful ignorance, Pete has forgotten how it feels to make Patrick blush. “You asked what I was thinking about! I told you — it’s really not that funny.”

“You’re serious?” he asks, but why wouldn’t Patrick be serious? “That’s why you’re staring at the horizon like it owes you an explanation? God, I thought you were thinking deep, philosophical thoughts.”

“Depends on your worldview. Some people find the influence of new wave music very important.”

“You’re a regular Plato for Synth Pop.”

Patrick sniffs, just once, to demonstrate his disdain and then he lodges his knees up against the glove compartment and spreads his hands against the (thick, luscious, deliciously solid) width of his thighs. It turns out, that once Pete allowed himself to begin thinking positive thoughts about Patrick it became easier, they flow more naturally, like water or oil slick. He wants to sinks his hands into
those thoughts, his wrists and his arms, to submerge himself until he’s irreparably dirty with them.
It’ll be like a reverse baptism, he decides, washing away the No Touch rule and making themselves filthy, how they used to be in college when all that mattered was the next illicitly gained orgasm.

Or maybe not exactly like that, what with the kids. Still, parent-friendly rediscovery sounds fun.

“Are you going to ask where we’re going?” he asks playfully. Patrick huffs under his breath.
“You’re not even a little bit curious?”

“McHenry, apparently,” Patrick says, squinting at the road signs. “What’s in McHenry?”

“A public library,” Pete informs him, sharing his Wikipedia knowledge even though Patrick looks unimpressed. “A couple of gas stations, a series of fast food eateries including, but not limited to, Subway, McDonalds, Long John Silver’s and, and, hold your applause, Patrick Martin Stump-Wentz, a Wendy’s.” Patrick rolls his eyes — Pete hopes this is affectionate, “I sense none of this is your scene, so let me blow you… away. They also have the Prairie Trail—”

“—We are not hiking—”

“—We are not hiking,” Pete agrees as he signals left at the intersection. “And a mall—”

“—God, the excitement—”

“—And… they have this.”

To their left is a high breezeblock wall, the lower section choked in creeping ivy. It looks like something from a fifties, coming of age novella. Pete wants to climb into his own nostalgia and relive his youth, to bring Patrick here in the shitty Jetta he drove in college, to watch that sunrise smile that used to bite at the corners of his mouth blossom once more. Or maybe it just looks like a crumbling subsection of a federal penitentiary and the romance is running away with him.

The sign is illuminated and Patrick catches it with a smile: McHenry Outdoor Theater.

“Do you…?” he begins awkwardly, because Patrick hasn’t spoken yet. “Is this something you think you’re into?”

They’re playing Top Gun — cashing in on the early summer nostalgia of middle-aged men who want to fake like the military machismo outweighs the overwhelming homoerotic subtext. The last time they watched this movie they’d just moved into their apartment in Roscoe. They made a pact to make out every time something gay happened and by twenty minutes in, Pete’s mouth was bright with the taste of Patrick’s tongue, his chin chafed with stubble burn. It’s not Ghostbusters, not Rushmore or Star Wars or any of the other movies that Patrick loves, but it’s something that feels important to them. He pulls off the road but not into the line for the ticket booth, like doing so crosses some ancient, sacramental line between them. There is no way he’ll repeat their first two dates; his silence is measured, intentional, controlled.

For a moment or two, it looks as though Pete has judged this as badly as he’s judged everything else for the past five years, Patrick’s grim, unsmiling mouth as flat as the horizon-chasing landscape they’ve driven through to get here. It’s no less than he deserves, he reminds himself, nothing more than the rotten yield of the crop he sowed with his absence. Then, with sudden, golden ferocity, Patrick’s smile breaks.

“Top Gun?” he asks lightly.

Pete’s smile is cautious as he slips the car into drive. “I thought it was — Do you remember that
night?"

“You only suggested that game so you’d have an excuse to hump my leg.”

God, Patrick, twenty-two and his mouth as red and sweet as a candy apple. The relative sense of privacy afforded by paper thin walls in a two-bed walk up right above a kosher deli when what they were used to was shared dorm rooms and communal bathrooms. Clothes were a forbidden thing for the first six months, crossing the threshold meant kicked off jeans and discarded shirts and Pete’s mouth everywhere on that flushed, pink skin and coppery hair. It was holy. Pete twists his fingers around the steering wheel and stops thinking about the things they used to do in that apartment.

“I would never!” Pete’s got half of his attention on the tail lights of the Dodge in front of them, the other half on the way Patrick rolls the tension knot out of his shoulders. Patrick shoots him this look from the corner of his eye, knowing, his smirk curling deliciously just beneath. “Okay, maybe that was part of the reason but, come on, d’you blame me? You were a fucking snack.”

It becomes apparent right away that this was not the right thing to say. The car falls silent until Patrick mutters, “Past tense.”

If Patrick is an empty vessel, then Pete will pour everything he has into him, he will flood him with good feeling, he will not allow this date to go south when there’s the possibility that he actually picked something decent. “Babe,” he says earnestly, “if you were a snack then, you’re a three course fucking meal right now.”

When Patrick stops talking this time, it’s less irritated and more stunned. Pete’s skin tone doesn’t really lend itself to blushing but right now, he is glowing. There is no way that he just combined those words into a sentence like a 12-year-old talking about their fave. Those are not words that men approaching forty are able to say out loud and retain their dignity. He concentrates very hard on the car in front and wonders how hard it would be to scale the wall and hurl himself to his death. It’s maybe 50 feet high — the odds are stacked in his favor.

Over the hum of the radio, Patrick appears to be choking to death in an attempt not to laugh out loud. It’s that or he’s in the middle of an aneurysm, senseless little nee nee noises squeaking from the back of his nose. The good news is that the tension is broken. The bad news is that it’s at the expense of Pete’s dignity.

“Stop laughing, it’s not that funny,” Pete says; Patrick breaks and starts to laugh like it very much is, big belly laughs that echo around the car and flush him pink and make his eyes wet at the corners. If it wasn’t aimed at him, Pete would find it charming. Instead, he buys their tickets and parks and waits, his arms crossed, for Patrick to stop being a dick.

“Oh God,” Patrick wheezes, leaning back in his seat weakly. “You — Did you pick that up from Caitlyn? That’s — Shit, that’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Shut up!” Pete implores, his mouth twitching at the corners. This man has seen him at his best and his worst, with blood on his mouth and tears in his eyes and everything in between. Embarrassment, at this stage, is completely pointless. “It’s not too late for me to put you out of the car and make you watch from behind the fence.”

“Go get your snack a snack,” Patrick says, waving Pete in the direction of the concessions booth with a twenty pulled from his wallet. Pete goes willingly and without taking the cash. “Oh, and Pete? Don’t put a hole in the bottom of the popcorn, I’m not falling for that again.”

“You’re no fun.”
The problem with being married, is that the other party knows all of your signature moves.

***

Pete brings back dixie cups of Dr Pepper, a box of black licorice sticks and one of cookie dough bites, and a family-sized bucket of salted popcorn. His hands overflow with movie snacks and he slops soda onto the upholstery of his car, apparently without noticing. As Pete hands him the licorice, as casual as breathing, Patrick is unreasonably touched that he remembered his favorite candy.

“I have no idea how you can eat that,” he says gruffly, as if embarrassed by his own carefulness. “At least meet me halfway and switch to the red stuff.”

“But I like the black,” Patrick objects. “It’s got real flavor.”

“So does ass,” Pete opines, “and whilst I’m not going to object to shoving my mouth down there, I wouldn’t want to sprinkle it on my ice cream.”

Patrick’s dick twitches at that. It’s been a while.

Pete is already wrist deep in the popcorn, chewing rhythmically. Patrick will need to stake a claim on his fair share if he wants it or Pete will, without a doubt, decimate it entirely before the trailers are finished. It’s nice to know these things about one another — simple things like favorite candy and movie snacking habits — the finest capillaries of a carefully tuned vascular system they’ve built together. This is a terrifying metaphor to draw — at the center of this twist of veins and arteries rests a heart that’s barely beating. What will they do if this last ditch attempt at CPR doesn’t work?

“Want some?” Pete asks, offering the bucket. He looks nervous, his amber eyes wary in the light of the movie screen. There’s no way Patrick is going to eat salted popcorn with his husband after the last time he ate it, the taste of Joe’s mouth and his rejection and Patrick’s bitter, toxic guilt still thick on his tongue. He shakes his head. “Listen,” Pete continues awkwardly, playing with the wedding ring he hasn’t taken off even if Patrick has, “I hope you don’t — I didn’t, uh, like — Bringing you here, to this specific movie? I wasn’t trying to, you know, recreate the last time. I’m not — There doesn’t have to be kissing or, like, any touching. At all. If that’s something you’re not comfortable with.”

This is the longest declaration relating to someone else’s personal comfort that Pete’s made in a decade. It’s not immediately clear how believable this one is. Patrick’s not an angry teenager anymore, he doesn’t settle his disputes with with his temper in the way he did before he met Pete (and after he met Pete and, actually, quite embarrassingly far into his relationship with Pete). He’s tired now, resigned, there’s no more fire or fight left in him. When he replies, his voice is controlled and terrifyingly level.

“Are you going to try to persuade me to suck your cock before Goose dies?” he asks. God, he sounds bone-fucking-weary.

“Hey,” the guy in the next car over objects, “spoilers!”

“Oh, come on!” Patrick snaps. “This came out in 1986!” He turns back to Pete. “Because, honestly? I really don’t feel like—”

“That’s not what I meant!” Pete sounds exactly like Caitlyn when Patrick catches her not attempting to hide the fact she has algebra homework. “Why won’t you let me be nice?”

It’s best in these situations to count to ten, to let everything take a breath, so Patrick begins, one, two, three…
“You want me to fail,” Pete continues, unwisely, in Patrick’s opinion. “Why are you always desperate to think there’s some ulterior motive to everything I do around you?”

FourfivesixseveneightnineTEN.

“Because there literally — literally — always is with you! You’ve never done anything in our time together that didn’t, in some way, benefit you. You don’t do selfless. You’re a spectacular, raging dumpster fire of self-absorbed bullshit and, like, seriously, if you pull another fucking stunt like you did after the bowling alley, I won’t — I refuse to be held responsible for my actions.”

Cuddled into the driver’s seat, Pete looks smaller than he ever has. He looks as though he might be about to cry, his hands twisting over the lip of the popcorn bucket. “I didn’t…” he begins, stops, and then tries again. “I didn’t meant to make you feel that way. I’m — Can I wind up the windows for a sec? I feel like everyone in McHenry is staring at us right now.”

“Go ahead,” Patrick sighs. They’re airing a commercial for leg wax and it’s been a long time since Patrick cared about a beauty regime that extends beyond showering and brushing his teeth. “I’m surprisingly not interested in getting that vacation-smooth feeling for up to six weeks.”

The window slides up silently and it’s just the two of them and the rustle of the popcorn that Pete doesn’t seem to know where to put. He settles for jamming it onto the dash and then turning in his seat carefully and with strict deliberation. Tonight, he hasn’t been drinking and Patrick is thankful for that, it lends additional sincerity to his eyes as he worries gently at a loose fray of skin by his thumb nail.

“You think I’m a jerk,” he begins, which is not untrue, so Patrick allows him to continue unchecked, “and it feels like it doesn’t matter how hard I try not to be a jerk, you’re going to keep thinking, like, Jerk Thoughts about me.”

The capitalization of Jerk Thoughts is audible. Patrick pinches the bridge of his nose and reminds himself that Pete is no longer 25-years-old and devoid of responsibilities; he doesn’t get to talk his way out of this by pouting. “You’re not…” he says carefully, “you’re not really giving me a reason to not think Jerk Thoughts about you.”

“I’m trying,” Pete implores desperately. “Can’t you just accept that I’m trying? Can’t you give me that?”

Patrick feels as though his head is caving in. For years, Pete has suffixed everything he does with ‘too’; he’s too much, too little, too late, too loud and too selfish. They’ve built their marriage around the universal truth that Patrick gives and Pete takes, that he hands over what little he has and Pete hoards whatever he wants. They don’t share, not in the strictest sense, and this — this overly cautious, treading on eggshells Pete — is too much to be sincere. Patrick has given everything, there’s no guarantee he has anything left inside of him to offer up.

The night he told Pete to leave, Patrick was terrified he was losing everything. In reality, and with a month of lived experience, he realizes that he doesn’t need Pete, that the hole he left behind was nothing more than a surface wound. Their family will heal and recover without him there and Patrick will — probably — be absolutely fine. It’s simultaneously reassuring and endlessly frightening to think that someone can take so much and contribute so little that the only thing left behind when they’re not clogging up the washing machine with their work shirts or leaving their dirty coffee cups in the sink is relief.

“I’m happy you’re trying,” he says eventually, because he is, “I’m glad you’ve decided that I’m worth at least a little effort, but I’m not sure trying is enough at this stage.”
“I can’t do anything else, I don’t — I don’t know what else you want me to do.” Pete is so desperate in his badly pressed Harley Davidson shirt and his jeans that are more appropriate for front row at a metal gig than lounging in the car watching Tom Cruise and Val Kilmer pretend they don’t want to fuck in the locker room. “I — please don’t like, punch me in the face for this, but — I love you. You know that, don’t you? Fuck, please tell me you believe that, if nothing else.”

“I—” Patrick falters. Pete looks desperate, hopeful, unfairly hinged on Patrick acknowledging his feelings, his emotions. “I know you do, but you’re not the only person in this relationship. You do understand that, right?”

Backed into the corner of his seat, Pete looks confused. “I didn’t say I was. Look, I know the last two dates haven’t gone well—” Patrick snorts under his breath, “—but it’s ridiculously unfair of you to even come on these dates if you’re not going to give me a straight shot when I don’t fuck up.”

That is… alarmingly sensible, far, far more sensible than anything that’s escaped Pete’s mouth since Patrick started noticing the bad stuff outweighing the good stuff. He clears his throat, blushing slightly, “I don’t — Do you feel like I’m setting you up to fail?”

“I feel like your heart isn’t in this,” Pete shrugs and bites his lip like he’s trying to be brave. “And, like, if that’s the case, then why are you putting both of us through this? I’m not asking you to rewind back a month and pretend nothing ever happened. I’m asking you to give me — to give us — an actual chance. If you’re not going to do that then, honestly, I think I should just take you home and let the lawyers start talking. But I love you, Patrick, and I’m sorry I haven’t said that enough recently.”

That makes Patrick pause. The last time Pete made a speech quite so heartfelt, when it seemed like he was cracking himself down the middle like a folding star and allowing Patrick to inspect the interplanetary dust and decay that lay within, was on their wedding day. Now, he’s forced to face the idea that Pete is more than an emotional vacuum, existing beyond a liminal space where nothing matters but work and badly-requested blowjobs. It’s not that he hasn’t cared about the possible effect the separation is having on Pete, it’s that he’s imagined this whole time that is hasn’t really bothered him at all. There is, after all, a pack of unopened condoms in his overnight bag that suggests he had alternative methods of entertainment.

He says quietly, “I’m not trying to be unfair.”

“I know!” Pete rushes to fill the geyser between them with words, to slap a band aid over a missing limb. “I’m not saying that. Well, I’m not exactly saying that, I just mean—”

“Pete,” Patrick says softly. “If this is going to get better — and honestly, I have no idea if it can at this point — you need to start listening and stop talking over me.”

“I—” Pete starts, stops, snaps his mouth shut fast and hard enough that his teeth click. He nods and stays silent.

“Our marriage is dead.” On the far side of the parking brake, Pete winces. “No, it’s true, and it’s time we said it out loud. There’s no bringing back what we had before, it’s gone, but I think — I hope — that there’s a possibility we can find something… new. We can’t revive it, but we can try to start again. And the way to do that isn’t by trying to, uh, I don’t know. I feel like you’re trying to recreate the good times and that’s — it’s not going to work.”

The movie has started and the sky is streaked with chemtrails and fighter jets and Kenny Loggins tinny on the speakers just beyond the closed windows. Sometimes, long-dead things can be reborn, Patrick thinks. Maybe there’s a phoenix that can rise from the ashes of this doomed, decaying corpse
of a relationship.

“What you need to understand,” he continues, “is that pushing things like you did in the bowling alley, or saying shit like Avery is my baby, these are things that are going to make sure I never let you back in.”

Pete looks suitably shamefaced, “I didn’t mean that. It was just — I just said it and I didn’t think.”

“But you said it, and it — it fucking hurt,” Patrick admits and it feels… unpleasant to be so vulnerable and exposed with his armour torn back and his body beaten bloody, “she’s your daughter, too.”

“You could’ve asked me to check on her with you,” Pete says quietly.

“And you could’ve offered,” Patrick points out. “But, if you’re serious, and you’re willing to take things slowly then I’m willing to listen.”

Patrick extends his hand carefully, palm up, outstretched towards Pete’s. This is the most crushingly open he’s allowed himself to be since Harper was born and every battered nerve screams at him to pull back, to prevent Pete from getting in and detonating another incendiary explosion beneath his heart. He holds fast, refusing to flinch as Pete reaches out and cautiously, carefully, as though Patrick is a fragile artefact unearthed, slides his fingertips along Patrick’s palm.

They’re both holding their breath, Patrick realizes, both fraught and broken and desperate as the pad of Pete’s thumb sweeps along the heel of his hand. Their fingers brush, lace and slide together. They still fit; Patrick squeezes gently, feels the length of Pete’s fingers around his own, the rough callus on his thumb, the whorls and divots of his palm. He hasn’t felt this lightheaded, this nervous and sweaty-palmed about holding hands since third grade. He exhales for the first time in months.

“I can see your heartbeat,” Pete says, raw as an exposed nerve, his eyes riveted on the chest of Patrick’s ratty t-shirt. He sounds overwhelmed.

Patrick laughs, a hyena bark as he shifts and reaches to roll down the window. The roar of the planes on screen cuts through his reply. “Yeah, well, that’s probably a cardiac issue, don’t flatter yourself.”

“You guys cool now?” calls the dude from the car beside theirs. “No more spoilers, okay?”

Patrick smiles winningly, “Maverick’s dad died a hero, the board just lied and said he was to blame for the crash.”

“Oh, fuck you!”

“Please don’t get us into a fight,” Pete begs. He’s snorting, ugly laughing, and his hand is still wound around Patrick’s. “I’m too fucking old to take punches for you.”

“I have an idea,” Patrick says, gathering their snacks into the center console. “Like the first time, only better. Every time I spot homoerotic undertones, you have to eat licorice and, if you spot them, I have to eat cookie dough. We can race each other to a sugar crash.”

Pete grimaces. “I hate licorice and you hate cookie dough.”

“Well,” says Patrick. “Guess you’ll have to race me to find more gay shit.”

“You’re way gayer than I am, you’ll win,” Pete pouts.
“Come on,” Patrick goads him. “Do it for the subtext. You know what they say…”

Pete finishes for him: “You can’t spell subtext without buttsex.”

And Patrick leans into him, brings their shoulders together and — not at all erotically — jams a stick of licorice into Pete’s mouth. Tonight, they can laugh and they can watch Maverick and Iceman and muscular dudes in short shorts playing volleyball and exchanging desperate looks in the locker room. Tonight, there’s a possibility that things are worth fixing. Patrick is willing to try. So, Patrick laughs at Pete’s grimace until he exchanges it for one of his own when Pete crams an unfairly large handful of cookie dough pieces into his mouth. If he concentrates very hard on Val Kilmer’s ass — which is not a burden — then he doesn’t have to concentrate on the idea of a pack of Trojans he can no longer say, with certainty, are unopened. So, he sits back and enjoys the rest of their evening, avoiding conversational man traps that will have to be triggered at some point in the future but not tonight.

It is, for the first time in a very long time, nice.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr here!
“So, what I’m saying is, I don’t not like the heather, but I’m almost certain I like the charcoal more, you know?” Patrick says. “Oh God, I can’t decide. What do you think?”

He holds up two t-shirts for Pete to inspect. They are both very plain and very boring and the only discernible difference between them is that one is dark gray and one is light gray. Other than that, they’re completely identical, right down to the shapeless neckline. A palette of misery in monochrome in the center of the men’s section of Target. It’s been a long time since Pete’s worn eye makeup, but he’s pretty sure Urban Decay would be all over this shit — Midsummer Night’s Sadness, for when you want your smokey eye to really tell a tale of back-to-back night shifts, TV dinners for one and broken dreams.

“Patrick,” he begins, “when I said I wanted to take you shopping I meant, like, in actual clothing stores, not monolithic temples to low-cost, disposable consumerism.”

“Can you stop talking like you’re writing an article?” Patrick purses his lips and picks at an imaginary thread on one of the t-shirts. “This is where I buy my clothes.”

“That’s not reassuring, it’s tragic.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Target, they actually do some pretty decent buy one, get one half off specials and if you couple it with a loyalty card—”

“Stop,” Pete begs. “Please, just stop.”

“You’re being a snob,” Patrick sniffs, which is fair, he totally is. But, while they might not be able to bathe in Dom Pérignon, they’re definitely at a stage where they could stretch to washing their balls in a sink filled with Moët and it would be nice if Patrick could stop acting like they’re counting the pennies.

“There’s nothing snobby about appreciating quality over quantity,” Pete informs him haughtily. Patrick glances doubtfully at Pete’s shoes. “You look like you stole your sneakers from a homeless person and the laces don’t match,” he points out. “I don’t think you’re in any position to call anyone’s clothing quality into question.”

“These are limited edition,” Pete points out, “they cost eight hundred dollars!” Patrick boggles slightly and makes a sound like he just touched a live wire. Pete rushes on, before he can start talking about boring things like overpaying the mortgage or ballet lessons. “But anyway, we’re supposed to be here to get stuff for you.”

In response, Patrick gestures expansively at the two sad-looking t-shirts. They have bright red stickers affixed to the precise spot where Patrick’s right nipple would be, should he slip them on instead of his current sad, gray shirt. The stickers say WOW $8. Pete has never felt less wowed in his life.

When Pete does nothing more than lift an eyebrow in the direction of their cart, which is filled to the brim with kid’s clothes, Patrick blushes. “Look,” he says, “babies and toddlers outgrow their clothes in nanoseconds, and Noah goes through socks like he’s eating them, and Caitlyn said she needs new jeans and she literally never asks me for anything, so, like, what am I supposed to do?”

“Okay, stay calm,” Pete says, carefully taking hold of the hangers and placing the god-awful t-shirts
back in the depths of retail purgatory where they belong. “I think you’re probably supposed to leave everything in that cart for a day when we come back with the kids. For today, it might be nice if you focused a little attention on yourself.”

“I was doing that,” Patrick snaps. “That’s exactly what I was doing when I showed you the t-shirts.”

“You grabbed them from the rack without looking!” Pete says. “And, honestly? I think the only reason you didn’t buy both is because you’ve convinced yourself you shouldn’t spend sixteen fucking dollars on stuff for yourself.”

“Oh,” says Patrick. “Um…”

Fortunately, Patrick’s too polite to point out the many times Pete’s talked about his salary. He frowns at the cart like he might be thinking about making a break for the checkout line with it before Pete can stop him. Pete edges between the two of them, cutting off the predator in sensible sneakers from its prey.

“And here we see the Stump-Wentz,” Pete begins, “a hominid hunter-gatherer approaching the 50 percent off rack. See how he circles the earth-toned poly-blends, clearly hoping he can separate a geriatric button down from the rest of the herd.”

Patrick scowls. “Stop doing David Attenborough impressions at me, your British accent sucks.”

“Other things about me suck,” Pete assures him, deadpan. “Other much more fun, much more enjoyable sucking experiences to be had if you play your cards right, but right now we need to get outside before someone rubs two pairs of acrylic sweatpants together and the whole place goes up in flames. Do you want the kids to be orphans?”

Making blowjob references might not be the wisest idea Pete’s ever had but then, neither is taking Patrick on a shopping date when he’s most at home in Old Navy cotton-blends and sensible shoes. But Pete is a not-quite-ex-husband with a plan: If it’s true that he’s spent the past five years systematically deconstructing the basic cellular structure of Patrick’s withered self-esteem, then he should be the one to put him back together, to apply the fashion-conscious sunshine to his drab, wintery wardrobe and watch him flower. Not to sound overtly homosexual, but Patrick is about half a decade overdue for a significant fashion makeover and Pete has five hours to metamorphosize his husband from PTA Zero to Ballet Dad Hero.

“You said we,” Patrick mutters as they head back into the parking lot.

“Hmm?” Pete asks. “When?”

“In the store. You said we would bring the kids back for new clothes some other time.”

The significance of the choice of noun is lost on Pete. He frowns, confused. “I — Yeah? I mean, did you want to fix a date for it, or…?”

“No,” Patrick says, shaking his head and smiling a small, private smile. “It’s fine. So, where are we going, Donatella?”

“Somewhere better,” Pete says decisively.

“Sears?” Patrick asks, clipping on his seatbelt and reaching for the radio. “Ooh, or how about The Gap? I have a coupon!”

Pete sighs an exasperated sigh. “Patrick, I said better.”
Patrick raises his eyebrows. “JCPenney?”

“Oh God,” Pete shakes his head, “come now, young Padawan, much to teach you, there is.”

“The only thing more terrible than your Attenborough impression is your Yoda voice. Where the hell are we going?”

Pete smiles toothily. “You have to trust me.” Patrick looks as though that’s unlikely.

This will be the best damn shopping date anyone has ever been on.

An hour later, they stand at the furthest edge of Club Monaco. The reason they’re in Club Monaco is because Patrick physically refused to cross the threshold of Gucci with the kind of visceral fear reserved for vampires being lured into churches. The store is crisp and clean and smells of expensive clothing and the cologne of every guy-like-Pete stocking up on essentials. Patrick looks desperately unhappy and a little bit frantic around the eyes as he thrusts yet another shirt back into Pete’s arms.

“Pete,” he begins, through gritted teeth, “that shirt is almost one hundred dollars. Do you know how many shirts I could’ve bought in Target for that price?”

“None,” says Pete, “because everything in Target comes with a big, I’m cheap and cheerless, eight-dollar sticker right on the nipple. Do you want people to think you have eight-dollar nipples?”

“I don’t think anyone is thinking anything about my nipples as a general rule,” Patrick grumbles. “At least, I hope they’re not…”

“You have super nice nipples,” Pete informs him absently, which he does. “Impossibly pink.”

The guy at the next rack chokes softly.

“Okay,” Patrick hisses, “can we please pretend this is a world where we don’t talk about my fucking nipples at the mall like that’s a thing normal people do? Can you fake that for me?”

Patrick’s been eyeing a dark blue, leaf-print number with short sleeves and a button collar for the past ten minutes. Picking it up, then putting it down and scowling at the price tag like he can change the number with the power of disapproval. The constant motion of his arm is beginning to make Pete feel car sick and it’s clear he isn’t going to carpe his diem and take it any time soon without external assistance.

With an exasperated sigh, Pete leans past him and grabs it in a large. “Do you like this? Or is your hand sticky?”

Behind them, the clerk looks as though he might be in the process of having an aneurysm. There’s every possibility he thinks Patrick, in his bleach-stained Henley by Walmart, is actually wiping something unpleasant onto his hundred-dollar shirts. Pete smiles at him toothily and fakes like he’s picking his nose.

“I—” Patrick pauses and cocks his head like a puppy. “I neither like nor dislike it. It’s fine, it’s just a shirt. Can you stop picking your nose? God, I shouldn’t have to have these conversations when the kids aren’t with us.”

“Do you want the shirt?” Pete asks, although it’s very obvious that Patrick does want the shirt. “You want the shirt, right? Let’s get the shirt.”

“We’re not getting the shirt,” Patrick says firmly. “That would pay for Caitlyn’s karate for a whole
They’re not in a position where buying a shirt is going to tip them into a cycle of credit card debt and payday loan sharks. It’s becoming increasingly annoying that every item of clothing Pete picks up is met with the same deafening shriek at the price like he’s Jeff Bezos and avoiding his tax bill to keep himself in Club Monaco pants. There’s got to be more going on than Patrick keeping a beady eye on their finances.

Pete sighs, “You know we can afford both, right? Like, you buying this shirt isn’t going to mean you’ve got to feed the kids ramen for the next six months. You clearly like the shirt.”

“It’s just a shirt,” Patrick insists. “I could get, like, four just as great shirts from Old Navy for the same price.”

“No you couldn’t, because they’d be shirts from Old Navy.” Pete snaps, exasperated. “Patrick, you like the shirt, just try it on and then we can buy the fucking shirt and move on with our lives. Which are going to remain unchanged, so we’re clear, only you’ll be dressed in a nicer shirt.”

Patrick folds his arms theatrically. “I’m not trying on the shirt.”

“Oh why not? God, just take the damn shirt and—”

“Because it won’t fit me!” Patrick hisses, before Pete can continue. He sounds so angry that Pete takes an involuntary step back and brings the shirt to his chest defensively. “Because I’m a fucking fat ass and there’s no way that’s going to button up when I strap myself into it. I’ll be lucky if it’ll even go over my shoulders.”

Pete frowns and touches the hem of Patrick’s Henley. “No, this is a large, I mean, you’re a—”

“Double XL,” Patrick mutters at his shoes. “I’m – Yeah. I’m fat. And that won’t fit me. So if you could just put it down and stop talking about it… That would be great.”

“Your clothes are too big,” Pete says calmly.

Patrick’s head snaps up as he glares at Pete. He is so furious it radiates from him like heat, like Pete will burn if he steps any closer. Through gritted teeth, he whispers, “I – Excuse me?”

“Your clothes,” Pete continues matter-of-factly. “If you’re wearing a double XL, then you’re buying way too big to cover up.” Patrick looks as though he might be imagining removing Pete’s testicles from his body with the bluntest part of a clothes hanger. “Look, glare at me all you want but I know clothes and I know that you’re buying the wrong size. Try the large,” he hands it over and Patrick takes it, pissy and wary. Pete waves a hand in the direction of the changing room. “Go ahead. I’ll wait here, you don’t have to show me if you don’t want to.”

The short story is this: They buy the fucking shirt – and three others – in a large and Pete manages not to look too smug about it.

“Where next?” he asks, examining the map.

Patrick shrugs, “Honestly, that’s – We can go home now.”

“No way, we’re just getting started! You have to think big!”

Patrick looks down at his stomach and grimaces. “I always think big. Kind of necessary, you know?”
“Babe,” Pete begins quietly. “I didn’t—”

“It’s fine,” Patrick cuts him off in a voice that suggests it’s definitely not fine, “it’s just one of those things, we don’t have to analyze it, or discuss it, or even talk about it at all. Hey, is Mexican food okay with you?”

It turns out that realizing he’s the cause, keeper and sustainability program of Patrick’s self-consciousness is not a particularly pleasant feeling. Maybe if he’d tried a little harder. Maybe if he’d delivered a few more compliments instead of taking swipes about the ice cream in the freezer. Maybe if he was a different man, capable of considering the feelings of others ahead of his own. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Cautiously, he says, “Look, if you wanted to come with me to the gym, sometime…?”

“Hey, look at how I’m not talking about it!” Patrick exclaims cheerfully. “Do you see how I’m doing that? And how you’re, like, not doing that? Could you maybe follow my lead, do you think?”

“I’m not being a dick,” Pete insists sincerely. “I just – you seem like you were happier with how you looked back when Harper was a baby and I want you to feel like that again.”

They walk in silence and it’s awkward, which is sadly not unusual. Most of their interactions for the past few weeks have had this same pervasive background level of awkwardness, like the constant click, click, click of an emotional Geiger counter humming through every conversation they have. Pete’s almost certain he’s said the wrong thing – again – and he can’t figure out why – again. The whole thing is so confusing and unfair. He’s trying. Goddammit, he’s trying and that should… He feels like it should count for something.

“Do you know why fat people don’t like it when thin people offer to help them lose weight?” Patrick asks eventually. Pete would like to get back to discussing discount t-shirts but shakes his head in response. “It’s because we know how to be thin, academically at least. We’re not fucking stupid, we know that carrot sticks are better than donuts, we know that jogging is better than television shows on the couch. But it’s so fucking hard.”

“I can help,” Pete insists. “We can do it together; I could stand to lose a few pounds myself.”

“Shut up,” Patrick says sharply. “The thing is, you’ve always been thin. You were a skinny kid who grew into a skinny twenty-something who hit the gym and turned into an athletic thirty-something, you know?”

Pete stays silent, because it sounds rhetorical and Patrick is not a man who enjoys having his rhetorical questions answered. Finally, when the silence becomes too much, he allows himself a non-committal hmm and continues to stare at the food court up ahead.

“I’m not like that,” Patrick admits quietly. “I was a fat kid, then a chubby twenty-something, then I got, like, three years where I looked okay, 10 percent of my life where I didn’t look like the broad side of a barn. Do you know how hard I had to work at that? Just to be… normal?”

“You – You went to yoga,” Pete says weakly.

“Fuck yoga,” Patrick snaps viciously. “You don’t get it because you’ve never had to work at being thin – you’re the societal expectation without even trying and I’m the guy who fights with himself every time he chooses Ben and Jerry’s over broccoli and do you know why I don’t make the right choice?” Pete shakes his head slowly. “Because what’s the point? Because I can deny myself and be unhappy or I can eat and still be unhappy, but at least I feel better while I’m eating ice cream.”
Pete stares miserably at his shoes and feels stupid and humble. The truth is, it’s been so simple to think of Patrick’s weight as a demonstration of his moral weakness, his inability to keep his hands out of the refrigerator. Stupidly, he didn’t imagine that losing weight, or maintaining that loss, was hard because it isn’t hard for him. He breathes deeply and listens to the muzak being piped through the mall and thinks he is the biggest fucking idiot in the north side of Chicago.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally. “I didn’t realize. I – I won’t talk about it again, if it makes you uncomfortable. I just,” he falters and reaches and, impulsively, he grabs at Patrick’s hand and squeezes gently, “I want you to know that I think you’re fucking gorgeous, you know? Whatever the label in your jeans says.”

“You don’t have to say that,” Patrick mutters.

When he speaks, his ears and the crests of his cheeks turn pink and lovely. If delivering compliments makes him flush quite so beautifully, Pete makes a private resolution to do it more often.

“I mean it,” he says. “You’re a very handsome dude. It’s basically the only reason I married you.”

And, because Patrick is soft and open and it seems as though, today, he might not get knocked back, he grasps both of Patrick’s hands in his own and pulls him back against the wall. He strokes his thumbs along the delicate skin inside of Patrick’s wrists and watches him and thinks he is so, so lucky to be allowed to do this.

“Shut up,” Patrick warns, raising his middle finger and flashing it in Pete’s direction.

“Well, that and the huge—”

“Thank you, Peter.”

“You have beautiful eyes,” Pete continues. “You also have an irresistible mouth, like, fuck, who gave you those lips? They have to be an arrestable offense, sir.”

Patrick scowls sourly and turns a deeper, richer shade of red. “Fuck off.”

“I love that you gave Avery your red hair,” Pete murmurs and breaks a hand free to pet it gently. Patrick bites into his lip and stares at their hands and looks very, very pleased.

“It’s strawberry blond, if we’re being technical.”

“Sure,” Pete laughs. “Still, that was an awesome thing for you to pass along so, good job. I love that she looks so much like you because when she smiles, it’s your smile. It’s your frown and your pout and your filthy fucking temper.”

“She’s – she’s not so bad,” Patrick agrees. Then he frowns and continues earnestly. “Do you… Look, I know this sounds stupid, but you do think her hair’s going to grow, right? Like, you don’t think baldness is hereditary?”

“Patrick,” Pete says seriously, which is difficult when the corners of his mouth are twitching. “I genuinely do not believe that you’ve sentenced her to a lifetime of looking like an egg.” Patrick scowls darkly and Pete rushes on, “But like, she makes a lovely egg, either way. The nicest little egg with legs I’ve ever seen. I think she’s totally eggcellent.”

He assumes the Wyld Stallyns pose, just to make Patrick laugh.
“You’re making it very hard for me to be mad at you,” Patrick admits as they fall back into the flow of foot traffic heading towards the bank of restaurants and coffee shops. He doesn’t let go of Pete’s hand. He doesn’t stop smiling. Pete is alight like Fourth of July in his chest.

Their sneakers squeak on the tiles. In every store window, Pete sees their reflection from the corner of his eye and he feels… happy. He feels proud. For the first time in a very long time, he begins to think of his marriage in the present tense. It’s a living, vibrant thing, pushed into hibernation by his apathy but now it feels like the long, cold winter might be starting to thaw. There are 2.7 million people in Chicago – roughly 51 percent of them male — and this man chose him.

“I’m glad,” he says quietly, and means it.

***

Patrick calls Pete midweek and he tries his best not to make it into a Big Deal.

“Wentz,” Pete says briskly.

It doesn’t sound like he looked at the phone before he picked it up. A panicked man – which Patrick is not – would assume Pete is busy and find an excuse to hang up.

“Oh, hey,” Patrick stumbles. “Uh, so, you can totally say no but, like – How are you fixed for dinner tonight?”

“Um,” Pete pauses, “I think my mom said something about going out so, like, probably a sandwich and oh God, no, you’re inviting me, aren’t you? Like – At your place? Our place. The place where our kids live.”

Somewhere, probably on another blog, Patrick read something about assuming a power stance whilst talking on the phone. Apparently, it makes the speaker sound more assertive. He spreads his legs a little and straightens his shoulders, bouncing on the balls of his feet. That’s what athletes do before a big game. Maybe. That’s probably what athletes do.

“Daddy?” Harper hisses from the kitchen table. “Do you have to poop?”

Apparently, his power stance could use a little work.

“Yeah,” he says – to Pete, not Harper. “I meant here. It’s just, I made way too much lasagna and, if you wanted to, it might be… nice.”

“I see. Well, if you’d just be tossing it out, it would be a real shame to waste good lasagna,” Pete says sagely.

“Right,” Patrick agrees. “Food waste is a really big issue. Did you know that Chicagoans toss out 36 percent of everything they buy at the grocery store? That’s 17 percent more food waste than the national average.”

Pete pauses, then he says, “Is that true?”

“Yes,” Patrick says, when he means probably. Like, it could probably be true. “So, you’d be doing me and the environment a huge favor, really.”

“Oh God,” Caitlyn mutters at her homework. “This is embarrassing. I’m embarrassed for you.”

Patrick’s hands are shaking. This is because Patrick is an idiot whose central nervous system can’t
tell the difference between a hot new date and a man who, once upon a terrible haircut, held back his hair on a windy day so he could eat a donut. He wants, very much, for Pete to say yes without making an excuse about work.

“Oh, sure,” Pete says and he sounds like he might be smiling. “In that case, count me in. Around six?”


Acceptable? He bangs his head sharply off the nearest cabinet. Avery giggles and shouts, “Dada!” Patrick reevaluates his decision to make this phone call in front of his children and finds the intellect of the Patrick of two minutes ago entirely lacking.

Pete doesn’t speak but it sounds like he’s smiling. This is obviously ridiculous because all Patrick can hear is Pete’s breathing but it sounds like… happy breathing. Pete is breathing happily and Patrick is grinning stupidly at his children and blushing and — Oh, God. This is so fucking juvenile.

“Okay,” he says briskly. “Well, I — You should probably get on with work. And I should… make lasagna.”

“Patrick,” Pete says carefully.

“Hmm?”

“You said you already made too much lasagna.”


“It sounds like this whole lasagna thing is insanely complicated,” Pete says, laughing. “Since it can’t decide what stage of production it’s at and whatnot. I should let you go deal with that.”

“Yes, I’m a very busy man.”

“Cool,” Pete says, far too casually. “Cool, cool. Well, try not to create a wormhole in the kitchen. If the recipe calls for plutonium, just keep in mind that we don’t own a Delorean.”

“I — I’ll try,” Patrick agrees with much nonchalance. “It’s a — complicated recipe.”

“Seems like,” Pete says fondly. “See you tonight.”

Patrick hasn’t heard Pete sound fond in years.

“Yeah,” he nods. “I — See you later.” He hangs up the phone and deliberately does not look at Caitlyn as she pretends to do her algebra. “Lasagna okay for dinner, kids?”

“Yum,” Harper declares.

“Yeah,” Noah says.

“Blaaaagh,” Avery says, very seriously.

“Daddy,” Caitlyn rolls her eyes. “You — Your flirting is awful.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” he lies. Badly, in case there was any doubt.

“You were flirting,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “Badly.”
“My house is full of horrible, ungrateful brats,” he tells her without malice.

Noah looks up. “I’m not a brat.”

“Oh, please.” Patrick ruffles Noah’s hair affectionately. “You’re the brattiest brat to ever brat. You’re the Great Bratsby.”

“Hmmph,” says Noah, looking unimpressed.

Caitlyn raises an eyebrow, which makes her look so startlingly like Pete that Patrick feels it in his solar plexus. “Yeah, well, you should listen to me because that was painful.”

“Riiight,” Noah chirps as he resolutely ignores his homework. “What does Jackson think of your flirting, Caitlyn?”

“Can we have him adopted?” Caitlyn implores.

Patrick looks at his son critically. “Honestly? Who would take him?”

“Hey!”

“I mean — He’s basically housebroken,” Caitlyn shrugs, “someone will probably want him. Maybe someone who can teach him how to flirt because, otherwise, he’s got to rely on you.”

“New family rule: Children who are currently failing algebra do not get to comment on my conversational habits until their homework is complete and they’ve told me all about Jackson. And, by the way, just to make one thing perfectly clear, I was not flirting.”

Caitlyn sighs deeply. It’s clear she believes him not at all. “Sure, daddy. Whatever you say.”

“I’m making lasagna,” he says decisively and Avery shrieks and Harper looks bored and Noah isn’t listening and Caitlyn? Caitlyn eyes him shrewdly as he grabs an onion from the vegetable rack and slices into it with a grim sense of efficiency. “That’s all. Just lasagna.”

“Sure thing, daddy. Just lasagna.”

***

When Patrick opens the front door, he doesn’t expect to come face to face with a wall of flowers.

“Hey,” says the bouquet. “Lilacs, right?”

“Pete?” Patrick asks, somewhat concerned. “Are you in there or have I developed the ability to communicate with foliage?”

From somewhere amidst the riotous display of purple, Pete’s eyes appear. “I think foliage is just the leaves, if we’re being technical.”


Pete follows him down the hallway and into the family room. The children are arranged along the couches in various stages of atrophy as the Disney Channel does an excellent job of substituting for actual parenting. There’s a general flurry of excitement when Pete follows him into the room. Which is fine. It’s totally fine that they treat Pete’s appearance with the enthusiasm of a visiting celebrity. It’s nice that they want to be around him. Patrick is not jealous at all.
“Dad!” Noah exclaims, falling over his own too-big feet in an effort to scale the back of the couch. “I missed you!”

“Buddy!” Pete says, juggling flowers and car keys and Noah hanging off his arm and Harper hanging off his leg with something close to aplomb. “I missed you, too. And, Harper! How’s my favorite girl?” Caitlyn sniffs delicately from the couch. She does not take her eyes off the TV. “I mean, uh, my — joint favorite girl. I have two favorite girls. Three. I have three favorite girls.”

Patrick rolls his eyes. “Noah, didn’t we just talk about using the furniture as a climbing apparatus or am I confusing you with my other eight-year-old son?”

Noah looks sheepish. “Sorry, daddy.”

Caitlyn glances up at the flowers. “Are those for daddy?”

“No,” Pete crosses to the couch and bows with much theater and, carefully, extracts a single bloom from the bouquet. “This is for you.” Caitlyn takes the flower and looks nonplussed. Pete moves down the line. “And you, and you, and you.”

“No…” Noah says, confused.

“Can I plant it?” Harper asks.

“Blat,” Avery says. She examines her flower for a moment, turning it over in her chubby little fists. “Dada!”

“Pete, maybe you shouldn’t give that to—” Avery shrieks and, before Patrick can cover the three big strides towards her, she crams it into her mouth and gums it with enthusiasm. “The Baby,” he finishes. “Oh. Too late.”

The problem is that Pete has no lived experience of dealing with the real-time reactions for four small children. It’s not his fault. Well, it is his fault but he won’t learn if he isn’t allowed to make mistakes. Patrick peels lilac petals from Avery’s tongue and attempts to stop Harper from jamming the stem of her flower up her nose.

“Lilacs are not toxic to pets,” Pete declares confidently.

He waves his phone in Patrick’s direction, as if inviting him to double check this information for himself.

“Avery is not a pet,” Patrick points out indignantly. “Maybe we should put these into a vase, before Penny gets ideas about eating them, too.”

From beneath the coffee table, Penny thumps her tail agreeably.

“He’s not going to win us over with flowers,” Caitlyn hisses. Pete is in the other room, out of earshot and crashing through the kitchen cabinets in search of a vase, Noah and Harper in hot pursuit.

Patrick picks Avery up and balances her on his hip. The flowers are a nice gesture.

“I know,” he says. “But we have to let him try, Caity. It’s not fair if we don’t let him try.”

After lasagna and ice cream, Noah points out he has reading to practise and Caitlyn slopes off to her room to study. Patrick clears the dishes and Pete helps, scraping plates into the trash and handing them over for Patrick to slot into the dishwasher. It’s companionable, almost easy, their reflections in
the kitchen window smiling back at them.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Pete says sincerely. “And, by the way, the new shirt looks good on you.”

Patrick blushes and feels like he’s twenty again. “No problem. I — The kids miss you. A lot.”

“And you?” Pete asks quietly. “Do you miss me?”

This is not a subject that is available for discussion. Patrick has bottled his feelings up, stored them in a vault and sworn not to examine them too closely. Maybe Pete’s effort is fake. Maybe Patrick is broken. Maybe none of this will be worth a damn in the long run and they’ll still find themselves petitioning the courts, caught in an acrimonious cycle of alimony and custody and property division. He shakes his head and tries to dislodge the smell of Pete’s cologne from his nose. This is so much harder to analyze critically when Pete is filling the space with his presence, when he’s acting like the husband Patrick’s wanted him to be so badly.

“Okay,” Patrick says, closing the dishwasher. “I’m going to read with Noah, do you think you can give the babies their bath?”

Against the refrigerator, Pete baulks. It’s not like Patrick blames him, not really, tossed into the deep end — or, not too deep, for the sake of safety — and asked to deal with bathtime. Maybe they should switch jobs, Pete can sink into the couch and read with Noah because, God knows, the kid seeks his dad’s approval like other eight-year-olds seek out Pokemon. It might be nice to let them bond, to share some time together. Patrick opens his mouth to tell Pete this.

“Okay.” Pete says, gathering his courage and his youngest children and heading towards the stairs. “How hard can it be?”

Patrick suspects the term ‘famous last words’ was coined for moments like this.

Still, he can’t pretend it’s not nice to be the one to collapse onto the couch after dinner. They read together, without Avery snatching at the pages or Harper demanding a story of her own. It’s not that he doesn’t adore all of his children but one-on-one time is a luxury he can’t generally afford.

When the book is finished and the room is still, Noah asks, “Is dad moving back home?”

“Oh God, Patrick!” Pete sounds genuinely distressed. “She’s — It’s everywhere.”

Noah gives him a look that suggests he finds Patrick’s metaphors entirely lacking. “Dad isn’t a shark. He wouldn’t eat Penny, for one thing.”

“No,” Patrick agrees. “I suppose not, but—”

“Oh God, Patrick!” Pete sounds genuinely distressed. “She’s — It’s everywhere.”

“Avery pooped in the bathtub again,” Noah says, with all the sage weariness of a child who has been in the tub with Avery before.
“It certainly sounds like it,” Patrick agrees affably.

“You should go help him.”

“You wouldn’t be saying this just so you can watch Teen Titans instead of doing more reading, would you?”

Noah smiles, a charming, lopsided, distinctly Pete smile and grabs at the remote.

By the time Patrick makes it upstairs and into the bathroom, it is everywhere. There’s shit on the tub, on the tiles, on Avery’s feet and smudged on Pete’s shirt. The sidelong glance that Harper shoots him as he enters the room is far too knowing for a three-year-old.

She says, “Avery pooped. Dad doesn’t know how to clean it.”

“I told you,” Pete shrieks. “The tub is for cleaning! If the tub isn’t clean I don’t know where to clean anything, this is a paradox and I’ve had no prior training!”

“Nfagh,” Avery says. She looks inordinately pleased with herself.

“It’s on me,” Pete wails, holding out his hand in demonstration. “What do I do? If I clean myself first, I’ll get covered in it when I clean her. If I clean her first, then I’ll make her dirty again when I touch her. This is like that stupid logic puzzle with the chicken and the grain and the fox but the boat is made of sh—”

“Poop!” Patrick cuts him off sharply.

“Dad isn’t very good at bathtime,” Harper whispers loudly.

“Hey, listen kid, I tried! No one warned me there’d be poop.”

“I didn’t poop!” Harper says indignantly.

“No, you did not,” Pete agrees. “Which is why you’re getting Avery’s college fund.”


“Ugh,” Caitlyn says from the relative safety of her bedroom. “If I have to.”

When Pete shrugs out of his shirt, huffing ‘ew, ew, ew, ew’ under his breath, Patrick blinks in surprise at the sight of Pete’s naked chest. Which is a truly ridiculous thing because showering can’t be done efficiently if the showeree is fully clothed; it’s obvious that Pete removing his clothing is a natural part of the showering process. Still. That’s a lot of skin and ink and hard, compact muscle Patrick wasn’t mentally prepared to deal with during bath time. His tongue feels sticky, gummed to the roof of his mouth as Pete shuffles out of his jeans and pauses in nothing but his tight boxer briefs, as he leans into the shower cubicule and adjusts the temperature of the water.

Nudity is weaponized within their relationship. Which is sad, because it used to be a cause for celebration but for years, Pete without clothes has been the harbinger of sex that’s unsatisfying at best, humiliating at worst. Now, with the safety buffer of their children and a bathtub full of things Patrick doesn’t want to think about, he can appreciate that Pete’s naked body is a gorgeous, terrifying thing.

He sucks in his dad-gut as Pete shucks off his underwear, his pubes neatly trimmed and the dark hair
clinging to his chest and stomach carefully sculpted. Patrick thinks of the sandy thatch of his own pubic hair rioting its cheerful way down towards his knees, of the way the hair on his chest is edging steadily higher with each passing year, in inverse correlation to the way it thins on his head.

Fat, hairy, balding; what a catch. God, he should be grateful that Pete ever wanted to fuck him at all.

“Baby,” Pete says, wet and gorgeous from the shower spray.

“Yeah?” Patrick asks absently.

“No,” Pete shakes his head and points at Avery. “Uh, I meant, you know, hand me the baby? But like, I can call you baby, too, if you like? Hand me the baby, baby.”

“Oh,” Patrick fumbles to do so, his face hot. “Yeah, right — uh. Of course. Just — Like, put your arm under her butt and — Yep. That’ll do it.”

So, Patrick cleans the tub and doesn’t look at Pete in the shower and doesn’t smile to himself with just the corners of his mouth as Pete begins to croon ‘my baby pooped in the bathtub’ to the tune of My Baby Takes the Morning Train. If Patrick is to be subjected to this Tom Selleck, Three Men and a Baby nonsense, he needs a moment of privacy in which to deal with it.

“You can’t sing,” he calls out, bursting with the need to say something. “Like, at all. I’m very embarrassed on your behalf.”

“You can sing,” Pete says cheerfully, not even squealing as Avery grabs his soapy nipple and nips into it with her impossibly sharp baby fingernails. “You’ve always been the singer, hasn’t he, baby girl? Daddy should sing for us.”

But singing is like playing the guitar and Patrick isn’t ready for that yet. Plus, there’s something hard and bright behind Patrick’s breastbone, caging the beat of his heart as he chews over the sound of Pete calling Avery ‘baby girl’ with unbridled affection. It makes his throat ache, a casual reminder of their first apartment, of Pete and Caitlyn in the tub together while Patrick sang to them.

He smiles instead. “Not tonight, you couldn’t handle the awesome. Anyway, I’m all done here, I’ll go lay out her pajamas and grab you some clean clothes.”

“Sounds good,” Pete says.

He goes right back to singing.

Once he’s out of the room and out of earshot and out of reach of that dark, dangerous curl of a smile that Pete does so well, Patrick hums along with him. He doesn’t take a moment to look uncertainly at their bed, or to think about the way Pete looks behind the fogged up glass, hazy and cut with lithe muscle under all of that ink. He doesn’t think about Pete pushing him over the mattress and biting at his mouth, licking past his teeth and then sliding down, over his chest, tugging at his jeans, his mouth wet and red and messy.

No. Those are things he definitely doesn’t think about. He catches sight of himself in the mirror, sweaty and pink, his hair a spiky mess and tufting unattractively over his ears.

“You’re ridiculous,” he tells his reflection.

His reflection, for the most part, looks as though he agrees.
End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you wanted to leave a comment or kudos that would be absolutely, spiffingly awesome of you :D

You can also find me on Tumblr [here](#).

Have an awesome week!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!