**Summary**

A drunk Johnny Lawrence shows up on Daniel LaRusso’s doorstep with a note for Robby in his pocket. Daniel gives Johnny a ride home, and it all ends up about how you’d expect (and maybe, in some ways you wouldn’t).

A story about old flames, old hurts, finding balance, and new beginnings.

(Or: Season Two, but gayer.)

--

NOW COMPLETE. Thanks all, drop us a review or kudos if you enjoyed!

**Notes**

On authorship: This story written by Storyshark2005 with edits, moral support, and some humble textual contributions by Elise_51. AO3 seems to insist on listing creators alphabetically, but this work should be credited to Storyshark2005.

Warmly,
Elise_51
Addendum: She's full of shit- Elise_51 wrote some incredible parts, many of my favorite Johnny moments especially were her words. Many thanks to the Quiver Sisters on tumblr for their friendship and writing fellowship and contributions to this growing fandom.

Sincerely,
Storyshark2005

Like playlists while you read? Got one for you here...
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeBysrcU-kQuPHEF1l8zb4C2_WnD2pK5s
Part I: Prelude

“Hunger makes thief of any man.”

- Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth*
Johnny thinks about failure quite a lot these days. It sits heavy, brewing dark and low in his belly.

He thinks about Ali’s hair in the sun, the way her smile had always cut a sharp white wound into his chest, someone so beautiful, so whole, looking at him the way she had back then. Like he was worth his weight in her love.

He thinks about the heaviness of Kreese’s hand on his shoulder his junior year, after his second All Valley Championship win. The reinforcing assurance of being told, two years in a row, that he was worth something. He remembers the hours after class spent going over footwork, technique, the sharp bite of his Sensei’s words. *Again! Again!*

“Do you know what the word ‘sensei’ means, Mr. Lawrence?” Johnny can feel his heart galloping, slower, slower, as his chest heaves, his gi sticking to his chest. Kreese paces in a patient, predatory circle as Johnny keeps his eyes stuck to the wall straight ahead.

“It means ‘teacher’, Sensei.”

Kreese smiles, in that way of his. A way that is unsettling, is more like a grimace of pain, a wounded animal. *Vietnam*, Bobby had hissed in his ear, years ago now, after Kreese had freaked out on one of the students, screamed at him until his face was red, had damp, watery eyes. Kreese had dismissed them early, told them not to come back the rest of that week. *He’s still half in the jungle*, Bobby had said.

“No, Mr. Lawrence. It means ‘guide’. It means I’ve already walked the path you have before you.”

Johnny had taken that with seriousness, with weight. He’d taken it to mean he wasn’t alone anymore.

He’d been wrong, of course. Instead of being the strong father figure Johnny had hoped, Kreese had snapped his second-place trophy in half and tried to murder him.

He can still feel his mother’s tentative fingers pressing coolly at the bruises at his neck, wrapping a bag of frozen peas in a soft towel as Johnny had lain miserably in his bed the rest of that weekend, and the following Monday, listening to his mother do verbal battle with Sid. It was one of the few she’d won, calling Johnny in sick that day. He can still feel those cool fingertips pressing into his salt-red cheeks, wiping futilely at the tears.

“He was a liar,” he’d croaked. “He didn’t give a shit about me. Just like dad.”

“Your father loved you.” She whispers fiercely into his ear, cradling his head.

“Then why did he leave?” He sits up, searches the blue eyes he’d inherited.

“He was,” his mother swallows. “He was sad, baby. He didn’t know how to take care of himself.”

“He didn’t even try.” She can’t seem to meet his eyes, and something black and resentful inside whispers, *she’s weak. She’s always been weak*. And he feels like shit for it, like less than shit.

He wonders what it is about men, these sick men, why it is Kreese had to hit and hurt, why Sid had
to snap and bite and yell, why his dad had to give up and leave before Johnny’d had a chance to crack open his newborn eyes.

He thinks about LaRusso, bruised and limping in the sand, Ali yelling at him to leave him alone - leave him alone!

He thinks it must be the kind of sickness that gets passed on. That maybe he was doomed to carry this anger, this deathly acid churning and seeping skin-deep, bleeding out from under his fingernails—maybe he was doomed to take it out and pour it all over everyone around him. He remembers thinking that maybe someday he’d have a son or a daughter that hated him in kind, a hatred that was burning a hole through the center of his own chest, from the inside out.

Johnny is on the wrong side of 50, his back hurts and he has a son who hates him, a dojo in a shitty strip mall he can barely make the rent on, and he has Miguel. Miguel, who is now just as love-sick and angry and twisted up inside as Johnny is.

“Johnny.”

Daniel LaRusso is staring at him with those stupid brown doe eyes that haven’t changed in thirty years. Who has proven over, and over again, just how much better a man he is than Johnny. A better fighter, a better husband, a better father.

“Johnny, I can’t let you see him like this.” Daniel puts his hand on Johnny’s chest, pressing him gently, but firmly back.

Johnny wishes his mother was alive, with an aching, desperate want. Wishes her light was still on, waiting for him to come home to her comforting arms, her warmth, and the smell of her ginger shampoo.

But she isn’t. She’s sixteen years gone now, dead and in the ground. He wants to curl into a fetal position, pull his knees into his chest, and wish until somehow, he might break, might die too.

The ground shifts under his feet, and Daniel catches Johnny’s shoulders, steadies him out until the world balances itself.

“You,” Johnny starts, and he hates this weakness, the drunk cobwebs over his vision, the tears down his face. “Could you just give him this? From me.”

Daniel takes the letter, penned onto a wrinkled yellow legal pad, because Johnny doesn’t know how to work a fucking computer, or find the right printer at the library to make it print out correctly. Nothing ever came out right anymore.

“Yeah, sure, Johnny.” Daniel keeps his hands on Johnny, and Johnny thinks that Daniel knows he wears his age better too. His dark skin glows under the patio lights, the only wrinkles Johnny can see are the smile lines at the corners of his eyes.

“Is there somebody I can call? You can’t drive home like this.”

“No,” Johnny answers. “There’s nobody left.”

“I’ll take you home.” Daniel says, and folds Johnny into the black Audi and watches the houses shrink and the streets roughen from Encino to Reseda. It feels like time travel, downhill in every sense of the word. They’d always been from two different worlds, Encino and Receda. Rich and poor, white and black, good and bad. Miyagi-do and Cobra Kai. He’s glad, in a way, that Robby had chosen the right side in the end.
They pull up in front of the apartment complex, LaRusso shifts to park, staring at the yellow-orange streetlights until he twists the keys around, kills the low purring rumble of the engine.

“Johnny. You know...everything’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna get better. You know that, right? You’re not alone out here.”

“The only people that say that are the ones who don’t know what it’s like to be alone.” Johnny stares at the apartment complex. “Anyway. Don’t worry about me. I’ve made it this far by myself.” He fumbles for the door handle.

“Johnny-”

“What?”

Daniel twists in his seat, and Johnny can feel fingers card through his hair, straight back to the nape of his neck before their lips meet. Daniel doesn’t kiss like a girl, he kisses the way he fights, like the way he does everything else- insistent and gutsy and graceful. He tastes like salt and smells like aftershave and sweat and the faintest hint of motor oil. Johnny meets him there, in the middle. Action, reaction, strike, block, strike again.

He thinks of a night, somewhere far back, with dark water and brown skin in the moonlight. Water, water, and the hazy chords of memory.

1984 was a year that took more than it gave, was nothing like the era of golden ex-degeneracy he had imagined. Not just because things with Ali came to a sudden end, and not just because the towering figure of Kreese crumbled into dust. But with Kreese went karate, the keystone to Johnny’s young world- the centerpiece which had brought the rest of the loose pieces of his life together in a stable, orderly arch. The first thing he’d shown real talent for, the first and last idol he’d ever bowed down before- his art, his sport, the first vessel he’d poured himself into completely, for which he was rewarded real happiness, gratitude, confidence, and self-esteem. Karate had always been Johnny Lawrence’s first true love; Ali Mills had always come second.

And the cause of these endings? Daniel LaRusso, skinny little Jersey punk, whirling into the Valley like a damn hurricane, brought him loping in like a deer, all impossibly long legs, glowing brown skin, and those baby browns that could set your heart knocking into palpitations that took days to re-synchronize. The only option had been to kick LaRusso’s ass up and down the San Fernando Valley.

Johnny knew, had always known, somewhere in the darker corners of his brain he didn’t care to examine too carefully, that he thought about LaRusso more often than he should. That it was weird how often he thought about Daniel. That Tommy had made a joke one day about Johnny’s new rebound “Danielle” so that Tommy had to be popped in the jaw and told to shut the fuck up about shit he didn’t know about. That maybe, maybe, Johnny could just begin to admit--that one time between wake and sleep he may have had something akin to, like, a brief locker room fantasy that Johnny wasn’t, at the time, even going to begin to address.

It had all been very confusing.

The thing about hurricanes, Johnny thinks, the thing people tend to think they understand, but the thing that they inevitably (and often fatally) forget, is the Eye. You get through the storm, and the wind calms down, and you think, it’s over, it’s finally over. Johnny Lawrence is starting to suspect, with a dawning dread (and the sharp pain of white teeth biting into his lower lip) that maybe the last thirty years of his life, he’s been stuck in the Eye of the storm, staring guilelessly up at the California bluebird sky, forgetting the long, dark wall at his back.
Maybe the worst has yet to come.

“What the fuck-” Johnny whispers, pulling back, his head is spinning but Daniel’s fingers hold him steady.

“C’mon, Johnny.” Daniel’s voice is low, coated in that Jersey accent. “You know.”

Johnny did know. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, yeah?” He asks, and Johnny knows he’s playing up the accent, reminding Johnny of the scrawny Italian pain-in-the-ass from the wrong side of the tracks.

“Yeah.” Johnny breathes him in. “You comin’ in or what?”

Maybe the worst was yet to come, but Johnny Lawrence has never held his own best interests at heart. He was, after all, an ace degenerate.

Anything else had been a lie, singing through the spaces of his own teeth.

***

In the Summer of 1967, Newark exploded in a rash of heat, anger, hurt, and frustration, during an unfortunate upswing of racial tension, and the downturn of New Jersey’s economy and the city’s employment numbers. John William Smith, a gentle cab driver from Georgia (J.W., to his friends) signaled, driving west on 15th avenue, and passed a double-parked police cruiser. Two Newark police officers, John DeSimone and Vito Pontrelli, pulled Williams over, yanked him from the cab, beat him, arrested him, and transported him downtown, where they continued to beat him from the confines of his cell. Crowds gathered, onlookers whispered, then shouted. He’s dead! they shout, They killed him! Bricks, bottles, and stones, led to a march, which led to guns and molotov cocktails. Buildings caught fire, cars burned, people smashed and bashed and police officers tasted their own sweat behind riot masks and night sticks and were told by the men in the hats- fire if necessary. Six days later, Newark smoldered in its own rot and ashes. Six people left their families smaller, and over 700 people were left wounded and injured.

Lucille LaRusso pressed her knuckles between her fingers, and felt her son kicking, almost like he wanted out and into the action.

Lucille has always told Daniel, from the time he was born, that he came from fire, a born fighter. An underdog, his father had teased him, “like a terrier,” he’d described Daniel. “All bark, and bite, but you’re not big enough for those teeth, kid.” Too skinny, too small, too loud, too cocky. Daniel had felt from the time he could remember, that he was straining against his own bones.

He’d always had it, that Jersey fire burning deep in his chest. The smell of garbage piled on street corners, the sound of the subway rumbling beneath his feet. Dark hair, brown skin, Hackensack and the Bay. The smell of hot asphalt in the summer and the sick taste of petroleum in his mouth, wafting down from the oil refineries.

California had been a dream. Sea salt and sand and blonde hair and Daniel stuck out like a sore thumb. He still felt it, felt odd and out of place, a little too dark, found himself habitually adjusting his tie at the country club, scrubbing under his fingernails in the bathroom over, and over again, scrubbing them clean.
He’s not clean now. He’s got Johnny Lawrence under his skin, literally. He can smell the guy’s cheap cologne like he’d been hosed down with it. He steps into the guest shower and sprays the taste of him from his tongue, his gums, his lips. He rubs at his eyes and tries to press out the shape of a broad shoulder, the dip down to the clavicle. He can still feel rough stubble under his fingertips.

That he would someday grow up to meet a beautiful woman, who would become not only his wife, but his partner in the truest sense of the word. That they would run a successful business together, raise two kids, piece together a bucolic home in Encino- this would have been beyond 16-year-old Daniel’s wildest dreams. Receda, at least, had made sense to Daniel, had shared a lot of the rundown rough and charming appeal as his hometown, even if it was sunnier and smelled a hell of a lot nicer than Newark ever had. Encino...Encino still seemed like a cosmic prank that could be pulled out from Daniel’s feet at any time. Sorry, guido, corn-fed Americans only!

That he would grow up to have all of these things, only to become a cheater- an adulterer. Why, he thinks, scrubbing his face dry, and wrapping himself up in a stupidly expensive towel. Why, of all people, did it have to be Johnny Lawrence. He’s not even so concerned, at this point, that it was a man. The much more disturbing facet was that the person he’d just slept with, the person that for the past few months had walked a beaten down track around his head- this was not some old flame, some sweetheart. This wasn’t Ali Mills and her ‘crack open your heart’ smile, this wasn’t unfinished business with Kumiko and her long, lean dancer’s legs.

This was the asshole who’d almost killed him with a flying side kick to the head. Johnny Lawrence, despite the mournful, hooded methylene blue eyes, was not good news. He was the opposite of that. He was very bad news, indeed. Very bad, bad news.

“Don’t be such a nerd,” Johnny had snapped, pushing him up against the wall. “Nobody fucks in their socks, Jesus Christ.” This the type of insightful, articulate advice from somebody about to give Daniel the blow job of his life.

It wasn’t really all that confusing. Daniel knows himself well. Knows he’s really just a repressed adrenaline junkie (Samantha had to get her driving skills from someone). The fact of the matter is, Daniel knows exactly why he finds Johnny Lawrence as unbelievably hot as he does. He is exactly the wrong sort, which at this suspiciously middlish point in his life, where he may or may not be having something akin to a crisis- would make him exactly the right sort to pour gasoline all over Daniel’s perfectly respectable and repressed desires, and pencil himself into the blank lines of Daniel’s life: Something to fight for, someone to fight with, and a mutually understood conduit between.

A ‘Battle of the Dojos’ of epic moral proportions; Johnny Lawrence; karate.

It felt like a conspiracy. “Yeah,” and the voice is Johnny’s, “A conspiracy to get your ass into my bed!” Daniel groans at the thought, in a manner completely un-erotic. He didn’t know how he would ever live this down. Live with himself.

But, hell. Who was he kidding, he thought, every muscle in his body pleasantly warm and buzzing from the flood of endorphins. The mouth on him, he thought. He hadn’t felt that way since he was a teenager. Totally, physically sated. He wasn’t sure how he’d get through the week, not to mention the rest of his life.

“Ok, next time, it’s Rocky III.” Daniel’s eyebrows were practically over his hairline, looking down at a (still) drunk Johnny Lawrence, in nothing but his underwear, sitting on the bed upright against the wall, drinking a Coors. “Three point match, then...you know. Whatever.”
Whatever. Daniel hadn’t even argued over the presumption of “next time.” He’d stumbled back out to the Audi, seen the state of his hair, and spent a minute raking his fingers through, flattening it back down. Before he could leave, Johnny’d come running out to the car in boxers and a zip-up black hoodie over his bare chest. No shoes. He’d leaned into the lowered window.

“Hey. You’re still gonna give him the note, right?”

Daniel just rolled his eyes. “Yeah, Johnny. I’ll give him the note. I’m not an asshole.”

Johnny’d gotten a sort of panicky, manic look in his eyes, “Right. Thanks, LaRusso” and dove his head into the car, lips first. “See ya around,” had been his parting words a few seconds later, leaving Daniel’s head spinning, tongue tasting of beer.

Now Daniel feels his way down the darkened back hallway to the bedroom, padding quietly on the carpet. He slides under the covers and knows immediately by the still line of Amanda’s body that she is awake.

“You were gone awhile.”

“He was drunk. I had to talk him down.”

“For three hours?”

Daniel doesn’t answer, swallows down the knot in his chest.

“I think you need to get this out of your system.” She says to the ceiling, voice tight.

He sighs, too exhausted for conversation. “What do you mean?”

Amanda sits up twists away from him, her feet hanging off the side of the bed.

“I’m sick of that...that car lot smile, Daniel. It’s for customers. It’s not for me.”

“So I don’t smile right. What do you want?” Daniel, not-so-briefly, loathes himself.

“You’re unhappy.”

“I’m stressed out. Cobra Kai coming back, Robby. It’s got me all....” He gestures to the dark. “Turned around.”

There is a long, heavy pause. “You need to work things out with Johnny. I don’t care how-”

“He’s a drunk, and he’s twisting these kids up. I don’t need to be around it anymore. I’m done with him.”

“You’re in it already. You’re obsessed with it, with him-”

“I’m not obsessed with him-”

“You need to work it out.” She turns half around, the tired angles of her face illuminated by the security lights filtering in through the blinds. “I don’t care how.” She takes a breath in, lets it out again. “Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

He works his mouth searching for words. He doesn’t find them. “Can we go to sleep now?”

Her shoulders are a hard line, but she lies back down. “I’m not coming in tomorrow. It’s mom’s
birthday. I'll be a couple days up there.”

“Okay,” he says. And adds, like an afterthought, but not untruthfully- “I love you.”

Her fingers rest briefly at his shoulder. “I love you, too.”

***
Part II: The Middle - May

Chapter Summary

Face the Music Friday; Sunday Funday, or “LaRusso Family Beach Day”; A Case of the Mondays; Bad Dreams, and Tiny Tot Tuesday; Thursday with My Antonio
Okay, so I got angry and began
To shout, and woke the street. Okay. Okay!
And I was sick all down the neighbour's van.
And I disgraced myself on the par-kay.
And then … you know how if you’ve had a few
You’ll wake at dawn, all healthy, like sea breezes,
Raring to go, and thinking: ‘Clever you!
You’ve got away with it.’ And then, oh Jesus,
It hits you. Well, that morning, just at six
I woke, got up and looked down at the skip.
There lay my life, still sodden, on the bricks;
There lay my poor old life, arse over tip.
- James Fenton, “The Skip”

May 2018

Face the Music Friday

Daniel spent the hours between his shameful return home and daybreak caught in a sort of purgatory between sleep and consciousness, head pounding with fatigue and unable to block the sense memories still pressing into his skin. He emerged from this fitful fog to hear the sound of running water, Amanda in the shower. Rising on his elbows, he spots her overnight back packed and ready, sitting expectantly by the bedroom door.

“No, it’s fine. You should just…enjoy the time with your parents. You haven’t been up there in awhile. I’ll take care of breakfast. Kids won’t be up for another hour.”

“Sam and Robby are already up. They went for a run. It’ll be hot today.” Amanda pulls on a loose, sheer red blouse and denim shorts, and leans in for a kiss. She smells like orange blossoms.

“I’ll see you Sunday night?” He pushes the covers back, and pulls on a pair of running shorts, toes into a pair of moccasins.

“I might stay another night and come back down Monday morning. I’ll let you know.”
Daniel walks her out to the driveway and closes her in behind the car door. He leans in for a kiss, chaste and soft. He wants to ask if they’re alright, but of course, he doesn’t. She studies him, sunglasses pushed up into her hair. “You remember what I said last night?”

“Yes.” he nods.

She nods cryptically, pushes her sunglasses down, and Daniel watches her roll out of the driveway, down the curving Encino Hills, until she is gone.

Robby and Samantha wander into the kitchen later, tan and glistening with sweat, and Samantha begs off for a shower, laughter bubbling like a fountain.

“Hey, Mr. LaRusso- what’s my dad’s car doing in the driveway?” Robby sits down, head cocked to the side in a way that was now terrifyingly obvious in origin. Daniel checks the heat of the pan, pours batter down in slow, widening discs.

“I drove your dad home last night. He left this for you.” Daniel wipes his hands on a towel, and slides the slightly wrinkled envelope from last night across the table.

“Why didn’t he just knock on the door and talk to me?”

Daniel stares at the bubbling sides of the batter. “He was a little...”

“Wasted?” Robby cautiously fingers the envelope, mouth turned down.

“Yeah. I didn’t wanna pull you out of bed to see him like that.” Daniel gestured with the spatula, flipping pancakes.

Robby nods, hand flat over the envelope, and they spend a few minutes quietly, the pan sizzling over the sound of birdsong.

“So, uh.” Robby clears his throat. “Bachelor weekend, huh? Any plans?”

Daniel scooped the last of the pancakes onto a platter. “I’ve gotta spend some time at the dealership today and tomorrow. Sunday, though, I thought we might go to the beach or something. If you’re not busy.”

“What, me too?”

And Daniel realizes objectively, that Robby’s bottle green eyes must come from his mother, but there’s something around the cheekbones and the jawline that smacks Daniel in the face, stinging distinctly of a certain blonde karate jerk.

Daniel shakes himself. “Yeah. I was thinking you, me, Sam, and Anthony. I mean, Anthony’ll just sit under the umbrella staring at his gameboy all day.” Daniel throws dishes around in the sink, and turns around, drying his hands.

“You sure you don’t want it to just be you three? Like a, ‘LaRusso Family Beach Day’ or something?” Robby does that funny little side smile. He’s never seen Johnny do that. He wonders if it’s something Robby gets from his mother, or if it’s just pure Robby.

Daniel grins, shakes his head. “Nah, kid. You’d be doin’ me a favor. Give me some male company that won’t dump me at the first sign of wifi.”

Robby looks cautiously happy, a subtle sort of glow that breaks Daniel’s heart, how the little things
his kids didn’t even think about seemed to settle on Robby like a warm blanket. Having a plate set in front of him, having a stack of clean clothes laid out on his bed. Daniel had never had money at that age, had never been as comfortable as he’d made Sam and Anthony’s lives. But he’d always had the single-minded focus of his mother’s love, never held in doubt.

“Did you read it?”

Daniel looks up. “What?”

“The letter. Did you read it? It’s okay if you did-”

“No, I didn’t, I wouldn’t-”

“- I’m sure it’s just a bunch of drunk excuses.”

“Robby,” Daniel watches the tightness at the corners of Robby’s mouth, straight across and down. “Look. I don’t know...what you’ve been through. I don’t know why your dad wasn’t there. But he, he-”

He doesn’t want to make Johnny’s excuses for him. But he can’t get that haunted look out of his head, of Johnny Lawrence, drunk and broken on his doorstep. I just want to talk to my son, he’d said, and it had sounded like the truth.

Daniel can’t conceive of a reason to be an absent father. He knows what it’s like to have a parent die on you, how tightly that can twist a kid up inside, how dying off that early can feel like a betrayal. But he can’t imagine the feeling of having a father who might not want you. Even if it’s not the truth, it’s close enough, and what does the truth matter? The end result is the same.

“He’s your father.” Daniel finishes, lamely. “And I think he’s trying, anyway.” He gives Robby a look, trying to convey sympathy without pity. “I miss my dad every day. I got to say goodbye but...I’d kill for another day, you know?”

Robby swallows. “I just wish I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What it was about me that made him go away.” Robby takes his fork in hand matter-of-factly, swallows his pancakes dry.

Daniel has to look away, press down the rise of anger.

“It’s okay, Mr. LaRusso.” Robby’s voice pulls him back, and Daniel watches him slip the letter under his plate. “I’ll read the letter. If you see him, you can tell him that. You’ve got to take his car back, right?”

Daniel’s eyes dart to the key rack by the door, spots the second set of keys, hanging from a scratched and battered AC/DC keychain. He remembers, then, that this was not a normal morning. Normal had gone out the window the moment he kissed Johnny Lawrence right on the mouth.

***

His first thought on waking: what a fucking idiot.

Or that was a second thought because Johnny’s first thought(s) was that 1) he was dying of thirst and
2) it was his mother’s birthday.

Also it was way too bright in his living room, his head was pounding, and his neck hurt--probably because he had passed out sitting up on the couch in his boxers and jacket like a sad old man. He was fucking old was what the problem was, also he was a fucking idiot.

He attempted to close his eyes and stop existing, but as that didn’t work, Johnny checked his watch instead: 1:32 in the afternoon. And so he was winning at life already this beautiful Friday afternoon.

Actually last night had been kickass. So I guess I’m gay for LaRusso wasn’t nearly as disturbing a revelation as he would have expected even 24 hours ago. The little bastard could kiss and was frankly adorable, especially when his eyes got all huge after Johnny basically ripped his pants off.

Johnny immediately forgave himself for starting his morning with another Banquet because why not at this point, and also hair of the dog was what was called for on days like these. He flicked the cap beautifully, and paused with the bottle just at his lips. A toast:

*Happy Birthday Mom. I’m alone, estranged from your only grandson, I have the kind of bank account balance that drove you to Sid forty years ago--but don’t worry because I guess I’m also a gay homewrecker, and I think things just might work out after all!!*

He shook his head, laughed at himself almost. It was closer to *Jesus Christ* but then he had gotten laid last night, so there was hope yet. Or could you, do gays say that? If you didn't actually stick anything anywhere, I mean, you know, how do you define it when there are you know...no ladies...you know.

He could hear his mother’s laugh, *Oh Johnny, you’re awful*, the only person in the world he had always managed to make do so. To smile in spite of whatever shitty day they both had on a regular basis. “I love you Mom,” just words in the empty air, but he meant them more than anything else he ever said or did.

But then this LaRusso thing. Oh Johnny, you’re awful, he thought to himself. Seriously. But seriously. It had been really really good. He snorted out loud, thinking of Daniel LaRusso in his socks and would you look at those MLB boxer briefs.

“The Mets, huh? I like your little pin stripes,” Johnny’s shit eating grin as he dives for Daniel’s neck, LaRusso flushing like a little girl. Johnny had no idea what he was doing, and yet he had a pretty good guess at what he could do. What he wanted to do.

“It’s game day-” Daniel laughed, “and what are you wearing? You got some cobra boxers free with that ridiculous paint job?” Daniel’s hands slipping down the back of Johnny’s jeans. Yeah, he was okay with that.

His head shot up to look right at LaRusso, “Hey, whatever it takes to keep the snake in the--”

“Shut the fuck up,” and Daniel did shut Johnny up, real quick. And he was really good at it.

Now, getting dressed like an adult, Johnny was faced with the harsh, *harsh*, light of day-after thinking. This probably won’t happen again, probably definitely shouldn’t happen again. He had been drunk, but to be honest with himself, Johnny had been in complete control of all faculties. *Allll faculties*, he chuckled to himself. He could almost hear LaRusso shake his head, *Really, John? Really?*

He bit his lip, staring out his shitty window at a shitty parking lot, looking at nothing. Really. Thinking of how little Daniel had aged, how warm he had been, brown hands, brown eyes; and how
his own loneliness had just melted away last night, Johnny had to squeeze his eyes shut, push that thinking out of the way. It needed to go away now because it would probably never come back. Because tonight he'd be alone again. Because now King LaRusso was up in his castle with his super hot wife and his kids he talked to all the time, and his cars and job and his, HIS kid too. Robby was probably...well he was probably having a good morning over there now. Anyway.

Johnny is not sure how you can really hate and really...really like someone all at the same time. He wasn’t going to be a little girl about this whole thing, but he could admit he was definitely messed up about Daniel. He hadn’t actually been this...this girlish about anyone since Ali, and Ali had really done a number on him.

Johnny remembered everything last night pretty goddamn well. He remembered taking charge and getting Daniel off and he definitely remembered everything after that, and then like there might have been a few minutes of what would appear to an outsider as snuggling, but whatever, fuck off. To whomever. Whatever. Daniel got dressed sometime after and then Johnny chased him outside to follow up on important shit, and then Johnny passed right the fuck out on his own couch feeling better than he had in years.

And now he might as well get to the dojo early. If he can find his goddamn keys, that is.

Johnny searches for ten minutes before he remembers Daniel driving him home--his car would be at LaRusso's. It would take him almost an hour to walk it and god help him, any other day. He called a cab and decided he'd figure it out from there. He might be a gay homewrecker, but he wouldn't be late for his Cobras.

Fuck. He had fucked Daniel LaRusso. Or, whatever. Gotten off and snuggled. He didn't even want to think about the fallout here, could already see Daniel freaking out this morning.

*See his skinny brown torso and his wet hair, shaking hands clutched around a twisted up t-shirt. “I gotta go home,” he had said, and the moonlight lit the planes of his back until he was gone, over the fence.*

Johnny would enjoy it except he wasn't a total asshole.

Or maybe he was. But as soon as he saw Miguel in his head he felt certainty again, knew what he had to do. Show up and teach karate. Get Kreese under control. Make things better with Robby somewhere in there too. Everything else would have to wait.

***

Daniel parks the Challenger in the backlot of the dealership, and endures a verbal gauntlet run from the shop guys, who already see a lot of ridiculous looking cars in the Valley. Donovan, the head mechanic, almost chokes on his iced coffee when he leans in through the window and sees the gear stick.

At 5:30, Daniel cuts his losses, leaves the place in the hands of his Assistant Sales Manager, and slinks back out to the car, exhausted. It’d been awhile since he’d worked a full day on the floor without either Amanda or Anoush there with him. He pulls his tie off, and unbuttons the top couple buttons, letting the air conditioning cool the interior of the car, which is also surprisingly clean and sparse. No crumpled fast food packaging, no water rings in the cupholders. Just clean leather and the
Daniel pulls open the console and finds a battered CD wallet, printed with a Metallica logo and blue and purple flames. He spends a couple minutes flipping through it, snickering at the three Cyndi Lauper albums hiding in sleeves near the back. He slots “Born in the USA” into the player and hums in approval.

The dojo is straight West on Victory Boulevard, but he might be able to open up the throttle a little bit on the 101, and according to the website Johnny’s last class isn’t over till 7, so Daniel turns the purring engine South toward the Freeway. The evening sun isn’t quite in his eyes yet, and the air conditioning has done its job so he rolls the windows down and lets the wind throw his hair into disarray, pulling his sunglasses down over his eyes and even though rush hour traffic puts a damper on his cruise, he’s still able to get up to fifth gear. Things slow down right before the bridge over the 405, and two head-bopping dudes in a Mustang yell, “Light ’em, man!” and Daniel is only a little bit tempted by the request for a burnout. The Mustang peels out in a cloud of rubber and disappointment.

Daniel parks the car in front of the Dojo and pulls open the frosted glass door, jangling in greeting, and feels a blast of deja vu at the red walls and students in white gi, and sits down in one of a line of chairs by the door to watch.

The kids are the advanced high schoolers group, Miguel and Aisha’s class. There’s another kid Daniel remembers from the tournament, with the mohawk and the back tattoo. The kids are sparring in groups of three, rotating to officiate. He can’t help smile as he watches Aisha land a particularly nasty looking hook kick to another kid’s jaw. The overall atmosphere is lighter than Daniel had imagined, and most of the kids are smiling and laughing. He finally spots Johnny near the back, working one-on-one with a tiny looking blonde kid in glasses, and Daniel recalls him as the one who took the front kick to the chest at the Tournament, remembers him clutching his chest, curled on the ground before the medics cleared him.

He catches Johnny’s eye, and flicks his chin toward the door. Johnny nods, and calls out toward the back office, before heading toward Daniel. Daniel’s halfway out the door before he spots John Kreese- which he should have expected, it’s been a couple of weeks since- but it’s still a shock, to see Kreese stalk out from the office in a black gi, straight out of Daniel’s nightmares.

Daniel is frozen mid-step until Johnny grabs him roughly by the elbow and maneuvers him the rest of the way through the door and onto the sidewalk. The awkwardness of seeing him up close again dissolves under the old, familiar antagonism.

“What was that- you’re having him teach classes - are you insane?!”

“Keep your voice down, Jesus Christ. My head is killing me-”

Daniel lowers his voice slightly, hissing. “Did you mean anything you wrote in that letter?”

Johnny flinches. “You read it?”

“No. But I think it’s rich you’re trying to make amends the same time you let him back in your life.”

Daniel jerks his chin sharply. “You expect me to let you bring that crap around Robby?”

“You don’t know shit, LaRusso.” But Daniel can see he’s hit a sore spot. “Maybe I’m just trying to give somebody a second chance.”

“So you want to give this psychopath a second chance- maybe you should have given your son a
first chance.”

He can see the hook he’s got in Johnny’s gut, can feel the tautness in the line, and his fingers tighten around the rope. He’s sunk Johnny’s battleship, but Daniel isn’t done. His eyes flicker back to the dojo, toward Kreese, and he can’t believe how weak, how pathetic this man is, to let someone like John Kreese back into his life. Daniel doesn’t want his boat, he wants blood, he wants the whole goddamned fleet.

Daniel levels his gaze back to Johnny, focuses his anger to a hot, sharp point. “Do you know what he asked me this morning, Johnny? He said, ‘What is it about me that made him leave?’”

The slide that drops from Johnny’s eyes shows the direct hit Daniel’s made. He seems to struggle for words, and Daniel watches him with a hot fury. Take that, you bastard. You deserve it, everything you’ve got coming you deserve.

“Johnny,” Kreese’s voice calls, velvet soft, and Daniel hadn’t even heard the door, hadn’t noticed him slide out onto the sidewalk. “Don’t listen to him. He’s lying.”

Daniel braces himself to bite back, but Johnny turns, back to Kreese, says quietly, “I don’t need you for this. I need you to cover class.”

Kreese stares between them, reluctant to leave, to pull his claws from the situation, but he does, eventually, slink back into the dojo, bell ringing behind him.

Johnny turns back, throat working. “Look. I know I’m a fuck up. You don’t have to remind me of everything I’ve ever done wrong. But this time I’m trying to do the right thing here. And so is Kreese.”

“You mean the one I just—just—” He can’t even say it.

“You mean the one I just—just—” He can’t even say it.

“Cheated on? Jesus Christ, LaRusso, if that’s the worst thing you’ve ever done—”

“It is the worst thing I’ve ever done.” Daniel snaps.

He watches the stricken look flicker across Johnny’s face, disappear after a heavy breath.

“Well I’m sorry about your conscience. You won’t have to worry about that anymore. But...Kreese...we’re on the same page. He’s helping me out with the dojo, and he’s trying to turn his life around, not something you’d understand—”

“That’s not the point—”

“No, it’s not. The point is that Kreese has nothing to do with me and Robby.”

“Johnny, I just—”


“You can’t trust him.” Daniel steps closer toward the blue eyes watching warily. “You forget what he did to you?”
“He apologized. I accepted.”

“He tried to kill you -”

“Well he didn’t.”

“Because my sensei saved your ass-”

“What is this, a contest? What’s your problem that you’ve always gotta one-up me?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“No, you’re just taking my kid home like he’s your own-”

“Someone had to, he was eating cereal in the dark for dinner-”

“What are you trying to do, LaRusso? Why are you here?”

“I’m just- I’m dropping the car off.”

“Bullshit. Do you want to talk about my son, or your walk of shame this morning?”

Daniel is caught out, and he feels his face flush red. He puts his hands on his hips, mind spinning, trying to catch his tongue on the right words.

“You’re gonna cut up your feet out here.” Genius, Daniel thinks loathingly, giving Johnny an inadvertent once-over. He should look stupid, a fifty year-old man in a sleeveless black gi, and the headband. But he does not look stupid, his traitor brain supplies. He looks incredibly hot. None of these thoughts are helpful in the least.

Johnny smirks knowingly. “Aw. Didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t.” Daniel snaps, petulant. “I just...think it would look pretty gross if you got blood all over the sidewalk is all.”

“Mmmhmm. You know you’re cute when you get all flustered. Plus you’re wearing your little car salesman outfit.”

“Oh my god.” Daniel covers his face.

“It’s not my fault. You took advantage of me.”

“Do we have to talk about this?” Daniel says from behind his hands.

“If it makes you uncomfortable. Yes.”

“I shouldn’t have...kissed you.” Daniel can barely get out the last two words. “You were drunk, and I...I did take advantage. I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

Johnny stares, arms crossed. “So?”

“I’m sorry. Like I said, I shouldn’t have done that, you were in no condition. I put you in a really shitty position. And...I dunno. I haven’t decided if I should tell Amanda or not. So if you could just...not say anything, I’d appreciate it.”

There is a very awkward, pregnant pause, as Daniel trails off. Johnny shakes his head. “You are
such an asshole.”

“Johnny, I said I was sorry—”

Johnny stares at him like he’s a total idiot. “Fuck you, LaRusso. Don’t you have an Uber to call or something?”

“You said you wanted to talk about it—”

“Gimme my keys.”

“Am I missing something—”

“Keys, LaRusso.” Johnny holds out his hand, twitching his fingers.

Daniel reluctantly fishes the keys from his pocket and tosses them over, but an approaching car draws their attention. The black Audi pulls up to a vacant spot, clicks off the engine. Robby steps from the car and jangles the keys between his fingers.

“Hey, Mr. LaRusso. Thought you might want a ride home, hope that’s okay.” He keeps his eyes on Daniel, and hasn’t looked over at his father yet.

“Yeah,” Daniel answers faintly. “No, that’s great, Robby. Thanks.” Robby hands the keys over and finally turns toward Johnny.

“Hey, dad.”

“Hey, Robby.” Johnny’s voice sounds strange, more of a question than a greeting

“I got your letter—” Robby starts.

“Hey, I’m just gonna—” Daniel points to the car. “Just...let me know if you want a ride back.”

Robby tears his eyes off his dad. “Yeah, would you just give us a minute? I still definitely want a ride home. If that’s cool?”

Daniel nods and slides inside the car, pulls it around and across the parking lot to find a spot that feels less like he’s a spectator in a movie theater. But the windows are tinted dark and he has a vested interest in both of them. One his student, living under his own roof- the other he hasn’t ever been able to keep his eyes off of in the same room.

Robby scuffs his feet and Johnny’s eyes are watery, visible from fifty yards, the guy had no poker face. Robby does most of the talking, Johnny a lot of nodding with his eyes on Robby or on the ground.

Robby shuts the car door behind him, letting a puff of hot summer air in with him. He sits, and Daniel turns the volume down on NPR, not a word of which he’d absorbed in the past few minutes.

“How’d it go?” Daniel asks carefully.

“We’re gonna hang out tomorrow.” Robby stares straight through the windshield, eyebrows furrowed.

“You okay with that?”

Robby purses his lips, turns to Daniel, and his eyes are suddenly brilliant green pools, brow arching
upwards in a sort of tentative disbelief, all set into beautiful relief by a wide, white smile.

“Yes,” he says, and Daniel can’t help but pull him into a hug, and is grateful for the tinted windows hiding this gift from Johnny’s sore sight.

“I’m so glad.” Daniel says.

And he is. For the first time in a week, Daniel feels the good stuff pushing down on the bad, the light and the dark anchoring firmly into place, locked into perfect, pristine balance.

***

Sunday Funday, or “LaRusso Family Beach Day”

‘LaRusso Family Beach Day’ dawns inauspiciously enough as Daniel wakes to find the supply of espresso beans totally empty, and so begins his day without the aid of caffeine. Things seem to brighten with Samantha’s radiant presence bouncing into the kitchen, but quickly darken again as she bears the bad news.

“I already told Moon we would hang out,” she says, setting her purse gently on the counter, and he can see her itching to slide out the front door. “I’m sorry, Dad. Besides, she’s my only girlfriend. Aisha’s still not really talking to me…”

And because Daniel has never learned to defend himself against his daughter’s ocean water blues, he finds himself one more LaRusso down. Walking dejectedly back toward the dojo room where Robby had made himself at home, Daniel sets his face to a cheerier expression.

This too, passes quickly, when he sees a neatly made bed, clearly not slept in, and remembers Robby’s text from the night previous, informing him he was sleeping on Johnny’s pull-out after a late night of marathoning Bruce Lee movies. He was probably still at Johnny’s, eating a horribly unhealthy breakfast. Daniel shoots Robby a quick text, informing him of time/location, and lowers his expectations.

Fair enough. Daniel hasn’t had one-on-one time with Anthony in quite awhile. Today- today would be a Father-Son bonding experience, and Daniel would banish all thoughts of his future conversation with Amanda, all thoughts of his adulterous missteps, all thoughts of Johnny Lawrence’s fit body and fine- anyway. He wouldn’t think of that today.

This optimism too, would pass.

“Dad. This sucks. You promised this would be fun.”

“This isn’t fun?” Daniel kicks the ball, watches it bounce against the toe of Anthony’s sneaker, sinking down into the sand.

“Dad. It’s 90 degrees out. I’m sweating, and there’s no point to one-on-one soccer. I could be playing my game in air-conditioning.”

“What is it with the computer games? I know they’re fun, but- look around you, the wind on your
face- the ocean, I mean, look at those seagulls!” Daniel gestures desperately toward a flock of admittedly dusty looking birds picking at a pile of forgotten french fries left on the beach. “Those are real animals- nobody had to program them into a game.”

“The real world is better for some people than for other people.” Anthony gives the ball a half-hearted kick, rolling sluggishly over the beach.

“Kid,” Daniel meets the ball halfway, tipping it onto his shoe. “I know it’s hard to tell sometimes, but you’ve got it pretty good. When I was your age-”

“Yeah, I know dad. You were playing with a bag of nails in a dirty alley.”

Daniel sighs, rolls the ball underfoot, studies the sweat beading over the soft, pale skin of his son. He looks hot and miserable.

“Okay, forget the ball. What about a walk? You’ll feel better after. Sweat it out a little.”

“Right.” Anthony frowns. “Can we go home after that?”

“Fine.” Daniel grimaces. “But let’s get at least an hour in, okay? We can be inside the rest of the day.”

Daniel stashes the soccer ball back in the car, and looking at the cooler, ponders whether introducing Anthony to his first beer would be cool enough to salvage this excursion, or just make him more of a bad parent.

“Mr. LaRusso!”

Daniel swivels around, squinting across the parking lot, and sees a familiar lithe teenager, hair whipping around in the wind.

“Robby? Hey, kid, I thought you were-” Daniel’s enthusiastic smile drops instantly at the figure approaching from over Robby’s shoulder. Red swimming trunks, faded black Def Leppard t-shirt, dark sunglasses. He looks tall, and fit, and horrible, straight out of Daniel’s worst memories of high school. Daniel refuses to look down at his own skinny legs and uncool, dad-like attire.

“Dad and I were hanging out, and I remembered it was beach day, so I thought maybe we could all hang out together?” Robby smiles painfully, obviously trying to keep the train on the tracks. “Sorry for the surprise, I tried to call you...” he trails off, glancing furtively around. “Um. Where’s Samantha?”

“She’s hanging out with Moon today.” Daniel tries for a civil tone, glaring at a smirking Johnny.

“Oh, okay, I didn’t know that...”

“What’s up, Danielle?” Judging from his tone, Daniel is not the only less-than-thrilled party.

“C’mon, dad, you said you weren’t gonna-” Robby looks between the two of them.

“It’s fine, Robby, your dad just has a little trouble acting like an adult most of the time-”

“Your t-shirt looks stupid.” Daniel and Johnny both stop, and look down to regard the youngest LaRusso. Anthony crosses his arms over his chest and widens his stance, and Daniel feels a rush of warm affection for his son.

Johnny’s smirk disappears “Why are you wearing shoes to the beach? You’re just gonna get sand in
“Your socks.”

“You’ll wish you were wearing shoes when you step on a jellyfish. Or a stingray. Steve Irwin got stabbed through the heart by a stingray.”

“That’s ’cause he was up in their face like a dumbass.”

“You’re a dumb-”

“Anthony-” Daniel reluctantly cuts his son off. “C’mon, language.”

Robbie claps his hands together. “Dad and I were thinking we’d play some volleyball, and then maybe grab some lunch after. Dad’s treat. Right, Dad?” Robbie turns to his dad. Johnny seems to gather himself.

“Yeah, course. It’s a good start for taking care of my kid.”

Daniel’s eyebrows go up.

“I want In-N-Out.” Anthony nods decisively.

Daniel shakes himself. “Hey, no way. You mom would kill me, we’re not letting you put that crap in your body.”

“I want a Double-Double with cheese, fries, and a chocolate shake.”

Johnny frowns in contemplation, watching the exchange.

“If you buy me In-N-Out I’ll play your stupid volleyball game.” Anthony straightens, arms still crossed, belly sticking out under his sweaty t-shirt.

Daniel does a double take. “You wanna play volleyball with these guys?” Anthony had never before put physical exercise on the table. Ever.

Johnny starts to grin. “Will this piss your dad off?”

“Hey-”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely. Just don’t tell my mom, ’cause I’ll get in trouble too. She’ll put me on a Nazi diet.”

Johnny pushes his sunglasses up into his hair, squinting down at Anthony, then up at Daniel, grinning. He leans back, regarding Anthony with newfound approval. “You’re all right, LaRusso.”

Daniel scoffs, but leans forward and punches the volleyball up and out of Johnny’s arm, catching it in one hand. “Whatever, I get Robby on my team. You two can talk about french fries and never telling my wife about this.”

Daniel tosses the ball to Robby, who is looking much relieved, and after Robby points in the right direction, they all set off for the nets.

“This is probably good, because my dad sucks at volleyball.” Anthony stage-whispers behind them, and Daniel hears Johnny snicker.

“Hey, but he’s really good at soccer.” Anthony amends. “And I know he could kick your ass in karate. Remember when he kicked you in the face? We have pictures, I think sometimes when dad
gets stressed out he pulls up that picture on his phone and just stares at it-”

“He- what? Hey, LaRusso, you have a picture of that on your phone?” Daniel hears Johnny start to jog close behind. “What is he talking about-”

Daniel catches the ball from Robby, turns, and spikes it right into Johnny Lawrence’s face.

It feels exactly as good as he imagined.

***

The nearest In-N-Out location is in Topanga, according to Robby’s smartphone, and after he finally weasels the cross streets out of the kid (he sure as hell wasn’t gonna let some robot tell him the quickest way across town) Johnny points the Challenger towards the highway, and tries to lose LaRusso on the freeway in his stupid mom-van. Johnny’s grinning into his rear-view mirror, watching the dark red suburbanwagon shrink down the road, when he sees Robby gripping the edges of his seat, mouth tight, and thinks better of it, easing off the gas, and pops back into the right-hand lane.

“Sorry- I’ll slow it down.”

“You drive like Sam.” Robby pushes out a breath.

“LaRusso’s daughter?” Johnny finds the exit ahead, merging into the lane, and glances back at Robby to continue.

“Yeah. She drives like a maniac.”

“You mean she drives like a girl?” Johnny grins.

“No- she’s actually pretty good, I think. It’s just she drives too fast. Like she thinks driving to the mall is a NASCAR race-”

“Hot.” Johnny nods approvingly. “You guys going out?”

Robby purses his lips. “Um.” His face was turning a little red. “I don’t…”

“You guys sneakin’ around LaRusso?”

Robby turns bright red at this, forehead pinching in worry. “Please don’t tell him- we just haven’t decided how to break it to him.”

Johnny laughs, shaking his head. “What a dumbass. The guy takes on a karate class, grand total of two teenagers, one of them his daughter- and doesn’t expect a hook up?!”

“Samantha isn’t a hook up. I really like her, Dad. And we’re going to tell Mr.LaRusso. It’s just…there hasn’t been a good time just yet.” Robby stares through the passenger window, twisting his fingers together in his lap. Johnny feels like a total ass.

“I didn’t mean it like that, kiddo.” He tries, gently. “She seems like a cool chick. I just want you to be careful. Diaz’s been moping around for weeks. Don’t want you to end up like him.”
“She dumped him because he got wasted at a party, yelled at her in front of all her friends, and shoved her to the ground. I don’t plan on acting like your star student.”

Sometimes, Johnny wonders how he manages to screw up so fantastically. Other times, he can look back and see the path of his fuck-upery with painful clarity. This is one of the latter cases. *Why the fuck would you bring up Diaz?*

Johnny studies the tension of Robby’s jaw, the frown pulling down at his lips. Five minutes ago, Robby had bounced into the car, sweating and happy from the volleyball game, a sight so beautiful and fragile that Johnny hadn’t the heart to ask his son to wipe the sand from his feet and clothes, so desperate he was not to ruin the good mood. Both LaRussos, it turns out, sucked pretty badly at volleyball. The real fun had started when Daniel’d run after the stray ball, and dribbled it back instead, toeing the ball up to bounce around on his knees. Robby’d jogged over, shouting, “I’m open, I’m open!” and so had begun the impromptu soccer match, which ended after Johnny decided only a full-on body tackle into the surf could stop the dribbling New Jersey phenom. Anthony’d then jumped up on Johnny’s back with a fierce war cry, sending him face-first back into the water, much to LaRusso’s delight, judging by his sputtering laughter. Robby had finally joined, quickly sucked into some kind of mystical-Miyagi-surf kata that LaRusso was demonstrating. Johnny had watched with an 120 pound twelve year-old clinging to his back, but was distracted after a small fist smashed into his kidney.

“You little shit—”

“C’mon Sensei Dumbass!” the chubby little mini-Daniel had said, jumping back into the water. “*Not so tough without your stupid karate friends!”* And so he had to chase the little fucker down and toss him out to sea, which was pretty gratifying.

Anyway, point being he had fucked up the good mood already. Parking the car in the mostly empty lot (it was almost three o’clock, they’d spent the better part of the afternoon at the beach) Johnny set his hopes skyward, that he could patch things up over lunch.

Johnny sighs heavily, the air conditioning still blasting as they sat parked, waiting for the LaRussos. “Look. I don’t know why I keep saying the exact wrong things. I shouldn’t have brought up Miguel. But...all I was trying to say was, I love you. And I just want you to be happy. And if LaRusso’s daughter does that for you— then that’s great. I just want you to be careful because I’m your dad, and I worry. I know I haven’t done most of the stuff dads are supposed to do. But that’s one of ‘em I do all the time.”

Robby watches him with those big green eyes that sort of come from Shannon’s side, but that Johnny, despite the mismatched color, can’t help but see his own mother in.

“It’s okay, Dad.” Robby nods, unbuckling his seatbelt, and he must not realize how brutal the sound of those words are, the same ones Johnny’d last heard watching his son clutching an injured shoulder, wrapped in a white gi and LaRusso’s supportive arm.

Daniel and Anthony finally pull in next to them, and Johnny switches the car off. He can see Daniel through the tinted windows, sunglasses on, his saltwater soaked hair had dried into curly-ish waves, and he was bitchin’ at Anthony, probably to put his video game away. He looked every bit the minivan mom Johnny could make fun of till the sun went down. But more than that, he looked like a dad, like how a father was supposed to look with his son, exasperated and exhausted and entirely familiar.

A father wasn’t supposed to be tiptoeing around sixteen years of failure, trying to get to know his own son like a long-lost girlfriend, falling on his face more often than not, and saying all the wrong
things.

Daniel LaRusso may have looked like a total and unrepentant dork, but as the four of them walked into the restaurant, Daniel shrugged comfortably into the shape of a parent. His shoulder bumped warmly with Robby’s as Johnny held the door like a hotel bell-boy, like a stranger, looking in from the outside.

Johnny pulled out his wallet. It seemed like, for the moment, it was the only thing he had to give.

***

A Case of the Mondays

Daniel wakes as the sun rises, the sheets empty all around him. He reaches for his phone, scrolls blearily through the text from Amanda an hour ago, saying she’d started her drive down from Ukiah. Two hours down to SFO, then a two and-a-half hour flight to LAX. Thirty minutes home...she’d be exhausted

“Coffee,” he mutters in relief. But of course, there isn’t any coffee. He’d forgotten to pick up beans yesterday, too distracted after the post-volleyball hamburger lunch. Which had been fun, actually, despite the oddness of it all. The only awkward moment had come in the parking lot, when Robby’d had to grab his overnight bag from his dad’s car to head back home with the LaRussos, and Daniel’d had to twist away, hands in his pockets, as father and son had hugged tightly.

“It was pretty fun today,” Anthony’d whispered to Daniel that night, hopping under his covers. “Robby doesn’t usually talk to me much.”

“He likes you. He’s just not used to having siblings.” Daniel brushed his son’s hair from his eyes, over the wrinkled nose.

“How doesn’t he live with Johnny, now that they get along?”

“I’m leaving that up to him. He gets to choose. Besides, I don’t think Johnny has a whole lot of extra room in his apartment.”

“He can’t get a bigger one?”

“Apartments are expensive. Not everyone is as lucky as you.”

“He has a really nice car though. Maybe he should have bought a new apartment instead of his car.”

“I think,” Daniel had said, grinning at his son’s astuteness, "you should ask him that exact question next time you see him.”

Daniel had almost ended the night happily, right then and there, despite the pile of receipts and shoppings bags Samantha had left on the kitchen counter and the neglected sales reports on his laptop.

“Dad.”
“Yeah.” Daniel looked back, leaning against the door frame.

“What if I want to learn karate?”

And why had he sounded so hesitant, when he knew such words would ignite Daniel’s heart? Daniel had stepped back to the bed, eyebrows skyward.

“Yeah? Kiddo, that’s great- we can start tomorrow-”

“No, Dad. The thing is...what if I want to learn from somebody else.”

“What?”

“Not because,” Anthony had amended quickly, seeing Daniel’s heart sink to his toes. “I mean, just- I think it’d be better to learn from someone who’s not my dad- it’s only, I think I might learn better that way.”

And gutted, with his son’s eyes full of pity, Daniel pulled himself together.

“You sure? I mean, we haven’t even tried-”

“Well there was that time a couple years ago-”

“You weren’t serious about it then, and now you’d be with Robby and Sam-”

“I was thinking maybe Johnny. Could teach me.”

Anthony twisted his fingers together for another few minutes, regarding Daniel with a guilt-ridden look equally full of obvious, awful, terrible, hope. Hope that Daniel would say yes.

“Sorry, Dad. It’s fine. I’ll just forget it.”

“So it’s this or nothing? I don’t get a shot?”

“I just don’t think...I mean I don’t want to just follow Samantha around. Just cause it’s karate, you know. I want to do it different.”

“Same, but different.” Daniel sighed wearily.

“Yeah.” Anthony stared at his own thumbs. “I’m just...I’m tired of being fat.”

“You’re not.”

“I am, Dad.” Anthony burst out, fists clenching. “I just think maybe someone who doesn’t...Who might yell or something. Might...work better. And I don’t want to be doing yoga with Ken and Barbie-”

“What about Demetri? He’s new, you’d be training with him-”

“Dad. He’s annoying.”

“Well. Yeah, but-”

“It’s fine. Forget it. It was a stupid idea.”

And so, the gauntlet thrown, Daniel had sighed, laid a hand on his son’s shoulder.
“I’ll talk to your mother.”

Which, as Anthony well knew, was as good as, I give up. You win!

And so, defeated anew, and once again without coffee, Daniel drags himself off to the dealership, resigned that he would have to text Samantha today’s exercises, and with any luck, catch his small class up tomorrow afternoon.

After a couple of hours catching up from the weekend (sales reports still sitting on his computer), Sheila pops her head in the office.

“Daniel, Amanda’s on line one.”

“Thanks, Sheila.”

He picks up the receiver.

“Hey, babe. How’s it going?”

“Hey, I’m just at the airport, I’m about to board so I wanted to give you a call...how’s your morning?”

“Good. Under-caffeinated. I forgot to pick up the espresso.”

“I wrote it down on the list-”

“Yeah. I know.” Daniel knows his voice is testy. “I just...didn’t.”

She pauses, and Daniel can hear the tinny warble of announcements in the background, the high, cacophonous echoes of San Francisco airport.

“Okay. Well, I just talked to Anoush. We need you at North Hollywood today.”

“Where’s Anoush?”

“I sent him to Woodland Hills.”

“What? Why?”

“The Sales Manager quit.”

“What?! When? We just hired her.”

“This morning. She’s been working 60 hour weeks since she started. We promised her an assistant manager in the first month, but you haven’t been around for interviews, so we never hired anybody.”

“Well let’s, let’s hire someone-”

“I did. Anoush called me this morning after it happened. He likes a guy for the job, so I gave him the go-ahead to call him. That’s why I need you at North Hollywood. Anoush is onboarding him at Woodland Hills right now.”

Daniel wilts. “I didn’t even know-”

“It’s fine. Just go. We can talk later.”
“Okay. Thanks...for takin’ care of all that.”

“Alright. Anoush might need some feather-smoothing, too-”

“I’ll drop by at the end of the day.”

“Give him some of that famous LaRusso charm.”

The genuine humor in her voice soothes Daniel’s own nerves, and he packs off to North Hollywood with slightly renewed calm, determined to motivate the NoHo sales team and sell some goddamned cars.

***

Johnny spends Sunday night on his couch watching *Top Gun*, which he’s pretty sure can explain the bizarre dream he has with Carmen dressed as a man, whipping her hat off like Kelly McGillis in the elevator, which is pretty great, but it dissolves into Johnny toe to toe and nose to nose with Daniel LaRusso dressed as Maverick, all cocky walk and his hair all wavy like it’d been in high school, complete with flight suit and aviator sunglasses. Johnny remembers snapping his jaw, like Ice Man, right in LaRusso’s face, pissing him off, and then LaRusso had whipped off the glasses to reveal a bruised up eye, and then he was LaRusso from high school, and then Johnny was 17 again, and they were standing on a dock over Encino lake under the moon and Daniel was crying with those big brown eyes of his, screaming at Johnny, like Johnny had been responsible for the black eye.

Well he had been, hadn’t he. In real life, that is.

His head is all mixed up, between the morning and memory and dreams, and he burns the images off with a long morning run through Receda, down to the concrete culvert containing the trickle of water that was the Los Angeles River. He turns back, realizes he’s gone further east than he meant, and that he’s less than a mile away from LaRusso’s old place.

The field out back had long been paved over and turned into acres of cheap condos and apartments, but Johnny circles around the back, and sees the same chain link fence still standing. He looks up at it, catching his breath, remembers Dutch ripping Daniel down by the waist, fingers curled desperately over the top. He remembers grabbing him and shaking him and hating him more than he’d ever hated anybody, maybe except for Sid and his no-account father. He remembers Bobby’s voice, faintly audible under the static of Johnny’s rage- What is wrong with you, Johnny?! He’s had enough!

He can’t escape the memories, not in the Valley, and sometimes he wonders why he never ran away, why he stayed like a ghost in a haunted house, floating endlessly over the floors and empty rooms. He could have moved somewhere nice, maybe the midwest, like Iowa, where his mother was from. He knew fuck-all about Iowa (what was in Iowa, corn?!) but then his mother came from Iowa, the best person he’d ever known in his life, and so maybe everybody was that nice, that warm, in Iowa. But he figures, if he’d gotten there and stayed sad, it might have been worse knowing than not knowing. This way, at least he had the illusion that all his problems were geographic, and not an inescapable and inextricable part of himself, destined to float around over his head like that stupid sad cartoon donkey who lived in the stick house.

Johnny heads back home, scrubs the salt and sweat from his hair, and scarfs down a hot dog.
sandwich. His phone makes a *boop* -ing sound from the counter, and realizes for the second day in a row, the stupid thing is almost dead. Piece of shit, his old phone could go a week without a charge. *Smart phone, my ass.*

A text pops up from Miguel:

*hey sensei tory is picking me up today so i dont need a ride- c u in class!*

He’s a little disappointed to have been dumped for a new chick, but he’s glad Miguel was starting the long, slow climb out of heartbreak, and would hopefully drop the torch he’d been dragging around on the ground.

He cracks a beer, responds to Miguel, then clicks a different name and begins tapping out a hopefully normal sounding, not overly-desperate message:

*hey kiddo hope your day is going good. u training w/ sam and larusso today? hope you have fun i have my 3 pm class but am free after let me know if u want to come over ltr or grab food or something. tomorrow is good to same schedule. Love dad*

Johnny lets his thumb hover over the little ‘send’ button, wondering if it’s cool to say ‘ltr’ instead of ‘later’, or if that would make him look like an idiot, and if it was ‘to’ or ‘too’. But the only person he could really ask about that was Miguel, and Miguel was maybe the last person who would want to hear anything related to Robby Keene, and so Johnny tosses his hesitation over his shoulder like so many fucks to give, and pushes the little green square.

***

Daniel sells some goddamned cars. Three of them.

The only problem is, no one else knows how to actually close a deal without Anoush doing it for them. He has a few good teaching moments throughout the day, but the couple of softballs he tosses to the staff end up falling through, one because there’s nobody answering their phone at the insurance company, and the other car a junior staffer does sell, Finance doesn’t manage to sell any add-ons or warranty packages, so any profit margin dissolves away with the number of sales people standing around running up payroll.

“This is Hollywood,” he gestures tightly to Janine and John, newer sales people. “If we can’t sell luxury Audis in *Hollywood*, where the fuck are we supposed to sell them?!”

Janine starts to cry a little, and John just stands there, nodding and biting his thumbnail, and Daniel wants to kick him in the mouth. But he can’t, and Janine is sniffling, and so Daniel apologizes and feels like a cad.

He feels bitter, and jaded, and just not himself.

The drive over to Woodland Hills at the end of the day is just the last thing he wants to do, but it’s only a half hour after close, so he knows Anoush will still be there running the numbers, and hopefully Jason, the new guy.

All but a few of the floor lights are off, and Daniel lets himself in with his key, seeing Anoush at the front counter with the new guy. Daniel approaches as Anoush is taking Jason through the reporting
software, voice a little rough. He’s clearly exhausted.

Anoush’s eyebrows quirk up as Daniel sets down the brown paper bag and carton of coffee.

“That better be Blaqhaus.”

“It is Blaqhaus.” Daniel nudges the bag forward, resting his elbows on the counter.

“Just click here. You’ll have to wait a minute while it loads.” Anoush regards the bag suspiciously.

“Fries?”

“Oh, how could I forget, after last time?”

Anoush peeks in the bag, and seemingly satisfied, snatches the coffee. The new guy coughs delicately.

“Oh. Jason, this is Daniel. Daniel, Jason. He’s from your neck of the woods.”

Jason extends an enthusiastic arm, all white shirtsleeves and gelled hair. He looks like a salesman, but he has a nice smile that Daniel thinks the customers will like.

“It’s great to meet you, Mr. LaRusso, I’ve heard great things.”

“Sure, sure. You from Jersey?”

They chat, and it turns out Jason isn’t from Jersey, he’s from Long Island (Anoush wouldn’t have cared about the difference). Everyone’s been very friendly so far, and Daniel is glad to hear it. Anoush pulls Jason back, shows him how to shut the system down, and finally gives him the closing tour, what lights to leave on, etc., etc. They won’t give him keys for another week or so, but it’s good to get him used to the procedure.

Jason leaves, with a jaunty walk.

“He’s perky.” Daniel takes the other coffee, eyebrow quirked as Anoush locks the door behind Jason.

“For now. See how he looks in a couple months. Burnout is real.”

Daniel sighs. “I know it is. How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. Just the same old.”

“Well, can I help with that?”

Anoush snorts. “Can I go back to Sherman Oaks?”

“You get Jason on his feet, sure. Where’d you find him?”

Anoush digs into the bag for the container of fries. “He looked at our LinkedIn page, and Acura had him on a list of their top sales guys in the Northeast. He’s here because his wife wanted to be closer to her family. So, we got lucky. Good timing.”

“That’s awesome. I don’t think it’s just luck, though. We wouldn’t have found him without you. Nice work.”

Anoush shrugs, biting into his sandwich. “He would have dropped a resume off, anyway.”
“And he might have dropped one off at Cole’s. Seriously, I know I haven’t been around as much lately. I want to apologize for that.”

Daniel stops at Anoush’s shaking head. “You shouldn’t be apologizing to me. Whatever doesn’t go on you...it goes on her, Daniel. You can find a dozen of me–”

“Don’t sell yourself short-”

“Just listen to me. Nobody can do what she does around here. Things run smooth, and they stay afloat around here because of her, of every little decision she makes, because she’s in the office, and she’s there to pick up the phone. Did you see the numbers this weekend?”

The conversation is turning south faster than Daniel can handle, and he feels a headache at the base of his neck.

“I haven’t gotten a chance yet-”

“They’re shit. Because Amanda took a weekend off, Laurie was already checked out, and F&I can’t make a decision without her- it was a mess.”

“They could have called me-”

“You were up to your ears in the NoHo garbage fire, you know we never should have opened that location-”

Daniel feels hot anger start to rise up, because it was true- North Hollywood was a stress point, and some cracks were starting to show. But the money was there, and Daniel felt confident the territory was solid. Sure, there were growing pains, and scaling was always a difficult challenge- but who was Anoush to question the business? He didn’t have any real consequences to failure, any real skin in the game- the pressures from their financial backers- he could move on anytime. Hell, Cole’s would kill to pick up a Sales Manager with Anoush’s numbers.

“Hey, what is this, we have one bad weekend-”

“Weeks, Daniel- you’ve been checked out for weeks-” Anoush stops shoving his sandwich back in the bag, eyes locked with Daniel.

“Honestly, things haven’t been the same since the karate stuff started back up. Nobody’s called you out on it because we know it’s your thing- but you need to make a choice. Are you going to be here - and try and make this work? Or are you going to be playing karate master in your backyard with a bunch of teenagers?”

Anoush folds the brown paper up, and boots the computer down, leaving Daniel in darkness at the front desk, feeling completely and totally out of step.

“Fuck.” He says, to noone. “Fuck.”

***

From: Robby, 5:50pm - hey dad yes i did train today, but no mr. L, just me and sam, he was busy at the dealership all day, we also have a new guy named demetri. U prob remember him he was pretty
mad about cobra kai. Anyway hes a long shot but mr. L is trying, he says the kinds of kids who look hopeless are usually the ones who need it most. Im eating dinner at the larussos tonight but maybe we can do pizza and movies again like we did saturday? That was fun.

From: Robby, 5:51pm - also you dont have to sign your name after your text it always says who its from :D

To: Robby, 5:52pm - haha ok smartass tomorrow sounds cool i can pick u up whenever tell larusso have fun with that demetri kid he sure talks a lot so they should get along glad u had 1 on 1 time w/ Sam be smart wrap it up

From: Robby, 5:53pm - omg dad stop

Johnny cracks open a beer, feeling the stretch in his muscles from the day’s class, and scrolls back through the decently sized message history between him and Robby. It’s not as long, and it doesn’t have the funny pictures that Miguel always sends him, but he thinks there’s hope yet. He had Miguel show him how to send a picture of his own, and so snaps a picture of his plate of chinese food, and sends it up to a satellite, and then back down across town.

Robby responds a few minutes later with a picture of some kind of fancy pasta dish, with the caption:

Mr. L says i can bring leftovers tomorrow and that u should learn to cook instead of eating everything out of a box or styrofoam container haha he can be kind of a snob about food

Johnny thinks of witty responses for a few minutes, finishes his beer, and then types out:

Tell mr. L thanks for feeding my kid and also i can make spaghetti too. Goodnight kiddo love you. From dad.

Robby sends back a heart, and signs it with his name.

***

Bad Dreams, and Tiny Tot Tuesday

Daniel tosses and turns and dreams of Anthony dressed in a Cobra Kai gi, punching a wooden man with Terry Silver looking on, hair slicked back and grinning like a shark.

“A man can’t breathe, he can’t fight.” He hears an awful, heavy dragging sound, and then Kreese appears, dragging an unconscious seventeen year-old Johnny around, his big meaty arm gripped around Johnny’s neck like a vice.

“My knuckles hurt-” Anthony says, bleeding, staring at Johnny’s limp body, hanging from Kreese’s arms, still wearing his jeans and red windbreaker. His eyes were shut. His lips were blue.

“Get your hands off him-” Dream Daniel says.

Terry Silver shakes his head. His teeth are sharpened points. “Wake up and smell the coffee, Danny-
“boy.”


He wakes in the dark to Amanda’s shadowy form curled at his side, looking down at him, a warm hand on his shoulder.

“Daniel,” her voice is dry and sleep-heavy. “Daniel you were talking in your sleep.”

“What time is it-” he turns over, searching for his phone.

“Almost five.”

Daniel lays back into his pillow, tries to push Silver’s black eyes and shark teeth from his mind.

“What were you dreaming about?” Amanda lays down onto her shoulder, slides her fingers softly around his forearm.

“Anthony.” He says, after a pause. “His hands were bleeding.”

She hums softly, rubbing a thumb along the soft skin at the crook of his elbow. “Maybe he played his computer game too long.”

Daniel lets out a huff of breath. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “No, he uh. Asked me, last night, if he could take karate lessons.”

Amanda lifts her head. “Really? Honey, that’s-”

“Not from me. He wants to learn from Johnny.”

Amanda closes her mouth. Daniel’s eyes have adjusted to the dark, and he can see the shadows caught between her jaw and high cheekbones, the ambient glow of her pale skin.

“Are you okay?”

“I told him I’d talk it over with you.”

Amanda sighs, pushes herself up to lean back against the cushioned headboard.

“Well. Did he say why he didn’t want you to teach him?”

“He just said he thought he’d learn better from Johnny. Instead of learning from his dad.”

“Well, he’s hitting those years where it’s not as cool to hang out with your parents-”

“It’s just I know how Cobra Kai can look from the outside. It’s flashy, and cool- but it’s also dangerous, and I don’t know how to convince him that the way Mr. Miyagi taught me is the better path.”

“Daniel, a karate dojo is not dangerous-”

Daniel thinks, then, why he’d never told her about Mike or Terry, about those dark few months. He thinks he could tell her right now, get her to understand why the thought of Anthony in a Cobra Kai gi makes his stomach turn. But it’s too late, maybe years too late for that kind of talk.
He bites the inside of his cheek, tamping down the beating of his heart.

“I always thought Mr. Miyagi might’ve been around to help me teach them. I never thought I’d be doing it on my own.”

“Daniel, Mr. Miyagi wasn’t the only good karate teacher out there.”

“He was the best,” his voice cracks.

“Babe...he’s gone. And Johnny might not be such a bad teacher.”

“It’s just...it’s not-”

“Daniel. You’re teaching his son-”

“This isn’t about my pride, it’s about what our son gets exposed to-”

Amanda stays silent for a few moments, her voice returning a little bit tighter. “Well. You can either force him to take lessons from you, or let him stay in his room on his computer all day. But if he’s excited about this, I think we should jump on it.”

He groans, and sits up on the bed. The sun is coming up, taking with it all chances of additional rest.

“Sometimes,” he swallows, staring at the picture at his bedside table, the Yellowstone vacation four years ago. They’d stopped for a picture at Grand Teton, hiked that afternoon down to Jenny Lake. “I don’t think I’m a good person.”

He hears Amanda shift around on the bed, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Daniel.” Amanda speaks carefully. “If you need to tell me something. You can. I would understand.”

He swallows. “There’s just...some things I need to work out.”

She studies him closely. “Okay. Okay.”

He watches the orange light of the sunrise lick over his skin through the blinds, striping it like a tiger. “I’ll go over to the dojo after work today. I’ll figure it out.”

***

Daniel manages to get a couple of hours with Sam and Robby before leaving for the dealership, and they promise to relay the lesson to Demetri that afternoon.

“I promise,” he says to Samantha’s disappointed blue gaze, “tomorrow. We’ll get a full lesson in with all three of you.” He kisses her cheek, remembering he used to have to bend over double to reach her sweaty temple, and his jaw and heart ache in sympathy. He feels so old, some days.

Anthony slouches in just as Daniel is reaching for his keys.

“Morning,” he says to his son.
Anthony sighs and sits, reaching for the warm plate of eggs, covered in foil.

Daniel rolls his lips between his teeth. “Hey. If you want, your sister and Robby are practicing this afternoon at the dojo with Demetri around two o’clock, I think.”

Anthony scoops eggs onto his plate with determined aloofness.

He sighs. So much for the last ditch effort.

“I’m stopping by to talk to Johnny after work. See if he has any room left-”

Anthony stops, turns, and actually looks at his father, brown eyes lit up. “Really??”

Daniel holds a finger up. “I’m okay with Johnny. But there’s a different...instructor there I don’t want anywhere near you. So this only works if he can guarantee me you won’t be in the same room as this other guy. Understand? So it might not work out.”

“Can’t you just spring for private lessons?” Anthony asks, chewing his eggs innocently, and Daniel knows what his mother was talking about all those years ago. *Show me those baby browns*, she’d cooed.

Daniel rolls his eyes. “How did my children get so spoiled?” But he can’t help bathe a little in the light of Anthony’s genuine smile, less of a smirk than usual.

“Your fault!” Anthony chirps, and Daniel watches as Anthony grabs for the toast.

“Butter’s in the fridge,” he offers. “It was melting.”

Anthony shakes his head. “Nah. I gotta cut back if I’m gonna be a karate badass. I’ll just dip it in the egg yolk.”

Daniel frowns.

This is new.

***

Johnny rubs his eyes into the back of his head, hoping that when he opened them again, the dojo would be empty.

“Don’t worry, Sensei” he hears Miguel let out a relieved breath, “they’re all gone.”

“Thank Christ.” Johnny groans, and pulls his headband from his hair, wrapping it around his wrist. “I don’t know if this is gonna work. I can deal with the kids, but these freakin’ parents-”

“Sensei, you could really clean up here.” Aisha swept the room, picking up the newly purchased head and knee pads. Apparently, that was like a rule, or something with little kids. “A lot of these Valley moms are either divorced and on the prowl, or looking to piss off their husbands. Picking their kid up from karate class is probably the highlight of their day.”

“Karate cougars-” Miguel pointed knowingly at Aisha.
“HA! Oh my god,” Aisha laughed, carrying the pile of pads back to the supply room.

“Plus, you did say we need the money with the rent going up again.” Miguel nodded sagely, pushing a swiffer up and down the mats. “I think the youth class is a great idea.”

“Yeah.” Johnny grimaced. “I just don’t like it when their whole face moves up and down with their eyebrows after they inject that gel crap into their foreheads. It’s creepy.”

“I thought fear didn’t exist in this dojo, Sensei?” Aisha snickers, re-entering the room.

“It’s like Sensei’s only weakness- Encino housewives!”

“Yeah, yeah, alright chuckleheads. I gotta meet my kid in an hour, so just wipe down the heavy bags and get out of here. Oh, and-” Johnny turns back on his way into the office. “Thanks for helping out with this, guys.”

“Yeah,” Aisha says, “those kids would have eaten you alive without us.”

Johnny waves them off, retreating back to the office, mentally going through the evening’s plan so that he wouldn’t forget something and fuck it all up- Call in the pizza, change, lock up, pick up a six pack, pick up Robby from LaRusso’s- then swing by the red box thing on the way home.

He’s halfway through dialing when hears the door jangle and Miguel nervous-stammering to an all-too familiar voice. Johnny picks out ‘Mr. LaRusso’ amongst the grab-bag word vomit of ‘uh ’s and ‘um ’s, and glances at the clock on the wall. Yeah, he thinks, smirking, I have enough time for this.

Johnny leans on the doorway of the office, watching as LaRusso chats with Miguel and Aisha, keeping to the white tile at the edge of the room, eyes darting around like he’s nervous, and he quickly spots Johnny, and straightens up.

Johnny crosses his arms, calls across the room. “Diaz, did you pat him down first?”

“Uh, w-what? I didn’t think-” Miguel looks between them.

Daniel’s forehead crinkles up. “He’s just joking, kid.”

“Oh, ah- yeah, ha ha , I knew that-”

“C’mon Miguel,” Aisha rolls her eyes, and pulls Miguel by the elbow, exchanging a quiet goodbye with LaRusso.

“That’s your star student?” Daniel closes the distance slowly, taking his time walking the perimeter of the dojo, and Johnny tries not to look too closely at the low-slung tie or the skin exposed by his sleeves, rolled up on his forearms, focusing instead on the playful quirk of his eyebrows.

“Yeah, he’s a little skittish around you.” Johnny feels his cheeks warm, LaRusso must have brought the ninety degree heat in with him. “Still thinks he can charm his way back on track to being your son-in-law.”

LaRusso tilts his chin to the side, does that thing where he runs his tongue over his lower lip, but not obviously, not like he’s thinking about it.

“Yeah, well he’s got a long road ahead of him. Sam’s not exactly moping around the house.”

“No. Just doing yoga-pants karate all day with my son.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” He can practically hear the bones popping in Daniel’s neck, ready to rumble. Johnny has to squeeze his hands into fists, press down the crackling nerves, resisting the automatic shift of his body sneaking into a higher gear, as it always has done in LaRusso’s presence.

He remembers his promise to Robby, and leads the way back to the office, pushing off the door frame.

“Nothing. Forget Miguel, he’s got a new little girlfriend, he’ll be fine. You need something?” Johnny sits.

Daniel does not sit. “Where’s Kreese?” he bites out.

“Not here.”

“Where is he?”

“How should I know?” Johnny turns, pulling two beers from the fridge.

“Last I saw you two were tied at the hip.”

“Last couple times you’ve seen me, I don’t remember him being there.”

Johnny twists the cap off, flicks it in the general direction of the trash can.

Daniel’s cheeks flame up. Adorable.

“Just sit down, idiot. He’s not in on these days. Whatever this is, make it quick. I gotta go meet Robby in less than an hour.”

Daniel shifts his weight around, then finally sits.

“I want to talk about my son.”

“You mean my son?”

“No. Anthony.”

“What about him?” he takes a drink, and pushes the other bottle toward Daniel.

Daniel shakes his head, holding up a hand at the beer. Snob.

“He wants to take karate lessons.”

Johnny nearly loses some beer out from his nose. “Oh my god- good luck with that little cream puff-”

“From you.”

This time Johnny does lose beer out from his nose. Choking, he reaches for a towel behind the desk, and thankfully finds last night’s chinese takeout napkins sitting on top of the mini-fridge.

Daniel ignores Johnny’s plight. “As long- as long as Kreese stays away, I’m serious Johnny, I don’t want him in the same room. That part isn’t negotiable.”

Sopping up the mess, he chokes out, “Why don’t you just teach him yourself? Can’t squeeze him
into your busy schedule?”

Daniel winces, staring up at the ceiling. “He’d rather you teach him. For some reason.”

“Oh,” and the thought dawns on Johnny, like a wrapped present falling into his lap. He smirks, leaning back in his chair. “He thinks I’m cooler than you.”

Daniel’s eyes narrow, “No Johnny, the kid just wants anyone other than his father teaching him. It’s a thing teenagers do. You’d know.”

Johnny ignores the shot, enjoying himself. “Weellll, I think he also thinks I’m cooler.”

“Then he might be delusional. His brain’s still developing y’know. And all those video games...”

“But I mean I am. Cooler than you. It’s actually why you like me. Because I’m badass.”

LaRusso’s smiling now, shaking his head, looking at his hands, “Maybe this was a terrible idea.”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“Really?”

“Seriously. It’ll be this adorable thing where we teach each other’s sons and resent each other.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“We’ll call it even for taking Robby in.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“The thing with Kreese, though-”

“He’s not in on Tuesdays or Thursdays. If those days work, you won’t have to worry about it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I just started a youth class to pay for my rent hike -”

LaRusso has the decency to duck his head.

“That’s why Miguel and Aisha were here, helping out. Kreese isn’t interested in the little ones.”

“You’re teaching little kids?”

“8-13. Just started today. It was horrible. Little shits have no coordination-”

Daniel tips his head back, laughs, and regards Johnny warmly, which isn’t good, not at all - the head tipping thing exposes the long column of his neck and it’s just the worst.

“How many kids?” Daniel rests his cheek on his fist, speaking softly now.

“Six. They’re all Aisha’s mom’s friends’ kids-” Johnny runs that through his head again. Right.

“So a bunch of rich, Encino helicopter moms in yoga pants?”
“Oh my god. They wouldn’t leave- I gave them my usual bullshit line about an insurance thing, but-”

“Won’t work with the younger kids. Parents have their claws in them-”

“They’re terrifying- and they were wearing their mom-sneakers all over my dojo-”

“I bet they couldn’t get enough of you in that gi-” Daniel’s voice trails off, and he gives Johnny a once-over, adjusting his hand so his fingers hide his mouth. Hell yeah, Johnny thinks. He’s always been aware when he’s getting attention, has been since freshman year when he grew six inches and really started packing on the muscle. Suddenly babes who wouldn’t have coughed in his direction before were coming up to buy him cokes at the beach.

He wishes he had more time for this, see if he could nudge the flirting past this tentative, awkward high-school bullshit and into something more fun. Bad idea? Yes. Terrible, in fact. There was no sense in it, LaRusso was married, and they were both (mostly? supposedly?) straight, and why the cookie crumbled this way was beyond Johnny, why his traitorous mind wanted this one was beyond him, and besides how many other hot fish were there in the sea?

But he hadn't felt this turned on by somebody, this keyed up about somebody- well. Since high school. Big surprise there.

Fuck. He needed to get out of this room.

“So, uh” Johnny clears his throat. “Does Amanda pick out all your little ties, or --”

Daniel stands up, sighing. “Nice talk, Johnny, I’ll see you Thursday.”

“What time?” Johnny calls.

Daniel slouches on the doorframe like it was custom-made for him. Jesus.

“Might be hard for me to drop him off before six, sometimes I can’t get away from the dealership-”

“Have Aisha drop him off, he can take the youth class, and I can hang out with him and get some one-on-one time until you can pick him up.”

“You sure?” His eyebrows implore. “Might be late some nights.”

“Yeah. I don’t have much of a night life.” Johnny finishes his beer, feels a little buzz, which is weird.

“Okay. That’d be great. You’re meeting Robby tonight?”

“Yeah. Just pizza and a movie.”

“That’s great, John.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe I’ll see you there. He’s at your place now.”

“What, you were gonna pick him up? I keep telling him to take the Q7.”

“He's probably afraid he’ll wreck it. It's a nice car.”

“He needs to stop worrying about stuff like that.”
“He doesn’t want to mess it up with you.”

A pause, and the floor grabs Daniel’s attention. “Look. I don’t want to get into it...but I really didn’t know, when I took him on-”

“I know.” Johnny clears his throat. “I’m just glad somebody came through for him.”

“Right. Well-”

“I gotta go. I don’t wanna be late.” Johnny stands, comes around the desk. “I don’t wanna mess it up with him.”

“Right.” Daniel rubs the hair at the back of his neck, and Johnny remembers the feel of it. “I’ll see you Thursday, probably about 6?”

Johnny nods. “Ye-ep.”

Daniel leaves and Johnny stands and watches him go, watches him keep to the edges of the room, careful not to step where he shouldn’t.

***

Thursday with My Antonio

By the end of the youth class on Thursday evening, Johnny Lawrence had solidified his opinion of Anthony LaRusso.

He was a Grade A Asshole - with a capital A. Not only was he whiny, slow, and overall a bad example for the other students- he was a cocky, overconfident little son-of-a-bitch. Furthermore, the other students liked him. He was almost the oldest of the bunch, and he apparently already knew the other kids in the class, probably from Daniel and Amanda rubbing elbows at country club weekends, or sending him off to rich-kid summer camp.

He was like his father, in a few obvious ways. The chocolate dark eyes, for one, and under the pounds he needed to lose, Johnny could pick out the shape of a perpetually boyish face that would probably always make him look about 15 years younger than he actually was. He would say the giant chip missing off his shoulder was another- but this kid had virtually no past grievances to carry around- raised rich, and loved, with whatever videogame-of-the-month he could want. Johnny at least understood why a 16 year old Daniel LaRusso would have the attitude of a pissed off jack russell- too skinny, no friends, a continent away from his old life, dead father, poorer than church mice, and he’d had to ride around in that god-awful green station wagon with his mom.

LaRusso had preemptively bought the kid a brand new white gi and belt, obviously to keep Johnny from sticking him in anything with a Cobra Kai logo. He had planned on sending the kid home with a stack of t-shirts.

Now, however, after an hour of his mouthy antics, he was tempted to stuff the kid into the nearest dumpster and walk away.
“Can you teach us the face kick my dad used to knock you out in that Tournament fifty years ago?”

The other six students had all oohed and ahhed over that one. ‘Face kicks?’ ‘Yeah! Teach us face kicks!’

“You little punks can’t even do ten pushups yet. You’ll learn to kick when you’ve earned it.” He hadn’t figured that part out yet. He’d probably get a lot of flack from pushing a bunch of ten year olds into the deep end of a pool.

Then, Anthony had interrupted the lesson by trying to do a headstand in the middle of the floor. For no apparent reason. Probably just an attention whore- the resemblances just kept on coming.

Also, these little brats didn’t seem to be as intimidated by Johnny as the older students. The one little girl in the class had tried to hug him after the lesson was over. He’d patted her awkwardly on the back and sent her off to her goggling mother, who kept making a point to flash her ringless left hand around at any opportunity. Johnny shuddered with the memory.

The last parent edges toward the door and Johnny stalks over to where mini-LaRusso is talking at Aisha, who is actually busy cleaning the fucking dojo.

“LaRusso, grab a mop and help Ms. Robinson and Mr. Diaz clean the mats.”

Anthony wrinkles his nose, predictably. “What am I, the help? My dad isn’t paying you for janitorial services.”

Johnny bends over, nose to nose. “Your dad ain’t paying me shit - which means there is no paperwork- which means if something happens to you here he can’t do shit about it-“

Anthony puts his hands on his hips. “I think what you mean to say is that he has no legal recourse-”

“QUIET!” Johnny yells, right in his stupid little face. Which works just as it should. Miguel had told him earlier he couldn’t yell at the younger students. Bullshit . Anthony’s eyes get about three times larger and he shuts right the fuck up.

Johnny presses his advantage. “You’re gonna take this swiffer mop from Aisha, and she’s gonna show you how to clean the dojo. Once she says you’re finished, you walk your little butt over to my office and have a seat. Is that clear, Mr. LaRusso?”

Anthony nods several times very quickly, and Aisha hands him a swiffer mop, grinning with delight.

“What’s that, Mr. LaRusso? I don’t think I heard you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is that how you address your Sensei?”

“Yes, Sensei!”

“Mr. Diaz,” Johnny straightens. “Toilet’s getting a little dirty in the back, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, Sensei!”

“After Mr. LaRusso is done wiping down the mats, why don’t you show him where the cleaning supplies are. Check his work when he’s done, and then you can send him to my office. According to my watch, we’ve got a full hour till his dad gets here. Let’s make it a productive one.”
Miguel grins, and Johnny feels that punch of warmth over his heart that hits him occasionally around Miguel, his one continuously bright, shining star.

“Yes, Sensei.”

Johnny bows to the mat, bows to his students (LaRusso needs a little elbow from Aisha), and retreats to the office to compose a little ‘come to Jesus’ speech, tailor made for one Anthony LaRusso.

***

“What is this, the Principal's office?” LaRusso crosses his chubby arms, cheeks still streaked with sweat and grime from the bathroom.

“No. This is worse. If you don’t cut the attitude I lock you in the trunk of my car and park it in the sun.”

“Yeah, you mean until my dad gets here.”

Johnny leans forward over the desk. “I don’t have to tell him where I parked it. It’s a big city, kid.”

Anthony’s eyes get wider again. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Probably not. But I can tell your dad what a pain-in-the-ass little shit you were in class today and kick you out. Then you’ll have to do karate with him and your sister.”

“Then I’ll just tell my dad you touched me in inappropriate places and he’ll let me sign up for a different karate gym and then he’ll sue you until you have to shut this place down and go to jail.”

“Jesus Christ, the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“Look,” Anthony breathes out. “I’ll be better if you just teach me karate. I need to lose thirty pounds and get strong.”

“Kid, you will die if you lose thirty pounds. You’re gonna have to wait a couple years till you get taller.”

“That’s bullshit-”

“That’s how it is, you little punk. Look-” Johnny squeezes his fists under the desk, trying to keep it together. “Do you even want to be here?”

“Yes, I told you so-”

“Then what’s with the attitude? You don’t listen to instructions, you were yapping your mouth when I was trying to talk.”

“Look, I’ll stop- just don’t kick me out-”

“Yeah, well you better. Just ‘cause your dad puts up with that shit doesn’t mean I will.”

“Fine, I will. Just...gimme another chance.”
“Next class you shut up and listen.”

“Yes. Okay.”

Johnny watches LaRusso shift around in his seat, arms still crossed over his belly.

“Do you have like an attention problem? Is that it?”

“Yeah, well, maybe you would too if you lived in my family.”

“That’s bullshit, you’ve got it made- loving parents, big house, your dad’s a total doormat who buys you whatever you want.” And Johnny’s not a hypocrite, he knows what can happen in nice houses- but he also knows the worst part about Daniel and Amanda’s parenting might just be they loved their kids too much, held them too close, and maybe that would spoil a kid but it wouldn’t damage him, wouldn’t hurt him- not in the way Johnny was damaged, or the way Johnny had hurt Robby.

“Yeah. Maybe if you’re my sister everything’s so perfect.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well how would you feel if you had a family like mine and you looked like me? They’re like supermodels...and now ‘Robby the Ken doll’ has moved in. Not like you’d understand.”

Johnny doesn’t have a great response, and LaRusso ploughs onward.

“Just look at you-” Anthony sputters, waving an arm at Johnny. “It’s ridiculous. This whole stupid Valley is filled with people like you who can throw their shirts off to play volleyball on the beach if they want, and, and-”

“Hold on, kid-”

“-and you know my dad doesn’t actually give a shit about me or what my life is like. All he does is complain about my computer games, but at least those people don’t care what I look like. I’m good at those games, you know, I actually enjoy playing them. He’s always on my ass about finding a hobby, but you know what he really means is karate, that’s all he cares about, and now that my sister’s finally given in, she’s like...finally perfect and so this whole thing is probably just a desperate cry for attention on my part-”

“LaRusso-”

“-probably if I hadn’t tried this stupid stunt they’d have forgotten me at a gas station already, or at least tried to send me off to summer camp, you know mom wouldn’t shut up about it, they’d probably throw a big party about how they wouldn’t have to worry about me and have to drive me places all summer, you know it’s like everytime I ask Sam to take me to the game shop it’s like I’m asking her to commit seppuku or something, god forbid I take her away from her stupid new hippie friends, so I just run up the Uber bill, not like mom and dad ever notice-”

“QUIET!”

Anthony jolts into silence. Johnny rubs his face, groaning in sympathy with himself. How the fuck does he get himself into these situations?

“Okay, just...shut up for a minute. Got it?”

“Fine.”
LaRusso crosses his arms even more protectively over his chest, frowning sideways at the wall, and his stupid little eyes are damp, and god help Johnny if he actually starts to cry.

“First of all...you think you live in a supermodel house, but just wait till high school, you’ll look like Frankie Avalon, you get those baby browns from your dad.”

“Dad looked cool when he was young, I don’t look cool-”

Johnny snorts. “Lemme tell you, kid, your dad did not look cool in high school-”

“He was skinny, and he had cool hair-”

“Your dad was a shrimp-” Johnny pauses, thinking. “He did have cool hair, though. Great smile...”

“If he was such a shrimp, how come he beat you at that Tournament?”

“That’s not the point- the point is, if you have sweet karate skills, by the time high school rolls around, you’ll be batting the girls off with a stick.”

Anthony frowns in contemplation. Johnny presses on.

“Second of all...your dad doesn’t really give a shit if you do karate or not. But he does want you to do something besides stare at a screen all day. If you don’t want to be fat anymore-”

“I don’t-”

“Right. Well you’re gonna have to start exercising. But you’re also 11-”

“I’m twelve-”

“Fine. You’re a little chunker who still has his baby fat. You’re growing but there’s nowhere for it all to go, so that’s a big reason you’re bigger around than you are tall. You’ve got to gain a few inches for everything to spread out a little-”

“So I’m stuck being fat till high school-”

“I don’t know. You’re at that age where you could shoot up six inches anytime. Karate won’t hurt, though. You won’t lose thirty pounds but you might lose ten if you lay off the twinkies or whatever your dad lets you buy when mom’s not looking.”

Anthony sighs. “I can’t stay like this- I start middle school next fall- do you know what happens to fat kids in middle school?? I’ll get my ass kicked-”

“Not if you stick with karate. I used to be a skinny, shrimpy loser. When I joined Cobra Kai I weighed 110 pounds soaking wet. I was 160 my junior year in high school, and 170 senior year. Nobody messed with me.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. I had the opposite problem as you. But after ninth grade I shot up six inches and it was like Lolapalooza.”

“What the hell’s that?”

“Nevermind. Point is, you and me are gonna put in the work. It might take awhile, but if you do what I tell you, you will become badass. Like me.”
Anthony leans back critically. “Well. You’re kind of a jerk. But you’re pretty strong. Okay.” The kid sticks his arm out, and Johnny nearly rolls his eyes, but takes his hand.

“Okay. Next step is, we make a workout plan for the days you aren’t here. And you’re gonna have to cut out some food.”

“What, you’re gonna tell me I can’t eat oreos now?” Anthony’s voice jumps up an octave, his forehead crinkles up, eyebrows twisting into funny shapes, and he looks so much like his dad that Johnny nearly falls out of his chair. He lets out a disapproving breath instead. “I’m not a Nazi—”

“Cool.” he nods. The kid’s eyes seem to be dry, so the danger zone has been averted, at least for now.

“Alright,” Johnny stands and ruffles the kid’s hair, pulled back in a ponytail, and LaRusso smacks at his arm predictably. “Let’s work on some punches till your dad gets here.”

“Well we work on a kidney punch?” Anthony asks excitedly, turning those baby browns up at Johnny. “I can try it out on him when his back is turned!”

Johnny lets out a surprised bark of laughter, and nudges the little punk towards the office door.

“Sure, kid. And I got a stack of t-shirts for you to take home. That’ll piss your dad right off.”

“Cool.” Anthony says, waddling out the door in that fat-kid way of his, and it’s sort of weirdly endearing.

“We’ll make a Cobra of you yet,” Johnny says.

And the thing is, he’s pretty sure he means it.

***

Daniel pulls into the Reseda Flats Mini-mall ready either for tears and a bloody nose- or worse, a happy son heaping effusive praise on Cobra Kai and Sensei Lawrence. When he pushes into the near empty dojo, bells jingling in a now familiar greeting, he gets neither.

“He made me clean a toilet.” Anthony is dressed back in street clothes, stuffing his gi in an already suspiciously overstuffed backpack.

“What d’you have in there, a sleeping bag?” Daniel asks, craning to get a better look.

“Nothing- just my jacket.”

“It’s ninety degrees outside-”

“I get cold sometimes.” Anthony shrugs, yanking the zipper closed.

Daniel looks up at Johnny, still in the usual sleeveless black gi, and tries to keep his eyes up. “Should I ask?”
“About the toilet?” Johnny deflects, smirking. “He did a great job.”

“Ugh,” Anthony groans. “It was gross. I thought it was dad’s karate that used child labor.”

Johnny actually giggles, sort of high and short, like it escaped before he could take it back.

“Oh, yeah? And what kind of moves did he learn cleaning a toilet?”

“He learned not to be an asshole during my class.”

Daniel looks down at Anthony. “Were you?”

Anthony grimaces. “No-”

Johnny crosses his arms. “You wanna try that again, hot shot?”

Anthony crosses his back. They seem to exchange words over an intense glare.

“Fine.” Anthony sighs. “I won’t talk over you in class anymore.”

“Really,” Daniel says, mildly impressed.

“And headstands,” Johnny says. “He was doing a headstand in the middle of warm ups, not even a handstand to make it cool-”

“Why were you doing a headstand-”

“I dunno, and plus it was cool-”

“It was not cool, you looked like a seal having a stroke, flopping around on the ground- ”

“- it was too cool, and you look like a washed up GI Joe who’s been in the sun too long-”

“STOP IT-” Daniel yells. “Jesus-”

“Just get on the mat, LaRusso. Let’s show him your jab punch.” Johnny wrests the backpack from Anthony’s hands. “Go on-”

“Fine-”

“Shoes-” Daniel and Johnny both correct in tandem.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch-” Anthony mutters, but toes off his shoes, and raises his arms. Daniel watches his fists curl in, thumb around the outside.

“Where are your feet?” Johnny corrects patiently. Anthony shifts his feet wider. “Good.”

Johnny holds out his hands, palms facing out, and plants his own feet wide.

“Where are you punching? Look where you want to hit. Breathe.”

Anthony takes a breath. His eyes focus on their target.

***
Daniel taps the steering wheel, the sun at his back, sinking down towards Ventura Boulevard as he points the black S7 east towards home.

Anthony has quickly devolved into his usual pastime, tapping at buttons on a flashing screen instead of, you know, talking to his father about his first day pursuing the art of karate.

“So...would you say he’s a good teacher?”

Anthony sighs, annoyed to be interrupted again.

“I don’t know dad, it’s only been a day.”

“Did you have fun, at least? That was some good form in there, your jab looked good for one day.”

“Yeah, I mean besides cleaning the toilet, it was good.” Anthony looks back down at his game.

Daniel clicks the air conditioning down a notch, traffic slows to the next light.

“Did you guys talk about anything interesting during the class? Or your private lesson? What about the other kids, how are they?”

“It was fine.”

“I thought you were excited about this-”

“I am- I mean...” Anthony looks up, and this time switches off the game. “I think it will be cool. Johnny says karate made him become a badass in high school-”

Daniel scoffs.

“-but he says it might take me awhile. He said I have to get taller before I can lose weight and stop being a fatass.”

“Did he use that word?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay. Good. Well...you shouldn’t either.”

“Aisha used it, she said she went from ‘fatass to badass’ -”

“Aisha said that??”

“Oh, and she’s lost like fifty pounds. Anyway, Johnny said I have to get tall first.”

“Well. He’s probably right.” This pains Daniel.

“He says I have to go running. And that you should come with me. He wrote out some kind of plan thingy for the next couple months.”

“Jogging?” Daniel frowns. Mr. Miyagi never made him go jogging.

“Johnny says ‘jogging’ is just a word slow pussies use. He said we have to run-”

“Don’t say ‘pussy’,” Daniel corrects tiredly. This is not his finest moment. It’s also not the first time
Anthony has used this word.

“Okay well he said we have to run. Like...tomorrow we’re supposed to run a mile. And then it goes up from there.”

“I really don’t think this is necessary for training-”

“And we have to do push-ups. We can start with 15 but he says we should be able to do 50 pretty easily in two months.”

Daniel thinks. He tries to remember if he’s ever done 50 pushups.

“That seems like a lot for you, you’re only 12-”

“I think I can do it.”

This brings Daniel to a pause. He glances over at his son’s face, set in steely determination. A lot like the expression used when asking for a new videogame, or new sneakers, when Daniel knew he would inevitably give in and buy whatever it was that Anthony wanted.

“Well that’s....it’s good to have a goal.”

“You think I can’t do it? I bet I can run faster than you can-”

Daniel crinkles his brow. “What? No, that’s- that’s not the point-”

“Johnny says he bets me five bucks that you can’t do fifteen pushups in a row, or if you can, that it takes you more than two minutes, and they’re ‘sad and weak’ because you don’t have much muscle definition in your chest and shoulders-”

“What is this , you guys just hang out and trash talk me? I hope you at least backed me up-”

Anthony shrugs. “Well, yeah. Five bucks isn’t a lot. I can stand to lose it. He did say I had to video you on my phone to prove it.”

“What an asshole,” Daniel breathes, turning down Escalon Drive.

“So, anyway. We have to start tomorrow. A mile run, and twenty-five push-ups.”

“I thought it was fifteen pushups to start-” Not like it matters. Daniel can do twenty-five push-ups. No problem.

“No, we have to do the fifteen pushups tonight. But we can split it up into three sets.”

Daniel schools his face. He must. His son was excited and motivated about physical exercise. He could do this-

“Alright. Well we can map out a course around the neighborhood tonight.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome.” Daniel feels his shoulders drop a little. “I’m...excited to train with you. I think this will be good for us. We don’t do enough father-son stuff together. I’m sorry I’ve been so busy at work, and with the dojo. I know it means we haven’t gotten much one-on-one time.”

Anthony nods, rubbing the black screen of his game with his thumbs. “Yeah. I mean...I’m sorry I
didn’t do your thing. But I think this class-”

Daniel shakes his head preemptively. “No, it’s okay, really, I didn’t mean to be jealous. You’re my son, and I love you, and whatever makes you happy-” he breathes. “I will do.”

“Can I wear Cobra Kai t-shirts around the house?”

“Absolutely not.”

Anthony laughs, patting his backpack. Which is odd, but Daniel doesn’t pay it much attention, it’s been too long since he heard his son laugh.

They sit in comfortable silence, and Daniel kicks the a/c back up to its former level.

“Hey,” Anthony asks, after a moment. “Dad, what’s a knockout?”

Daniel’s heads snaps around to his son, “What, like boxing? You don’t try to knock people out in karate, Anthony, is he teaching you that?”

“No, Johnny was saying, like I said, how I might have to wait till I’m taller to lose weight and he said by high school I’ll be ‘a knockout’ like you.”

Daniel starts. “He said that?”

“Yeah. What’d he mean?”

“How did he say it exactly-”

“He said- ‘Just wait, by the time you hit high school, you’ll be a knockout, just like your dad.’”

Daniel laughs, approaching their street, and has to consciously slow down. “He’s full of shit.”

Anthony frowns. “I don’t get it.”

“He means you’re gonna be just fine. Better than fine.”

“Whatever. I’ll just look it up on Urban Dictionary.”

They do their push-ups that night, with dinner in the oven, and even though Anthony can only do three at a time after Daniel corrects his form, he feels the same warmth blooming in his chest as he does watching Sam and Robby perfect a complicated kata.

“This sucks-” Anthony grimaces, sweat beading off his forehead, blowing air out as he pushes up on his fourth, shaky set. Daniel pushes up, steady, right beside him, unused to the unpleasant strain on his own arms and shoulders.

“Yeah,” Daniel breathes, grinning like an idiot, “but you’re doin’ great, kiddo-”

Anthony collapses onto his back, groaning. “I thought I’d at least be able to do five in a row- I can barely do three-”

Daniel levers himself up, and pulls Anthony to his feet.

“We can practice more after dinner.”

“What are we having?”
“Lasagna-”

Anthony yips.

“Ok, go shower, we’ll eat in fifteen. Tell you sister to get off her skype chat or whatever she’s doing-”

“Okay-”

Anthony dinosaur stomps off to the bathroom (he never was light on his feet), hollering at Sam and Robby, and Amanda watches him from the kitchen table in front of her laptop, smiling softly.

“You look a little sweaty there, champ.” Her nose is wrinkled up, grinning.

He huffs a self-deprecating laugh, pulling the oven door open.

“Well,” he says, “We’re both learning.”

“From Johnny Lawrence?” Amanda’s eyebrows go up.

Before he can answer, Amanda’s phone lights up, and Heart’s *Alone* jangles through the warm kitchen air- Till noowwww, I always got byyy on my ooowwnnnn - I never really cared until I met you-

“What *is* that-” Daniel pulls his oven mitt off.

“Oh,” she says, a little guiltily. “I gotta take this- it’s Anoush- ”

Daniel glances down at the lasagne. “You need me in on it? I can let this sit-”

She waves him off. “No, it’s fine, just some HR stuff-”

“Okay-”

“Hey-” Amanda picks up, smiling around the one-syllable greeting. Pressing the phone to her ear, she walks out the kitchen door the back deck. Daniel can hear the tinny sound of Anoush’s peppery voice.

“What’s that-” A hand on the door, she lets out a surprised, delighted laugh, it peels light and easy, like bells.

“You’re kidding me- oh my god, well, you know, I seriously just had this talk with John the other day- ” the conversation muffles down as she slides the door gently shut, and relaxes down into a chair beside the pool.

Daniel watches through the glass door as his wife grins into the distance, ear pressed to the receiver, miles away, and thinks that he hasn’t made her laugh like that in a year.

***
Part II: The Middle - June

Chapter Summary

Heartbreak On A Friday ; Saturdays with Miyagi ; Saturday Night - Call me, call me any, anytime ; Monday - Funeral Blues ; Tuesday - Heartache and Bad Pizza ;

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 2018

Heartbreak On A Friday

Daniel LaRusso’s heart breaks early on a Friday morning.

It’s been two weeks since Anthony started taking the youth class at Cobra Kai, and two nights a week that Daniel walks into the dojo to pick his son up and talk to Johnny, and maybe a little inadvertent flirting each time. Once they almost went out for tacos, but then Daniel pictured Johnny Lawrence in his car again and quickly made up some excuse about how Amanda had dinner on (Amanda couldn’t cook to save her life, this was a bald, blatant lie, and Daniel thinks Johnny knew it by his smirk and response, Oh yeah, what’s for dinner, dry scrambled eggs?).

It’s been three weeks since Daniel kissed Johnny Lawrence in his car outside Johnny’s apartment, three weeks since Johnny dragged Daniel out of the car, (he’d barely gotten the keys out of the ignition), pushed him up against the apartment door and pulled him down the hallway and shoved him down onto the bed.

Three weeks of a low simmering lull after this adulterous storm, and Daniel had thought that this was a good thing, it’s getting better and he’d thought maybe the town was big enough after all, big enough for the both of them to exist and cool down this insane sparking thing between them, this fuck or fight response thumping loudly against his ribs. Maybe, with a little more time, they could have a real, genuine friendship, and it would be built on these things they loved, on karate, cars, even
fatherhood. Maybe they could put the whole ‘one night love affair’ thing behind them.

Daniel wakes before the sun on Friday morning, and he and Anthony go for a mile run (they’re still walking quite a bit if it, but less and less every time). He eats breakfast with Sam and Robby while Anthony goes back to bed. The three of them pile into the Q7 and Daniel makes Robby drive, who is still nervous around any of the LaRusso cars. They pull up to the dojo and see a sick, black ‘X’ over the hanging wooden sign, and the white toilet paper waving like flags from the trees, and the rest is all just a whirlwind of nausea and pain.

Daniel feels his heart break with the glass in the empty frame of Mr. Miyagi’s Medal of Honor, and the snapped roots of the bonsai trees, the holes slashed into the canvas punching bags and the shattered, irreplaceable clay pots that Jessica had spun on her wheel thirty years ago. He doesn’t think it can break more until he turns around to his daughter’s voice, and sees what he missed running into the house before.

The red paint is thick, and ugly, like coagulated blood in a gaping wound, and the old, familiar rise of a hot, seething rage, of betrayal, of powerlessness fills his chest and sets his aching heart to purpose.

“He can’t have done this.”

Robby’s voice pulls Daniel out of his fog and he looks over, and Robby’s face is a white sheet. “Why would he do this, after everything-” Robby’s voice breaks, and his eyes are green, watery pools.

Samantha puts a hand on Robby’s shoulder. “We don’t know that it was your dad.”

She looks up at Daniel, shaken but collected. “We should start by taking pictures. If Johnny doesn’t know about it, we can show him what happened.”

Robby’s jaw clenches. “I want to look him in the eyes and ask him what happened. If he knew about this...it’s over, and I’m done with him.”

Daniel breathes, and breathes, and tries to push down the bad.


***

“Nice work, Diaz. Bow. Go again.”

Johnny suspects something is wrong when he hears the squeal of tires and the sharp, metallic slam of car doors.

He knows something is wrong when the jangling of bells announces an eager visitor. Hawk and Miguel pull out of their stances and turn to the door, along with every face in the class. LaRusso, Robby, and Samantha blow in through the door in a violent phalanx. Samantha brings up the rear, whispering furiously at the other two to calm down!

Johnny is pretty familiar with people looking at him like he’s just kicked a three-year-old in the face. Daniel’s expression is terrifyingly reminiscent of some of Shannon’s greatest hits, playing on a
looped reel in his head, a lovely cocktail of anger, disappointment, and just the smallest touch of poisoned pity.

Robby’s expression, though, is the worst. Missed birthdays, soccer games, sorry buddy, it might be awhile before I see you again. Betrayal. That’s what he sees in Robby’s glass green eyes.

“Sam-” Miguel’s voice is undisguised shock, and she turns to him with her blue, desperate eyes. “What’s going on?”

Her mouth opens, but she doesn’t answer.

“I need to talk to you,” LaRusso’s voice says he’s pissed, and Johnny starts mentally flipping back through the past few days, but he can’t think of a good reason Daniel would have to barge into his dojo, unannounced, with Sam and Robby in tow. Despite their strange little sex-tinged truce, LaRusso doesn’t have a good reason to interrupt class every time he gets his panties in a bunch. It’s bullshit, and it’s a spectacle, and now Johnny is fucking pissed, too.

Kreese looms at Johnny’s back like a shadow, and the tension notches up. Just like old times, and Johnny has to fight the itch to widen his stance and raise his arms.

“I’m in the middle of a class, LaRusso. You can come back later.”

“Now.” Daniel answers, like a stern mother, and then he steps his stupid sneakers onto the mat, and Johnny feels his hackles rise. “We can talk right here or take it outside, your choice.”

Johnny hears little ohs! from the students, and he should know better, he and Carmen just had this talk, but Daniel’s eyes are black and furious, and just the tiniest bit thrilling, and no way is he backing out of this, whatever it is.

Johnny steps up, closer, and the room goes a little blurry at the edges. “I don’t know where you get off, LaRusso, but you better take your shoes off or step off the mat, you’re disrespecting my dojo-”

“You wanna talk about disrespecting dojos, Lawrence ?!” Daniel hisses, and Johnny can smell him, this close, all fancy aftershave and sweat.

“HEY!”

The fog in the room snaps and Johnny pulls his head around. Aisha’s stepping toward them, waving her hands.

“STOP IT, you’re both acting stupid! Just talk outside and Sensei Kreese can keep class going-”

Johnny looks blankly at Aisha, then Miguel, then Kreese. He doesn’t know what he’s asking for, but Kreese nods subtly.

“Miss Robinson is right. Go settle your differences, Mr. Lawrence.” Kreese purrs, calmly, arms crossed. “I’ll take care of the class.”

“You stay out of this, you sonuvabitch -” Daniel starts to charge forward, finger pointing, but Johnny catches him in the chest and pushes him back out the door, flicking his chin and Sam and Robby.

“Alright, c’mon, outside, easy, LaRusso- ” he can feel LaRusso’s rabbity heart pounding hotly up against his palm.

They get outside, and Daniel jumps away, strides over to that stupid yellow car he drives around like
an old man, and Johnny sees it before Daniel slaps the fender furiously.

“This- Johnny, this is exactly why I didn’t want my son around your little death cult-”

The red paint is the same color as the dick he sprayed onto LaRusso’s face a few months back. It’s pretty bad, taking up the entire space of the driver’s-side front and rear doors. Johnny sighs, heavily.

“Look, I’m sorry, I’ll pay for the paint job, but if you’re saying I knew about this-”

“You’re saying you didn’t?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, and you should really think twice about getting up in my face about a vandalized car, at least yours didn’t nearly burn down an apartment building.”

“It’s not just the car.” Samantha’s sweet voice cuts through the aggressive air like water over fire. She stands by the car, hugging her arms around her ribs.

“What?”

“Show him the pictures, Dad.”

“Pictures of what, what are you talking about-”

Daniel pokes furiously at his smartphone, the newest apple model, which probably cost more than Johnny’s monthly rent, and shoves it in front of Johnny’s face.

“What is-”

It takes him a minute, to process what he’s seeing. He cranes closer, finger out.

“Go ahead. There’s more.”

Johnny flips through the photos, and a heavy dread settles over his skin. There are probably thirty pictures, at least, smashed paper walls and shattered pots, those little trees that Daniel loved more than most people would find healthy, tipped over, spilling out their potting soil guts. Those weird little Japanese statues pushed into the ground, some of them missing parts. Long, sick gashes cut into the heavy bags, plants ripped up by their roots, spraypaint and toilet paper everywhere. Someone had kicked up all the tatami mats in the main dojo and thrown down all those stupid IKEA paper lamps and-

Daniel swipes to the last picture, an empty frame with smashed in glass.

“His Medal of Honor.” His voice is cracked, shaking. “They took his Medal of Honor, of all the cowardly, disgusting-”

Johnny pushes the phone back, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “Look, just...”

“Did you know?”

“Do I look like I knew!?” Johnny shouts. “Jesus Christ, LaRusso, why would I do that?!”

“Just because you didn’t do it doesn’t mean you don’t know who did-”

“Well I don’t. If you give me a minute, I will find out, but you have to cool off-”

“Cool off?! You know you really picked the wrong morning to mess with my dojo-”
“I didn’t mess with your dojo, you—” Johnny barely manages to bite off the word (asshole, that’s what he was going to say, by the way) and he thinks better of it (be the bigger man, Carmen had said. And he had, he’d delivered the letter and slept with his arch-karate-rival. Or, maybe that wasn’t what she’d meant). Anyway. So he manages not to call LaRusso an ‘asshole’ in front of Robby and Samantha.

“He’s probably the one who did it—”

Daniel snaps, like a small, barky dog. “Well I’m not standing out here on the sidewalk like an idiot, while you give some lecture about respect to a bunch of kids who don’t know the meaning of the word—”

“Well I’m not gonna let you go in there until you cool it. We’ll figure this out but not if you storm in there with these two and start another rumble—” Johnny emphasizes, pointing back to the dojo.

“My kids didn’t start a rumble at the Mall—”

Johnny bristles at ‘my kids’. It’s bad enough Robby’s sleeping at his house, and probably has a nice room of his own bigger than Johnny’s whole apartment. He doesn’t have to rub it in.

“Just- come in and wait in the office, alright? Hawk is enough of a hothead, I don’t need to be dealing with anymore—”

“He’s probably the one who did it—”

Johnny relents. “Yeah, maybe. But we don’t know yet. Give me a few minutes to find out.”

Johnny starts to turn back to the dojo, but catches Robby’s eye, who has been silently watching.

“You really don’t know?”

Johnny looks him in the eye, and it hurts, the knowledge that even after all the time they’ve spent together (but what was that, really, a few movie nights, a new skateboard- what was that to 15 years of failure) that his son would still believe LaRusso over him. It feels like a rejection, anyways, but he probably deserves it.

So he looks his son in the eyes and he does his best. “Robby. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

(Except I sort of fucked your sensei and will never, ever, tell you about it because you would hate me forever and ruin any progress we’ve made.)

Johnny leaves this last part out.

Robby nods. “Okay. I think my dad’s right, Mr. LaRusso. We shouldn’t go in there swinging.”

Daniel sighs. And he’s still all riled up, in his little hoodie and soccer pants and sneakers.

Johnny bites down on his smile, hopes it goes unnoticed. It might be hard to explain.

“Okay. Gimme your phone, LaRusso. I need those pictures.”

Daniel keeps his phone in his hand, and gestures for Johnny’s. “I can just airdrop them to you.”
Johnny stares blankly. “What?”

And then he’s back, the LaRusso that Johnny’s only recently been seeing, the one who laughs and smiles at him, with sultry eyelids and a thousand-watt grin.

“Just gimme your phone, genius, I’ll put them on there for you.”

Johnny grimaces, but hands over his phone. “How long will this take?”

“Less than a minute.” And LaRusso starts swiping and typing with the best of them, as fast as any toddler these days, and Johnny feels a little old and dumb and why did everything come easy to LaRusso.

Daniel shakes his head, “You should really put a password on here.”

*Fuck off, Danielle.* “I hate typing in the number every time.”

“You could just do the fingerprint lock-”

Well maybe Johnny would if he’d even known that was a possible thing on his dumb phone but just quit nagging, “And give that shit to the government? No thanks-”

“Yeah, like you haven't been arrested before.”

Well he was right about that.

“Fuck off, LaRusso.” and he struggles this time, not to mirror back LaRusso’s stupid smiley face.

“Ok. They’re in your photo folder,” and LaRusso’s handing the phone over all easy and cool, the little device hot from use, and Daniel's fingers, and the California sunshine.

So Johnny heads for the door, ready to start the interrogation, but turns sharply. “Take your shoes off before you get to the mat.”

Daniel scoffs, but nods. “Whatever,” and Sam and Robby follow, toeing their shoes off just inside the door.

Johnny leaves them crossing their arms by the door, and the students all turn their heads from where Kreese appears to be giving them some sort of lecture. Kreese looks from LaRusso, back to Johnny.

“What’s the problem, Sensei Lawrence?”

“Yeah, I need to talk to you,” Johnny says, lowly. “You know anything about this? Johnny holds up his phone, showing a picture of the trashed dojo. Kreese pauses, stone faced, staring at the picture, and then shakes his head.

“No.” He straightens, arms crossed. “Pity, though. Looks like they have a lot of work to do.”

“You telling me the truth?” Johnny looks him in the eye, this old proud lion. He remembers the years it took to stand up straight under that gaze, how afraid of Kreese he’d been, how much he’d wanted his favor, his approval, his affection. It’s strange now, that Johnny is writing his checks, that it’s Johnny who is in charge now, who has all the power.

He knows LaRusso thinks Kreese is behind it all, and he knows LaRusso will never, ever, believe otherwise. If he found every student involved in the vandalism, and every one of them swore up and down in front of him that Kreese had no knowledge of the plot, Johnny knows Daniel would still
think Kreese had somehow brainwashed the kids into it. Daniel had no head around Kreese, no capacity to think clearly.

Sure, he had his reasons. Kreese sicking the Cobras on Daniel had been cold and calculated. And the parking lot stuff...Johnny remembered Daniel’s horrified expression. And it had been horrible.

But Johnny thinks that he and Kreese are, these days, at least partly, of a kind. Something that LaRusso, rich and comfortable with his booming business and big house and beautiful family- would never understand.

They were both broken men trying to fix themselves. And every once in awhile, all they needed was a goddamned break, and for somebody to give them the benefit of the doubt.

“I feel like a broken man, Johnny. I don’t really think I can be fixed.” Kreese had said he wanted a second chance. A shot at redemption. Johnny knew all about that. Daniel could never understand that. He’d always been the hero of his own story. He didn’t know what it was like to be anything else.

“Johnny,” Kreese says, lowly. His blue gaze meets Johnny’s, seriously. “I’m telling the truth.”

Johnny lets out a breath. “Okay. Okay, fine.”

Kreese glances up at LaRusso, and Johnny doesn’t miss the little smirk on Kreese’s face. “You want me to get him out of here?” He feels a little shiver of doubt, and knows he can’t be too careful here, or comfortable in his assumptions.

“No,” Johnny says. “I need you to take a walk. I need to find out who did this, and they won’t talk with you here.” Kreese’s face sours, but Johnny pushes. “They respect you too much. C’mon, I just need 20 minutes. You can have them the rest of the day after.”

Finally, Kreese nods, and walks toward the door. “Remember,” he turns back to the dojo, “In Cobra Kai, you are all brothers and sisters for life.”

“Where is Sensei Kreese going?” Hawk calls, as the door jingles.

“He’s just going on an errand for me. Miss. Robinson, up front. I want you to flip through these pictures on my phone, and tell me what you see.”

Johnny proceeds into a harsh lecture, glancing up at LaRusso a few times, and after the students stand silent after the third time he asks for answers, he sets them on burpees, and gestures LaRusso back to his office.

“Mr. Diaz, my office. Now.”

Johnny pulls out a couple of extra folding chairs, and collapses behind his desk, already exhausted. LaRusso reluctantly sits his prissy ass down after Samantha chides him again to calm down, and Johnny thinks he might be starting to like this chick. He rests his elbow on Johnny’s desk and grabs one of his pens with the clicky top and starts clicking it impatiently.

Miguel comes in, clearly nervous, and stands at attention, looking everywhere but Samantha. Johnny sees Robby tense up, all in his shoulders and neck and jaw. LaRusso lets up on the clicky pen, which is good because Johnny was just about to grab it and throw it in his stupid face.

“Yes, Sensei.” Miguel pins his eyes to the wall opposite.
“Spill.” Johnny orders. “What do you know about all this?”

Miguel flounders a minute, glancing from Daniel, to Robby, and finally resting on Samantha a few moments. She looks away, tucking her chin.

“Relax,” Johnny eases, gently. “This isn’t about anything except you telling me the truth, now. You’re the only one I can trust to do that.”

Miguel folds, shoulders slumping. “I don’t know who did this, Sensei. I don’t think Hawk or Tory do either.”

“You think it was one of the new guys?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did Kreese say to you, when we were outside?”

“He just said...stick together. We’re Cobra Kai for life. Stuff like that.”

“He said not to squeal.” Johnny corrects.

Miguel waffles, but nods. “I guess. But I really don’t know, I wouldn’t lie about something like this-”

Samantha scoffs, and Miguel looks gut-punched. She at least has the decency to look sorry about it when Johnny sends Miguel back out to the class to keep the burpees going.

“What’s next?” Daniel grits out, and Robby breaks in at the same time.

“Dad, I don’t trust him. He could be lying-”

“No,” Johnny looks at Robby, and shakes his head confidently. “Miguel wouldn’t do that.”

“But-”

“Robby, I don’t want to hear it.”

“How do you know?” Daniel presses. “You have no idea-”

Johnny grits his teeth. “LaRusso, will you give me a goddamn minute-”

“You said ten, Johnny, and it doesn’t look like you have a plan here except an ab-workout-”

“If you have some kind of mystical karate master button you can push, LaRusso, by all means do it but this is real life -”

And Johnny has never, ever been so glad to have his phone ring, if only for a few brief seconds of relief from this mess.

Daniel looks like a flustered house wife. “John, I swear to god, if you answer that-”

Johnny smirks across the desk at LaRusso’s red face. He peeks down at the screen and grins genuinely at the name flashing across the screen. He taps the green button.

“Hey, man, long time! Listen, I’m just in the middle of-”

The bad news must show on his face, because LaRusso’s annoyance starts to melt away. Johnny
looks down at his desk, and presses his fingers into his temples, into the pressure starting to build around his head.

“Yeah,” he says, “Okay. I’ll be up there, I gotta straighten some shit out here first, but I’ll give you a call when I’m on my way. Okay. You too, buddy. Bye.”

Johnny drops the phone loudly on the desk, and tries to quietly scream into his hands.

After a moment of heavy silence, Johnny hears Robby sit up. “Dad, are you okay?”

Johnny pulls in a long breath, and makes a few, quick decisions behind his hands before he has to face the world.

“I’m fine.” He pulls his hands down, and breathes out again. “I have to go. Out of town.”

“What?” LaRusso straightens, panicky. “No, you gotta stay here and make this right-”

“My friend is sick.” Johnny snaps. “I’ve got to go see him.”

Daniel’s face softens predictably. “Ok, well-”

“It’s fine. I’ve got it figured out-” Johnny stands and sidles around the desk, and pops his head out into the class. Miguel has done well, the students look pale and sweaty.

“Five minute break!” The students all groan and collapse down onto the mat. “Diaz, Robinson, in my office!”

He leads them back into the office, still breathing heavily.

“Okay. Here’s the plan.”

***

“I’ll be outside in just a sec, okay?” Daniel waves Sam and Robby off, and turns back, leaning in Johnny’s custom-made-for-leaning-LaRusso-doorframe again.

Daniel looks across the room at him, at Johnny behind the desk, who is taking the edge off with a beer. He looks at him with those dark, fathomless brown eyes, curtained over with dark eyelashes.

“Thank you,” he says, voice a little rough. “For taking this seriously.”

Johnny nods, feeling as exhausted as LaRusso looks. “Like I said, that’s not what this dojo is about. I’ll make it right.”

“I know you will.” Daniel nods, meeting Johnny’s eye, then dropping to the floor. Johnny has an itch to get up and reach out to grab the zipper on LaRusso’s hoody, and zip it up and down, up and down, until his hands get slapped away.

“So, about you friend...”

“That was Bobby. Tommy’s been pretty sick. Cancer.”
Daniel’s face falls, his mouth open just enough to reveal his front teeth, just slightly crooked. Johnny might not have noticed except three weeks ago he’d run his tongue over them a few times.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel says. “I didn’t know you still kept in touch with those guys.”

Johnny nods. “We get together every once in awhile.” He smiles, adding, “Bobby’s a pastor, you know.”

Daniel grins. “Actually, that I knew. He came to Mr. Miyagi’s funeral. He was...he was really great. He got up and said some words. It was a pretty small gathering, so. I just thought it was really great of him to do that.”

“Right.” Johnny clears his throat awkwardly, nods.

“Anyways. What’s the prognosis...for Tommy?”

Johnny shakes his head, takes a long, cool drink. “Not good. This might be my last chance to see him. He’s in hospice.”

“I’m sorry, Johnny.”

“It’s just...how it goes, I guess.”

Daniel looks like he wants to say more, but he just looks down and nods again, like the floor needed reassurance.

“Ohkay. Well, thanks again.”

LaRusso starts to push off the doorframe, and Johnny stands up, sets his beer down, and comes around to sit on the front of the desk.

“Hey- look. I really am sorry about the dojo. They’re usually great kids, I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “It’s bullshit.”

Daniel clicks his tongue. “Just...be careful. A few bad apples...”

“Yeah, don’t I know it.”

“John...” LaRusso steps closer, keeping his voice low. “You know who’s behind this. It doesn’t matter which student he brainwashed to do it.”

Johnny shakes his head. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“Just be careful.” Daniel sighs, frustrated. “I don’t trust him.”

“I know you don’t.” And Johnny wants to keep talking, explain this whole thing about second chances and redemption and about how if Kreese doesn’t get a second chance then maybe that means Johnny won’t either, and how he somehow still needs Kreese’s nods and his sly smiles and his fist, raised not at Johnny but to him, a salute of encouragement.

But, he doesn’t think Daniel would want to hear any of his excuses. Because they probably are excuses. But he needs them, he doesn’t have much else going for him.

They’re floating kind of closer and Johnny can see the soft roughness of Daniel’s stubble, like he hadn’t had time to shave that morning.
“Call me Saturday” Johnny says, lowly, “After the cleanup. Let me know how they do. Miguel and Aisha should keep everybody in line, but let me know if there are problems.”

Daniel nods, still close, and they’re just sort of breathing in the same air. “Sure.”

And it’s pretty obvious where this is headed, but Johnny is an idiot, and so instead of reaching out and pulling LaRusso down by the front of his hoody, like he wants to, he just sort of reaches out and pulls on one of the little white stringies that cinch up the hood.

It’s an odd moment and Johnny lets go after a couple of tugs, and Daniel backs off a few inches, frowning and clearing his throat.

“Uhm-” Daniel says.

“You need my number?” Johnny barely saves them both from whatever horrible conversation they were about to dive into.

And there’s that kilowatt smile again. LaRusso taps his back pocket. His phone. “I grabbed it earlier. With the pictures.”

Johnny finally, genuinely, laughs. “LaRusso, you dog-”

LaRusso winks, he actually winks, the bastard. “I still know a few tricks.”

He floats backward, and taps at the doorframe. “I’ll see you when you get back for Anthony’s next lesson, Sensei Lawrence. Tell Bobby hello from me.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “No way, that’ll be a whole thing-”

Daniel leaves, and Johnny cleans up the dojo, wiping down the punching bags and stacking pads up in a corner. Kreese finally comes back, a 6-pack of Coors dangling from one hand.

“Not tonight,” Johnny shakes his head, grabbing his duffle, now in t-shirt and jeans. “A buddy of mine called with an emergency, I’ve gotta go. I’ll be out of town tonight and tomorrow. Classes are cancelled until I get back.”

Kreese nods, and breaks off a can. “I think I’ll stick around and do a little organizing, if you don’t mind. The office is a mess. I can lock up after.”

“Thanks, that’d be great.” Johnny says, relieved. He hates paperwork.

“I’ve got your back, Johnny.” Kreese quirks his lips, giving Johnny’s shoulder a squeeze, and he can’t help but feel comforted by the gesture.

“I’ll see you in a couple of days,” he says, and leaves.

***

Saturdays with Miyagi
“I feel sick.”

“You better feel sick outside, this car isn’t even a year old yet-”

Miguel groaned. “What am I supposed to say to her? I can’t even look her in the eye. And Tory’s gonna be around, and it’ll be so weird-”

Aisha slid the steering wheel around in her hands, following the directions of the Google Maps robot-lady, peppering them with instructions.

“It’ll be fine. I mean, it’s a little weird with Sam and me, too-”

“Yeah, but you didn’t date her and then accidentally punch her when you were a sad, angry drunk-”

“No-” Aisha says, pulling up to a stoplight. “But we used to be best friends. Like, best friends, all the way up to middle school. Until she got caught up with the popular girls. And now...I dunno. It’s just weird.”

“At least you don’t have Tory all pissed at you too-”

“What’s she pissed about?”

“She still thinks I have feelings for Sam. She said I was staring at her in the dojo yesterday.”

Aisha snorts. “Oh, Miguel.”

“What?”

“I mean...you do...right? It’s pretty obvious. You should probably just break it off with Tory before she does something crazy.”

“Yeah, but how am I supposed to get over Sam if I don’t date other people?”

Aisha shrugged. “I dunno. But I think it’s really dumb you never actually talked to Sam about everything. It seemed like she was really into you. I mean, maybe you guys could patch things up if you just talked to her?”

Miguel sighed, pressing his fingers to the window, watching the orange dawn light spill over Receda. “It seems like she’s already moved on, anyway.”

“Oh, Abs?” Aisha laughs.

Miguel scowls. “Yeah, him. I’m pretty sure it’s just the two of them all summer.”

“Plus Demetri. You heard about that, right?”

“Yeah. Hawk was all pissed off about it.”

“Whatever. He wasn’t ever going to do well in Cobra Kai anyway.”

Miguel sighs and presses his fingers up against the window again. “I just wish Sensei were here. It’d be way less weird if we didn’t have to be in charge of this whole thing.”
“Boy,” Aisha reaches over and swipes at Miguel’s arm, “Quit leavin’ fingerprints all over my windows-”

“Your windows- ” Miguel mocks surprise. “Oh, I’m sorry- did you save up all your allowance money and buy this insanely expensive Audi from your dad? Wow, Aisha, I’m really proud of you, that’s really self-sufficient-”

Aisha gives Miguel’s shoulder a hard shove into the door.

“OW-”

“Suck it up, lover boy, we’re almost...yep, right here.” Aisha slows the car, and pulls the Audi slowly up and over a packed dirt entrance, through a tall, cedar fence. They see a round, dark wooden sign hanging from the entrance with a dark, black painted X slashed across.

Miguel pulls in a breath, sees the door hanging crooked from the japanese-style door frame, the toilet paper trees waving from the backyard, and red and black paint graffiti marred all over the fence. A row of classic cars are parked to their left, all with ugly lines of red and black paint streaked over the hoods, the doors, and windshields.

“I don’t see anyone else here, yet. I’m glad we carpooled, there isn’t much room left-”

“Yeah,” Miguel breathes, “Hawk, Tory, Bert and Nathan were coming in one car. I dunno about the others...”

And he sees Samantha stepping through the broken door, out into the early morning light, and her hair glows gold and orange, and the sun reflects in her eyes like a sunset on Topanga beach. She crosses her arms over her chest, and Miguel almost forgets to breathe.

Aisha parks the car, kills the engine, and starts to open her door. She stops, and looks back over at Miguel.

“Ready?” she asks.

Miguel shakes his head. “I’m such an idiot.”

“Well, yeah,” Aisha laughs. “We already knew that. C’mon, let’s go. It'll be fine.”

Tory and Hawk pull up next to them, in her beat up blue Cavalier. “It’s a piece of shit,” she’d said, “but it’s my piece of shit. I worked at Sonic for two years to save up for a down payment. My parents didn’t put down a dime, that’s all me baby,” and she’d laughed that low, throaty sexy laugh of hers and she was just so different from Sam and her luxury convertibles, picked from her dad’s dealership like a flower picked from a bouquet, on a whim.

Tory unfolds herself from the car and smiles over the hood at Miguel, her slim, hard body wrapped in flannel and denim. She grins under sunglasses.

“Jesus fucking Christ it’s early-” she laughs, and her swaying hips carry her into Miguel’s arms.

“Hey, Champ,” she mumbles into his lips, and he sees Samantha walk back into the dojo, arms clutched around her ribs. Tory tastes like coffee and raspberry chapstick.

“Hey,” he says, and pulls his lips into a smile, and it’s almost the same as when Sam used to make him smile.
Almost, but not quite.

***

Samantha steps back inside the small front living area of the dojo, into the tiny tiled kitchen. Her dad does a double take, still pouring the second pot of coffee into a large, glass carafe.

“You cold, sweetie? It’s gonna be hot today, anyway.”

Sam shakes her arms out. “I’m fine dad. They’re out front.”

Robby grimaces, loading up the coffee pot for another round. “Why the hell are we making them breakfast when they’re the ones who trashed our dojo?”

“It’s called a peace offering, Robby. Most of these kids probably had nothing to do with it. We should take this as an opportunity.”

Robby purses his lips. “I believe dad when he says he didn’t know. But I don’t think we can eliminate anybody else from suspicion. We’re letting the Trojan Horse in, for all we know.”

Daniel wipes his hands on a towel, and pulls a couple of large boxes of bagels from the fridge.

“Sometimes,” he says, “you have to make the first move. That’s not the same as ‘strike first’. Take your dad.” Daniel leans on the counter, and Sam watches Robby carefully, his green eyes are guarded.

“If your dad hadn’t gotten up the courage to give you that letter—”

“Liquid courage.” Robby corrects, crossing his arms.

“Okay, sure. But if he hadn’t done that, you guys wouldn’t be hanging out, doing stuff together, watching movies, and rebuilding your relationship. Nothing would have changed if he’d been too afraid to do it.”

Robby presses his lips together. “Fine. But that’s not the same. He was the one who did all the damage, and he was the one to apologize. We’re the victims here, I don’t know why we should have to make the peace offering—”

“Somebody has to do it, Robby. Doesn’t matter who. Besides, it’s just a little fuel for a long day. I plan on keeping these kids plenty busy—”

Daniel turns back to the window, and Sam can see a dozen or so Cobra Kai students huddled around in a loose, awkward circle.

“Okay,” Daniel claps his hands together. “We’ve got that table set up out front. I’ll grab the coffee, you two get the bagels and cream cheese. Time to get started.”

Samantha takes a deep, deep breath, closing her eyes. She feels a warm arm come up around her shoulder, and dry lips pressing to her temple.

“You okay?” Robby murmurs.
“Yeah,” she answers, taking another breath. “It’s just gonna be a long day, I think.”

Robby nods, and then lets out a breathy laugh. “It’s funny. I think your dad’s actually kind of excited about this.”

Sam rolls her eyes. “Oh my god. Yeah, he gets to tell a bunch of teenagers how to clean up a yard and re-pot bonsai trees and re-sand the deck and re-paint the house.”

“So you’re saying these assholes inadvertently gave us a ton of training to do?”

“Yeah. And I’m positive he’s gonna try and recruit all the Cobra Kai to Miyagi-do.”

Robby shrugs. “He can probably do it, too.” He frowns. “Man. If he does, my dad might be pretty pissed.”

Sam laughs, resting her forehead briefly at his shoulder, smooth and strong. “It seems like they’re having fun trying to be friends. They’re like a bickering old couple—”

Robby tips his head back, and they laugh at the image of their fathers pushing a cart together in a grocery store, arguing over what kind of salad dressing to buy.

Daniel yells at them from outside, and they share a last commiserating look. Robby squeezes her hand, and picks up the cartons of bagels.

“Here we go,” he says.

***

“Whoa—”

Miguel breathes, following Aisha and Mr. LaRusso through the small, sunlit house, and out the back, where a wooden walkway zig-zagged around a landscaped yard. Even though the place was pretty well trashed, it was also obviously beautiful.

“Okay,” Mr. LaRusso turns, gesturing with his fingers. “C’mon, everyone gather around, don’t be shy- Aisha did you take a headcount?”

Aisha nods, poking at an iPad.

“Great. Okay, well you all know why you’re here. Your Sensei had to be out of town, but he and I came to an agreement about how we fix this little problem—”

LaRusso spread his arms out, gesturing at the mess around them. “I’d still really like to know who all was involved here, and if any of you do know, you should also know I’m not pressing charges. I’d like to talk to whoever felt the need to destroy my home. Because this is my home. I lived here with my sensei when I was a teenager. He was like a father to me, and his name was Mr. Miyagi. This dojo is named after him, and his style of karate, which goes back hundreds of years and many generations in Okinawa.”

Samantha clears her throat.

“Okay, okay, I’ll keep it short. Anyway. You all did the right thing coming here, today. Aisha has a
list of teams, and we’re all going to divide up and tackle different tasks. Nobody touches the cars, I’ll have the auto body shop deal with that. But everything else is getting fixed, today. And you’ll all get the privilege to see what a little hard work can accomplish.”

LaRusso pauses, making eye contact with each student. Miguel lifts his chin a little, trying hard not to look down in shame.

“There are a couple of delicate tasks that Sam and Robby know how to do, but we’ll need your help. Miguel Diaz-”

Miguel straightens, and the words leave his mouth automatically, “Yes, Sensei!”

Everybody cracks up, hard, Hawk covering his mouth and leaning on Tory for support. Miguel feels his cheeks heat up, and he ducks his head.

“I mean, yes, sir. Mr. LaRusso.”

Mr. LaRusso’s voice is devoid of laughter, and surprisingly gentle. “Okay, that’s enough - it’s alright, kid. Anyway, Miguel, I want you working with Robby and me. We’re gonna take care of the bonsai trees. Your Sensei says you’ve got steady hands, and we’ll need that.”

Miguel feels his eyes widen, but LaRusso’s already moved on.

“Aisha and Sam will supervise the rest of you, everything else is pretty basic, DIY homeowner stuff. For the spray paint, we’ll try this remover spray, I’ve never tried it but the guys at the shop said it works great. Anyway, here’s where the rest of you are, so listen up-”

Miguel feels his stomach turn over, and he looks over at Keene to see the guy glaring at him like he’s just murdered a litter of kittens.

Fuck.

This was going to be a long day.

***

To Miguel’s surprise, the day was actually going by pretty quickly. Keene certainly wasn’t smiling his way, but under the close watch of LaRusso, he was keeping any aggression for Miguel under check.

“You’ve got to put a layer of gravel down first, stupid.” Keene muttered under his breath, calculated to go unheard by LaRusso. “He said that like five times.”

Miguel wiped his forehead of sweat, inadvertently adding a layer of potting soil to his skin. It fell into his eyes in soft, black flakes.

“I didn’t forget, I was going to -” Miguel huffed and pulled the bag of crushed lava rock closer. He actually had forgotten, not that he’d admit that. Using a trowel, Miguel tipped a scoop of lava rock into the bottom of the large, ceramic pot, and then switched over to the special potting soil Mr. LaRusso had carried over.

“You’re putting too much in, we need to leave room for the tree-”
“There’s still plenty of room.” Miguel patted the soil down. “I help my ya-ya with her plants, it’s not that different.

“Who the hell is ya-ya?” Keene snickered, carefully lifting the tree from its old, broken pot.

“Robby, let Miguel help, those roots need to be supported-” LaRusso knelt down, pointing at the tree, and Miguel shoots his hands out, gripping under the root ball.

“I think I’ve got it, Mr. L-”

“Two hands are better than one, Robby- nice work, guys, let her down easy-” Miguel slipped his hands out from under the roots once the plant was settled. LaRusso clapped, kneeling closer to the plant between them, and his excitement was infectious.

“Do you think it’ll be okay?” Miguel found himself asking, brushing a leaf gently with the tip of his finger. “Aren’t these trees kind of delicate?”

Mr. LaRusso sucks air between his teeth in a hiss. “Depends. It’s all about the roots. If the roots are strong, the tree will survive.” LaRusso looks at the tree tenderly, and it’s only a little weird.

“This tree was one of the first Mr. Miyagi ever gave me. I was fifteen, I’d just moved here from New Jersey. I’d never seen anything like it.” LaRusso stays quiet for a minute.

“Anyway. Good work, guys. Lemme get the new pot for the next one. It’s right over there, I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

Miguel nods, and he follows Robby awkwardly over to the next tree, the pot shattered, and the little branches resting on the ground, several of them splintered and snapped.

“This one looks pretty bad,” Keene comments.

“Yeah,” Miguel adds, intelligently.

They wait in more awkward silence, and Miguel glances up to see Tory and Hawk scrubbing at spray paint along the fence. They are moving at a slow, unmotivated pace, snickering and flinging sponges at each other.

“Oh, um. My ya-ya. It’s what I call my grandma. She lives with my mom and me. Our apartment is right across from your dad’s. That’s how I know him.”

“Okay.” Robby replies, blankly.

“How’s your shoulder, anyway?”

“It still hurts sometimes.”

“Oh,” Miguel says. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay.”

More horrible, awkward silence and Miguel wonders how long it takes to find a fucking pot for a plant. Finally, he sighs.

“So, I’m not trying to pick a fight. But are you and Sam going out?”
Robby freezes, then swallows. “Ye- no. I don’t know. I mean, it’s really none of your business.”

Miguel nods, dejected. “Right.”

Keene sighs. “Whatever. Here comes Mr. LaRusso. Let’s just pot these things and we never have to talk again. Okay?”

“Sounds good.” Miguel nods, and wipes his hands of dirt.

***

Diaz may not have been as bad as Robby had thought, but his presence was still like a slow, awful itch. Robby could see Miguel stealing looks at Samantha across the dojo, and he could pretty well put together the situation.

That other girl, Tory, (who was frankly, terrifying, as far as Robby could tell) was playing sloppy seconds to Miguel, who was still clearly infatuated with Samantha, and the problem was Robby couldn’t definitively say that Samantha wasn’t still carrying a torch for Diaz. She’d sworn up and down that it was over between them, but Robby wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t blind. The more he looked up to see Diaz sneaking looks, the more he noticed Sam doing the same thing. Mr. LaRusso had to tell him to take it easy on the potting soil, he was patting it down around the roots a tad aggressively.

It was infuriating, the kid was clearly a reformed dork, but a dork nonetheless. He muttered, and stammered, and even had a tiny bit of a lisp or something. He was obviously star-struck with Mr. LaRusso, which was another thing that pissed Robby off.

Diaz had his father wrapped around his finger, he still had Samantha’s attention, and now he was sucking up to Mr. LaRusso. It was as if someone had designed an individual to specifically sabotage every good thing in Robby’s life.

“You know,” Robby stopped digging in the bag of potting soil, and looked up at Miguel. “I realize you might not be doing it on purpose- but if you could stay away from the LaRussos, I’d appreciate it. My dad already likes you better than me. So it’d be nice if you didn’t do the same thing to Sam and Mr. L. They’re all I’ve got.”

So. He was throwing himself a pity party. So the fuck what, he deserved it, didn’t he?

Miguel’s hands stilled from where he was patting soil around another tree.

“I-” he stammered stupidly. “I don’t think that that’s true-”

“Oh yeah? Then why’d he ask you to be his student last year, instead of me? He was already trying to apologize and shit all the time, but he never once asked me if I wanted to do karate with him. Not once -”

Robby feels his throat tighten up, and he knows his voice sounds choked up, like he was going to cry, and that’s not going to fucking happen. No way.

“I don’t even-” he mutters, shaking his head. “I don’t know why I even said that. Just shut up and we can get through this without killing each other.”
They plant in silence a few minutes, and Robby looks up when he hears Mr. LaRusso clapping and Samantha’s musical voice cheering. Demetri and a couple of the other Cobra Kai students have managed to lift the big, stone pillar thing across the yard.

Another sound draws Robby’s attention, the swinging open of the back gate, and heavy footsteps on the walkway planks. Robby smells the cigar smoke before he sees him.

“Students-” Kreese yells, and all work ceases. “This..humiliation, is over.” He takes a puff off his cigar. “Class is back in session.”

***

Robby is on his feet in seconds, and he feels Miguel stand in tandem. Robby turns to see Mr. LaRusso storming across the yard, arm extended, pointed back to the fence.

“OUT!” He yells, “Get off my property, I swear to God you’ve got one minute and I’m calling the cops-”

And this is just about the angriest Robby’s ever seen Mr. L, besides yesterday morning, waking up to the destroyed dojo, but that had been tinged with palpable heartbeat. This was pure rage, he was shaking with it.

“I won’t be here long,” Kreese says, softly, calmly, his voice almost a musical lilt. “I’m just here to collect my students, Mr. LaRusso. You wouldn’t have a problem with that, would you?”

“That wasn’t the deal,” Daniel seeths. “These kids are here to right a wrong, to learn from their mistakes. Johnny and I agreed-”

“Sensei Lawrence,” Kreese interrupts, “left his students in my care. I’m taking over classes for him, and those classes start now.”

Kreese turns, broadcasting his voice across the partially cleaned yard. “Let’s go! You are finished with this exercise. I think Mr. LaRusso has had enough fun. Anymore is degrading.”

Robby watches as the Cobra Kai students throw down rags, paint brushes, Hawk and Tory throw their sponges to the ground, all muttering variations of “I’m done with this shit”, “Thank God”, and “This is stupid.” Robby feels a hot wave of anger, that of course no one had taken this seriously, that they would leave at the first opportunity.

“Wait- WAIT!” Miguel steps forward, down the planked boardwalk. The other students pause and turn at his voice.

“Sensei Lawrence told us this was our assignment. We should finish it.”

“Sensei Lawrence had good intentions, Mr. Diaz.” Kreese intones gently. “But Mr. LaRusso here is humiliating you. His is using you to make a mockery of Cobra Kai. You are finished here, Mr. Diaz.”

This explanation seems to satisfy any hesitation for most of the students. Robby turns from side to side, seeing a few students still standing still. Aisha and Miguel, but also Chris, Nathaniel, and a couple others whose names he didn’t know.
Miguel takes another step toward Kreese, and stabilizes his stance. “Someone in Cobra Kai did this. It’s our responsibility to clean it up.”

Silence falls as Kreese takes in this assertion. Tory and Hawk hover near the entrance, and the girl calls,

“Miguel, c’mon, Sensei Kreese is right, this is stupid. I didn’t do this, and neither did you- it’s not our job-”

“He said-” Miguel shouts, louder, pointing at Kreese, “He told us we should stick together. That if one of us makes a move, we all do. So it’s all of our responsibility to fix our mistake-”

Tory sets her jaw. “I’m not spending my whole Saturday scrubbing a fence that I didn’t vandalize.”

“C’mon, Miguel.” Hawk calls. “We’ve done enough, we helped them out. It’s their dojo, they can clean the rest of it up-”

“I’m staying.” Aisha’s voice carries from where she stands next to Sam. “Sensei Lawrence was clear. And Miguel’s right. This is our responsibility. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Stay or leave.” Daniel’s voice is steady, he turns, addressing all of the students. “I’m not going to make you do what you don’t want to do. It’s your choice. But I think you know what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Kreese glares at Daniel, cigar still smoking. “You always were a sanctimonious little bastard. Just like your dead Sensei.”

Robby watches the air leave Daniel’s lungs, like a heavy foot was pressing on his chest. Before he can think, he’s moving, needing to get between Kreese and Mr. LaRusso, but he doesn’t get far-

“Stop-” Diaz grips Robby’s forearm, and Robby whips around, twisting away. “You’ll make it worse-”

“STOP- Get away from my dad-” Samantha’s voice cuts through the fog, she lunges forward, coming in between Daniel and Kreese. “Take your little Cobra Kais and get out of here!”

Kreese puts his hands up, smiling. “We’re on our way.” He raises his eyebrows, jerking his head toward the entrance. “Class?”

Robby shrugs the rest of the way out of Diaz’s grip. He looks over at him, shaking his head, watching the line of Cobra Kai students skulk out of the dojo, listens to the sound of starting cars. “You should join your friends.”

Miguel looks at him, steady and dark. “No, man. I can make my own decisions, thanks.”

“Whatever,” Robby says, and he glances over to see Sam hugging her dad. Mr. L still looks shaken, a little pale. “Let’s get to the rest of the trees. There’s been enough damage done.”

***

Miguel isn’t the only Cobra Kai student who stays. There are seven of them all together. Along with Miguel and Aisha, Chris, Nathaniel, Abe, Frank, and another kid everyone seemed to just call “Red”
stick around. Seven Cobra Kai plus Sam, Robby, and Demetri meant they could still have five pairs of people working at the same time. By the time pizza arrived around 7, the dojo was starting to sparkle once more.

“Thanks for the pizza, Mr. LaRusso.” Chris was a large, intimidating kid, but Daniel could already see he was a teddy bear.

“Yeah, this was actually pretty fun,” the little asian kid, Nathanial chimed in, biting into a slice of pepperoni.

The kids were all seated out on the deck, legs dangling over into the grass. The afternoon heat had lifted, cooling the air, and the trees in the backyard cast long shadows over the training area.

Aisha was practicing kicks on one of the repaired heavy bags. She reached down to run a hand over the stitched up canvas.

“I think this’ll hold up fine, Mr. LaRusso.”

Daniel turned to where a tall brunette was seated, gulping down a glass of coke. “Nice job, Frank.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank was tall, pale, and quiet. He hadn’t said much during the day. “My dad sails a lot, so sometimes I have to help with repairs and stuff.”

“Well your dad did a great job teaching you. I should thank him.”

Frank nods noncommittally, and dives back into his pizza. The kids all chat amicably, and Daniel enjoys the moment, looking back out onto the power washed and restained fence, the clean lawn, the repotted bonsai trees.

Robby sits up from his seat beside Sam and Demetri, and stands next to Daniel, sharing the view.

“You know,” Robby says quietly, “That Chris kid already mentioned to me how he’d like to maybe take some classes here. I don’t think we’d have to push much to get the others on board.”

Daniel laughs. “Just keep feeding them, right?”

Robby shrugged, smiling. “Doesn’t hurt.”

Daniel took a breath, enjoying the breeze. “Hey. Thanks for playing nice with Miguel today. I know you guys have your differences, so I appreciate you keeping a handle on it.”

Robby shrugged. “Getting this place cleaned up was more important than my issues with him. And-”

Robby seems to struggle, so Daniel finishes for him.

“How about him standing up to Kreese, huh? That was...unexpected.”

Robby nods. “Yeah...the others probably wouldn’t have stayed, otherwise.” He clears his throat, and Daniel knows how hard he’s working to find the good things about his rival.

“Well. I’m really proud of you, Robby. C’mere-”

Daniel pulls Robby into a hug, and then holds him at arm's length. “I’m glad you and your dad are getting along. But you’ll always be a part of my family, too- got it?”
Robby ducks his head, nodding with a big, wide smile. “Yeah, okay.” he says.

Daniel grins, and clapping his hands together. “Okay- what’s the pitch, Robby? How do we get these guys to jump ship? Go for subtle or go for broke?”

Robby purses his lips, looking around the dojo. “I don’t think you’re gonna get Miguel and Aisha-”

“Nah, I didn’t think so, either. What about the rest of them?”

“I think,” Robby says, “We should just tell them the doors of Miyagi-do are always wide open. Plus, they already know classes are free. I don’t think it’ll take much.”

Just then, Chris stood, folded his paper plate and carefully dropped it into one of the black garbage bags hanging off the porch. Wiping his hands, he walked up to Daniel and Robby.

“Hey, Mr. LaRusso. I just wanted to say we had a good time today. And me and a couple of the guys wondered if we could maybe come back this week and see what the lessons were like here versus Cobra Kai, you know. Compare the competition.”

“You and a couple of the guys, huh?” smiling, Daniel looked around, and saw Nathaniel, Frank, Abe, and Red looking at him, hopefully.

Chris nodded shyly. “Yeah, you know. Some of us just think we don’t really fit in over there, anyway.”

Daniel looks at Robby, who quirks his eyebrows, and laughs.

“Chris, the doors to Miyagi-do are wide open. We’d love to have you guys.”

“Okay,” Chris says, nodding, a cautious smile on his sweet face. “Sounds good. Should I call you Sensei?”

Daniel shakes his head. “Mr. LaRusso is fine. You can get my number from Demetri, I’ll shoot you guys a text when we have our next practice.”

“Great. Uh, is it okay if we hang out a little longer? My mom said she’d be here to pick us up at 8.”

“Yes,” Daniel says, “Beautiful, that’s...that’s perfect, Chris.”

Chris goes back to the others, and Robby returns to Sam’s side, and the sun dips low into the Western sky and Daniel runs his fingers over the healed gash Frank had sewn shut on the punching bag, and he kneels down to pat the dirt over the freshly potted bonsai trees, and it’s all whole again, everything is put back together.

Except for the black and empty frame, now sitting on a shelf in the reassembled dojo. Daniel runs his fingers over it, listening to the sounds of engines in the dark as the last of the students leave. He hears tentative footsteps, and he turns, expecting Sam or Robby.

It isn’t. It’s Miguel.

Daniel studies him, waiting.

“I, um. Just wanted to say. I’ll do my best to find the medal.” The kid swallows heavily, it seemed to be a habit. “And...I know you hate Cobra Kai, and this doesn’t make us look good. But it’s not all, I mean it really helps some people. Sensei Lawrence helps us.”
Daniel sets the frame gently down. “I appreciate that, Miguel. And I know your Sensei is doin’ his best. But...there are things about Cobra Kai...even he doesn’t know about. I know what he’s trying to do. But you need to be careful about these credos, about what he’s teaching...mercy isn’t a bad thing. I worry about that-”

“Does Sensei Kreese know? About the things Sensei Lawrence doesn’t.”

The sun was pulling its last rays from the dojo’s pale, wooden floor.

“Yeah. He does.”

Miguel sighs through his nose. “He’s...Sensei Lawrence. He’s different around Sensei Kreese. I don’t know how to describe it.” He looks back up at Daniel, eyebrows pinched in thought.

“Teachers can be a powerful influence, Miguel. We look to our teachers for balance, for answers. And just because you look up to somebody, doesn’t mean they’re teaching the right lessons. Does that make sense?”

Miguel nods. “Yeah.”

“Look...I know I’m not your Sensei. But my advice would be to steer clear of Kreese. And when it comes to him...Johnny tends to have blinders on. We all do with our teachers. And Kreese is in a position to take advantage of that. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. I think I do.”

“Dad? You ready to go?” Daniel turns, Samantha is standing in the doorway, leading out onto the backyard. Miguel’s head snaps up.

“Oh-” Sam stops, gripping the sliding door nervously. “Hey,” she says, to Miguel.

“Hey,” he calls back, softly, with wide brown eyes, and Daniel groans internally. Clearly this wasn’t over, whatever it was.

“Ready to go?” Aisha calls from the opposite door, the one leading out to the packed dirt driveway.

Miguel, after a moment of star-crossed gazing, turns back to Aisha. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

Daniel watches the awkward goodbye, and after the Cobras leave, drapes an arm around his daughter.

“You okay?” he kisses her hair, his baby girl.

“Yeah,” she nods. “Just a long day.”

“Let’s go home,” he says, but it doesn’t feel quite right on his lips. Daniel’s not sure what you say when you’re going from one home to the next, when you can hang your hat on more than one door, feel the hum of your life in both places.

It’s not an unfamiliar feeling, though. He’s used to it, this feeling of his heart in two places. Jersey winter and California summer, one father long dead, another blown in from across the sea. One Johnny Lawrence, hated from thirty years ago, and a newer one who seemed to fit just right, anywhere that Daniel could think to put him.
Saturday Night - Call me, call me any, anytime

The phone rings close on 9:30, an insistent buzzing sound from his jacket pocket, hanging off the back of his chair at the high-top table in the hotel bar. Johnny doesn’t get a lot of calls, not like a lot of people even have his number these days, so he’s prepared to push the red ‘Reject’ button, but the white letters scrawled across the screen catch his attention, and he lets out a surprised laugh before he slips out of the chair, Bobby and Jimmy whistling at his back.

“Hey-” Johnny presses his middle finger into his ear, blocking out the background noise as the connection opens, Tom Petty crooning over the speakers. He walks out toward the lobby, and drops down into one of the non-descript cushioned chairs surrounding a coffee table full of magazines that nobody actually reads.

“Hey-” LaRusso’s voice crackled over the speaker.

“‘The Real All-Valley Champ’, huh? You’re lucky I don’t know how to work these things, or I’d change it to something else-”

Daniel’s laugh tumbles through the line. “I wondered if you’d see that before I called-”

“You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?” Johnny jokes, wonders if he’d remember.

“Nah, you know. I always did like to push it.”

Of course he does. Johnny rubs at his eyes. “Jesus.”

“Yeah...” There’s a bit of an awkward pause. Johnny briefly thinks about apologizing for that particular incident, but thinks better of it. Besides, he got the shit kicked out of him that night, too. So...they were pretty much even.

“Where are you? You make it back to the Valley?”

Johnny looks up at the drop-tile ceiling, studying the old, brown water stains.

“Uh, not exactly. San Bernardino. Bobby and Jimmy and I got a hotel, we’re here for the night.” Johnny sighs, sick of the thought and this conversation. “Tommy’s gone.”

The air sits staticky while LaRusso absorbs this information. Johnny can almost see him, sitting out on his big patio by the pool, the night lights making the water dance.

“We had this,” Johnny continues, “big dumb plan to give him a last hurrah, you know. We signed him out of the hospice last night, rented some bikes and drove up to Big Bear. We used to do that over Summer Break in high school.”

Daniel stays quiet, and Johnny’s not sure if he’s grateful or annoyed for it. He’s not normally a talker like this, not one to pour out his feelings, but his chest feels a little like a cage right now, something dark and awful prowling around behind it.

“It’s just...he looked so good last night. And we had this great talk, about old times. He...he told me
he was in love with Ali. All Freshman year, he was thinkin’ about asking her out. And I didn’t even
know it...you know, he held that in for years, and he never told me.”

And it hits Johnny, the staggering unfairness of it all, it brings him back almost twenty years to his
sick mother, the awfulness of this disease that eats away at a person, turns somebody whole into less-
than, weakens and cripples and turns them into a body, a broken sack of meat. His mother had been
more than that in life. So had Tommy. Johnny presses at his eyes, glad nobody can see the tears
there, but he’s pretty sure LaRusso can hear the choked off sounds coming from his throat.

“He woke up dead, in his sleeping bag.” Johnny breathes. “Anyway, so it’s been a shit day. We had
to call his sisters and get him to the funeral home and spend all afternoon with some jackass in a
cheap suit, talkin’ about what kind of box my best friend is going in.”

“John, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. They want to try to do the funeral Monday, so I should be back that night.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a long day.” He sighs into the phone, watching a little girl in a swimsuit, soaking wet,
skitter across the lobby towards the pool room. “How’d the cleanup go?”

“It was fine. We can talk about it later.”

“What? Why, what went wrong- did Tory give you attitude? ‘Cause you can just smack that girl-”

“What? No- I mean, yes a little. But-”

“Just spit it out, LaRusso.”

“Kreese showed up. But it’s fine, I don’t want you worrying about it, you’ve got enough on your
plate.”

“What do you mean, he showed up ? I told him, classes were cancelled until I got back-”

“Well that’s not what he said.”

“Well what did he say, don’t jerk me around-”

“I’m not jerkin’ you around, Johnny, I just didn’t want you to worry about it-”

“Jesus Christ, LaRusso-”

“Fine! Fine-” And it’s almost funny, this mutual ability to wind each other up at every opportunity.
“ He just...he showed up before lunch, we were a couple hours in, and basically he called the kids
off. He said I was ‘humiliating’ the students, and that ‘class was back in session’.’”

“So they all just left?! ”

Johnny hears the smile in Daniel’s voice. “No. Your boy Miguel stood up and tried to get everybody
to stay. So I got to keep him and Aisha, and a few others. They did a great job, everything’s pretty
much back to normal. I’ll get the cars in the shop this week, the paint should come off pretty easy.”

“We’ll pay for it.”

“Don’t bother, it’s just my guys in the shop, I’ll wait for a slow Wednesday, or something, it’s not a
big deal. Besides, I kinda owe you.”

“Owe me for what?”

LaRusso chuckles, but sort of nervously. “Well...just to give you a heads up. And I didn’t encourage them, they just up and asked me....but a few of your students sort of asked if they could take some classes at Miyagi-do. So...you might be a few short next class-”

“You poached my students.”

“I didn’t poach your students, they came to me-”

“Which ones? You didn’t take Miguel.” Johnny feels briefly, very sick.

“No, Jesus, I would never do that, and besides he’d never leave. Kid is like a labrador, he loves you. Anyway, uh...Chris, Nathaniel...”

“Yeah, I could see that-”

“Uhm. Frank...Abe, and Red.”

“Chris, Nathan, Frank, Abe, and Red.”

“Yeah.”

“And that’s it?”

“As far as I know.”

Johnny wipes a hand down his face, but can’t prevent the giggles from welling up.

“What’s so funny?”

“LaRusso, you-” Johnny laughs, “You’re like a dork magnet - literally, those are the worst students in my class-”

“Yeah, well we’ll see how they look at the Tournament next Spring- maybe they won’t look so dorky when they’re kicking some Cobra Kai ass-”

“Yeah, right, in your dreams, LaRusso.”

Suddenly, Bobby and Jimmy plop down in chairs across the coffee table. Bobby mouths, ‘Is that Daniel?’ and Johnny frowns, waving him off.

“Listen, man, I’ve got to go-”

“Sure, uh, hey before you go, this is gonna sound weird, but what if I came up, Monday?”

“What for the funeral?” Bobby is nodding excitedly. Jimmy gives him thumbs up, like a fucking dipshit. Johnny angles away from them, pressing his finger in his ear again. “Why would you do that?”

“I want to be there for you. Plus, I could bring Robby, I think it’d be good for him to see what a big part of your life these guys are-”

“What are you, Dr. Phil? I’m not bringing Robby to the funeral of somebody he’s never met-”
And Bobby, the snake (Cobra Kai for life, they say) plucks the phone from Johnny’s hand, like candy from a baby.

“Daniel? This is Bobby-” Bobby stands, sidling away, and Jimmy’s cracking up like an asshole.

Johnny swipes for the phone, to no avail.

Bobby’s laughing at something LaRusso said. “Oh, man, we’d love to see you- you should come up! I know it’s not the most joyous occasion, but we could all grab beers-”

Bobby almost trips over the chair, dodging Johnny’s sweeping foot.

“Yeah, I’m doing the service-”

Johnny gives up, and kicks at Jimmy’s shins, which just makes Jimmy laugh harder.

“- that’s really good to hear, I didn’t know you guys kept in touch-”

Johnny rolls his eyes, making grabby hands for the phone.

“- yeah, it’s totally a small town! Okay, well that sounds good, man- yeah, I’ll grab your number from Johnny- ”

LaRusso must have said something funny, and Bobby laughs his douchy, feel-goody pastor laugh. The troubling part is, it’s not even fake. He really laughs like that.

“- oh, man, that’s so true. Okay, well Johnny’s about to kill me- okay man, I’ll see you Monday-okay, bye.”

Bobby’s eyes sparkle mischievously. “He’ll be there.”

Jimmy is breathing hard, recovering from the peanut gallery.

“Oh my god,” he says, “You’re friends with LaRusso, now?!”

“We’re not friends-” Johnny snaps, catching his phone as Bobby tosses it across the table. “He has a dojo in the Valley. I’ve been giving his son karate lessons. And he’s been teaching Robby.”

Bobby frowns. “I thought he still had the dealership?”

“He does. He just also teaches karate. But it’s barely even a real dojo, he only has a couple of students.” And now some of Johnny’s students. Prick.

Jimmy leans forward. “And...Robby is one of his students? And you teach his kid?”

“It’s a long story.” Johnny thumbs over the black, glassy screen. “It is...sorta weird I guess.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Bobby and Jimmy exchange a long, serious look, which Johnny knows means they’ll be calling their wives later and talking in concerned voices and shit.

Then, Jimmy tips his head back and laughs, laughs so hard he starts to cry. “Oh my god,” he says, “Tommy would love it, man- he’d love it!”

***
San Bernardino was, generally, a shit hole. But Tommy had liked it all right, and he had also like Trevor’s, a pool hall bar & grill not far from Cal State, and so Jimmy had suggested beers and burgers and it had seemed to be the right thing to do.

The funeral had been a blur. It had felt strangely too short, and also a lifetime of an afternoon, both at the funeral home and the graveside service. Johnny hadn’t really planned on crying, but when he saw Tommy’s Cobra Kai gi laid over the casket like a flag, probably his last one from ‘84, something he’d worn, warm and alive, he’d had to duck his face into Jimmy’s shoulder.

He hadn’t sat in the front row since his mother’s funeral, but Tommy’s sisters had insisted. Tommy’s parents had both passed, so it was just Tammy, Theresa, and the other Cobras. The worst and the best part had been when Bobby’d read a letter from Dutch, post-marked from Lompoc:

‘He was my brother,’ the letter read, ‘they’re burying my brother today, and I’m in here. And it’s all my fault. Too many times I wasn’t there for him in life, and today I’m not there for him in death.

‘There were five of us. Johnny was the legs, the leader, he always led the way and got us where we were going. I was the fists, the enforcer, always ready to jump at a fight. Jimmy was the thinker, he was the head when we forgot ourselves. Bobby was our heart. But Tommy...he was our guts. He had a tough time growing up, but he never complained. He took care of us, the group always came first, and he never gave up when the rest of us wanted to. He got a little mixed up in the drugs and the booze, but he never lost his humor, he never lost his spirit. And losing him guts us all.’

Johnny’d just sat there, watching Bobby cry like a girl through it, Jimmy right there at his shoulder, feeling the truth of Dutch’s words, feeling gutted and just so damn sad.

But now Robby was here, sitting at Johnny’s side, diving into a burger like he hadn’t eaten all day, washing it down with a coke, and he doesn’t even seem bothered when Johnny stretches his arm back over the booth behind him, and it almost feels like they’re just a regular father and son, out for dinner with friends.

“This is Josh, and Jordan, they’re 17-”

“Twins?”

“Yeah, fraternal.” Jimmy grins. “And this is our odd one out, the caboose- Jesse. He’s 12.”

Daniel grins. “Jordan looks just like you.”

Jimmy nods, “Yeah, he gets that a lot!”

LaRusso and Jimmy, sitting on the other side of the booth, are getting along like a house on fire, like Johnny knew they would. Bobby was always the sweet one, the peacemaker, but Jimmy was the one who could get along with anybody, could disarm the toughest crowd with his down to earth affability. After a couple of beers, Jimmy could befriend the farmer as well as the pharmacist.

Daniel had the decency not to order a fancy martini, instead opting for a “tall vodka tonic with lemon,” which he’s pretty sure fucking Shannon used to order.
Johnny, like a gentleman waiting for the rest of the round, couldn’t just not say something. “Nice drink, Danielle. I’m surprised it doesn’t come with one of those little umbrellas.”

This was funny, but Daniel had just shook his head and scoffed, picked his drink up from the bar. “It’s actually very refreshing, John,” and walked away to the table. Johnny was about to say something clever or whatever, but Bobby spotted the drink and—of course he did—was all over it, What’d you get Daniel? Boy that sounds great and I’m getting that next blah blah blah and even Jimmy with the A great summer drink, oh my god, all the testosterone had just been vacuumed out of the damn building. Daniel actually winked at him, the little bastard.

The ‘84 Champion now angles his phone over to Jimmy, scrolling through pictures of Sam and Anthony. Daniel looks relaxed and happy, finally loosening up after Johnny had pulled him aside after the funeral, asked if he and Robby would come out to the bar.

“I won’t let Bobby anywhere near your knee,” Johnny had joked, seeing the hesitant look on LaRusso’s face.

The teasing had worked, along with an entreatig look from Bobby (he didn’t care who you were, nobody could say no to Bobby Brown’s puppy dog eyes), and so the five of them sat, Robby and Daniel doing a lot of listening, telling tales of better days.

“Hey,” Bobby interrupts the photo sharing, setting down his beer. “I did run into Susan last year.”

“No way,” Jimmy says. “What’s she doing these days?”

Bobby laughs. “I wrecked my car. She was my insurance adjuster-”

Jimmy almost spits out his beer, and it’s a near thing for Johnny, too.

“I bet she’s still a total bitch -” Jimmy says, recovering, mouthing the “bitch” for Robby’s benefit.

Bobby nods, still laughing. “She was, until she recognized me, then she got all sweet.” He looks at Johnny. “She was asking about you, actually. She wanted to know what ‘Johnny blue eyes’ was up to these days-”

Jimmy slaps the table. “She was such a snob!”

Bobby cracks up. “She didn’t have a ring on, Johnny- I can get her number- bet she’d love to see you back in a karate gi-”

Jimmy is laughing so hard, he can’t even talk.

Johnny makes a gagging sound, and finishes his beer. He reaches over and grabs Daniel’s drink, and downs that in one.

“Don’t say shit like that Bobby, I swear to God- ”

Daniel’s been watching, smiling. “‘Johnny Blue Eyes’, huh? You always were popular with the girls.”

Johnny makes a face. “Yeah, except for one.”

Jimmy raises his hand. “Can I admit something?” Silence - He stage whispers behind a hand- “I never liked Ali. ”

Johnny groans. “Jimmy, c’mon-”
Bobby jumps in. “She did dump you for a bullshit reason- I mean, missing her birthday?! It wasn’t that big of a deal- the rest of us were hungover-”

Johnny gestures for another drink. “I don’t think that was the only reason-”

Daniel shakes his head. “She sure did know how to dump a guy.”

Bobby and Jimmy look over. “We haven’t heard this story.”

Johnny looks uncomfortable. He has heard the story.

“Oh kay,” and Johnny can tell that Daniel is just on this side of drunk, maybe two drinks in, cheeks warm and soaking up the attention. “So after all the bullshit for all those months, and after I-” he points to himself, “came out on top at the Tournament-”

Johnny crosses his arms over his chest, and the other guys laugh.

Daniel continues, “I thought we had something special, you know? A few months go by, we’re going out, it’s all great- I mean, her parents hated me-”

Johnny jumps in. “Hey, they loved me-”

“I’m sure they did, ‘Johnny Blue Eyes’- the golden boy from the Hills-”

Bobby and Jimmy crack up.

“So anyway, here I am, some poor Italian kid from Receda, I’m picking her up for prom in my brand new tuxedo-”

Johnny jumps in. “I remember that thing- powder blue, Jesus Christ, LaRusso, that thing was already dated in the ’80s, no wonder she dumped your ass-”

Daniel makes a face. “Hey- that suit looked great on me-”

“You looked like a cotton swab, all skinny with that fluffy hair on top-”

“Hey,” Jimmy says, “Johnny, can we get past the part where you were checking out Daniel in his suit-”

“I was not-”

“Anyway-” Daniel presses on. “So we have a few dances, but clearly her head is somewhere else, and she’s giving me the cold shoulder- so she asks if we can go home, and then she wants to borrow my car.”

Bobby asks, “That old yellow thing?”

“Yeah, Mr. Miyagi gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday, right before the Tournament- my most prized possession- and like an idiot- I let her borrow it. I let her drop me off and she peels down Receda Boulevard, and I’m standing there like an idiot in a cloud of rubber- and she brings it back at 3 in the goddamn morning, the fender’s all banged up, the bumper’s hanging off the front, and the engine’s trashed- and she’s crying, telling me she’s in love with some football player at UCLA, and she’s sorry it didn’t work out. And then she wants me to call her a cab home.”

Robby looks disturbed. “That’s horrible.”
Johnny shakes his head. “She was the worst driver I’ve ever seen. Bar none.”

The waitress comes over and deposits a fresh round of the “refreshing summer drinks,” and Johnny is about to stop her but she’s got four and who is he to waste, and besides it actually wasn’t so bad.

“I’ve still got the car, though. Just got a new paint job.” Daniel gives Johnny a wink. “I’m trying to decide if I should charge the guy who’s responsible.”

Johnny looks innocent. “I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about LaRusso.”

“This is just...so crazy. It’s great.” Bobby leans his chin on one hand, gesturing back and forth between Daniel and Johnny. “Seeing you two, bantering back and forth. Does my heart good. Reminds me of Saul on the Road to Damascus-”

They all groan and shut Bobby up before he can talk anymore about God or the Bible or Jesus.

“You know Tommy hated that shit,” Johnny reminds him, gently bumping his shoulder.

Bobby just smiles, and Johnny can see those damn beautiful eyes misting over. Bobby clears his throat, and nods.

“Yeah,” he says, a little rough. “But he always listened to what I had to say. He’d laugh at me, but he’d always listen.”

Johnny puts an arm around his shoulder, shakes him gently, and he can feel LaRusso watching from across the table.

Jimmy reaches over and squeezes Bobby’s wrist.

“That was Tommy,” Jimmy smiles. “That was our Tommy, alright.”

They raise their glasses, and even LaRusso tips his against theirs, eyes flicking between his drink and Johnny.

***

Jimmy asks, maybe three vodka drinks later. “So, you’re still in the Valley, Daniel. Do you ever see anybody else from high school?”

Daniel shakes his head. “I did bump into Barbara years ago, she bought a car from me. But, I mean I was only there the one year. I didn’t really make friends with anybody else. Except Ali.”

Daniel smiles in sympathy with the thought in a way that makes it seem like he’s hiding, crouched down behind his own teeth with his hands over his head.

The heaviiness in the air is palpable, and Johnny watches Daniel carefully as Bobby and Jimmy stare down into the depths of their drinks. Johnny can feel that year like a lead weight in his stomach, the coming down of everything good in his life, but he had always blamed it on Daniel, and even if Johnny could say objectively that he shouldn’t have done a few things- that elbow to the knee, for instance- he hadn’t ever really doubted the story of ‘LaRusso the interloper’, the cocky newcomer sweeping in and moving in on his girl.
He’d wondered, a few times, why LaRusso’s little gang wasn’t ever around him after that night on the beach, but then why question it- the little punk was so easy to get alone, he was always by himself, it was like shooting fish in a barrel- push LaRusso into a locker, wait until he leaves a restaurant by himself, to ride his bike back to Receda by himself, nobody at soccer tryouts to take his side of the story, no one watching his back while Dutch peeled him down off that fence like a piece of rubber on a hot sidewalk.

Johnny looks at Daniel’s face, and knows that high school is a haunting thing. That what happens to you at that age has a nasty habit of sticking with you, that it can hook into the ground and drag you right back down at the mention of a word or the sight of an almost forgotten face.

And that as much as Ali had probably swept Daniel off his feet (it was staggering, how out of his league she’d been) maybe he’d attached himself to her for another simple reason- she’d talked to him when nobody else would.

Jimmy rubs the condensation off his beer. “Hey, man. I know Bobby’s probably said it, and Johnny. But. I’m really sorry about all the shit we did to you in high school. That was pretty messed up. I’ve thought about that for a lot of years.”

Daniel taps his hands on the table. “Hey, it’s alright. That was a long time ago. Water under the bridge, right?”

Daniel swallows, staring at his fingers tapping the lacquered surface, and Johnny watches, and he can see Robby looking between them. Judging by the horrified look on Robby’s face, he can bet Daniel never told Robby the true nature of their past, had never mentioned the bullying (for that was what it was, five to one was a cowardly number, and even Johnny couldn’t delude himself to justify it anymore), had probably glossed over the whole story and told Robby they’d had ‘girl trouble’ and had settled their differences at a karate tournament.

Jimmy says to his beer, “It took a long time to get all that shit from Kreese out of our heads. Dutch never did.”

Bobby nods, and looks Daniel in the eye. “You were a better man than us, Daniel.”

Johnny takes a drink. “He still is.”

Everyone looks at Johnny. He clears his throat roughly, scrambling for a detour. “Didn’t he show you a picture of his wife?”

Jimmy and Bobby laugh, Jimmy gestures for a picture, and Daniel passes his phone over. “She’s beautiful, Daniel! You did well.” Jimmy congratulates, and Bobby leans across to offer his own compliments.

“I don’t deserve her.” Daniel says, and he looks at Johnny while Bobby smiles at the family photo. He shakes his minutely, eyebrows pinched down in question. Johnny shrugs- everything he said was true, but this seems to exasperate Daniel further.

“Where’s that waitress?” Daniel says, looking like an impatient Encino club member. “I’ll go get us another round.” Bobby passes the phone back and Robby takes it, clicking it closed and lays it face down on the table in front of Daniel’s empty seat.

Johnny goes to take a piss.
They stand around in the parking lot in front of the bar, talking and kicking rocks for what seems like hours, but Johnny guesses it was maybe 20 minutes. He’s drunk, but not that drunk, he’d spaced his drinks out enough to build up a pleasant, warm buzz, and he tips his head back as Jimmy and Bobby roughhouse with Robby. LaRusso’s laughing at his shoulder, shouting instructions at Robby.

Eventually after enough procrastinating and hugging, Jimmy and Bobby take off in their respective cars, bound for different corners of the city.

“You should ride with your dad,” LaRusso throws out affably, only slurring a bit on the ‘should’.
“You guys can get some father-son time.”

“Robby’s gonna drive you home, LaRusso. You’re too drunk.”

Daniel scoffs, kicking his polished shoes, and Johnny catalogs his partially unbuttoned shirt and tie slung down messy and low.

“And what are you, sober?”

“I drive better drunk.” Johnny teases. “I’m a real man, LaRusso, I know how to hold my liquor.”

“Yeah, Mr. L. I’ll drive. I need the practice, anyway.” Robby jangles the keys he’d already pinched from LaRusso. Little punk , Johnny thinks affectionately. “I’ll go pull the car around.”

They watch Robby go, and LaRusso turns back to him.

“They’re cool. You’re really lucky.”

“What?” Johnny squints, trying to translate drunk Daniel’s line of thought.

“Jimmy and Bobby,” he says, more like Jimmynbobby. “You’re lucky to have friends like that. They’re not exactly how I remember.”

Johnny nods. “Yeah, well, things change. They weren’t trying to beat the shit out of you, so that was probably nice.”

Daniel nods, and Johnny catches a little dampness at his eyes. “You alright?” He wouldn’t normally give a shit. It was the alcohol, is what it was.

“Fine,” Daniel wrinkles his nose and forehead up, probably trying to act casual and not cry. “I’m just...glad we’re friends. We are, right?” He uses those baby browns to devastating effect, and Johnny has to look away.

“Yes, LaRusso, if it’ll make you happy. Just don’t tell anyone, okay? I’ve got a reputation to keep up.”

And suddenly, he’s pulled into a tight hug, which normally wouldn’t be a huge issue, but Daniel tucks his nose and mouth down into Johnny’s neck, and he can feel the guy’s wet eyelashes on his skin and smell his cologne and what must be his shampoo. And Johnny’s not made of marble and it has been a long day, so he puts his arms around Daniel’s waist and ribs, and sort of pats his back awkwardly, being so bold as to slide his fingers up and down, feeling his spine under his suit jacket. LaRusso’s breath puffs over his neck and shoulder, and down his shirt.
Robby pulls the car around, and Johnny pulls back, “Hey, not in front of the kid, alright?” But he’s not sure LaRusso takes it so lightly. He jerks back, wipes a sleeve across his eyes.

“Hey,” he says, as Robby steps out, peeking over the roof of the car. “I was just joking-”

“It’s fine. It’s just been hard.” Daniel’s voice shakes in a warning way. Johnny looks over at Robby, “Hey, kiddo, could you give us a minute?”

Robby nods. “He okay?”

“M fine, Robby-” LaRusso calls, unconvincingly.

“He’s fine” Johnny says, one hand still on LaRusso’s shoulder. “Just had a little too much to drink-”

He pulls Daniel down the sidewalk a few feet, and Robby drops back inside the car.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

“Nothing-” Daniel shrugs out of his grip, half turning away. “It’s like you said, I’m just a little drunk.”

“No, you’re getting all huggy. And you’re crying.”

“You cried today-”

“That’s because my friend died.” Johnny snaps, harsher than he means.

Daniel winces.

“It’s okay, just...what’s going on, LaRusso?”

“I-” Daniel waffles, pinching at his eyes. “It’s just... I never did tell Amanda what happened with us.”

Johnny groans. “So you’re feeling guilty? Just tell her, it’s not like it’ll happen again-” He really does say the stupidest shit sometimes.

“I just miss you-” Daniel chokes out, and the tears are real. Jesus fuck he was gorgeous, and crying, and ohhhhhman.

Johnny presses the meat of his palms into his eyes, hoping this sight would be gone by the time he looked again.

“Fuck,” he says. “Then come over. If you miss me, come over sometime.”

Johnny doesn’t need anyone to tell him what a goddamn idiot he is. He hadn't meant to say it, but he had, and now he couldn’t take it back, not with LaRusso looking at him like that, with his tears slowing down, and now he’s even biting his lip a little bit-

“That’s probably not a great idea, is it?” Daniel says, frowning, breathing all heavy to calm himself down.

“Probably not.” Johnny looks back over at the car, wondering what Robby’s thinking. “Just...come over, or don’t. I don’t-” He was going to say he didn’t care, like a liar. “You know, whatever.”

Daniel breathes deeply, and wipes at his face. “Shit. I’m sorry. I really am drunk. I didn’t mean-”
“It’s fine,” Johnny says, before he can take it back. Because he really doesn’t want him to take all that back. “It’s fine. Just...call before you come over. If you do. We could watch your stupid baseball team or something.”

LaRusso laughs, and Johnny feels his chest ease up.

“Yeah, you’d watch a Mets game with me, huh? They’re not doin’ so hot lately.”

Thank God. Normal talk.

“As long as it’s not soccer. That shit where they roll around on the ground drives me crazy. Bunch of _pussies_.”

LaRusso laughs again, and he almost looks normal.

“Okay. Car, _now_, LaRusso. It's like six hours past your bedtime.”

“Yeah, yeah-” Daniel waves him off, drunk-walking back to the car.

Robby meets them with an arm reaching out to LaRusso, the passenger door open. “C’mon Mr. LaRusso, we gotta go home now.”

“Night, princess!” Johnny tucks Daniel down into his seat, and ducks out before he tries something crazy. He shuts the door and almost sighs in relief.

Robby turns to Johnny, shoving his hands into his pockets. “He’s pretty drunk, huh?”

“Yeah. Little shit gets two martinis in him and he’s dancing on the bar.”

Robby laughs. “Seemed like he had a good time. He doesn’t really hang out with other guys his age.”

“That’s ‘cause he’s actually an eighty year old woman inside.”

Robby smiles, and nods. “Well. Thanks for being his friend. I think it’s cool you guys get along now. He’s important to me.”

Johnny sighs heavily. “Yeah, I know.”

Robby nods. “Okay. Think we can hang out this week?”

“Anytime you want.”

Robby walks into his arms, and Johnny wraps him into a hug, kisses his hair, his little boy, and wonders how they got this far in just a couple of months.

“Love you, dad.” Robby says.

“I love you, Robby.”

Johnny follows them back to the Valley, the highway flying past his windows in a deep purple blur. He follows them all the way to the Encino turnoff from the Boulevard, and then turns the car around, downhill, back to Receda. It doesn’t really feel like going home, though. It feels like the opposite of that, like his heart is on a string being tugged backwards, _away_ from him.
Tuesday - Heartache and Bad Pizza

Daniel wakes up the morning after the funeral exhausted, hung over, and alone. He fumbles blearily for his phone on the nightstand, and finds a text from Amanda:

You looked tired, so I shut off your alarm- Anoush and I should be fine today. Sam said you got some new students. Use them to find some balance, its ‘ya thang, babe. Love you, hope everything went ok with johnny and the funeral.

Daniel groans in relief, head pounding, and knows he doesn’t deserve his wife. He flips to the next text, from Demetri:

hey mr. L samantha said we might have class today? Let me know i can get the others down, we are all privileged teenagers with no jobs as far as i know so we can be free whenever. also btw did you see hbo only commissioned 6 epis for s8 of GoT ? total crap imho

One from Samantha:

morning dad! I told demetri we might have class today, what do u think? Robby and i are on a run, see u when we get back maybe i’ll try making bananarama ;)

And another from Samantha:

oh also mom said to tell u we are out of coffee again - sorry!

This last note is most unfortunate. He had hoped the coffee would help burn off the humiliation of the fuzzy memory, now slowly rising in awful clarity, of drunkenly throwing himself at Johnny last night, and also maybe even crying a little.

Daniel groans, pressing his fingers into his eyes while the memory materializes. The words then come over, if you miss me come over ring in his ears, and something about the Mets. He was 50 years old. Sad, hungover, and desperate was a bad look at 50. He tries to think of some kind of Miyagi-ism that would make him feel better. All he can think of is the first time he ever got drunk and tried to sleep in at the dojo. Mr. Miyagi had woken him up by banging a saucepan against a wooden spoon, yelling UP! UP, DANIEL-SAN! WORLD NOT WAIT ON YOU! OPEN STORE, INVENTORY DAY!

Up, up, Daniel-san.

He walks out into the kitchen to find Sam and Robby giggling over the blender, Samantha stirring a large bowl of batter, directing Robby in the proper art of smoothie making.

“You need to put in ice,” she laughs, still stirring. “Ice, ice cold!”

“I don’t want a crunchy smoothie! Stick to your pancakes, LaRusso!” Robby waves her off with a wave of his pink, strawberry-covered spoon.

“Hey, mess makers!” Daniel calls, laughing, interrupting the spoon battle.
“Hey, Dad!” Sam chimes, setting the batter bowl down on the counter. “We ended up running by Starbucks- I got you a coffee.” She points across the kitchen to a beautiful white and green paper cup.

“Ohhh,” he groans, “you are the best daughter in the world. Thanks, Sammy.” Daniel makes a beeline for the coffee, diverting only to kiss her on the forehead.

“Mmm,” he says, after a fortifying sip. It tastes like gold. “You guys ready for class today? You got me the whole day.”

Sam nods, testing the heat on the stove. “Yeah, we already told the guys to meet at the dojo in an hour!”

“It’s gonna be a hot one,” Robby grimaces. “Like triple digits. Dunno what we can do in this heat.” Samantha frowns. “Well we can just train inside the dojo, right? In the air-conditioning?”

Daniel’s mind whirls. “Yeah. Something like that.”

***

Shochu-Geiko is great, and so is kon geiko, while it lasts. The kids are sweating and complaining, and then shivering and actually listening, and Demetri manages to block an attack. One of them, anyway. Daniel was really teaching and it was working - it was terrifying and thrilling and wonderful.

And that’s when the phone rings, and the day starts to fall apart.

Daniel arrives at North Hollywood to find the office door shut, the blinds down. He knocks lightly and opens the door slowly.

Amanda looks drawn, sitting behind the desk with Anoush seated across from her, mouth behind his hand. Daniel looks between them, and despite everything, he knows his wife well. She’s been crying.

“What’s going on?” Daniel says, sitting down carefully on the couch near the desk.

“We need to fix this,” Amanda sighs.

“It’s too late, I made my decision.” Anoush says to Amanda, then turns to Daniel. “This is a good opportunity for me, and it’s a direct path to a GM position-”

“We can do that now-” Daniel cuts in, looking at Amanda, “if it’s just the money-”

“I told him that,” she says, tightly.

“Look,” Daniel shakes his head, “I know I’ve been away with this karate stuff, we already talked about that. And you’re right. I’ll...I’ll shut it down, Anoush, you’re right, I’ve been an idiot, I’m an adult, with responsibilities, and I need to be here- so I’ll do that, alright? It’ll be the three of us again-”

“Daniel,” Anoush pinches his temples, “it’s not that. I just need to leave for my sake, alright?”
“Why?! We always said, the three of us, three amigos, you were the first W-4 employee, we always said you had to be a part of this, I don’t understand.”

“I want change.” Anoush swallows. “I need a change. That’s all.”

“We can have change here-” Daniel gestures. “Amanda wears all kinds of hats, she doesn’t need the GM title. It’s yours, we get you a bigger office, you can work whatever locations you want, hell if you want ‘em all except NoHo, let’s do it, let’s make it work-”

“I can’t-” Anoush covers his eyes. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Daniel. But this isn’t something we can negotiate-”

“Then what is it?!’ Daniel knows he sounds desperate, because he is. He is desperate. “What have we done wrong?! Why-”

“Daniel,” Amanda looks on the edge of tears again, forehead in one hand.

“What?!” he turns to her. “Are you giving up? We need him-”

“Dan- just stop.” Anoush’s voice cracks, and this is something else entirely. Anoush never calls him Dan, hasn’t called him that in years, not since they’d all first met.

Daniel licks his lips, trying to calm the air. “I just...I want to know why. If it’s not money, if it’s not the position...” he sighs, “I’ll stop, I’ll stop with the karate, I’ll be here -”

“You know maybe it’s not about you -” Anoush stands suddenly, shooting the words from his mouth like bullets, fast and harsh. “That’s your problem, Daniel. Everything is about you , and Amanda puts up with it, and maybe some things just have nothing to do with you, maybe.” Anoush gestures, face turning red, and Daniel sits in shock. “Maybe I can’t work with you guys anymore. Maybe I want something new. Maybe I want to work where the owners don’t bring their shit from home in with them. Maybe I don’t want to come to work and watch you under-appreciate your wife everyday, who is smart, and beautiful, and funny, and maybe I’m sick of feeling like that everyday, and maybe-”

“Anoush-” Amanda tries, her eyes are all wet, and the world starts to spin a little as Daniel catches up.

“Maybe I’m in love with her.” Anoush finishes, throwing his arms in the air. “Maybe,” he croaks, “Maybe I’ve been in love with her a long time. And I need a break. And I deserve a break. So....”

The room is silent, except for Anoush’s breathing and Amanda’s quiet crying.

“I’m sorry.” Anoush tips his head up. “I’m sorry...to both of you. But I need to get out. I didn’t want to go to Cole’s but my parents are in the Valley, and I need to be there for them, and he’s the only real alternative. I just....I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore.” He shakes his head, and heads for the door.

Anoush leaves them in the darkened, quiet office. Daniel collapses back into the couch, and Amanda pulls her tears back inward, breathing heavily.

“Did you know?” Daniel asks the ceiling, then turns to Amanda. He keeps his tone gentle, he knows this is a delicate line.

She sighs, leans back in her chair, and grabs a tissue from her desk.
"I can see it now," she addresses the tissue. "But, I never thought-" She sniffs, shaking her head.

"Are you okay?" he asks, instead of doing what he should. He can hear the words, in his head- *I slept with Johnny Lawrence. The night I drove him home, and I lied to you, and I slept with him. I cheated on you, my wife.*

She nods, spreading her long fingers flat on the desk. "I need to go talk to him. I think if I just talk to him...we can make it work. I’m not ready to let Cole have him yet." She meets his eye, blue and steady. "But I don’t think you should be there."

Daniel nods, wearily. "Alright."

Amanda stands, and pulls out a compact from the desk, checking her makeup. "The staff are probably freaking out. I need you to put on a face, alright?"

"Yeah. You’re right."

"You can close tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." She walks around the desk, leans down and kisses him, a quick peck on the lips. "Thanks for showing up, anyway. Even if he’s upset, it means something."

He nods. "You know where he’s gone?"

"Yeah," she grabs her purse. "I’ve had to drag him out of there before. He likes to sit at the bar and drink Brandy Alexanders," she snorts.

Daniel frowns, but she’s already half out the door. "I’ll let you know how it goes," she calls over one shoulder.

***

Daniel spends the rest of the day lying to John and Janine about where Anoush went, but thankfully they’re excited enough about working a shift with Daniel on the floor that they don’t ask too many questions. The afternoon slows down, and so Daniel coaches Janine on her cold-calling strategy. There are a couple of painful interactions, and she starts to get upset, but he manages to calm her down and the next round of calls, she actually gets two different leads to come in, customers pissed off enough with their experience at Cole’s that they’re willing to give LaRusso Auto a try. John then manages not to fuck up those leads, manages to get them in the box, and F&I actually sells an extended warranty or two. It’s incredible. John walks both customers up to Daniel, beaming, and Daniel gets to do his favorite part, what Jerry used to call ‘the kiss’, the little thank you and send off to an already happy customer. It’s great, and he can tell this growth in maturity is due in large part to Anoush’s mentorship.

It’s after 9:00, he’s closing up with John (they let Janine go at 8, she has a ‘hot date’, which they tease her about, but wish her luck), when Daniel feels his phone buzz from his jacket pocket, and realizes he hasn’t checked it for the past hour or three. He lets John out the front door, locking up, and pulls out his phone.
He’s got a missed call from Johnny and a text from Anthony, both around 6:30. Why would-

Oh. Oh fuck.

The text from Anthony is simple- hey dad you forgot me johnny says this makes me true cobra kai now

Which is eerily similar to the voicemail from Johnny, Daniel presses the phone between his chin and shoulder as he throws the keyless fob into the cupholder, and the audio switches seamlessly over to the car’s speakers, Johnny’s voice vibrating all around him as he pulls out of his dedicated parking space:

“Hey dumbass you forgot your kid! It’s fine, don’t freak out, we’re just hangin’ out at my place. Robby took one of those Uber things over, we’ll get dinner or something if I don’t hear from you. Ok bye.”

“Siri,” Daniel calls to his phone, “Call Johnny.” He pulls onto Victory Boulevard, and turns into the sunset.

The phone boops, and Daniel’s heart ratchets up over the dial tone resonating through the car, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. Finally, the connection clicks into place.

“Hey-”

“Hey, I am so sorry, I’m on Victory right now, I’ll be there in twenty five minutes-”

“Calm down, LaRusso. We’re just eating pizza and watching Bloodsport. It’s not a big deal.”

“I feel like an idiot. Is Anthony okay?”

“He’s eating pizza and watching Jean-Claude Van Damme.”

“He’s not pissed at me?”

“Why, ‘cause he didn’t get to sit at home by himself and play computer games for a couple of hours? Robby’s keeping him entertained, he’s fine.”

Daniel slows down at Van Nuys, at practically every red light on this stupid road. He should’ve swung North and taken 170 to the 405. He takes a few breaths, feeling awful and tired and worthless. He realizes he didn’t even call Amanda to see how it went with Anoush. He feels like a terrible father, a terrible husband.

“You still alive over there?”


Daniel can hear the boys in the background laughing, and the sound of Johnny breathing.

“I’ll unlock the door. Just come in when you get here.”

The line clicks closed, and Daniel keeps hitting red all the way to Reseda.
The door is unlocked, and Daniel walks into the apartment, lit only from the kitchen and the blue and red light from the TV. Johnny is at the breakfast table with a beer, watching Robby and Anthony bounce around the sofa, imitating Jean Claude and Bolo Yeung. Anthony has stacked all four pizza boxes up on the coffee table, his fist hovering over the pile. He yells, Dim Mak! and smashes his fist down.

“You idiot!” Robby howls, “You’re supposed to break the bottom one!”

Johnny quirks his eyebrows in greeting, then stands and walks to the fridge as Daniel shuts the door, locking it behind him out of habit.

“Hey guys,” he calls. He walks over to Anthony, and forces him into a hug. Anthony tries to wiggle out of it, in the middle of some kind of TV style karate chop. Daniel lets him go and pats Robby on the shoulder, now smiling up at him from the sofa.

“You know you could’ve called your sister, instead of eating all of Johnny’s pizza.”

“What’s there to do at home? This is more fun. Plus, Johnny gave me an extra hour of practice, and Miguel taught me how to do the elbow punch thing.”

“What?” Robby asks, incredulous. “Show me. He probably showed you wrong.”

“Yeah right- Cobra Kai for life!”

The boys proceed to push the couch back to practice the ‘elbow punch thing’. Daniel decides to ignore his son’s obviously imminent indoctrination into Cobra Kai. He’s too tired for this shit.

Daniel wanders back to the kitchen and sits heavily in the other chair, Johnny at the fridge.

“You want a beer?” he asks, bending over, and the warm yellow light from the cheap fridge does all kinds of things it shouldn’t. He’s wearing worn out jeans and a soft looking navy v-neck. He doesn’t have any shoes on, and Daniel finds himself staring a little too long at his feet poking out under the frayed denim.

Daniel nods minutely, swallowing down his guilt.

“Jesus-” Johnny sits down, slotting a Coors into a koozie and pushes it across the table. “Are you really beating yourself up for forgetting your son for a couple hours? Try 16 years-”

“Four hours.” Daniel swallows, pinching his temples. “It’s ten o’clock.”

“Oh- oh shit- are you about to cry?”

Daniel takes another drink, shaking his head, but his eyes are all watery. “Just gimme a minute. It’s been a shit day.”

“You hungry?”

Daniel stares glassily at the pizza. “No. Not really.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

Daniel thinks. “Samantha bought me coffee this morning.”
“So you’ve been running on caffeine and fumes for 12 hours—Jesus eat a slice of pizza—” he throws a slice on a paper plate and pushes it across the table.

“This isn’t real pizza, you know.”

“Don’t be such a snob.”

“You should try my pizza. I’ve got this stone pizza oven in the backyard—”

“Of course you do.”

“Pizza should be thin—and you should be able to taste the tomatoes, not like this canned ketchup crap they pass for sauce—”

“Uh huh.”

“With fresh mozzarella—cheese is supposed to be white, you melt it until the oil comes out, they always bake the shit out of it until it’s just this dry crust on top.”

Daniel takes a bite, nose wrinkling. “You know, and so thin, you can fold it in half. I could kill for somebody in this town who could do real pizza, you know. If a fat guy with a cart can do it in Newark, why can’t some Valley yuppie figure it out with a storefront.”

“LaRusso.”

“This town, thirty years I been waiting for decent pie, man.”

“LaRusso—”

“What?” Sharper than he’d meant to be.

“What happened today?”

Daniel thinks of telling him the whole story, with Amanda near tears and the fact that Daniel hadn’t heard from her since, hadn’t bothered to call himself, the fact that he can’t even find it in his guilt-wracked soul to feel jealous that his wife could very well be drunk on cognac at some hipster bar with Anoush. That he hadn’t even bothered to ask if she’d felt anything back. How self-centered did that make him? Self-centered enough to forget his own kid at karate class. Self-centered enough to cheat on his wife. It’s always about you, Daniel—he hears Anoush’s wrecked voice echo in his head.

Instead, he just says, “I lost Anoush. He went to Cole’s. I’m fucked.”

“What, that weiner Indian guy?”

Daniel sighs wearily. “His family’s from Iran.”

“Whatever. Why’d he leave?”

“Cole offered him more money.” It was partly true.

“Like you don’t have that. Just call him back with a better offer.”

"It's past that."

"It's never past the point of more mon—"
"Yeah it is. You don't--," Daniel tries to center himself, "I've been...I've blown him off several times. Too many times. I've been distracted, and he's sick of it all. Sick of me. He's done."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

An almost comfortable silence, and Daniel's eyes flick over to the boys, and he soaks up the familial sounds echoing around this small apartment in this moment. Laughter and arguing and sounds of ku-mi-te! ku-mi-te! in background from the kiddos. Credits music on the tv. Traffic muted but present outside.

"What's been distracting you?" Johnny's voice cuts through, softer than before.

"Hmmm?" Daniel sharply inhales since he'd unconsciously paused his breathing. He drags his eyes away from his laughing son, and there's Robby looking like he didn't want to run away anymore. Like he'd finally found his long way home.

Johnny repeats the question, but Daniel knows that his answer is sitting right in front of him. An answer that had been there since Johnny'd roared up to the beach on a dirt bike all those years ago with nothing but hatred in his blue eyes for Daniel. But his eyes didn't look like that now, not at all.

He takes another drink of beer and instead of continuing to look at Johnny, leans his head back until it rests against the solid wall behind him.

“I saw you twenty years ago,” the words just leave his mouth before he even realizes he was thinking them.

Johnny’s brow furrows in thought, “Where’d you see me? Twenty years ago I was probably--”

“Working for Bobby’s dad? I was selling used cars in Tarzana. Would have been ’94 or ’95? No, ’94 because I was pretty new and Jerry was still married at that point…”

“Jerry…” Johnny’s eyebrows suddenly went up, “Jerry Reed? I used to mow that prick’s lawn! His wife was always bitchin’ at me too, wouldn’t even let me in to use the bathroom like I was going to rape her or something.”

Daniel frowns in the way he seems to save for Johnny.

Johnny gestures in protest, “Oh believe me, she wasn’t exactly Boobs Bardeau!”

Daniel snorts with laughter, “Adrienne Barbeau? Johnny, your taste in women…”

“What, she was smokin’ hot! Plus, you know…”

There’s a beat, and Daniel meets Johnny’s sparkling blue gaze across the table. Sparkling jesus, and he’s not even kidding, they really do that.

“The boobs,” they both add, laughing.

Johnny leans back, stretching his long legs out, arms behind his head. “So you didn’t say hello?” he kind of winces, “Guess I can’t blame you.”

“I think I tried. Got pulled away by a paying customer probably. I just remember seeing this head of bright blonde strutting through my line of sight--”
Johnny jumps out of his position, leaning forward, elbows on knees, eyes dancing and his eyebrows quirk up. “I never strut, LaRusso.”

Daniel can feel himself smile, failing to play it cool, “Well, memory you know…”

Then Johnny sort of hangs his head, taking another drink. “No, I actually do remember that.”

“What?”

“I saw you that day in Tarzana.”

“What? Really?” Daniel had no idea.

“You’re hard to miss is all. I could hear you yakkin’ across the lot, fluffy hair, bad blazer. Yeah I remember. Didn’t think you’d be interested in, uh, in seeing me I guess.” Johnny looks down, and he’s pinked up a little, but it could be from the alcohol too.

Daniel’s voice gets softer, and he leans in a little bit, “I was gonna ask you out,” Daniel adds after a pause, “for a beer or something. Catch up. Heal old wounds, you know.”

Johnny kind of grimaces as he rolls his Coors between his hands. “I probably would have been a dick. I was pretty drunk.”

“That day?”

“That year.” And Johnny looks like he wants to crawl back into himself.

Daniel nods, trying to understand the pull to excess, to just wreck oneself, that Johnny had probably always had. Daniel wonders who he would have been, who he would have become, without Mr. Miyagi.

“S’okay, Johnny. You make being a dick kind of charming actually.” Daniel’s starting to feel his headache go away, the warmth of companionship easing over his frayed nerves.

Johnny cocks his head, narrowing his eyes in blue amusement. “Wish I could say the same, LaRusso, I tend to get my rent doubled when you feel like being an ass.”

Daniel feels a blush down his whole body. He deserved that. “I’m really sorry, John, that was uncalled for--”

But Johnny’s already on his feet. “Don’t sweat it, champ,” and his hand ruffles gently through Daniel’s hair before he can protest. “If we start apologizing to each other, we’ll be here all night.” And Johnny’s hand moves down to Daniel’s shoulder and squeezes, and Daniel sort of leans in against his old enemy’s hip, and maybe they both sink into the physical contact for just a minute before Johnny barks at the kids that “Danielle needs her beauty sleep,” and is wrangling Robby and Anthony out the door to the Audi just outside.

And Daniel’s almost safe but as he passes Johnny at the door he feels a warm hand between his shoulder blades.

“Hey. What are you doin’ Friday night?”

Johnny’s eyes dart around, like he’s talking about something a little dangerous. And maybe it was, if Daniel’s heart rate picking up is any indication.

“Nothin. Why?” he slouches in the door, and tries to be cool about it.
“Come over. Mets are playing the Dodgers.”

“I could probably get tickets to that game-” Daniel starts flipping through his mental catalog, who might owe him at the club.

Johnny wrinkles his nose. “Nah, I’m not buying overpriced beer and shitty hotdogs. Come over and make me some of your fancy pizza so I can see if there’s anything to your special princess recipe.”

Daniel’s thumb points to himself, “This princess will make you the best pizza pie you’ve ever tasted,” and Daniel is reminded that some things just sound better in your head than spoken out loud.

Johnny sort of frowns and shakes his head in pity at Daniel.

“Jesus, LaRusso, try not to be such a goddamned dork-”

“Fine, fine, I’ll have to clear it with Amanda.

“Oh, yeah? What’re you gonna tell her?”

Daniel rolls his lips between his teeth, shrugs. “The truth. That I’m watching the game with you. No big deal.”

Johnny crosses his arms, matching Daniel’s lean.

“Oh no big deal, huh? I thought you missed me?”

Daniels feels his face flame up. “I did,” he deflects, “up until right about now.”


Daniel doesn’t have a great answer to that, and so waves Johnny off, promising to see him Thursday for Anthony’s lesson.

The car ride home is quiet, Robby looking thoughtful as Receda melts away. “Dad was cool today. He seemed happier than usual.”

Daniel hums in agreement. “He’s glad to have you in his life, kiddo.”

“Thanks, Mr. L. For trying to get along. I think Dad needs friends too.”

“Everyone does, Robby. Life’s pretty...it can be really hard without good people in your life. You gotta hold on tight when you find them.”

Robby nods, and Daniel pictures Johnny standing in his lonely apartment, cleaning dishes and going to bed alone. He sees him in the seat next to him, almost a month ago, drunk and broken. He sees him collapsed on the asphalt against a car, tears down his hot cheeks as a nearby Miyagi brings Kreese to his knees. Daniel had made that mistake, he had looked his enemy right in the eye and nothing had ever been the same.

He finds Amanda tucked into their bed, fast asleep. A note on the kitchen counter reads,

*Left my phone at the bar, I’ll get it tomorrow. Anoush says he’ll think about it.*
Thanks guys! Leave us a review if you enjoyed and I'll keep these friday updates coming ;)  

Acknowledgment:  

Jimmy's sons, Josh, Jordan, and Jesse, are original characters created by InvisibleObserver13, who is currently working on a full-length fic about Jimmy, Jenny (a canon character mentioned by Jimmy in S2E6), and their kids Josh, Jordan, and Jesse.

She is also working on another fic centering on Jimmy's younger years, in a romantic relationship with a different original character named Julie (Johnny's little sister). Stayed tuned for that work, she has posted some one shots featuring Jimmy and Julie already, check out her profile to read about them.

InvisibleObserver13 (aka DreamBeyondtheFantasy on tumblr) created and owns these characters and I borrowed them with her express permission.

Thank you Dream!
Part II: The Middle - July

Chapter Summary

Green Eyed Thursday ; TGIF - Mike Piazza, Princess Pizza, and “the L-Word”

Soundtrack----> https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeBysrcUKQuPHEFI18zb4C2_WnD2pK5s

July 2018

Green-Eyed Thursday

The youth class is going well. After a month’s worth of classes (and Miguel and Aisha’s help), Johnny’s small quiver of seven students are starting to develop some coordination, and most of them can actually make it through twenty push-ups (not on their knuckles...but still). Plus, at $150 a head every month, they’re really helping cover the rent and beer.

Johnny is confident enough in his young class that he allows Miguel and Aisha to join Hawk and Tory at some stupid concert he doesn’t care enough about to remember the name to. He wishes later that he’d bothered to remember. So he could go grab their asses and drag them back to class, because apparently without a couple of assistants, the kids quickly peg that Johnny is vulnerable to attack, and decide to act like a bunch of assholes, but Johnny can’t just shout in their little faces or smack them around like the advanced class, because their stupid parents are hovering and laughing and literally drinking wine cooler about thirty feet away, standing in a loose gaggle of bleach blonde and yoga pants and Daniel LaRusso.

That’s right. Daniel LaRusso apparently doesn’t have anything better to do at 4:30 on a Thursday afternoon than stand around and watch Johnny teach. And flirt with the Encino moms. Or be flirted with, their purple enamel nails digging into his forearm, he’d even taken the blazer off, he was just in shirtsleeves, his little “casual car salesman” getup, seemingly oblivious to the she-wolves and cougars hanging off his elbow and his stupid jokes.

So Johnny’s a little distracted. And now the youngest, and the only girl in the class, is crying. All they’re doing is pairing off to practice punching, fists wrapped and everything. They were even punching the pads, not each other. Since there were seven of them, Johnny was paired off with the little one so she wouldn’t get pushed around as much.

“That’s wrong?” he asks, impatiently. Some of the moms are starting to look over. Thankfully, her mom wasn’t one of them, and wouldn’t arrive until the end of class.
“I, I-” she breaks off into tears, clutching her hand.

“Sensei, did you just kick Julia in the hand?!” LaRusso gapes from across the room. Anthony LaRusso, of course. The little shit.

“NO, I did not- shut it LaRusso, get back to work. And fix your stance, you look like a retard on roller skates.”

Some of the moms gasp. He’ll probably get an email later. Luckily, he doesn’t know how to check those, so Miguel will have to deal with it.

Johnny turns back to Julia, who is still sobbing, but by this time, LaRusso Senior has toed his shoes off to walk over, and Johnny’s both pissed off and relieved at the intervention.

Johnny tries for a last ditch effort before Daniel sticks his big fat nose in. “There’s no crying in Cobra Kai-” he hisses, grabbing her hand. “There’s nothing wrong, you probably just jammed your finger. You gotta shake it off-”

“She just wants a hug.” LaRusso stands there in his socks, hands on his hips.

Oh. Fuck no. “There are no hugs in Cobra Kai. Quit making my students soft-”

Daniel ignores Johnny, and kneels down in front of Julia. “What’s your name?” he asks all gentle and nice.

“Miss Nelson,” Johnny snaps.

Daniel sighs and looks up at Johnny, like a disapproving mother. “I meant what’s her real name?”

“Julia-” Julia sobs, clutching her little fist. She walks into Daniel’s arms, and he folds her into a hug. It is a little heart-wrenching. Just a little.

He pulls her back after a moment, smiling. “Nice to meet you, Julia. I’m Daniel. Can I see your hand to make sure it’s not hurt?”

“I already checked, it’s not hurt-” Johnny shifts uncomfortably. The Encino moms are looking at him with daggers. They’re regarding Daniel with a slightly more....predatory gaze.

Daniel ignores Johnny again, turning her little hand over a couple of times, peeking under the hand wraps. “Sensei Lawrence is right, looks like you just jammed your finger.” He pats her hand, and her sniffs slow. “No big deal. It just means you’re trying hard. Now. How did Sensei Lawrence tell you to make a fist?”

Julia folds her fingers tightly, correctly, looking up at Johnny. His heart squeezes a little.

“Yeah, that’s right! He taught you well. Okay, you wanna try again? Just keep that fist tight!”

She nods, looking worryingly at Johnny. He sighs and holds out the pad. “Try again,” he says, trying not to let his annoyance at Daniel bleed through. “Keep that stance wide...”

Her lip wobbles. It always does when he corrects her.

“That’s great, Julia.” Daniel interrupts. “Just punch when you’re ready.”

They don’t punch ‘when they’re ready’. Johnny tells them when to punch. But Julia’s little face is still red and wet and Johnny doesn’t really have the heart to enforce it.
She sniffs. She punches.

The smack of her fists on the pad is loud, it’s better than she’d done all class.

“Nice job!” Daniel laughs, “See, you did great! You’re a tough girl, it’s hard punching with a jammed finger, but it’ll get better. Okay? I promise.”

She smiles at Daniel, tears drying. He pats her shoulder and stands up, quirking his eyebrows at Johnny smugly.

“Sometimes they just need a little support. A little reassurance, you know?” He runs his tongue over his teeth, like he’s some kinda hot shot.

Johnny points back to the door, the pad still strapped to his hand. “Back to the peanut gallery, LaRusso. I don’t need your help-”

Daniel holds his hands up, shaking his head, still smiling. “Hey, it just looked like you could use a hand, that’s all-”

“I had it handled-”

He does that DeNiro face shrug thing. “Okay... ” and he’s such a little shit. “I’ll back off, if that’s how you want it-”

“Yeah, it’s how I want it,” Johnny nods, not sure that’s quite the truth, but he has his pride.

“You sure?” He smiles, all casual and cool.

“You wanna see me after class, LaRusso?” Johnny’s not really sure why he says this, but Daniel’s face lights up like Christmas come early, and he leans in, mouth close to Johnny’s ear.

“Am I in trouble, Sensei Lawrence?” he murmurs.

Jesus, he thinks. He didn’t know LaRusso had it in him. So Johnny responds with something smooth and witty and flirty. You know. Like,

“J-just get back over there. I have a class to teach.”

Johnny hasn’t stuttered once in his goddamn life. So starting now in the middle of a gay midlife crisis as a 50 year-old strip mall karate teacher is a greeeaaaaat start.

LaRusso just smiles over his shoulder, shaking his head, and grabs a bottle of Seagram’s from Naomi Harrison. He rejoins the peanut gallery, and Johnny has to shake his thoughts back to class.

He straightens up, pulling the pads off his hands. “CLASS, FALL IN!” The kids look momentarily startled, but they do as asked, a 3x2 block with Julia standing off to the side.

Johnny paces and calls, “Mr. LaRusso, Mr. Harrison, up front.” Anthony manages not to shoot his mouth off as he steps forward, but his eyes are full of that patented fuck you just cause look preprogrammed into his DNA.

“Fighting positions.” Johnny orders.

Harrison looks confused, and Anthony crosses his arms. “We need our pads-”

Johnny bends over, hands on his knees. “No pads, Mr. LaRusso. Bow.”
And instead of a mouthy protest, like Johnny is expecting, Anthony’s face lights up, eyes comically wide.

“Are we about to do real karate?”

“Yes, Mr. LaRusso.” And he adds, low and even, enjoying the scared look on Harrison’s face. “Now. Fighting positions.”

Anthony turns, bows, squares his stance, and raises his fists.

Johnny backs off, arm raised between them. “Fight!”

***

Of course, he knows it’s coming. The kids are outside pushing towels around with their hands, cleaning the mats, chattering excitedly, Anthony’s voice loudest of them all.

“What was that?” Hurricane Daniel whirls into the office just as Johnny’s about to crack open an ice cold can of sanity. The door slams shut behind him.

Johnny snorts, sitting down and taking a drink. “What, the karate? I know you’re probably not used to seeing that type of thing in your class.”

“Well I don’t like what I saw in my son today. It was overly aggressive, and besides that he wasn’t ready, his technique was sloppy.”

“Your son kicked ass today-”

“These kids are young, and they’re clearly not ready for sparring. You saw Julia, this is a youth class, you can’t treat them like adults-”

“The whole point is to build confidence, and to do that they’re going to have to face their fears and jump into the fight- even if they don’t feel ready. They don’t get better with hugs and kisses.”

Daniel shakes his head, but a little of the venom has gone out of his voice. “You’re such a dick, you know that?”

“Sit down. You’re just upset because Harrison’s mom made a fuss.”

“Well she has a right to be pissed, Anthony probably fractured her son’s nose-”

“He didn’t fracture his nose, and even if he did, it’ll heal, he’ll be fine.”

“Well I’m the one that’s gonna have to deal with the fallout-” Daniel sits on the edge of Johnny’s desk, one leg still planted on the floor and like, Johnny hadn’t even known that was a thing with him. It kind of pisses him off, why it was so hot.

“Yeah, I bet,” Johnny mutters behind his bottle. He knows he probably shouldn’t push it. But, you know. LaRusso.

LaRusso’s eyes narrow, ear cocking to the side, pretending like he hadn’t heard exactly what Johnny’d said. “What was that?”
Johnny sets his beer down, pulling his headband from his hair, wrapping it around his wrist. He leans back in his chair, and watches Daniel’s eyes drop down to follow his fingers.

“I’m just saying, judging by your behavior today, you probably wouldn’t mind a little alone time with her.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

“Oh, c’mon, she was *all* over you, and you were eating it up—”

“If you really think it was Naomi Harrison I was flirting with you’re dumber than I thought—”

“So you were flirting—” Johnny sits up in his chair, obliviously triumphant.

“What do you call this?” Daniel leans in closer.

Oh.

Johnny stops, glancing out the office window. Anthony is by himself, punching a bag. The other kids and parents have filtered out. Johnny has a couple of choices. He could do the responsible thing, downshift, get back onto steady ground. Or...

“Oh, *up*, LaRusso.” He stands, shoving LaRusso off the desk and into the far corner of the office, where you’d have to press your face against the glass and really angle your eyes over to see anything.

Johnny crowds him into the corner, and he hears Daniel’s breathing notch up, and Johnny feels his own heart pounding like a teenager. He calms himself down, and braces a hand on the wall behind LaRusso’s head.

“This is flirting to you?” he asks, roughly.

Daniel laughs, a little out of breath. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“You’re saying you weren’t looking at those Encino moms all class?”

Daniel shakes his head. “You’re a little distracting in that *gi*, you know that? They all want you.”

They’re really, very close right now.

“Just the moms?”

Johnny would say later that it’s *him* who strikes first, in true Cobra Kai fashion, since he’s the one who leans in for the kiss. But really, had you pressed for more, he would have admitted that Daniel was the daring one, because Daniel is the one who slips his hand under the fold of Johnny’s black *gi*, his warm, dry skin pressing into Johnny’s ribs.

“Oh, only anybody with eyes,” he murmurs.

It was, Johnny would admit, a pretty smooth line to follow a truly alpha move.

Johnny makes like a cobra, and strikes.

He grabs Daniel, both hands around his jaw, and catalogs the sensations one at a time, and all at once. He tastes as he remembers, with the tangy addition of strawberry daiquiri, and he is caught between the urge to push him back and laugh hysterically, and the need to just keep pulling him in, more and more.
Johnny’s ribs heave under Daniel’s fingers, and he almost expects (hopes) LaRusso’s other hand would find itself in a similar position. Instead, as their hearts and breathing slow down, Daniel runs his other hand up Johnny’s forearm and stops at his wrist, wrapping around so that his thumb was pressing in from underneath, between tendons and veins, digging under the headband to find Johnny’s pulse point.

LaRusso pulls back a little, and Johnny drops his free hand down to his waistband, fingers curling just inside so his knuckles press into the soft skin of LaRusso’s abdomen. Johnny feels the pulse in his wrist pushing back against Daniel’s thumb. It’s comforting, somehow. Grounding, and relaxing, and Johnny’s eyes feel heavy as they float in each other’s space for a few moments.

“That was really good,” LaRusso says dumbly.

“Yeah, no shit.” Johnny says, and kisses him again, feeling Daniel’s fingers tighten around his wrist.

“I should- I should probably go. Get Anthony.” Daniel mumbles between kisses.

“Yeah, probably,” Johnny says, and he’s just picked out a spot on LaRusso’s neck that might need attention when they both hear it, and Daniel freezes like a deer to a gunshot.

A dry, raspy laugh, some lower murmurings, and Anthony’s high-pitched laughter peppered in-between the sound of fists on a punching bag. Daniel cocks his head to the side, listening, and they both clock the voice about the same time.

“Shit-” Johnny says with resignation, stepping back with Daniel’s forceful shove, and he whirls out of the room as fast as he’d entered earlier.

Johnny braces himself, following Daniel out onto the dojo floor, where Kreese is standing over Anthony, smiling and presumably giving him pointers.


“Dad,” Anthony turns, startled. “He was just showing me how to-”

“NOW -” Anthony isn’t stupid, and Daniel’s voice brooks no argument, and he takes the keys from his father’s hands, throwing a confused look at Johnny before picking up his backpack and heading for the door.

Kreese says nothing, just crosses his arms over his chest, initiating a stare-down.

Daniel’s fists are clenched and he’s practically shaking with rage. Johnny approaches, hands out, like he was trying not to scare a wild animal. “Hey, c’mon, let’s just...calm down-”

This fails spectacularly, and Daniel turns on Johnny, seething. “DON’T- don’t tell me how to protect my son-” and it’s a little sad, how quickly this had all gone downhill. Just a minute ago Johnny was this close to biting a hickey into LaRusso’s neck, and he was almost sure LaRusso was going to let him.

“You said I wouldn’t have to worry about this-” Daniel points at Kreese, but his anger is all for Johnny.

And, you know, it was so stupid, this insane paranoia LaRusso had about Kreese, it wasn’t like he had ever really killed anybody, he hadn’t even caused permanent damage. So Johnny had a scary moment. Kreese wouldn’t have gone through with it, anyway. Miyagi had good timing, but it wasn’t like Kreese and the guys would have let him die. Bobby would have...anyway. It was all stupid. All
of it.

“You’re overreacting, LaRusso, just like you always do—”

Daniel shakes his head, working his jaw around in disbelief. “He’s still got you, Johnny, and you can’t even see it—”

This hits a sore spot, something Bobby had always said about blinders, a father figure gone wrong. But Bobby didn’t know shit about it, he’d had a normal life with normal parents and a doting father who supported him and... he’d never understood that some people had to do the best with what they were given.

So Johnny has to tighten his own fists, he fumes. “At least I’m not still freaking out about a tournament that happened 30 years ago.”

This seems to catch Daniel, he visibly jerks. “You think this is about the Tournament?”

Johnny shifts uncomfortably, feeling like he’s missed something. “What else would it be about?”

Daniel looks over at Kreese, who still has his arms crossed.

“Why don’t you ask your Sensei here about his friends, Terry and Mike? About what happened the year after you left Cobra Kai? Maybe he can explain it to you.”

“What are you talking about?” Johnny yells as Daniel takes off for the door, shoes all over the mat. The door jangles, and slams shut.

Johnny turns to Kreese, looks him in the eye. “What is he talking about?”

***

TGIF - Mike Piazza, Princess Pizza, and “the L-Word”

Daniel gets to NoHo early, propelled out of bed by the still churning anger over the near-miss with Kreese, and a fresh helping of guilt from his trip-up with Johnny, doubly awful, not just for the infidelity. If Daniel had been paying attention to his own kid, instead of his libido, he wouldn’t have left his son vulnerable, open to attack. It made him sick, thinking of Kreese in the same room with Anthony. Anthony, who had never known real pain, real sheer, mind-numbing terror. Daniel had so far protected him from all of that, and as far as he was concerned, it needed to stay that way.

Traffic on the floor is slow, but there’s plenty to keep him more than busy, and so it’s after lunch hour before he’s able to duck into the back office to check his phone. Nothing from Amanda (she was up to her ears at Sherman Oaks without Anoush. Thankfully, Jason was flying Woodland Hills like a goddamn airplane). There are, however, two missed calls from Johnny, and a voicemail. Daniel bites his lip, waffling, before pressing the play button and pressing the speaker to his ear.

Hey, man. Uh... just wondering if you’re planning on coming over for the game. Yesterday was weird... so. I asked Kreese about what you said, those guys, Terry and Mike. He didn’t say much so maybe you could fill me in. Make your princess pizza or- HEY- no, kid, bleed in the trashcan, not on
Here there were sounds of scuffling, breathing, sliding sounds, a trashcan over a tile floor, somebody snuffling into a roll of paper towels, and Daniel can see the phone still tipped between Johnny’s cheek and shoulder, the way nobody did anymore.

*Ok, shit- sorry, LaRusso. I gotta go- let me know if you’re coming over. First pitch is at two-what? you’re gonna be fine, just- yeah, just don’t be a pussy, it’s not bleeding that bad-

The message cuts off, and that’s where Janine finds him, grinning despite himself, phone still pressed to his ear.

“Good news, boss man?” She bounces on her black flats, whispy brown hair pulled into a bun. Her easy grin is more and more a common thing, coming out of her mousy shell. He thinks it was the right choice, pulling her out onto the floor from behind the front desk. She’s good at this, if only she’d gain a little confidence.

“Nah,” he says, shaking his head, and slips the phone back into his jacket. “Just...something funny from a friend.”

“Oh!” she nods approvingly. “Good. You could use a little fun. Hey, here are those invoices from the shop. Keith said you wanted to see them, he’s on break-”

“Great-” he flips through them, eyes a little glazed over.

“Hey, you should get out of here. You’ll be here all weekend, anyway.”

“Yeah, I dunno, with the sales event starting-”

“Tomorrow morning. It’s slow today, people are waiting to come in, it’ll be a circus the whole weekend-”

“Did Connor say if he could work?”

“Yep, he got a baby-sitter, so we get him both days. Robby did all the social posts, and scheduled some for tomorrow and Sunday. F&I is fully staffed, and the shop guys caught up on all the back tickets.”

Daniel straightens, surprised. “Really?”

“Take a breather before the weekend. John and I got this, Sensei Boss Man. You’ve trained us well-” she leans in with a wink, elbowing him playfully.

“Well, I-” he shrugs, “I did tell my friend I might watch the Mets game with him-”

“Do it! There’s your excuse- get outta here!”

“Allright, allright, you’ve convinced me-” he waves off her shoo-ing hands, and John comes over for backup, threatening to “karate fight” him out the door.

Daniel turns back to the doors, mind already whirling with the list he’d need to pick up at the grocery store. He already had some pizza dough tucked away in the freezer from a couple weeks ago.

Before he goes, he turns and points back to Janine, bent over the front desk.

“Hey,” he shouts, “I forgot to ask- how was your hot date Tuesday night??”
John bursts out laughing, doubled over. Janine grins, leaning back on the counter.

“He’s a Giants fan,” she laughs. “He showed up to dinner wearing a Bumgarner jersey—”

Daniel slaps his forehead, staggers back comically. “Lose that number, Janine!”

John pushes off the counter, still laughing, clicking a pen under his thumb rapidly, one of his idiosyncrasies.

“I told her,” he laughs, spinning the pen between his fingers. “I told her, those dating apps are no good—he’s been messaging her non-stop, the guy is obsessed!”

“Need me to kick his ass?” Daniel falls into a mock-stance. “I’ll do it Janine, just for you!”

Janine grabs the pen from John’s fingers and flings it across the room, Daniel has to duck to miss it, and runs for the door.

She yells after him, “Go on, get to your hot man-date!”

John howls, and Daniel skips out the door into the sunshine and fresh air.

***

LaRusso finally calls, right as Johnny gets back to the apartment. He answers, stepping out of the Challenger.

“I’m still pissed, you know,” he says. Johnny can hear people in the background, the jangling of carts and the soft high blip of checkout counters.

“Yeah, but you’re buying me princess pizza at the supermarket. I can hear.” Johnny snickers, leaning back on the hot metal of the car. “I bet you shop at Whole Foods—”

“What, that’s not—”

“You totally are, aren’t you?!?”

“It just so happens to be on the way to your place—”

“Yeah, sure, whatever Princess. Just hurry up or you’ll miss first pitch.”

“I’ll be there in an hour. I gotta stop at home and pick somethin’ up first.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that.”

“You’ll see.”

***

“Jesus Christ you are such a nerd.” Johnny exclaims, pulling open his apartment to see LaRusso
step out of his fancy black car, and pull a grocery bag from the back seat. He’s wearing jeans.

“What?!” he shifts the bag over to his hip, and pushes his sunglasses up into his hair, the sight of which hits Johnny in the chest.

“That’s like...” Johnny gestures, “...wearing the band t-shirt to the concert. Nobody does that.”

Daniel looks down at his pristine white, orange, and blue Mets Jersey, #31.

“What are you talking about, if we were at Dodger Stadium tons of people would be wearing jerseys.”

“Yeah, but not when you’re at home in front of the tv. Is that what you stopped at your house to get?!?”

“I had to get the pizza dough.”

“You couldn’t just make it here?!”

Daniel pushes the bag of groceries into Johnny’s chest. “No, idiot, I can’t just make it here - you have to do it ahead of time.”

“Fancy.” Johnny mutters, peeking down into the bag. “You didn’t get any sauce? I don’t have any...”

“Don’t be stupid. We’re making the sauce.”

Johnny lets out a low whistle, chuckling. “What are you, tryin’ to get in my pants, LaRusso?”

Daniel rolls his eyes, but his cheeks bloom red. “Right, like I’d even have to work that hard-”

“Oh. You’ll work hard-”

“Just- get inside, genius-”

And Johnny’s just turning, Daniel hot at his back, when he spots Carmen pull up. She steps out of her car, arms full of her own groceries, still in scrubs from her night shift. She looks pretty exhausted.

“Hey-” Johnny turns, practically in LaRusso’s arms, and shoves the grocery bag back. “Hang on a sec-”

“What?” Daniel gripes, but he takes the bag anyway.

Carmen’s got the trunk popped, reaching in and loading her arms up with bags.

“Hey, Carmen! Lemme help-”

“Oh, hey, Johnny- you don’t have to-”

“Nah, it’s okay.” He grabs the last few bags from the car, shuts the trunk, and takes a couple more from her hands.

He sees the circles under her eyes, her curly hair is pulled back tight, but a few strands have come loose, whispy around her face. She’s very, very pretty, even like this. They chat while she opens the door, and he follows her in, heaving the bags up on the counter, which was only a little bigger than
his own. This unit was a little newer, had been remodeled.

Miguel was out, but ya-ya was winking at Johnny from across the room, on the couch watching her soaps.

“Hey, um-” he clears his throat, trying to avoid granny’s leering. “I’m watchin’ the Dodgers game with LaRusso over there. He’s gonna make some kinda pizza. We’re just gonna hang out and drink beer. You maybe wanna come over for awhile?”

“Oh, ah-” she hesitates, wiping back her hair. Grandma mouths something off in Spanish, and Carmen answers her back, hands on her hips. Grandma says something else, finishing off her point with a kissy face at Johnny. He cringes.

“Ach-mama!” Carmen waves her hand at her mother.

“So....” Johnny taps his fingers on the counter.

“I don’t know, Johnny,” she sighs. “I need to make dinner later, the laundry is piling up-”


He puts on his best, charming smile.

***

“Don’t be a dick-” Johnny hisses, a few minutes later, standing back in the doorway to his own apartment. LaRusso wasn’t taking the news well. And Johnny knows, you know, having a guest over was kind of a turn-off when you were probably maybe about to have an illicit affair.

“- she lives with her mom and son, she could use a little break.”

And. Well. Johnny’s eye slides to the ring on LaRusso’s left hand. Despite the thrill of possibly banging your childhood karate rival (again), said childhood karate rival was married, with the whole package- house, wife, kids, career. Which meant that this whole thing was doomed anyway. So.

Might as well keep his options open.

“Well maybe I didn’t bring enough pizza for three people,” Daniel mutters.

Johnny tips his head, arching his eyebrows. “Really?”

Daniel grimaces, contrite. “No.”

“Quit acting like a jealous little girl, Danielle.”

“You know I hate that stupid nickname-”

“Well quit acting like it and I’ll stop calling you one-”

“Yeah, right-”
“Okay, just-” Johnny sighs, straightening, glancing across the way at Carmen’s door. “Just be nice. She won’t stay for the whole game, anyway. Women don’t have that kind of attention span.”

“Whatever.” Daniel shoulders past Johnny, still holding the bag of groceries, which is when Johnny sees the overnight bag, slung over one shoulder, bumping against his thigh as he pushes into the apartment.

“Wait- are you staying over?” Johnny does a double take outside. Still no Carmen. He shuts the door.

Daniel has his forearms buried in the grocery bag, pulling out all kinds of green and red stuff Johnny’s apartment has never seen. He opens the fridge to put some shit in, presumably, and scoffs (such a snob). He’s bent over at the waist, his head in the fridge, and Johnny drops his eyes, up, down.

LaRusso almost never wears jeans. He should wear them more often, apparently.

“Jesus, Johnny.” Daniel picks up an open package of salami, half-turning back around. “Do you know what this shit does to your colon?”

Johnny lifts his eyes, shaking his head. “What?”

Daniel does the tongue thing, and lifts himself up, an elbow on the open fridge door. His stupid Mets jersey hanging open over a white undershirt. “Really?”

Johnny steps closer, kicking the fridge door closed behind LaRusso. “Are you staying over?”

Daniel stands up straight, leaning back against the fridge. Everything was so close.

“I told Amanda if I drink too much, I might crash on your couch.”

“It’s not a very comfortable couch.” Johnny posts a hand up on the fridge, boxing him in.

“You’ve got a pretty big bed, though.” Daniel cocks his head to one side, and it was stupid, how sexy Johnny found it.

“Oh you remember that?” Johnny pulls in a breath, pulls himself in closer.

KNOCK KNOCK.

Quick raps on the door.

“Johnny?” Carmen calls, voice muffled from the outside. Johnny sighs heavily.

“Happy, hotshot?” Daniel asks, eyebrows high.

“We’re coming back to this,” Johnny points at him, backing towards the door.

LaRusso makes a ticking sound with his teeth, sucking in a breath, and goes back to messing with his shit on the counter. He opens a big tupperware container of white dough, and starts to shrug off his jersey.

“I dunno, Johnny,” he looks up, and Johnny’s hand pauses on the knob, frozen on the spot by those big brown eyes. “No guarantees.”

Johnny suppresses a growl. He opens the door to Carmen’s glowing smile, no longer in drab green
scrubs, but a white t-shirt and little yellow shorts.

“Hi,” she says warmly. “Thanks for inviting me, it’s so nice to get out.” She looks into the apartment, the game already up and playing. She calls over to the kitchen.

“Daniel, you sure I’m not interrupting your boy time?”

Johnny has to cough into his fist. *Boy time. Freaking women,* right?!

LaRusso puts on his car lot smile, and punches his fist into the ball of dough.

***

Carmen is curled onto one end of the couch, all long bronze legs. Johnny sticks to the other side, drinking in denim.

“Pi-azza,” she says with a serene smile, stretching out the sounds.

“What?” Daniel asks, pausing, dough curling over his fingertips. The game is playing, bright and cheery on the TV, and Daniel could admit to himself that instead of sitting in the only available spot (that dingy yellow recliner) he was hiding in the kitchen.

Not like it was a bad spot to watch the game. He had his beer on the counter, and the apartment was tiny, which meant you could see the tv from any spot, except the bathroom and bedroom down the hallway. So maybe he’s hiding, and maybe making the pizza right now didn’t make the most sense since it only took 15 minutes in a hot oven. It was almost... 3 o’clock.

But he could stretch this out.

Hopefully, Carmen would leave soon, and he wouldn’t have to sit in that stupid chair like the third wheel and pretend to enjoy himself.

She points, index finger extended to Daniel’s jersey, slung carefully over the back of the yellow recliner. “Your jersey. Who is Piah-zah?”

“Oh-” Daniel twists his neck self-consciously, hands covered in flour. “Mike Piazza. He’s just a player I like.”

Johnny scoffs into his beer, and Daniel ignores him, keeping his eyes pointedly on Carmen.

“He plays now?” she asks, glancing back at the TV.

“No, he left the Mets in ‘05, and retired a couple years later.”

“He played for the Dodgers, first.” Johnny says innocently, to the TV.

“Yeah, well nobody remembers that-” Daniel snaps.

“He had his best seasons there.”

“He was barely there-”
“They had him for six years, LaRusso—”

“Yeah, and like I said, nobody remembers that—” Daniel slaps the dough around his forearms a little forcefully. “I don’t see his jersey hanging up at Dodger Stadium—”

Johnny shakes his head, laughing into his beer. “I just think it’s funny, is all.”

“Yeah what’s so funny.”

“That your favorite player is a mouthy Italian from New Jersey? C’mon—”

Carmen pipes in, cutting off a retort from Johnny.

“They’re your favorite team, Daniel? The Mets?”

“Yeah.” Daniel presses his lips into a thin line, tamping his anger down, throwing a glare at Johnny.

“You’re from New York?”

“I’m from Jersey.” Daniel presses the dough flat and even, clearing his throat. “The Mets were my dad’s team. He was from Long Island.”

“And your dad, he likes Mike Piazza, too?”

“No, he-” Daniel focuses on the dough. It was almost ready to toss. “He died a long time before then.”

“Oh,” Carmen says, a little taken-aback. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago.” There’s an awkward pause, Charley Steiner’s voice calls over the speakers, Ball 2.

“He, um,” Daniel stares through the countertop. “We used to go to the games at Shea when I was little. But he got sick, and couldn’t do a whole lot. Had to quit his job. So I’d come home after school and we’d watch the games on TV together while mom was still at work. It was kinda like...the last father-son thing we could still do together.”

Ball 4, Dozier takes a walk.

Daniel’s mouth drops a little at the silent room. Johnny’s looking at him strangely and Carmen looks like she might cry. “Jesus,” he coughs, “I’m sorry- lighten’ it up, right?”

“You don’t have to apologize-” Carmen’s forehead is all crinkled, her voice is soft and low and sweet, and he sees what Johnny probably sees in her. Absolution, redemption, all wrapped up in a sexy sun-kissed package. “That was a really beautiful story of your father, Daniel. He would be proud of you, I’m sure.”

“Thanks,” he says, his own throat a little tight, trying not to look at Johnny. “Anyway, hey, it’s time to toss this puppy-”

He lifts the dough up and over his left knuckles, twists, and pushes up with his right palm, launching the dough into a twisting, spinning disc.

“Oh!” Carmen sighs in delight, and Daniel feels his chest warm a little with the attention.

He flips the dough up again, and catches it on his knuckles and forearms.
“Could you teach me?” Carmen nods, legs already uncrossing to stand.

Daniel ducks his chin, pursing his lips so he doesn’t smile. He’s never been able to help himself around a pretty girl.

***

Carmen leaves after 5 innings and a slice of pizza, just missing Cody Bellinger’s grand slam off Zach Wheeler, putting the Dodgers up 4-0. The Mets answer back at the bottom on the inning when Michael Conforto singles and José Bautista slugs a homer, but it’s not enough to crawl back, and the Dodgers cap off the win with a run in the ninth, 5-2.

Johnny doesn’t see the grand slam, and he doesn’t know the score, and Daniel won’t know about Brandon Nimmo’s superb diving catch to rob Justin Turner of his line drive to right field. As soon as Johnny shuts the door behind Carmen, flips the deadbolt over he feels LaRusso’s heat at his back.

“Johnny,” Daniel, voice breaking a little, and Johnny turns into it, foreheads and noses this close.

“Is this what you came over here for?” and Johnny’s heart is hammering, nobody does this to him, nobody else.

“Yeah,” Daniel says, and he grips the collar of Johnny’s flannel shirt between his fingers, soft and rough at the same time. “Yeah,” he echoes himself, a mantra, yesyesyesyesyes.

“You’re not gonna regret it?” Johnny thinks he reveals too much here, but he has to ask because his heart won’t take that kind of crap anymore, he’s too old for it, too bruised up and too damn tired.

Daniel hesitates, but he looks Johnny in the eyes, square in the eyes, because he’s not afraid of Johnny Lawrence, hasn’t been for years now.

“No” Daniel whispers, and he means it.

Back, back, back, back, and his steps sync up to the pounding of Johnny’s heart. Daniel steps back and he doesn’t look anywhere but Johnny, who’s walking right towards him, right with him. Back down the short hallway, back into the dark bedroom, back onto the bed, back thirty years and the damp wooden planks under Daniel’s shoulder blades and Daniel’s hot skin under Johnny’s fingers, the sound of water, little bursts of moonlight winking from the night waves.

“What are you waiting for?” Daniel breathes hot at the junction of Johnny’s neck, Johnny crawls up his chest, between his knees, and rests his forehead at Daniel’s shoulder. LaRusso’s white shirt and his jeans were on the floor, and he was miles of dark skin and hair and eyes, and heat, he was that too, like hot coals buried under skin.

“Nothing,” Johnny shakes his head, and Daniel pushes his fingers into his scalp

Daniel’s guilt melts away because the relief is total and there isn’t room for anything else, anything more complicated than the fit of their bodies and the soft heat of his lips. Another infidelity, another lie to the woman he had promised his life to- it would weigh heavy on him, later. But at this moment...she didn’t have much to do with it. Nothing did, and nobody did, but the two of them.
Johnny bypasses all words, all thoughts of the nature of this thing between them, it’s transience, that even though it’s been a long time coming, that it wasn’t long for this world. That this was not a lasting thing. He doesn’t think of any of that.

Johnny bites into his mouth, again and again, and Daniel soaks in the heavy, solid weight of him, sinks down into the mattress, pressing his toes down into the sheets and his chest up into Johnny’s. He feels grounded, and about a mile in the air at the same time, and it’s...it’s fucking great.

“Hey,” Daniel heaves, his neck and chest sweaty and salty under Johnny’s lips. “Where do you want me?”

“Here is good,” Johnny nods, pressing their foreheads together, and reaches down between them.

“Ohmygod-” Daniel groans, “Jesus, John, that’s-”

“I know,” Johnny breathes. “I’m gonna give you a hickey, now.”

“Yeah,” Daniel chokes out.

“Your wife...she’ll probably see it.” Johnny presses a bruising thumb into Daniel’s hip.

Johnny’s blue eyes catch all the low light in the room, and they glow like lamps in the dark, like light underwater.

“Just...” Daniel swallows.

Johnny dips down, licks and bites the shape of his mouth into Daniel’s skin, so that it will last, and last, and last....

“I missed you,” Johnny feels from Daniel’s throat.

Johnny heaves a sigh, keeping his nose tucked down, so that his eyelashes catch on the skin under Daniel’s ear.

“I know,” he says, and he knows LaRusso will translate it so that it reads right, the way it should have come out.

Me too, his heart calls.

***

Johnny leans into the fridge to grab two cold beers, sets them on the counter, closes the fridge door, and reaches up and over the top of the fridge to grab a heavy glass bottle.

The last time around he’d been drunk. Getting Daniel LaRusso off clear-eyed and clear-headed had been....great. Way better than last time, no blunt edges, no clumsy fumbling, no hazy imagery to sort through. Just the sharp, searing cut of him under Johnny’s chest and hands, pushy and needy and so, so hot.

This part, however, he could do without. The coming down, the cold wash of regret. He’d left Daniel in the shower to rinse off, promising, with a quick, ducked movement of his head- more beer and pizza. And so, Johnny uncaps the bottle of Four Roses, standing in the kitchen in his boxers, and
takes one, two, three- deep gulps.

He winces, ah!, his throat burning, and shakes his head clear. Now. Now he can do this.

Johnny grabs the cold cans in one hand, and the rest of the pizza piled on a plate in the other, and sets off for the bedroom.

He’s almost there, bracing himself for the inevitable welp, gotta go! Or, Amanda’s expecting me, or I just remembered, I have to go sharpen all these pencils, it’s really very important - when the bathroom door opens, revealing a cloud of steam and a wet LaRusso with nothing on but a towel around his waist and a toothbrush in his mouth, hair a gleaming black, spots of color high up on his cheeks.

Johnny stops, leans in the doorframe.

“You stickin’ around awhile?” he asks, as casually as humanly possible.

LaRusso spits out his toothpaste, rinses the brush, and sticks it back into a black, leather dopp kit on the counter.

“You should take a shower.”

Johnny shrugs, hands full. Daniel reaches out and grabs a beer, cracks it open and takes a drink. Johnny follows the beer from lips to throat.

“Uh...yeah. Probably.”

LaRusso seems to think on that, frowning, but then he does that smiling sideways eye-roll thing he’s always done, the thing Johnny remembers watching him do around Ali, from across the hallway of lockers, when Daniel was happy or amused. He’d never done it around Johnny before, like he wanted to laugh and roll his eyes at the same time.

“Johnny.” Daniel says, and puts his beer down. “Get over here. Put the pizza down.” He makes those c’mere fingers, beckoning Johnny over.

Johnny puts the pizza down.

“C’mere,” Daniel pulls him over by the waistband of his boxers, and Johnny stops thinking in full sentences.

“Get in the shower,” Daniel licks into his mouth.

“Mnhmm.” Johnny nods. “Yeah. Okay.” He gets his bearings back and pulls LaRusso’s stupid towel away and pushes him back into the shower, slamming the knob around to hot, and gets the fuck down to business.

By the time they get out, the pizza is soggy from the steam and the beer isn’t cold anymore.

“Shower beers,” Johnny laments, gripping the warm can and watching the gold liquid pour down the sink drain. “So stupid. We forgot about shower beers.”

Daniel does the sideways eye-roll thing again! And laughs, slapping Johnny on the ass on his way back to the bedroom.

And even though Johnny knows this won’t end well, that it can’t possibly- for now, at least, it’s going about as well as he could imagine.
It’s fun. Good, filthy, fun.

Robby taps out a message to Sam, presses Send, and steps out of the car. Mr. LaRusso had finally convinced him to drive the red Q7 around town. Samantha still laughed at his dedication to the speed-limit and caution around yellow lights, but he couldn't imagine how awful it would feel to wreck this car, this rolling symbol of trust, that Mr. LaRusso had bestowed. Robby was already guilt-ridden enough hiding his relationship with Sam from her father. He didn’t need to add “wrecking a car” to the list of shit that could potentially ruin his relationship with his mentor.

Robby cautiously walks up to his father’s apartment, keeping a close eye on the door to the apartment across. He really, really didn’t feel like running into Diaz today.

“Dad?” Robby called, knocking on the door. He could hear the TV, and the Challenger was still parked in its usual spot. He should be here. Slotting the copy of the key his dad had given him into the lock, Robby pushed the door open.

“Dad?” he calls again, to no answer.

The kitchen and living room were empty, and Robby scans the room. The Dodgers game was on, top of the ninth inning, Dodgers up 4-2.

The apartment looks mostly neat, except for three plates and a few cans of beer on the coffee table, and signs of cooking in the kitchen- dirty dishes in the sink. But the counter was wiped down, clean.

Three plates, he thinks. Dad, Carmen, Miguel? Maybe they were all over at the Diaz apartment. That would explain the Challenger still parked. He drums his fingers on the counter, thinking.

Robby’s fingers brush over an Audi key fob sitting on the countertop. He double checks, but the Q7 keys are still in his pocket. He picks the fob up, turning it over, identical to the one in his pocket. He’s pretty fucking sure Diaz doesn’t drive an Audi, or they wouldn’t be living in this part of town. Robby’s eyes travel further down the counter to a pair of familiar sunglasses, but that can’t be right...

Suddenly, the sound of low laughing floats through the air, down from the back hallway, somewhere behind a door. Robby strains his neck, walks softly down the hall. The bathroom door was wide open, and he can feel warm, damp air on his neck as he passes by.

The bedroom door is shut, he strains to hear, fist raised to knock gently on the door. He’s about to raise his voice, call out, when he hears another voice, a man’s, jarringly familiar, murmuring lowly, and his father’s dry chuckle following- separate, distinct.

Robby’s head jerks backwards, his fist frozen mid-air, voice caught in his throat.

He could just knock on the door, there shouldn’t be any reason not to. His dad was probably just watching a funny show on his laptop, or something. It wasn’t a big deal. He’d told Robby he could come over whenever, use the key like it was his own place. And anyway Johnny was terrible about checking his phone, so if Robby swung by to see if he wanted to go see that new Skyscraper movie with the Rock, it shouldn’t be a big deal. And it shouldn’t be a big deal to knock on his door, say hi, see what was up. They were family, again.
But he doesn’t want to.

Robby pulls back his hand. The voices behind the door stop, but he can make out a high, yawning creak of a cheap mattress.

He backs down the hallway, hurrying for the door, pulling it behind him with a quiet, snick.

He slides behind the wheel of the Q7, reverses, and pulls out of the lot, and only sees the black sedan as he’s leaving. He steps on the brakes, slowing to a stop, squeezing the steering wheel. He could swing around and check the plate.

He could do that.

But he doesn’t want to.

He drives back home, pulls Anthony out of his headphones and out the door, and takes him to the movies, buys him a large popcorn with extra butter and a Mountain Dew, all the things he thinks a good big brother might do, and doesn’t remember much about the movie, only that Anthony seemed happy afterwards, asked if Robby could give him some skating lessons at the park.

“I’m glad you’re a part of our family,” Anthony breathes, struggling to keep his balance, arms out like a bird, picking his brake foot up off the ground. He looks up, his brown eyes are his father’s.

“Me, too.” Robby nods, and the storm in his chest calms.

It would be okay. Everything would be fine. It was probably nothing. He was freaking out over nothing.

***

They sit side by side on the bed, shoulders touching with the computer on Johnny’s lap, and Daniel tells Johnny where to go to check the score and pull up the highlights. Daniel nearly snorts up his beer when he sees Johnny stabbing at each key with his index fingers extended. It’s almost six o’clock, but the blinds are closed and the room is mostly dim, light slashing across the floor in bright white streaks.

“Oh my god-” he says, reaching for the laptop. “Gimme that-”

“Cut it out-” Johnny slaps Daniel’s hands away, and continues his hunt for the t key.

“You’re too slow.”

Daniel lets out a frustrated breath, but he’s not really. Frustrated, that is. Johnny’s bed doesn’t have a headboard so they’ve propped up the pillows and they’re in their underwear sitting up on the bed, muscles loose and easy from sweat and endorphins. Daniel feels like a teenager, his worries pushed to the back of his brain just for one evening he thinks, then I’ll worry about it. Until then he can stare at Johnny’s hands pecking at the keyboard and his ankles crossed at the foot of the bed, laptop leaning just a little off balance on his uneven thighs.

“HA- yes!” Johnny pumps his fist in triumph, and Daniel leans over to read the line score, and groans when he sees Los Angeles in bold letters, eyes trailing over the 0’s up until the action-packed
“What happened?” he asks, pointing to the screen highlights, his other hand pushing hot into the side of Johnny’s thigh.

Johnny’s fingertip traces over the trackpad, and he clicks on a video, and they watch Cody Bellinger’s grand slam.

Johnny chuckles, all high and delighted, reveling in Daniel’s pain, he’s sure of it.

“Don’t look so surprised, LaRusso. You know how many games they’ve lost to the Dodgers? Out of the last ten?”

Daniel closes his eyes, head banging against the wall behind him. “Ten,” he groans. “Ten out of ten. But- I just thought-” he continues, looking over at Johnny’s bemused expression. “You know, we were due! Baseball is like that, you know. You can’t always rely on the numbers. Anything can happen in baseball.”

“You like that, don’t you.” Johnny shuts the laptop, throwing it carelessly on the bedside table, and he turns back to Daniel, all cautious blue eyes.

“What?” Daniel asks, a little dry-mouthed.

“The underdog thing.” Johnny nods. “You like cheering for the losers.”

“I just,” Daniel pauses, licking his lips. “I like the ones who know how to take a few hits, and still get back up again. Who keep after it, you know. The hungry ones.”

Johnny huffs, reaches for his beer. “So is that what this is about? You like a hot mess when you see one?”

Daniel pushes his wrist down, lowering the beer can down to his lap.

“Look, just cause-” he shakes his head, trying to get the words out in the right order. “I don’t like what I saw at the Tournament. But I...I don’t think you did either. I could see that. And I can see you’re trying now...and...I have to admit what I see in Aisha, and Miguel...it’s mostly good.”

Johnny smirks and Daniel holds up his hand. “Mostly- I still don’t like the Strike First, No Mercy bullshit. But I appreciate you’re keeping that away from the younger ones.”

“For now,” Johnny corrects, setting his beer back down, and he twists onto his side, pushing closer. “That’s a lesson for another day.”

“Why do they need to learn that, Johnny?” Daniel murmurs, Johnny’s arm coming up and over to cage him in. “Is the world so brutal?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Johnny presses his lips softly to the bruise he’d bitten into Daniel’s skin, earlier. “You know the answer to that.”

Daniel slides his fingers around Johnny’s jaw, dips down to face him. “What if they don’t have to strike at all?” Daniel raises his eyebrows, imploring. “What if it doesn’t have to come to that?”

Johnny lowers his head, pushing into Daniel’s chest and neck, and he just rests there, drops all his weight down, and they’re pressed together, top to tail. They breathe, Daniel matching up with the rise and fall of Johnny’s chest, imagining their hearts beating in sync, too.
“Did you think about it, all these years?” Daniel whispers into his hair, fingernails dragging over Johnny’s scalp and neck.

“Think about what.”

“You know. Us. That night at the lake. Susan’s party. If things had been different...”

There’s an awful silence, and Daniel knows this is a cruel question, that he has no right to ask about the past when it doesn’t matter, when there isn’t really a future to consider.

“Why does that even matter?” Johnny murmurs into his skin, and he’s right, isn’t he?

Daniel kisses his temple, and wraps his arms around him, bringing his knees up to fit in around him, like a cage, between the two of them and the rest of the world.

For tonight, anyway. At least for tonight.

***

They sleep, and finally Johnny raises his head from Daniel’s shoulder to peer through the dark at the alarm clock. The long slats of light are gone from between the blinds.

9:30pm

Daniel is awake, judging by the slow, gentle rake of nails from the nape of his neck and up into his scalp, keeping Johnny in a soft, sleepy lull. He sits up on his elbows, realizing Daniel must have pulled a blanket somehow up and over them, from somewhere. Johnny wonders muzzily where he would have gotten it. They’d been sitting on top of the covers earlier.

“Hey,” Daniel calls, softly, fingers pushing into Johnny’s hair now, front to back, pushing his fringe up. The fingers swipe down his jaw, and up and under his chin, and he feels a little like a cat. But not in a bad way.

“Get some sleep, tiger?”

Johnny has to bury his face between Daniel’s arm and his ribs to hide his reaction to that one. Just because he liked that kind of thing didn’t mean he had to admit it-

“Not enough.” he answers gruffly instead. He pulls his head back up, squinting blearily in the dark. “You?”

“Not really,” Daniel shakes his head, but Johnny can just make out the small smile and the fond look in his eyes, almost like he didn’t mind sitting there for two hours, petting Johnny’s head while he slept.

This was disturbing.

“Hey, I got something for you,” Johnny deflects, pushing up to reach over to the nightstand drawer, almost knocking Daniel’s watch and the laptop onto the floor. He pulls out a purple and gold Crown Royal bag, and tosses it onto LaRusso’s chest.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have.” Daniel snickers, pulling it up by the gold tassels.
“Open it, idiot.”

He does the side eye-roll thing again, trying to bite his cheek from smiling, Johnny can tell, and he tries to keep his heart from breaking into a cheery gallop.

*Cool it, he thinks, you’re acting like a fucking girl.*

Daniel pulls out the gold and green star, and Johnny can hear his breath stop for a minute, before he’s suddenly fumbling, one-handed for the lamp.


“Johnny, where-”

“Miguel’s the one who found it. He won’t tell me where he got it, but I’m pretty sure it was Hawk. Anyway, I would have bought a frame or something, but you’re probably so damn picky-”

Johnny’s talking into the blanket now, partly because it was still too bright, partly because he didn’t really want to face LaRusso’s hurt expression, because even though he’d found it, it was still Cobra Kai who did all that damage, all those broken things, all the ugliness, which meant it was *Johnny’s fault*-

He hears the sound of metal on wood, and suddenly his chin is being pulled up. Johnny rallies, pushing into the kiss.

“Thank you,” Daniel mumbles into his lips, “Johnny, thank you.”

And Johnny’s pretty into it, this frantic sort of ‘thank you’ kiss, and he’s mentally patting himself on the back for it, when he feels Daniel’s arm come up and under his right arm, in a tight over-hook, pinning it down and pushing up with his other, his hips snap up, and suddenly Johnny’s on his back, head thudding down into the mattress.

And *Ohmygod*, being surprise-flipped onto a bed by someone thirty pounds lighter than him was maybe the hottest thing that’s ever, *ever* happened to him. Which is probably saying something, at his age.

“Um,” he says.

LaRusso’s got him pinned, forearms planted over Johnny’s biceps, and it was actually starting to *hurt* a little, which was also sort of a turn-on.

“Don’t move, don’t fuckin’ move, you got that?” LaRusso says into his lips, and then he moves his hands down to Johnny’s ribs, and gives him a cocky little grin, eyebrow raised. He’s doing that thing, too, where his voice gets all Jersey-ish, but like, on purpose.

“Oh, God,” Johnny says, looking down his chest, and LaRusso just keeps sliding *down*.

“Nope,” Daniel replies, pulling Johnny’s boxers down his thighs, really popping the *p* sound at the end. “Just me. Relax and enjoy the ride, Johnny-boy.”

Johnny sighs and rests his head back, closing his eyes.

“Of course,” he manages to choke out a minute later, “you’re good at this.”

Of course, Daniel doesn’t reply. He was busy.
Johnny wouldn’t be able to say if he lasted 2 minutes or for 20, getting off for the third time in less than six hours was either matching or establishing a new record. If he’d done it before it certainly wasn’t this memorable, nothing like pulling LaRusso back up so he could jerk him off until he was slack and pliant, easy to kiss and wrap into his arms and turn the lights off and go immediately the fuck to sleep, not even giving enough of a shit to go shower, thinking laundry could wait, everything could wait, that this was too sweet and soft a moment to ruin with like, walking around and being alert and clean and shit.

Ok. So he does wipe them both down with his t-shirt and toss it across the room.

But besides that they’re both out like a light, by Johnny’s guess, around 10 or 10:30.

Johnny comes back to the world at god only knows what time, the deep, dark quiet part of the night when even Receda seems to fall silent. He wakes on his stomach, arms stretched out under his pillow, and he has to carefully disentangle himself from LaRusso’s arm. He’s a side-sleeper, apparently.

*I can work with that,* Johnny thinks on the way to the bathroom, and then has to stop himself, shake that ridiculous thought loose. He takes a piss with the lights off, and doesn’t flush the toilet, trying to keep the noise down.

He tries to crawl gingerly back into bed, but LaRusso is on his back, head tilted to the side, and Johnny’s pretty sure he’s awake now by the lighter sound of his breathing. He’s proven right, when he settles back under the sheets and feels Daniel hook an ankle around his calf, turn back onto his side, and press his nose into Johnny’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he whispers, a little sleep rough.

Johnny can just make out his silhouette, the orange parking lot security lights casting a low, bronze glow over his skin.

“Hey,” he says, breathing deep. “What time is it?”

“Almost 5.”

“You don’t have to piss?”

“I did earlier. You were out for the count.”

Johnny hums, fingers on his stomach, eyes closed, when he feels dry, soft fingers pick up his own, lace under and around. Daniel shifts closer, chest warm at Johnny’s shoulder.

“What time are you leaving?” Johnny mumbles.

“Pretty soon,” he breathes. “I’ll be at the dealership all weekend. Big sales event.”

“Sounds fun,” Johnny snorts, gently, still tired.

Daniel hums noncommittally, still playing with Johnny’s fingertips, picking them up with his own, tapping against Johnny’s chest.
Johnny clears his throat. “I didn’t get to ask you. About what you said at the dojo. Those guys, Mike and Terry.” He tips his head to the side, and his eyes are adjusted well enough to pick out all of Daniel’s features, his lips, his cheekbones.

“Kreese didn’t tell you anything?” The fan of dark eyelashes when he looks down.

“No. He said he didn’t know what you were talking about.”

Daniel’s eyes stay down, his features harden, mouth neutral, but his eyebrows dip in, forehead wrinkling.

“He’s lying.”

“I know. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Daniel’s mouth pulls to one side, he still isn’t looking at Johnny. He taps his fingers against Daniel’s, attempting a little acknowledgement, maybe try to pull him out of his head a little.

“You don’t have to explain it now,” Johnny says after a bit. His heart has started to pick up, because how bad could it fucking be, LaRusso was looking downright disturbed, and he still hasn’t said anything-

“It wasn’t.” Daniel stops, shakes his head into the pillow. “It’s hard to explain. I mean, nothing really bad...nothing horrible...I mean it...it wasn’t like anybody got raped or murdered or anything.” Daniel swallows, and Johnny at least lets out a little breath, sort of grateful and disturbed at the same time that Daniel had eliminated those two nightmarish possibilities. Because it didn’t sound like it was that far off, from his tone.

LaRusso breathes, and adjusts the arm under his pillow. “That whole year or so, you know, I had a hard time. Not just ‘cause of you and Cobra Kai. I mean don’t get me wrong, that sucked. But...it was like after that, after I won and everything was supposed to get better, it started feeling like everybody left me, one after another.

“There was the breakup with Ali, and then Mom got a job in Fresno. So I went to Okinawa with Mr. Miyagi and some stuff happened there with a girl, and I guess I thought she would come back with me, but...she didn’t. And it was just me and Mr. Miyagi. We came back after that summer, and things were turning around, Mom was gone again but we had the shop. You know, the tree shop. It was just him and me, and that was alright.

“And then the Tournament came up again, and you know, I knew I wasn’t ready, it was a miracle really, that I even beat you. But I thought if I could defend my title, you know, I’d feel really good about it, proud of myself. So I go to Mr. Miyagi, and I’m all amped up. And he just...he had no interest. He basically said it meant nothing, you know. The trophy. I know he didn’t mean it that way...but that’s how it felt.

“So I drop it but then some shit goes down, and there’s like...this psychopath- seriously, he made Dutch look like a Boy Scout- Mike Barnes. And he wants me to fight so he can take the title, or whatever. I won’t go into it but finally I agree to fight him, even though I know he’ll probably kill me, the guy is like...bigger than you were, I’m thinkin’ no freakin’ way was this guy under eighteen.

“So I’m pissed off. It was maybe the angriest I’ve ever felt...all the time, like walkin’ around with this monster in my chest. It felt like the world had it out for me, and the people in my life who shoulda been there for me were all...you know, off doin’ more important things. Mom has to take care of sick Uncle Louie, even though his kids shoulda been helping. Mr. Miyagi had to go fishing, or who
the fuck knows. I had no real friends from school, Kumiko was dancing in Tokyo, Ali was fucking some football player at college, you know, all these people who used to say ‘I love you, Daniel’, you know, none of them was there for me. Not one.

“And then this other guy, Terry, he just swoops in at the right time, right when I really needed somebody. And he’s nice to me, and he says he’s gonna help me out, train me up, and like...this huge weight is lifted off my shoulders. Like...finally somebody really gave a shit about me.”

Johnny can tell by the way Daniel holds his breath in, the way his fingers still, that this is where is all falls through. And Johnny knows something about that, the coming down of things, the way you kicked yourself for even hoping something good could happen, could come through for you.

“But it was all a big joke. Terry was just messin’ with me, and Kreese was in on it, they had this idea to screw with my head and get me all twisted up and forget everything Mr. Miyagi ever taught me, turn me against him just so Mike could beat the shit out of me and make Cobra Kai look good.

“It all turned out fine in the end. Mr. Miyagi came around and he helped me and somehow I won the match. But it didn’t feel anything close to good.

“And it shouldn’t be that big of a deal. So a couple of guys messed with me for a few months, and they had some stupid elaborate scheme to use me to promote their dojo. It was like...the dumbest plan. I shouldn’t still be mad about it.

“But it didn’t feel dumb...it felt like...I felt used. And manipulated. And I hate that feeling of not being in control....I don’t know why but it really messed me up for a long time.”

Daniel pauses, tips his head up from Johnny’s shoulder, looks up at him like...like something Johnny can’t really process or put words to right now, like that depressing Tom Petty song he sometimes listens to when he’s drunk, Hey baby, there's something in your eyes, Tryin' to say to me, That I'm gonna be alright if I believe in you, It's all I want to do.

“I can’t have my kid go through that. I trust you with him...but not Kreese.”

Johnny has to look away, back at the dark ceiling, struggling to find his bearings, which was more and more a constant thing around LaRusso these days. What was he supposed to say to something like that. “I’m sorry”, “Don’t worry I’ll get rid of him for you,” or, “I know, I know, but he was like a father to me”, or, “yeah, a fucked up father, but I think I actually deserve it.”

“Anyway,” Daniel tucks his head back down, “I’m sorry I freaked out on you. It was my fault I left him out there on his own.”

“He was only out there a couple minutes.” Johnny turns back to face him.

Daniel’s forehead wrinkles. “Yeah, I know, but-”

“You were distracted.” Johnny corrects, matter-of-factly.

His forehead smooths out, the wrinkles shift to the sides of his eyes and mouth now, playful lines.

“Yeah,” he says, and his eyes shine like water in the dark. “Whose fault was that?”

“I wanna know what you were doing at the dojo on a Thursday afternoon anyway? Whatever happened to ‘It’s tough to get there by 6’?”

“I wanted to see you in action.”
“What’d you think?”

“You’re good with them.”

“You’re better.” It slips out, and Johnny winces a little.

“Just with the crying girls.” Daniel grins, softly.

“Is that like a thing with you, LaRusso? I make a girl cry and you swoop in and steal her?”

“Maybe you’re the one I wanted to steal,” he leans in, pushing his fingers into Johnny’s hair again.

“Maybe it was just you.”

“Bullshit,” Johnny snorts, “You-” but LaRusso is apparently done with all the talking, has moved onto the part where he checks Johnny’s tonsils with his tongue. Which is fine.

LaRusso reaches over a minute later, leans an arm over Johnny’s ribs to the table and flips the alarm clock around.

“Yeah,” he pants, “we’ve got time,” and then proceeds to pull the drawer open like the snoop he is, rudely paw through the contents till he finds a small plastic bottle.

“What are you-”

“Would you fuck me? If I asked you to?” Daniel’s still kissing him, like he’s trying to avoid eye-contact, and this makes for pretty distracted, fuzzy thinking, but Johnny’s pretty fucking sure he heard what he thought he heard. Plus, there was now a bottle of lube pushed into his palm. So he’s pretty sure he heard right.

Nonetheless he needs a straight answer, so he pushes LaRusso back, just a couple of inches, just to get his breath and force him to look him in the eye.

“You serious?”

“Yeah,” he nods, panting, maybe a little nervous.

So...Johnny’s never done this. But. He’s pretty sure of the logistical basics.

“Now?” Johnny asks, already shifting around, pushing LaRusso down into the sheets.

“Yeah.” Daniel nods, running his hands down Johnny’s back.

“Okay,” Johnny says, ignoring the cool metallic kiss from the ring on Daniel’s left hand.

***

After, in the shower. It all goes to shit.

Johnny’s body is loose and buzzing from the wash of endorphins, and LaRusso’s still smiling, which means he hadn’t fucked it up yet. They’re laying on their backs on the sheets (Johnny’s thinking how
he probably should just throw them away or burn them instead of sneaking past Carmen or her mother to the laundromat) and LaRusso says how he’s gonna be late and instead of getting dressed and leaving immediately he pulls Johnny into the shower with him. There’s no way they can get off again so soon but it’s sort of nice, bumping shoulders with somebody under the warm wash and LaRusso scrubs playfully at his hair while he’s shampooing and runs a hand down Johnny’s back when it’s his turn under the water, and it’s just...nice is all, except for the parts when Johnny has to see that gold ring again every time LaRusso shuts his eyes to rub his hands over his face.

Johnny ducks under the water again to rinse some soap off his face. He feels LaRusso push close again, and press his forehead between Johnny’s shoulder blades. Johnny turns around, to either kiss him again or call him out for being a girl, or maybe both, but LaRusso’s already there, pulling him in.

“I don’t want to go,” he says, holding him close, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Take the day off,” Johnny teases, speaking into Daniel’s temple, knowing he won’t. “Tell ’em something better came up.”

Daniel sighs, letting out a shock of a breath. “I love you.”

A few seconds pass, and Johnny can feel the hot water running out, so he reaches back to shut it off, so they just stand there, dripping, and Johnny can hear the air-conditioning kick on.

“Oh, Jesus,” Johnny says. “Okay.”

“Shit.” Daniel covers his face, hair wet and dripping. “I dunno why I said that.”

“It’s fine.” Johnny says, even though it’s not. Because LaRusso doesn’t really ever say what he doesn’t mean, that was the whole point of him. He was loud and annoying and mouthy and a know-it-all, but he wasn’t a liar, he wasn’t a bullshitter. LaRusso didn’t need a sleeve to wear his heart on, it was visible all over his face.

“No, it’s. Yeah, it’s fine.” LaRusso pulls his hands away, already avoiding eye-contact. “I’ll figure it out.” He pushes the shower curtain back, grabs the nearest towel. “I really gotta go,” he says.

“Okay...” Johnny’s feet feel full of concrete. His hands feel heavy at his sides, and his head too light. He thinks he might pass out pretty soon.

LaRusso scrubs at his hair, and Johnny finally follows him back to the bedroom, where he’s picking at clothes and shoving them into his duffel bag. He’s back in a white shirt again, and then he’s buttoning his pants, and then he’s glancing under the bed, maybe looking for a sock.

“But, uh.” He finds the sock, shoves it on his foot, and shoulders into the living room, still not looking at Johnny, who is standing there uselessly with a towel around his waist, dripping onto the carpet.

He finally finds his shoes, kicked off to the side of the sofa. He toes them back on, bends to tie the laces, talking to the carpet. “We should probably cool it for awhile. Right?” He stands, and finally glances up at Johnny.

Johnny dips his head. “Right.”

Daniel nods, swings over to the counter to pick up his sunglasses and keys. “Okay, I’ll, uh...see you around. Tuesday, Anthony’s class, right?”
Johnny nods, but he’s already halfway out the door, and then he’s gone, the cheap door slamming shut.

***
Part II: The Middle - August

Chapter Summary

Saturday Night Fever Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 2018

One Month Later

Saturday Night Fever Dream

The Saturday morning workouts are mostly attended by Johnny’s most dedicated students (Miguel, for instance) and also the losers who had nothing better to do with their weekends- Anthony LaRusso for one, apparently. Also Johnny, because Johnny was the one who had come up with the idea, because he was tired of sitting alone in his empty apartment. Robby had been blowing him off lately, and of course the whole disaster with LaRusso was over, and he hadn’t yet pulled himself out of his sinkhole of self-pity to ask Carmen out like a normal person with a drop of self-respect. So. He spends the entire day at the dojo fucking around with Miguel and whoever else shows up.

It’s past two o’clock when the class breaks up and Johnny shuts the office door as soon as possible so he can get a pre-drive-home buzz on before he heads back to his apartment and the bottle of whiskey on top of his refrigerator. He’s cracking the first beer when Miguel slumps in without knocking and collapses into a chair, throwing his backpack across the room.

Miguel pushes his face into his fist, and sighs the respiratory equivalent of Charlie Brown.
Johnny looks over, feet propped up on the desk, and swallows down the first half of his beer.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” he asks, in an obligatory way.

Miguel slides his eyes over to Johnny’s beer can. “Can I have one of those?”

Johnny doesn’t even bother to think why not. He dips down in the fridge and pushes a cold one across the desk, and Miguel fumbles it open, only wrinkling his nose a little at the first drink. Amateur.

They sip in silence for a minute. Johnny cracks open can-number-two after launching the first soldier across the room, missing the trash can by a foot. Recycling did not exist in this dojo.

“I think Tory’s getting bored with me.” Miguel blinks, face once again smooshed into his fist. He still manages to take a drink that way, though, which is mildly impressive.

“Yeah. She’s probably tired of you moping around like a loser.”

“Yeah.”

Johnny sighs. “Whatever. You need to forget her.” It’s a little unclear if he means to say Samantha or Tory, but the mind-numbing apathy keeps him from clarifying for Miguel. Fuck it. Forget both of them.

“She and Hawk have sort of been...hanging out. I dunno.”

“Fuck ’em.” Johnny says, wisely. He moves on to number-three. “Let ‘em have each other. They’re both a little nuts, right.”

Miguel frowns, watching can-number-two arc across the room. “You should probably slow down on those, Sensei.”

“Uh huh,” Johnny says. “Still carrying that torch for LaRusso?” And it’s sort of a fucked up question, he knows.

Miguel sighs, eyes damp, pressing his forehead into the can. “I miss her so much.”

Johnny squeezes his eyes shut. “Jesus, kid.”

“I know-” Miguel leans back in the chair, clearly beating himself up. “Just...does it ever get better?”

“You get used to it,” he says. Which is a cowardly answer, because familiarity didn’t make it any better, didn’t really take the sting away, the fatigue and the disappointment.

More silence. Can-number-four comes out of the bullpen.

Miguel presses in the sides of his one, finished can, setting it gently on Johnny’s desk. “My mom had a date tonight. The guy cancelled on her.”

Johnny studies the condensation of can-number-four. He’s finally feeling that sweet, numb warmth crawling up and around his ears, and behind his eye sockets.

“I think she likes you.”

“What?” Johnny swivels his head around, blinking.
“My mom. You should ask her out.”

Before Johnny can muster an appropriate excuse, the door fans open again, and Anthony LaRusso shuffles in, dragging another chair to the desk and plopping down like an unwanted turtle. He sets his stupid little backpack down and sits there, breathing all heavy like a typical fatty, looking around the room with his big brown LaRusso eyes, his hair pulled back just like Robby’s.

“What’s up?” he chirps, oblivious.

Johnny dumps the rest of his beer down his throat, and chucks the can at Anthony’s head.

“OW-” Anthony ducks, rubbing his forehead.

“Out-” Johnny points to the door. “This is man talk.”

“What?” he says, shifting around in the chair, making himself at home. “I’m a man, too. Hey, can I have one of those?” He points to Miguel’s empty beer can, teetering on the desk.

Johnny thinks about it, briefly. Daniel would kill him if he gave his son alcohol. So the idea had some appeal.

“Fuck, no,” he finally decides, because Anthony was a spoiled brat, and Johnny felt that as long as he disappointed one LaRusso today, he could feel good about it. Plus, Anthony was the type of kid to go home and tattle to his mommy, and Johnny was way more intimidated by Amanda LaRusso than her scrawny dork of a husband.

“Fine. Whatever.” And instead of skedaddling, the kid struggles to bend down to his backpack, and pulls out a giant, purple can of Monster, and cracks it open before Johnny can rouse himself to swipe the can from his chubby fingers.

Anthony takes a drink, smacking his lips, and looks curiously around the room again. Miguel remains slumped into his hand. Johnny closes one eye and counts holes in the drop-tile ceiling.

Anthony snorts, gripping the purple can. “So who died?”

“Your sister won’t go out with me.” Miguel says without pretense, staring through the opposite wall.

Anthony nods, wisely. “She can be kind of a bitch.”

Miguel kind of squawks and Johnny hears Don’t call your sister a bitch in his head, in LaRusso’s voice, so he doesn’t say anything, and keeps staring at the ceiling.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think she’s having sex with Robby or anything.”

Johnny inhales about a half-can of beer down his throat, and comes up sputtering, slamming the can down on the desk, feet finding the floor. Miguel is either laughing into his hands, or crying.

“I think he might be gay,” Anthony nods. “Doesn’t seem like he’s trying very hard. Mostly he just sits in his room reading books about Japan and shit. He’s been acting pretty weird lately.” Anthony takes another sip, mulling over the purple liquid.

“Yeah,” he finishes. “I think he’s probably gay.”

“My son is not gay-” Johnny snaps, mopping beer off his lap with a dirty t-shirt he pulls from his desk drawer. “Just ‘cause your sister won’t put out-”
“Hey-” Miguel yelps, “Don’t talk about Sam like that-”

“I’m just saying,” Anthony holds his arms up, looking just like his dad, talking with his hands. “He was following her around like a puppy for forever, and all of the sudden they’re acting all weird around each other.”

“Weird, how?” Miguel leans forward, interrogation-style.

Anthony nods quickly, soaking up the audience. “Yeah, I mean, like they used to be all giggly and gross over dinner. But now, they just sit there picking at their food, not talking.” Anthony frowns. “Actually, everyone’s been kind of weird. Dad’s been ordering takeout a lot, instead of cooking. And mom mostly eats in front of her laptop. Which is great for me, since I usually get excused and I can just go play my game in my room. He even let me order *Chik-fil-A* the other night. It was really good.”

Anthony continues frowning over his inane little thoughts, and Johnny absorbs the relevant part. So LaRusso was playing the sad-sack, too...

“You guys like *Fortnite*?” Anthony looks around again, sipping his purple drink.

Miguel groans into his hands. Johnny doesn’t know what the fuck that is. He finishes mopping up the spilt beer, and chucks the damp t-shirt across the room alongside the empty cans by the trash, just as the door opens again.

“Robby-” Johnny straightens as Robby pushes the door open fully, holding it back with one foot, jangling a set of keys.

“Hey, Dad.” He stands stiffly, like he’s uncomfortable. He gives Miguel a brief, cursory glance, and his eyes land on the beer cans littered around the trash can. He gives a sad, heavy kind of sigh.

“C’mon, Anthony. Time to go.”

“We’re having a man talk. And I have to finish my Monster,” Anthony huffs.

“You can finish it in the car. Let’s go.”

“You’re not my dad,” Anthony snorts, and takes another drink. Robby rolls his jaw around, and then does the last thing Johnny expects, which is to grab another chair out of the stack against the wall and sit down, still sweaty in his workout clothes.

“Man talk? About what?” Robby actually looks a little amused, turning from Miguel, to Anthony, and finally to Johnny.

“Sa-” Anthony starts.

“Did you guys work out today?” Johnny asks loudly, over Anthony, glancing quickly over to see how Miguel was doing. His face was blank.

Robby slumps down, heaving another sigh, apparently either missing or ignoring Anthony. “Yeah. I guess. Right now it’s just me and Sam trying to teach the new guys from Mr. LaRusso’s notes.”

“Notes?” Johnny frowns.

“He’s been at the dealership 24/7. They’re short everywhere, so...no karate lessons.”

“Oh. Well that...” He means to say *sucks*, but. “…works, I guess.”
Anthony sips loudly on his energy drink.

Miguel shifts around and clears his throat. “You guys going to Moon’s party tonight?”

Johnny asks, “What party?” and is soundly ignored by both his student and son.

Robby finally, briefly- meets Miguel’s eyes. “Yeah. I guess. You coming with that Tory girl?”

Miguel nods into his lap. “Yeah. I guess. Hawk’ll probably come with us.”

Robby purses his lips. “Great. I’ll be sure to watch my back.”

Miguel groans, “I already said I was sorry about that-”

“I wasn’t talking about your cheap shot, idiot, I was talking about your little buddy, who dislocated it in the first place-”

“Well good luck waiting around for that apology.” Miguel grumbles, slumping back down in his chair. “He’s my friend, but he’s also kind of an asshole, if you haven’t noticed.”

This takes Robby aback, and it takes Johnny aback, too. It was obviously true, but Johnny hadn’t expected that kind of a peace offering from his best student.

“Kind of?” Robby snorts.

Miguel puffs out a humorless laugh, but doesn’t rise to the bait. “Yeah.”

“Ok. Well. Whatever. I guess we’ll see you there.” Robby stands, and waves Anthony up. “’C’mon. Finish your drink. We gotta go. I’m supposed to get you dinner.

Anthony must be bored and hungry enough to comply, and he scoots off his seat, tossing his can into the trash. “Hey, can I come to the party?” he asks, looking up at Robby, and they look like brothers, with their matching hair. It makes Johnny’s chest hurt a little. Probably just gas from the beer.

“NO- ” Miguel and Robby speak in tandem, and Johnny pulls a smile.

Anthony grimaces, but seems to know he’s lost the battle. “Hey,” he says, turning back to Johnny in the doorway. “Are we still gonna practice kicks tomorrow? Noon?”

Johnny winces, but nods. He’d almost forgotten the promise, Anthony wanted a leg up on the rest of the class, and Johnny wouldn’t have to spend his Sunday sad and alone, so. It wasn’t such a bad deal. He’d show up a couple beers deep to take the edge off and get through it all right.

“Sure, kid. See you tomorrow.” He waves the two of them off, Robby’s hand insistent on Anthony’s shoulder.

They leave, his son and Daniel’s son, and Johnny and Miguel sit in silence before Miguel walks over to the trash can, picks up the discarded cans from the floor and tosses them. He wrinkles his nose, picking up the shirt with two fingers.

“You could still just wash this, I guess.”

Johnny stands, grabs his own duffel bag from the corner, and slaps Miguel on the shoulder.

“Screw it. It was old and worn out anyway.”
“Doesn’t mean it’s trash-”

Johnny just shakes his head, and pushes Miguel out of the office.

“Let’s go home. Maybe I’ll see if your mom wants to go get some tacos.”

***

One month after Daniel cheats on his wife for the last time, a month after he opens his mouth and drops his heart out on the floor of Johnny Lawrence’s shower, he’s still not sure this is something he can recover from.

Most of the days go by in a blur, as many hours as possible spent dedicated to running the business and making sure that Amanda isn’t having to carry any of his weight, or the extra left behind after Anoush’s departure. He’s all but given up on the dojo, not even giving Robby or Sam the courtesy of ending it cleanly. Instead, he hands them the notebooks full of lessons he’d started years ago, first with Mr. Miyagi’s help, shut up for years, and finally filled-in over several sleepless nights after the Tournament once he’d decided to re-open the dojo for real.

And now it was ending, one cancelled lesson at a time.

He knows that he’s a shell of the man Mr. Miyagi would have hoped to see. He’s a liar and an adulterer and a failure of a teacher. He’s a mess, and the worst part is, the selfish unredeemable part of it all is that still. Still. All he can think about is Johnny.

But he finds, if he keeps to the sales floor ten to twelve hours a day, if he keeps moving - he doesn’t have so much time to think about anything other than the customer in front of him, this sale, the next one, all of these stacked up to build increasing pressure towards the end of the fiscal year.

It’s just when he stops. When he has to go home. At red lights and all through quiet, dark nights. All he can do is sift through images in his head, and he can’t tell anybody about it, because the only people he cares about in this world are the ones who would be most hurt by what he’s done.

He’s a total piece of shit, is what he is.

And of course, after round and round of self-pity, all he can think of is what Anoush had said, and it was true enough- That’s your problem, Daniel. Everything is about you. He knows what the real solution is- either tell Amanda and deal with the fallout- or stop thinking about it, stop feeling sorry for himself, and dedicate himself to being a better husband and father.

Stop moping around your office after close, staring out the window and at your wedding ring, thinking about Johnny Lawrence’s face when you blurted out you loved him and he said, ‘Jesus, okay.’ Jesus okay.

Really, in retrospect, it had been the best possible way to extricate himself from the situation. He’d scared Johnny off and made a fool of himself, which meant that nobody was calling anybody on the phone at night, or texting, or doing any messy breakup-adjacent type stuff. Daniel had humiliated himself enough for the both of them. Jesus was right, he loses his gay-virginity and ten minutes later he’s declaring his love?! It was pathetic.
So he’s a total piece of shit pathetic (gay) loser, is what he is.

And self-centered to boot, or he wouldn’t be sitting in a dark office by himself wallowing in these sad, pathetic thoughts. He’d be doing something. You know, productive, or picking his son up from karate practice instead of pawning him off to Robby so that he didn’t have to face Johnny-

A soft rapping on his door pulls him back, Janine peeks her shoulder around the opening, hand wrapped around the knob. “Hey, Boss man. You got a minute?”

“Hey, yeah-” he says, pushing himself straight in his chair. “C’mon in, I’m just, uh-” Daniel looks around his desk for something he could have been doing besides moping.

Janine shuts the door behind her, lays a hand on the back of the chair in front of the desk. “This an okay time?”

“Yeah, you know my door is always open, even when-”

“Even when it’s shut.” She sits, lacing her fingers in her lap, smiling warmly. “Yeah, I know, boss.”

He nods, spreading his fingers out over the dark wood of the desk.

“I emailed the numbers on over. It was a good week.”

Daniel swooshes the mouse around, waking the monitor up, and clicks over to his email. “Oh, yeah-great. Man, you know, we’re catchin’ up over here, these are like Sherman Oaks numbers-”

Janine leans forward, grinning. “Look at Donny’s number-” she points to a line in the spreadsheet.

Donny was a new hire, young kid who’d dropped out of college. He showed up to work early, when John, Janine, or Daniel were opening the doors, he wore cheap suits that were steamed and pressed every morning, neat ties, and polished shoes. He carried himself with a nervous energy, walked around the floor with stiff legs like he had to stop himself from running over to the customer every time they walked in the door.

“No, shit-” Daniel can’t help the slow smile, eyes on the screen. “Look at Wednesday, he sold three cars?”

“He’s gonna be a superstar.” Janine sits back again, satisfied. “You were right to take a chance on him. He would’ve been wasted at an Independent.”

“This is awesome. Nice work. All you guys.”

Janine points a thumb back out the door. “We’re all headed to the bar, some of the shop guys are coming, too. You should come with-”

“Nah, I’m-” Daniel thinks about the house, Sam and Robby were probably out, but Anthony was maybe around, and maybe they could do something together. “I better get home, you know. I feel like I’ve barely seen Amanda.”

Janine nods, rubbing her thumbs together in her lap. “You sure?”

“Yeah, you guys have fun, I can lock up.”

Janine nods again, but she doesn’t stand to leave, she looks nervous in a pained way, like she wants to say something.
“Are you, uh-” she stammers, a little uncharacteristic for her these days. “Are you okay?” She finally looks up, brow wrinkled in concern over her light brown eyes.

“It’s just-” she pushes forward, over Daniel’s stunned expression. “It seems like lately you’re not yourself. And we’re...we all know you’re working so hard to make this team work, and we’re younger, and less experienced, and we know what a big deal it is to have the owner, like, training the sales people-”

“Janine-”

“-and we know it was tough for you losing Anoush to Cole. And...anyway this month you’ve just seemed really down, and we just want to make sure everything’s okay, and John and I think maybe you should take a vacation, or something, you know, you’ve trained us up and we’d really be okay, I think we’d be great, actually-”

“I know you would-”

“-and the point, is, boss, that we want you to know that we appreciate what you’re doing, and we’re just worried about you is all. You know. We want to make sure everything’s okay.”

Janine finishes abruptly, a little red-faced, twisting her fingers in her lap.

Daniel opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, like a fish, trying to form the right words.

“Everything is okay.” Daniel says carefully, hands calming the air, hoping Janine’s tears were only on the edge-of, and not imminent. “Everything is great, and you guys...have been doing such a great job that it really takes a lot of stress off my shoulders, Janine. The numbers are good, we’re viable-”

"No-” she says, interrupting, looking even closer to tears. “We’re not worried about the branch, Daniel.” She never calls him Daniel, only Boss, or Bossman, a term Daniel had taken as a sweet, respectful sort of endearment. “We’re worried about you.”

Daniel’s heart sinks, because he knows he’s failed to keep his own weaknesses and insecurities from his employees, failed to be strong for them, to be their rock- which is a role Daniel has not only always taken seriously, but it's the one he hasn’t gotten to really dig his fingers into for a long time. Managing North Hollywood has given that back to him, in a way he hasn’t been able to do for years, not since they had the one, young location, just he and Amanda and Anoush running the show.

He likes building a working team, and he likes being the leader, the paternal caregiver of the bunch, he likes building morale and giving out sober lessons as well as high-fives, watching his people growing and flourishing. He actually likes it way better than selling cars or managing inventory and profit, and especially the marketing and advertising.

He likes people. He likes coming through for them, showing them how strong they are, how good they are, what they were capable of, as salespeople as well as well-rounded adults. Point of fact, he’s way better at it with his employees than he is with his actual kids. He’s a better boss than father, and he’s a much better coworker than he is a husband.

But the way Janine is looking at him, it means he failed in this, too. They can see it. That he’s falling to pieces. His work refuge is fucked.

“I’m fine, Janine,” he says, forcing a smile, trying to make it soft and genuine, trying to keep his voice from sounding too wrecked. “Thank you for checking in. You’re right that’s it’s been a little rough without Anoush, since it means Amanda and I don’t get to see each other as often. But we’re doing okay, and I think pretty soon I’ll be letting you two steer the ship around here. So I can go
Janine sniffs, and nods, seemingly appeased. “Alright. Well...sometime you should come out and have a drink with us. Before you leave us and go back to all that owner stuff.” She stands, and smiles, and puts a hand on the door.

He lets her out after more thank yous and reassurances, and calls the bar he knows they’re going to and gives his credit card number to the bartender and buys the first round.

He locks up and sits in the car before picking up the phone. He trains the exhaustion from his voice, remembers Jerry used to tell him, *smile when you talk on the phone Danny, the customers can hear the smile.*

He bites his lip, and smiles, and doesn’t think about Johnny Lawrence.

“Hey,” he says, the line clicking open. “You wanna go out on a date with me tonight?”

Amanda smiles into the other end of the line, and he can hear it.

***

Amanda’s hand is warm and soft in his own as she pulls him through a maze of tables, led into the spacious back room of the restaurant by the hostess. It’s Saturday night, Salsa Night- something they used to do together back when things were normal and whole and understandable. He clings to her now, because she is that, too. Normal, and whole, and understandable.

Daniel sees him before he is seen- the blue eyes flick up and over Carmen’s shoulder and stop Daniel nearly in his tracks, his arm anchoring Amanda’s forward movement back to a jerky stop.

Daniel can hear the hostess, something about *last table, we’re all booked up, and seats at the bar* but he’s useless, heart pounding erratically in shock, the cavity in his chest filling up with everything in the room between them- the heat of humiliation, embarrassment. Anger that the normaley, the shelter of a date with his wife where he could forget everything that was wrong with his life, that this was now shattered. The impossible awful ache of desire. The quiet, and tired, and relentless call of his heart- *yes, I want you, yes, yes, yes-*

No.

“Daniel- ” Amanda and her sea eyes. She was addressing him. Expecting something. Her expression was both annoyed, and worried. She turns, earrings swinging, down to Johnny and Carmen, and back up to Daniel, with a pressing expression. “Can we sit down?”

He’s missed something, he thinks a conversation has already happened. Johnny has his elbows on the table, fingers folded together, and he isn’t looking at Daniel. He feels Amanda’s hand turn over in his own, and he automatically squeezes, but she twists her fingers free, sitting down at the booth beside Johnny.

Daniel swallows, pressing the cloying smog of feelings down, down.

He thinks he manages a hello to Carmen, and a *hey* to Johnny after an obvious, awkward pause. Carmen is radiant, glowing in the soft light of the restaurant, her skin is like warm caramel, and her
dress and her hair float around her, gauzy and gossamer.

Carmen and Amanda chat, voices like music, and Daniel stares at the menu and bites the skin of his cheek between his back teeth, and tries to focus on the pain, and breathe in and out. Breath as life, as energy, as a whole universe large and ineffable and ignorant of the pained hearts of man.

He gets through the drink order before he has to run.

***

The door swings open on hinges that need grease, and Johnny finds LaRusso bent over one of the sinks, elbows resting on the porcelain edges, fingers wet and pressed into the skin of his face. The water shuts off on its own, one of those timed faucets that rations water like a damn Nazi, that leaves your fingers cold and soapy. He hears Johnny come in and pulls his hands from his face and rests them on the sink, only looking up briefly in the mirror. He hangs his head and closes his eyes like he wants Johnny to just disappear, dissolve away into thin air. And that would be easier, wouldn’t it?

Johnny clears his throat and crosses his hands over his chest, leans awkwardly back against the paper towel/trash can combo thing.

“You good?” Johnny thinks his voice sounds pretty normal, considering.

Daniel straightens, scoffs, but doesn't take his hands off the sink. Doesn’t face Johnny.

“I’m fine. I just needed a minute. You can go back out there and tell them I'm fine.”

“You can go back out there and tell them yourself. I'm not your errand boy.”

“Then is there a reason you followed me in here?”

LaRusso finally turns around, his face is still wet, and he looks tired, and pale, his voice is strained and Johnny knows he’s hanging by a thread.

Johnny pushes off the trash can, steels his voice, because yes, there was a good fucking reason.

“Can you handle this?”

“Handle what?”

Johnny’s starting to see him now, exactly what he’d been looking for, that side of LaRusso that came out so easily, with just a little taunt, a little challenge, a little push.

“Getting through dinner without humiliating us both and ruining your marriage.” Johnny sets his jaw, trying to keep it together. He had to get LaRusso back to normal, back to a place they could survive this god-awful restaurant for another hour, maybe two.

“Oh, don’t worry, Johnny,” LaRusso scoffs and reaches past him, grabbing a few paper towels to wipe his face and hands down. “I’m not gonna cock-block you and your hot date.”

“Don’t be such a dick.”

Daniel throws the paper towels away, turning his full attention to Johnny. “So is this like a thing with
you? Goin’ out with your students’ parents?”

“I never went out with you, if that’s what you’re trying to say-”

“No you just fucked me and-”

“I’m not the one who left.” Johnny doesn’t realize he practically shouts this declaration until the ringing silence afterwards. Somebody with no face walks in the door, past Johnny’s periphery, everything else besides Daniel’s tight, tortured expression fades into the background.

“And maybe the fact she doesn’t have a ring on her finger makes it a little easier, you know, I- I deserve that.”

Daniel’s face crumples, and he has to hide behind his fingers again.

“I’m such...” Daniel squeezes his eyes shut, his voice sounds awful - “I’m such a fucking asshole, I-” he heaves a breath.

“It’s fine,” Johnny lies, nothing is fine right now, and his fingers itch to reach out to him.

“I hate this, and I hate myself- and you’re right, you deserve to move on, and I just, I can’t-”

Johnny’s eyes flick over to the handicap stall, and he thinks about pushing LaRusso backwards into it, slamming the door shut and wrapping his arms around him, holding him, feeling his arms and his spine through his shirt, and smelling his aftershave and probably he’d cry into Johnny’s sleeve like a girl and get Johnny’s shirt wet and then inevitably they’d make out and if it went any further-

But that was...well. There wasn’t any use in that kind of talk.

Johnny takes a long breath, pulling himself together. “You need to pull it together, man.” And he might be talking to himself. “You can’t go back in there lookin’ like that.”

LaRusso nods, and hadn’t actually gone into full tears mode, just threatening with those wide, brown pools, tired bruises under his eyes. He pulls in slow, shaky breaths through his nose, out through his mouth.

“Yeah, just...do your magic Miyagi hippy breathing.”

Daniel shoots out a laugh, and looks up at Johnny so affectionately, eyes still watery, laugh lines cracking open, that Johnny almost loses his goddamn mind right then and there. I want to keep you, he thinks, wild heart beating, and shuts the insane thought down, down.

“And ooohhh no, they couldn’t go there, not with everything here still heavy between them and Carmen and Amanda outside, wondering what the hell was taking so long, and it wasn’t gonna work, Johnny wouldn’t be able to hold it all together if Daniel said it again.

“It doesn’t matter, Daniel.” He snaps, harshly, and Daniel’s eyes shutter closed at the sound of his name on Johnny’s lips, like it was a sign of how serious he was. He thinks of Daniel as Daniel all the time in his head, but it is odd, coming out over his tongue as something other than ‘LaRusso’.

“You’re gonna kill yourself like this,” he finishes.

“I know, I know. But I-”
“Stop. You can’t. Just...cut it out.” Johnny’s stricken, he’s begging him with his eyes now, to just stop, and for once in his incessant, relentless, stubborn, jumped-up-little-shit of an Italian life, he needed Daniel to leave it alone, for God’s sake, because it was one of those things that would only go away if they stopped talking about it, immediately- and Johnny couldn’t do that on his own.

“Fuck,” Daniel groans, pinching his eyes. “Fuck-” And that’s about the size of it.

“You just gotta-” Johnny gestures, fists clenching so he wouldn't actually touch him.

“I know-” Daniel nods, breathing, and Johnny can see. “I got it. I can do it.”

“Good.” Johnny breathes out too. “The girls are probably wondering-”

“Yeah.” Daniel nods again, shaking himself out like he was getting ready to fight. “Okay. Let’s go. I’m good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They take another breath and Johnny notices that LaRusso really did do a good job, he looks almost normal. Johnny slaps him on the shoulder as they’re pushing out the door.

“Hey,” he says, and they have to stop in the little hallway to let a couple waitresses past them to the kitchen, the clanging of pots and pans sounding from behind the wall. “I didn’t tell you. I kicked Kreese out of the dojo.”

Daniel turns back to him, eyes open and wide, and his mouth falls open a little.

“You did?”

Johnny nods. “Yeah. You were right about him. I should have listened. But he’s gone now, he took off.”

Daniel’s mouth stays open, and Johnny doesn’t imagine the tender look, or his eyes falling briefly down to Johnny’s mouth.

Shit. Shit.

“I’m sorry, John. I know he meant something to you.” Daniel ducks his head, and reaches out to squeeze Johnny’s forearm, the bare skin beneath his rolled up sleeve. His hand drops quickly away, and he gives a sympathetic nod before turning and leading the way down the short, dim hallway. Back to the table and the music, and the lights.

***

The tequila is helping.

Forward, together. Back, together. Carmen leads Johnny around the dance floor, and everything is great except that Daniel is so distracted by the dancing couple that he almost twists Amanda into a table.
“Hey, eyes over here. Are you on a date with him or me?” Amanda jokes, she’s always been funny, middle child syndrome or something, the only sister bookended by two brothers.

His eyes snap over to her, peeling away from the broad shoulders and dark jeans just feet away. He wasn’t looking at Carmen, she’s damn sure of that. But he’s looking at her now, with a startled, naked shock that tells her she’s inadvertently skimmed across the truth, like ice cold fingers on overheated skin. It’s momentary, he covers it with a pained smile and a sideways-eyeroll, but it’s just about the last straw across her aching back.

The music ends and Carmen collapses into a chair by the dance floor and Daniel goes off for drinks and Johnny follows him without a backwards look, bumping their shoulders together and Carmen makes a comment about a fast make-up and Amanda feels sick to her stomach and makes a hasty excuse for the bathroom.

She drops down onto the closed toilet seat, fingertip kissing his name, and she presses the little speaker to her ear, and she breathes in through her nose, out through her mouth, the way she pushed two children into the world, and jogged her body back into shape. She’d always been able to control her body, everything besides her height, but that hadn’t really been a problem since high school. And fuck high school, anyway, just because you had money didn’t mean you got to hang out with the pretty girls and their sweet upturned chins and nasty biting words. It took her ten years after high school to wear high heels around a guy that wasn’t on the college basketball team. That was one thing about Daniel, he’d never cared about a height difference, maybe that was an Italian thing.

“Hey,” he says, and the line clicks open, and she twists the metal stall door shut.

“Hey,” she says, swallowing the shaking down in her voice.

He sighs deeply, and she almost regrets calling. “What do you want?”

“What you are you up to?” she says, with faux lightness. She can keep it together. Hell she can even make it funny.

A long pause. “Amanda. Why are you calling?”

She presses her ear to the phone. “I need you to come get me.”

“What are you talking about? He would never do that to you.”

Amanda laughs into the stale bathroom air, a little hysterically.

Anoush sighs. “Jesus. You’re sure?”

“Yes,” she says, even if she doesn’t have proof, it feels true enough. For this conversation, anyway.

“Well maybe you should talk to him about it.”
“What if I think I deserve it?”

She hears him groan on the other end, maybe mutter a surreptitious *fuck* under his breath.

“That’s...Amanda that’s a fucked up thing to say, why would you say something like that?”

“I told him to do it...I said, Get it out of your system. I told him I didn’t care how. And the...” She pinches her temples, staring at the red and orange and blue tiles sweeping over the floor in patterns. “The fucking thing about it is I think I’d be relieved.”

He breathes out over the line, and she can hear the wind beat against the speaker.

“Amanda... I told you...you know how I...” His voice breaks a little and she can picture him pulling at his tie, raking his fingers through his hair. “I told you how I felt about you. I don’t appreciate you using that.”

“I’m calling you because you’re my friend-”

“You were my boss. And I was in love with you, and you know that-”

“I called you because you’re the person I wanted to talk to, and I thought despite all that you could get over yourself enough to be my friend-”

“What do you want me to do? You want me to pick you up? Where are we gonna go, Amanda? Where am I gonna take you that an Uber can’t get you?”

“I just-” she chokes out, head bowed, hand over her eyes. “I just want to be someplace he’s not.”

“Get a hotel,” he snaps. “I’m not gonna be used for...revenge, or whatever it is you want out of me.”

“I want to be in a room with somebody who wants me to be there.” Her mascara is gonna look like shit after all of this. “It’s like...I make him sad, and this...fucking wedding ring...is all that’s keeping him here. Like he’s obligated...to smile and laugh and pretend he doesn’t just want to be with him instead of me...he’s been looking over my shoulder all night and I can’t just go back out there, Anoush, I can’t-”

Her thumbs are pushing starbursts into her vision, and she feels stupid, and pathetic, and weak, and what the *fuck*, you know *fuck this*, she has two kids at home and if he wants to ruin this, she doesn’t need anybody to lean on, she can goddamn pull herself together and, and-

“Where are you?” he says, and the relief opens in her chest like a warm wash, she can hear the click of his shoes on pavement, the rustle of keys from his pocket, the soft, heavy *thunk* of the car door sealing shut.

She tells him the name and the address and he says he’s five minutes away and he tells her to stay on the line with him until he can pull into the back alley.

“Just leave,” he tells her. “Grab your purse and leave, you don’t owe him anything.”

She gets up and wipes her eyes, and slides through the tables and meets Carmen’s curious look with a wave. Daniel is still at the bar with Johnny, they’re angled toward each other fully, a little cadre of drinks forgotten between their elbows. He doesn’t see her.

She pushes out the back door to a wall of fresh air brought in on the evening wind from the sea, waves washing against the sandy California shore, over and over again, washing the old away and
bringing in the new.

He meets her, stands up from the open car door and folds her in his arms, and he is warm, and welcoming, and wanting.

“Thanks,” she whispers into his ear.

“The things we do for love,” he jokes, and holds her at arm's length, and she *laughs*.

He’s always made her laugh.

***

The line clicks shut, switches over to voicemail for the third time, and Daniel doesn’t bother to leave another message.

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride home, Daniel?” Carmen pulls her arms around her ribcage, it’s not cold but the sinking sun is pulling the heat from the dry air, and the chill is a sweet relief. Her eyes widen in sympathy, frank and genuine.

She’s strikingly beautiful, the evening breeze is pushing her hair around in an artful mess of soft curls, and Daniel can picture Johnny’s fingers combing it back and kissing her soft lips and cradling her sharp, pointed jaw in his strong hands. They were a stunning couple.

He really shouldn’t have had those last couple of tequilas.

“Nah, I’m okay. It’s the opposite direction, anyway.” He adds, after an awkward breath. “I’m sure she just wasn’t feeling well, or something.”

He doesn’t tell them she’s turned off her location tracking, and that Sam isn’t answering his texts, or Robby, just Anthony who was spending the evening in front of the computer.

Carmen looks up at Johnny, concerned, her bare shoulder brushing against his bicep. She gives him one of those significant looks, like Amanda used to give him, months ago like ages, back when they worked.

Johnny rolls his eyes, and says, the same time Daniel says it,

“I’m fine, Carmen.”

“He says he’s fine-”

The valet pulls up with the Challenger, and Daniel clicks his tongue for some weird reason, eyes darting away from Johnny’s arm around her shoulders. He puts a few feet between, feeling the distance keenly, odd and alone.

Carmen steps in for a quick hug, one of those friendly, back-patting, overly-solicitous things that nobody really wants, but it seems like a nice gesture anyway, and Daniel would appreciate it any other night. The handshake with Johnny is weird and there’s a beat of a moment where Daniel thinks they might hug, but of course they don’t, and Daniel bites the inside of his cheek and just gets through it with minimal eye-contact.
One car door shuts but only one, and Johnny just stands there with his elbows on the frame of the
car, looking like he’s trying to decide if talking to Daniel anymore is a huge fucking mistake.

It probably is, but a second later he’s right there, all chest and shoulders and sad eyes that seem to
reflect the whole situation pretty well.

“ Weird night, huh.” He says, the red light from the neon sign catches on the angle of his jaw and
casts a glow on his black shirt.

“ Yeah. Well, it’s not over yet.” Daniel concentrates on not slurring his words, sucking in a breath of
cool air.

“ Think she knows?” Johnny finally catches Daniel’s gaze, locking him down to his feet. His blue
eyes have pulled in all that red light, and they glow a dull violet, lamplike. It’s getting kind of
annoying, and repetitive in his head, just how much he thinks about what the guy looks like,
hundreds of times over thirty years but it always hits him hard in the chest. It was want for a long
time, it was possession for a night or so, and now it’s grief and regret and...just sadness, really.

“I dunno.” Daniel grimaces and looks away, hands shoved deep in his pockets for something to do,
or so as not to reach out and just...grab him. Have him. “Either that or she’s just sick of me.” He
laughs, odd and sad and self-deprecating. It came out less funny than he’d hoped.

Johnny doesn’t laugh, just sighs and looks up at the sky, and he’s probably sick of Daniel, too. But
on the plus side, the movement shows off a really nice angle of his neck and collar bones. Daniel
pushes his hands deeper in his pockets.

“Just...go home, see your kids. It’ll blow over.”

“Yeah, sure.” He nods to the car. “You better get her home. Somebody told me once, ‘Never keep a
lady waiting.’”

“Jesus, Larusso.” Johnny says, shaking his head, but he looks back over at the car, back over at
Carmen.

“Hey,” Daniel grabs his elbow, because they’ll probably never talk again, at least never talk again,
anything more than superficial pleasantries, nothing real, nothing that could crack open the plaster
cast over this whole, awful few months, like a glimpse into an alternate universe that was so
impossibly beautiful and painful, it was better to just shut it up in a box and never, ever look at it
again. So this was it, and Daniel really only had one question, and it was stupid, really. He could
have asked anything, but most of what he wanted to say (lets just run, or what do you really think of
me, or what about when I told you I loved you) you know, all that kind of shit would just push him
away.

Johnny turns, eyes wide and open, his arm warm in Daniel’s fingers.

“The crane kick,” Daniel blurts, “the one Miguel did at the Tournament. When did you teach him
that?”

Light breaks out all over Johnny’s face, like a sunrise. “The night after the Board Meeting. He found
it on the Youtube site.”

“Was it just to screw with me?” Daniel steps closer, they’re practically on the curb, now.

Johnny shrugs. “It was that, and...it was a badass kick. I mean it only works once every thirty
years.”
They both laugh.

“But, uh...you know. I think maybe I wanted to let you know I actually learned something from you and your teacher. That I wasn’t totally a sore loser.”

“You handed me that trophy,” Daniel murmurs. “You weren’t ever a sore loser.”

“Don’t get too soft,” Johnny chuckles. “It was mostly a giant ‘Fuck you, LaRusso’.”

They’re at the door. Johnny pulls it open, Daniel holds it there. “Tell Miguel I said...tell him I said it was pretty cool.”

“Pretty cool?”

“Okay, tell him I said it was ‘badass’. Better than mine, anyway.”

“He had two good legs.”

Daniel tips his head up. “Riiight.”

“Bobby says sorry about that-” Johnny’s eyebrows quirk playfully.

“Uh huh,” Daniel grins, “I was more thinkin’ about that elbow to my knee, or maybe the leg sweep before that-”

“Maybe I was just tryin’ to ‘sweep you off your feet’-”

“Fuck you, Lawrence-” Daniel feels a little heady, watching Johnny laugh with him. It was a nice change.

Carmen’s still waiting politely, and Daniel feels immediately sobered. “You guys better get going. I should probably find Amanda.”

Johnny nods, taking a quick look back down at Carmen. “Goodnight, LaRusso.” he says.

“Bye, Johnny,” he says, and gives Carmen a wave before he pushes the door shut on Johnny Lawrence and his bleed-you-blue eyes.

The car pulls away and he lets out a jagged breath, and Daniel stumbles back on the sidewalk, and spends a few seconds reorienting himself, looking up at the sky.

The valet gives Daniel a critical look as he hands over his ticket, but he’s not even that drunk, so fuck this guy. Whatever.

“Hey, aren’t you that karate car guy?” The kid returns, jumping out of the driver’s side door, engine still running. Daniel sighs and nods and listens to the kid’s story about his aunt having a really great experience buying her car there and Daniel used to be way less jaded than this, he used to love stuff like this, who wouldn’t like somebody coming up to you and telling you you’re doing a great job?

But he can’t decide if he’d rather go home or just drive around all night avoiding a confrontation with Amanda. So he chats mindlessly with the guy until another couple shoves their ticket between them and the guy sheepishly shakes his hand and runs off for the next car.

Daniel drops behind the wheel, drunk and exhausted after the weirdest night he can remember for a long while. Or at least the weirdest night since his last time he spent alone with Johnny Lawrence.
He shuts the door, shifts into gear, and drives.

***

Sam is wasted.

Most of the time when he’s fucking something up, Robby has a pretty good idea while it’s happening that whatever he’s doing is either stupid or reckless. This particular instance is both. He thinks that letting Mr. LaRusso’s daughter get completely wasted would be bad enough, but now he’s ducking responsibility and driving her, on her own drunken whim, to his father’s house to sleep it off. This can in no universe end well. Either they get through the night and the LaRussos wake up with no daughter, and Robby gets the book thrown at him and gets kicked out of the house, or they discover she’s not at home right now and he knows Sam’s got that tracker thing on her phone so there’s no way they’ll get away with this and Mr. LaRusso gets to witness his daughter drunk and sloppy in a strange bed, and Robby gets murdered and probably buried in the dojo under one of the bonsai trees.

Either way, there’s no way this turns out better for Robby than if he just took her home right now, manned up and explained the situation to her parents.

But Sam had asked, pointed those insane sapphire watery eyes at him and said ‘We can’t go home, Robby’. So here they were, Robby dragging Samantha into the back bedroom (the only bedroom) of his father’s shitty apartment in Receda, and his dad is pretending to look for a set of clean sheets (which Robby doubts really exist) and the only t-shirt Johnny has to offer has a giant ‘Cobra Kai’ snake logo plastered on the front and Robby thinks fuck it because he’s dead either way, might as well make Mr. LaRusso angry enough to make it quick.

“Sam,” he holds out a large plastic tumbler of water and a couple of aspirin. “Here, you need to drink this—”

She’s looked on the verge of tears all night, but at least she’s been pliant and agreeable since they got here.

She takes the water in both hands and puts down a good portion of it before setting it on the nightstand. He hands her the aspirin, and she pops them into her mouth, swaying a little on the bed, and reaches for the water again. He turns around to grab the shirt and pajama set, folded on top of a set of boxes.

“Robby—”

Her voice is alert, suddenly sober. He turns around to see her holding a watch, turning it over in her hands.

“What?”

“This is my dad’s watch.” Her forehead crinkles in confusion, probably foggy with the alcohol. Robby’s heart picks up, a little warning bell sounding in the back of his head.

“What? What are you talking about?”

Her pale fingers turn the silver face over, and back again, the black leather strap brushing against her
wrist. “My mom gave this to my dad for their anniversary.” She turns her eyes up to him. “What is
my dad’s watch doing on your dad’s nightstand?”

His mouth drops, voice dying in his throat. It’s just a watch, though, it doesn’t mean- it should be
nothing. It’s nothing.

Sam reaches out to the nightstand drawer, and Robby almost stops her, but he’s frozen to the floor,
almost like he knows what’s about to happen.

Her fingers sink into soft, white fabric, and she pulls out a baseball jersey with blue piping, and a
blue and orange ‘31’ stitched to the back.

“Robby,” She’s still drunk, confused, but her brow is pinched and the wheels are turning. “What is
this?”

This isn’t hard evidence, there’s nothing here that explains the searing, bright red conclusion wailing
around in Robby’s brain, slamming from side-to-side, terrible with the truth of it, and the
consequences start unfolding like Cleopatra from the rug, a film his mother had shown him before he
was 10 years old, he only remembers that scene, and the end where she kills herself, ‘How strangely
awake I feel. As if living had been just a long dream. Someone else’s dream. Now finished at last...’

Now finished at last. He and Sam are done, because he and the LaRussos are done, because his dad
and her dad had ripped a giant tear down the middle of a perfectly happy family, whole and fine and
beautiful, and it wasn’t that surprising. Robby came from his father, and everything either of them
had ever touched had always and inevitably gone to shit.

“Robby, what-”

“We gotta go,” he says, pulling her up from the bed. He leaves the watch in her hand but he shoves
the jersey back in the drawer and slams it shut. If they can just get out of here maybe somehow they
could hold it all together-

Her hand is small and cold in his own, he pulls her out the door and through the living room, and his
dad looks up from the couch, folding down the pullout mattress.

“You guys got what you need?” Johnny clocks Robby’s face and he straightens, expression
dropping in alarm. “Whoa, what’s wrong?”

“We gotta go,” Robby doesn’t quite meet his father’s eyes, instead darting for the door. “Sorry, I’ve
just gotta get her home-”

“Robby, I don’t want-” Sam tries to tug her hand free.

“Sam, come on, your mom called, she wants me to bring you home now.” He’s okay with the lie,
anything to get them outside.

Robby watches his father now, confused and maybe a little hurt, and then his gaze drops down to the
watch in Sam’s hand. His eyes widen, and his mouth drops a little. Robby finally looks at his father,
and the room settles like an elevator dropping too fast and too low.

“Robby-” And Robby knows. He knows his father knows that he knows.

“Dad,” Robby struggles to keep his eyes dry and his voice somewhere in the range of normal. He
tugs at Samantha, and finally puts his fingers on the door knob. “I’m sorry, it’s just- we have to go
now. I have to get her home.”
They don’t say anything else, the door closes on his father’s shattered face, and Robby doesn’t look back as he tugs Samantha back outside, back out to the car. He thinks if he gets them home fast enough, maybe he’ll wake up in his room and the sun will rise over a world that was still familiar and still whole and full of hope.

***

“Your hands are shaking.”

Samantha grips the passenger side door, the streetlights of Reseda flashing through the windshield, the streets smoothing North to South, as Reseda started to fade into Lake Balboa and then climb into the rolling hills of Encino, under the 101, over Ventura Boulevard. She looks over at Robby, fingers now firmly clutching the wheel at 10 and 2.

He doesn’t say anything, jaw tight and face pale. The world is still a little unsteady, alcohol still rolling around in her stomach, her head is caught in an awful, dizzying fog.

“Pull over.” She snaps, seeing the back entrance to the Country Club on her left, the golf course, Encino Lake, all surrounded by the endless neighborhoods, draped over the hills, each square plot with a giant house and swimming pool of their own. It makes her ache sometimes, the sameness of it all.

“What-”

“Just pull over, Robby, I need to puke-”

This seems to do the trick and Robby swings the car into the park entrance road and slows the car to a stop in the patchy grass just off the road. Sam pushes the door open and launches out into the night, hands on her hips. Robby locks the door behind her, she can hear him approach at a cautious distance. She can see Encino Lake up ahead, a full moon rising off to the West, reflecting silver in the dark water.

She takes off, marching on unsteady feet, the cool night breeze off the water calling her forward, Robby’s footsteps slow but steady behind her. She can hear him, feel him now as acutely as on the balance wheel, hear his strong lungs in his chest and his reliable, warm presence. She walks until she reaches the edge of the shore, night waves lapping against the wet wood of the dock.

“Sam,” Robby calls. “Careful-”

She toes her shoes off, pulls off her socks with a hand braced on a nearby piling, and bends to roll the cuffs of her jeans as high as the tight material will let her, and steps onto the damp wood.

“Sam.” Robby chides, but she’s halfway down the dock and she can already hear him kicking off his own shoes and socks. He would follow her to the end of the earth, she thinks. He sort of is right now.

She spreads her arms out, gripping the pilings on either side, her toes curled over the end of the dock, and leans forward. The night wind picks up the smells of lake water and fish and wet mud, and blows the heady fragrance over her nose and cheeks and skin like a balm. The water is a flashing black and silver. She closes her eyes, and her ears fill with the steady thrum of water on wood like a heartbeat.
Her father’s watch is wrapped around her wrist, loose even on it’s tightest setting, and now it falls
down to her elbow, the well-worn Cobra Kai shirt Johnny had given her is soft over her torso, she’d
taken her bra off for bed, and she feels free, unrestricted and wrapped in the arms of the night. She
opens her eyes and they’re filled with tears.

“C’mon Sam,” Robby’s hand circles gently around her wrist. “Let’s go sit down somewhere, there’s
a bench-”

She sits instead, slowly bending her knees, one hand in his, the other trailing down the piling to keep
her steady. Her jeans are immediately soaked, but the water is balmy around her ankles, and the
alcohol pumps hot through her veins, heating her skin. Robby sits with her, his feet dipping into the
dark water beside her own. She grips his fingers tightly, pressing their shoulders and palms together.

“I need you to tell me what you’re thinking.” She looks over at him. “You saw my dad’s clothes in
his drawer, and you looked like you’d seen a ghost. Like you knew something else.”

“I don’t know,” he whispers. “It might be nothing.”

She holds up her wrist, and unflips the band from the clasp. The silver backing flashes in the
moonlight.

“He doesn’t take this off unless he’s going to bed. He wouldn’t just leave it somewhere-”

“I don’t know anything for sure.” Robby shakes his head.

“Tell me what you saw, Robby.”

“I don’t know...it was just. A few times...like they acted like they didn’t get along, but there was
something kind of...flirty,” Robby winces, “...about how they talked. And they were like...physically
sort of touchy-feely. Like after my dad’s friend died, we had dinner after the funeral, and it was
just...kind of weird. I saw your dad crying, and they hugged and talked for a long time.”

Robby hesitates, and Sam puts her shaking hand over his.

“And, I...I dunno. Last month...I went over to dad’s place to see if he wanted to go to a movie, he
wasn’t answering his phone. And I walked in and I thought nobody was there. But the game was on,
and there was a set of keys on the counter that looked like your dad’s...and his sunglasses.” Robby
swallows. “I dunno. I didn’t exactly see or hear anything...but the bedroom door was closed, and- I
dunno. Maybe they were just talking.”

Robby pinches his eyes behind his hand, and Sam knows he hadn’t told her everything, but she’s
heard enough.

“It was the Mets game,” she finishes for him. “He didn’t come home that night.”

Robby’s fingers lace through her own, she brushes her thumb over his.

“Aisha’s dad used to cheat on her mom. Aisha figured it out before her mom did, because her dad’s
cell phone was synched up with the ipad they gave her for Christmas. She saw all their texts...”

Sam shakes her head, remembering the frantic phone call from Aisha the summer before eighth
grade. They bonded that summer, Sam and Aisha spent most of it in the backyard or in the pool, or
her dad would drive them to the beach, and make dinner. Aisha was more or less a constant fixture in
the LaRusso home that summer. But the Robinson’s had eventually hashed things out as far as Sam
knew, and they hadn’t talked about it since.
Robby’s green eyes are studying her face, and he looks down and away.

“It was all over his face. My Dad. When we left tonight, and he saw you had the watch. It was just like...I knew.”

“Dad’s been weird all month. Like...really sad.” Sam’s voice breaks, she’s surprised to find she’s sort of sobbing, and she wipes roughly at her tears. “I don’t...I don’t know if mom knows.” She hates crying like this, and Robby pulls her into his side, untangling their fingers to wrap an arm around her, kiss her temple.

“I’m sorry,” he says, whispering into her hair. “It’s all my fault, if I hadn’t met your dad, and brought our families together-”

“Robby this isn’t your fault-”

“Everything is ruined, it’s all over, your family will hate me-”

“Robby,” she sobs. “I kissed Miguel.” Which. Isn’t the best time to bring this up, but Sam hasn’t ever felt this wrecked, like a box of broken glass rattling around inside, and Robby is basically her only friend and she’s just... she’s just so goddamn drunk, really.

Her brain jumps to an early memory, she was maybe 6 or 7, when her dad brought her to the dojo to see Mr. Miyagi. She doesn’t remember much about Mr. Miyagi, but she has a picture stuck in her mind of him, tiny and wizened, white hair and beard sitting in a chair in front of his kitchen window. He had a bird feeder hanging just outside the window, her dad would always make sure to refill it before they left. One day he left her to play in the backyard while they talked inside, and she’d been running back and forth across the wood walkways, racing as fast as she could, and she tripped over one of the bonsai trees, tipping it over and cracking the pot.

Her father had run out, probably drawn by her crying, knelt at her side and cradled her skinned knee, and then he’d seen the plant. “Sam, what happened?” She’d just cried and cried, unable to admit the truth, until Mr. Miyagi had hobbled out on his cane, wobbly but smiling. He was so short at that point, and stooped over, that he wasn’t much taller than her. Her father had pushed her, sobbing, up to Mr. Miyagi. “Just tell him what happened, Sam. Tell him the truth.”

She finally admitted it, and instead of anger, the old man had smiled warmly. “Truth is hard, Samantha-chan. Hard- but truth only way to find balance- find you. Other way-” He lifted his finger into the air, tracing a twisting path, invisible doldrums- “take you nowhere, twist up spirit, make person sick and sad. Truth move you forward, is freedom.

Truth make you brave, just like father.”

Good for you, she thinks. Telling the truth about how you cheated on your boyfriend.

You’re a cheater. Just like father.

“What?” His head snaps back, confused.

She’s sobbing now, and only manages to choke out, “At the party, I kissed Miguel- and I, I think that I-”

She feels him stiffen, and his arm pulls away as he stands, walks back toward shore to lean heavily on a piling, doubled over. She follows, tentative, stopping a few feet away.

“I knew...” he keens, a hand cupped over his eyes, rubbing at his brow.
“I’m so sorry,” she cries, wincing as his knuckles slam into the piling. “Robby-”

He sinks into a crouch. “It’s over,” he groans. “It’s all over.”

His shoulders shake under her cold fingers. “Robby, please, I don’t want to lose you. You’re my best friend-” She pleads, still crying. “I really messed up.”

His forehead presses into the damp wood, she catches a tear on her fingertips, brushes his hair behind his ear.

“I just wanted to be a part of the family,” he whispers, breaking her heart.

“That won’t change, it doesn’t have to-” she wipes her own tears, voice a little frantic.

“Sam, I’m not just talking about you and Miguel- if your mom finds out about our dads, your parents will divorce, and if they don’t, they’ll never want to see me or my dad ever again. It’s over, everything’s ruined-”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. We’ll figure it out. I’ll talk to my dad, I mean maybe it isn’t what it looks like-”

“Sam-” Robby says, pained.

“Okay so maybe it is, but even if it is, maybe it can still turn out okay. As long as everybody assumes best intentions, and tells the truth, and we can all talk it out-”

“The world doesn’t work like that-” he stands, walking back toward the dark water.

“Why not?” she asks, her head is hot and numb, but the dizziness is starting to pass, her feet feel steady, planted. “The world works how you make it work. If people just treated each other decently, and said they were sorry when they were sorry, and, and- if they tried to do the best they could- then things would be alright most of the time.

“And, maybe-” Samantha’s voice jumps up, tightly. “You know, maybe my dad... maybe he’s...maybe he’s gay. Maybe he’s been unhappy, and he didn’t know how to tell her. Maybe it’s all for the best and he’s in love with your dad and your dad loves him back. And if that’s the case, my mom deserves better, and she wouldn’t want to stay married anyway.”

“Sam.” Robby turns back to face her, his green eyes catching in moonlight. “What if your mom still loves your dad?”

She knows he’s caught on. That maybe she’s not just talking about her dad.

Truth move you forward, is freedom.

“They’re best friends,” she says, voice shaking. “They’ll always be best friends. Nothing could change that.”

He closes the distance between, sweeping her up into his arms, hugging her into his chest, solid and steady and she holds on, arms around his neck.

“We’ll be okay,” she whispers into his neck. “We’ll make it work.”

“I love you,” he says.

“I love you too,” she says, and it’s the truth. “Let’s go home.”
It’s almost midnight and Los Angeles is about as dark as it gets. The sky is a deep hazy gray, and you couldn’t see the stars, just the lights from the city bouncing back down off the smog like smoke trapped under a glass.

Daniel floats through the city, the streetlights flashing like checkout scanners through the windshield of the car, driving aimlessly, his fingers brushing over the leather-wrapped steering wheel. He drives past the old tree shop, torn down years ago now for a gas station. Jessica’s old pottery studio was a pawn shop. He drives by the South Seas, and past the bar around the corner where Johnny’d dragged him during the test drive, jangling his car keys like a bell, like a siren song calling Daniel, tugging him along on some invisible string.

He drives to North Hollywood, to the original Cobra Kai dojo. Kreese’s Cobra Kai. Daniel parks the car and peeks in, sees it empty, gutted. He glances over his shoulder. The Orient Express Restaurant was a liquor store now.

He gets back to the car and drives and drives and tries to remember the smells of Jersey, Nona’s cooking and the smell of Uncle Louie’s cigar smoke and the pine wood paneling of Aunt Tessie’s living room, the black and white television on a rickety table in the corner where he watched Tom Seaver pitch a no-hitter against the Cubs in ’77, staring at the screen with the absence of his father pounding a hole larger and larger in his chest, raw and ragged, months after he was dead and gone. Months he can barely remember now.

He remembers standing in the funeral parlor, eight years old in a cheap black suit with his mother’s hands on his shoulders, clutching his father’s Mets cap in his hands like a talisman, like it could somehow bring him back. Everybody looking down at him and crying, they hugged his mother tight but they could barely look at Daniel, like it was too sad to handle. You look just like your father, Daniel all his father’s friends had said. You take care of your mother, but he never had, not really. She’d taken all the weight.

He remembers horsing around with Louie at the buffet lunch, how stupidly grateful he’d been to his little cousin to treat him like normal, just for a few minutes that day.

He remembers holding his father’s hand in 1973, walking through the dark tunnel under the stands at Shea Stadium and coming out into the light, five years old and how green the field looked, and the brown dirt. The crack of the bat and the sharp pop of the ball in the catcher’s mitt. His father pointing to the first base side, see Dan, you see that man leaning on the dugout rails? That's Willie Mays! Daniel had craned to see, they were so high up, the stadium was incalculably large, so much bigger than on TV, and an aging Willie Mays playing out his last season with the Mets, looking small and strange in blue and orange instead of black and orange.

He remembers taking Mr. Miyagi to see a matinee at the Palace Theater in the late ’90s, trying to sell him on the merits of baseball. Mr. Miyagi was no sports fan but he loved Kevin Costner, so Daniel figured if Field of Dreams couldn’t do it, well maybe nothing would. He hadn’t expected the ending to be so devastating, though, and the two of them sat through the entirety of the credits, sobbing together while the teenage attendants swept up popcorn and spilt Milk Duds from the sticky floor. He remembers walking out into the early evening, surprised it wasn’t dark. The skin around his eyes was still salty and tender, and Mr. Miyagi put an arm around his waist, still a head shorter, and they walked back to the car in peaceful silence. Daniel, slipping into the driver’s seat had started the car,
clutching the steering wheel—Sorry, I didn’t think that’d be such a sad ending. His mentor had simply smiled, tipped his face up to the gentle evening sun. No, no Daniel-san. Happy ending. Very happy ending. Remind me father still here—and he’d pointed two fingers to his heart, tapping twice. Loved ones never leave, see? Good reminder.

Daniel, now, at almost one o’clock in the morning kneels in the dark, in the shadowy dirt before Mr. Miyagi’s grave, and he feels so incredibly alone. He taps his chest half-heartedly and drops his arm uselessly at his side.

“I don’t feel you there.” He swallows, his voice is hoarse and strange. “I don’t feel you anywhere, anymore. I just feel lost.”

He looks up to the starless sky, heart aching and voice shaking.

“This is stupid. I... I don’t know why I’m here. Hoping you can solve all my problems for me, like you used to.”

He breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth.

“You know, you said to me once, ‘Never put passion before principle. Even if you win, you lose.’ I’ve been thinkin’ about that a lot.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this alone...how you did it. I mean I know what you would do. Principle before passion, right? You loved Yukie but you left her in Japan because...”

Daniel’s throat catches and his chest hitches and he’s crying, again. He can’t seem to stop these days. He stands back up, paces, running his hands through his hair, throwing his arms in wild arcs.

“You know, why did you have to leave her? That woman...she was in love with you until the day she died, and how—how could you throw that away? What kind of principle is that, that two people have to....to suffer and...you could’ve had a lifetime with her. You could’ve grabbed her hand and run, and not stopped until you were halfway around the world. You should’ve...”

He bites the knuckle of his thumb, white teeth pressing down into bone, following the clear shot of pain through his mess of thoughts.

“So what am I supposed to do. Lie to myself? Pretend I don’t want to be with him? Go to bed with Amanda every night and pretend nothing’s wrong? She doesn’t deserve that. She deserves somebody who...well she deserves somebody better.

“Or am I supposed to tear everything apart. Because it’s not just my life. Sam, and Anthony...I ruin their lives because I...because of what I want? What kind of a father does that make me? What are they gonna think of me? What would you think of me?

“And, you know. The kicker is maybe I would have been fine if I hadn’t known what it could feel like. I never thought it would feel like this. I would have worked more, taught more kids at the dojo, drank more, you know anything—and even if....even if I still would’ve been sad. I wouldn’t have known, and that would’ve been okay.”

He wipes his tears, a hand down the length of his face, inhaling roughly. He turns back toward the empty street, eyes catching on all the quiet deadness around him, every stone the mark of a life. He remembers the pale skin of Kumiko’s forearms, twisting gracefully from side to side, a gentle spiraling motion from her waist, her elbows down to the delicate tips of her fingers.

“I hate feeling like this. Like I have no compass, and it’s all twisted around, like I can’t see straight. I
don’t know what to do, and I feel so lost. I’m all out of balance, and I...I need help.”

He falls back to his knees, fingers brushing over the bonsai. “I miss you so much,” he whispers. A few more tears fall, but his breathing calms down. He reaches out, all ten fingers pressed into rough marble, and he lends his weight to the stone, head tipped down.

“This is pretty stupid, isn’t it.”

He looks up. “It’s just this little voice in my head, sayin’ I gotta be a real idiot talking to you like this.”

He laughs a little, just a little, and looks back down at the stone. “So you’re saying I should talk to somebody real, huh? My wife, maybe? A shrink?”

Daniel listens closely, but nothing comes except the cricket song from the trees and the rustling of leaves. He takes the silence for an answer, and he knows that he’s had it all this time, knows where his heart is calling, still on a string attached to the one he longs for.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. I’ll go and see him.”

***

Johnny’s door is yelling at him.

He jerks awake, involuntarily kicking his foot into the edge of something firm but cushioned. It’s a hazy few seconds before he remembers he’s still on the couch, and that it’s either very late or very early, and that his son had just left.

Robby -

The door pounds again, and Johnny fumbles up, almost knocking over the open bottle of Four Roses sitting upright on the floor. He barely catches it, and lifts it up onto the coffee table. He thinks, halfway to the door, that he should probably hide it- but he has no idea where the cap is and anyway, Robby isn’t stupid. He knows his dad’s a drunk. And he knows...well. He knows, doesn’t he.

It isn’t Robby.

“Hey,” he says. And there’s a little tinge, a little waver of uncertainty in LaRusso’s voice, and his eyes swing up into Johnny’s as soon as the door clears. He’s still in dinner clothes, and he looks a little tired and desperate standing there with his arm braced up on the door frame and Johnny thinks for a second he’s about to do something rash like they always do in the movies, just skip past the pleasantries and swoop close and grab Johnny and kiss him stupid, and then all their problems would be gone, washed away like rain.

But it wasn’t raining, and this was real life.

“Uh,” he answers, mutely. “Hey.”

“Can we talk?” Daniel bites his lip, trying to peer surreptitiously over Johnny’s shoulder.

“What?” Johnny blinks stupidly.
“Can we talk- I mean, is now a good- jesus, Johnny, do you have anybody over right now?” LaRusso’s spluttering, and his eyes haven’t made it back up from Johnny’s chest just yet-

He looks at LaRusso’s pink face and down at himself in his own bare chest and boxers, and then back at his mess of a living room, couch half made-up for a bed, his own shirt and pants flung at and over the yellow chair, coffee table strewn with a six pack of empty cans and the capless bottle of whiskey.

_Ah_.

“Is this about Robby?” he clears his throat, stalling both to allow the fog in his brain to lift, and also, letting a wild and desperate-looking Daniel LaRusso into his living room at two in the morning was really getting away from the whole (though admittedly only passably successful) ‘_have enough self-preservation to move on with your goddamn life_’ approach of the last month.

“What?!” LaRusso’s face screws up in a strangely Italian-ish way, and why was it appealing. Jesus.

“No, no, it’s not about Robby. It’s Amanda.”

Johnny thinks he might tell Daniel about the watch and the awful realization on Robby’s face, about Robby dragging a sloppy Samantha out into the night, how they both must know, now. But you know, fuck him. He could figure it out on his own. From the sounds of it, the plug was pulled and it was all going down the drain anyway. That old familiar feeling.

Johnny wordlessly turns back into the apartment, letting LaRusso hesitantly follow, head ducking to peer down the hallway after a phantom partner. Johnny hears the door snick shut and the lock turn over, the bottle of whiskey already tipped up, burning on his lips.

“She knows,” Daniel breathes out, brown eyes turned up like he’s looking to Johnny for an answer, posted up against the end of the counter, shoulder pushing into the cheap white balustrade.

“Okay.” Johnny collapses down on the couch, bottle neck pushed like a wind chime between his fingertips.

Daniel paces, sleeves pushed up to his elbows, and he probably hasn’t even noticed that his watch was gone, but his bare wrist looks strange to Johnny.

“I don’t know what to do,” he says.

“Well. I guess not showing up at my apartment at 2 in the morning would be a good start.”

“How can you joke about this? I feel- I feel-” Daniel puts his hands on his knees. “I might be sick.”

“You’ll get over it.” He takes a pull. “Lots of people already have.”

“So you don’t give a shit. One way or the other, this was just a fuck to you.”

“What does it matter what I think?”

“You’re _unbelievable_, you know that? This month has been torture for me, and you, you-”

Johnny takes another drink, but his jaw is pressed tight enough he might just grind his teeth to dust. The anger swells up, almost unexpected in its intensity, but Johnny thinks after a summer of repression at this magnitude, it’s about time.

And _him_- standing there glaring at Johnny, like he’s blaming _Johnny_ for it all, after _he_ was the one
who started it, he was the one who came to Johnny and kissed him and took everything he had, and not just his son. Stripped what little he had like a tablecloth in a magician’s trick. It was amazing, actually, that Johnny’s life could have gotten worse, that he could tumble even further down the ditch of sad, middle-age pathos. He thinks, now, that having nothing to lose didn’t make the loss any better.

It was worse, actually, because you had no excuse for getting your hopes up in the first place. Who were you, the loser, to think you could have been happy? To think it could have lasted, that this...thing...could have ended in anything but resentment and regret and tears?

So. He lifts the bottle like a toast, and speaks very clearly when he says, “Fuck. You. LaRusso.”

Daniel’s chin jerks back, not for the first time hit with the sting of Johnny’s hurt.

The tears, though. He isn’t sobbing or anything, but it’s almost immediate, brown eyes glazing over like an ice cube thawing on a hot sidewalk, like the tear ducts were already primed, it was so quick.

Johnny waits it out though, because if there’s anything reliable about LaRusso, it’s that the heat of anger always follows the hurt. It does catch him a little off guard, though, when Daniel stalks over, all wet eyes and clenched jaw, and swipes the whiskey bottle from Johnny’s loose fingers.

“Oh, and this is it, this fucking... pompous asshole, poor him with his big house and his kids and his successful business. Facing a few nights on the couch at best, an amicable divorce and shared custody at worst, maybe a few child-support checks taking a drop out of his bank account every month.

The best and worst is the same, for Johnny, right back where he started with Robby, and his heart in pieces at the bottom of his stomach. The anger comes now, churning up like acid from the pit of his insides, the very core of him, and he knows this is the way of things for him. It was the way they’d always been. Something snaps a little and he’s on the balls of his feet, and he notes somewhere in the back of his head that there are tears of his own, dropping messily on his cheeks, down to the hot skin of his chest.

“Why do you always have to do this? You hide behind a bottle, and the walls you put up, you act like you don’t care, but you do, I know you do-”

Oh, and this is it, this fucking... pompous asshole, poor him with his big house and his kids and his successful business. Facing a few nights on the couch at best, an amicable divorce and shared custody at worst, maybe a few child-support checks taking a drop out of his bank account every month.

They don’t talk about this.

“Oh, you wanna talk about that night?” LaRusso’s voice cants upward, like a joke.

“Talk about what.” Johnny growls, retreating back on his heels, a coffee table between them, and years and years.

“I...want to talk about. What we never talk about.” He speaks slow and shaky and dangerous. The tears keep falling, for both of them, the silence is awful and Johnny’s voice almost sucks itself back into the vacuum of his chest.

“You’re the one who pushed me away,” he whispers, ragged. “You’re the one who said no.”

“You couldn’t give me one day?” Daniel shouts, more like a cry of pain. “I was high, and in shock-
and all I wanted to do was talk to you. I’m sorry I didn’t realize what it was. But I was young, and
naive, and all you’d done before that was try to make my life miserable - so I didn’t—” his voice
hitches painfully.

“I didn’t know. I wish I could go back to that night and handle things better, but I can’t. I’ve thought
about that night all these years, I think about it all the time- But I tried, Johnny, I tried to talk to you-
but you wouldn’t let me- why wouldn’t you let me?”

They’re a mess.

Daniel, because he can’t leave it all alone, can’t leave Johnny to curl up in the dark, in peace, to heal,
to recover. He says, and Johnny sees it coming like a bullet, approaching cautiously, mouth open and
hands tentatively calming in the space between them:

“I love you.”

Quiet and soft and wide-eyed, and it’s just as devastating as the first time. Johnny wants to slam his
hands over his ears and duck away, run away like an antelope from a hot knife.

“What is your plan, Daniel?” Johnny has to dig the words out of his throat with a chisel, dry and
rough. “What are you going to say to Sam and Anthony?”

“I don’t know,” Daniel chokes out.

“Then don’t...say...shit like that...to me.” Johnny bites the words out, slowly, so Daniel wouldn’t
miss one, it was that important. A last request, a bid for mercy.

Daniel slouches, lists off to one side, almost wounded. He puts his face in his hands, wiping his
fingers down, coming away wet like blood. Johnny feels sick.

“Can I just...stay here tonight. With you.”

“You can sleep on the couch.” Johnny answers, and turns away, slams his bedroom door shut and
crawls down under his covers, soft and dark and safe and away from this hellhole of a day.

He hears the door slam, maybe a few minutes, maybe an hour later, his head numb and tired and
dizzy.

He thinks.

Of course he wouldn’t stay.

***

Chapter End Notes

We love kudos and adore comments.

Part III is coming next week, and we'll dive back into the past. If you have a weird
feeling you're missing something, it's because you are...
There is more to this story than has been told, o best beloved.

Thanks everybody, see you next Friday!
- storyshark and Elise
Part III: Back to the Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember.”
Johnny stares at the plain white ceiling and the fan rocking steadily off canter, whipping the stale air of the room around. Bobby is on the other end of the phone line, the cord is stretched from Johnny’s
side table down to the floor, which seems to be the best place for him, considering his current state.

“What are you talking about?”

Bobby sighs, crackly over the connection, and Johnny deduces it must be past noon.

“Miyagi’s funeral. He died.”

“Why would you go, it’s not like you knew the guy.”

Bobby pauses, in that delicate way of his, and Johnny knows he’s trying to frame this so that Johnny will do whatever it is that Bobby wants him to do.

“I never told you, but I stopped by the tree shop, a couple years after everything.”

This gets Johnny’s attention, and the low whining of the fan becomes inaudible. He sits up, his aching back against the couch, rubbing his eyes. They never needed a date to bookmark 1984-1985, that was the year without a name.

“You what?”

“I stopped by the shop back in ’86 I think, Christmas break of my sophomore year at UCLA. I was thinking about dropping out.”

“I remember that.”

“Well yeah, so I was in the middle of that, and I came home and I guess I had this wild hair that I’d drop by and see LaRusso. Anyway so I drove up and walked in and it’s just the old man there. No LaRusso.”

Johnny waits, listens to Bobby breathing on the end of the line.

“So...I’m pretty nervous and I’m not even sure he’d remember me- and I’m about ready to bolt, and he...he just...he comes up to me, and takes my hands. And he says...and I swear to god, I started to cry, even before he said anything...he says, ‘Past is past. Must learn from, not live in.’ And it was like a bolt of lightning, and somehow I just felt like God was calling, through this little Japanese guy. I told my folks that night that I was dropping out and looking at Bible Colleges.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Bobby laughs. “My mom nearly had a heart attack.”

“Anyway, I never told LaRusso that story. I haven’t seen him since graduation. And...I dunno. I think it might be kind of nice for him to hear it. To know that...he wasn’t the only one whose life Mr. Miyagi changed.”

“Okay.” Johnny isn’t sure why Bobby is calling him.

“So...I dunno. You wanna maybe come with? I think it’d be a nice gesture.”

Johnny pinches his temples. “Bobby...I don’t have some warm fuzzy story about the guy-”

“But listen, it was Miyagi who was the one that showed us Kreese was wrong, he was the one who turned our heads back around-”

Johnny laughs, and it’s not funny. “He ruined my life, Bobby- him and his little student- just because
you had some ‘Jesus take the wheel’ moment doesn’t mean the rest of us did- I’m laying tile, Tommy’s so fucking high on pills, he doesn’t know what year it is, Dutch is in jail- how could you think that year brought anything good to us?"

Bobby is silent on the other end.

“I’m sorry...” Johnny’s head is pounding, and really, he’s just too drunk for this. He feels a hot wash of shame, that Bobby probably still thinks he’s sober. “I just...wouldn’t have anything good to say.”

“I’m sorry-” Bobby speaks after a few moments, and Johnny hears the tightness in his voice, like he’s about to cry, and he feels so low. “I’m sorry that I...that I didn’t do more for you. He just- he had you, man. He like...possessed you, and I was your best friend, and I should have done something about it-” And this is something they haven’t talked about, not in the nearly thirty years since.

Johnny won’t cry, he fucking won’t. “He was always there for me. He was like a father-”

“No -” Bobby says fiercely. “That’s not what a father’s supposed to be. He- he took advantage of you, that was emotional abuse. He saw a weakness, and he exploited it-”

“Jesus, Bobby, nobody exploited me -” and now Bobby is starting to piss Johnny off, he always does this, every time they talk, he tries to dig down to the old hurts, like he’s trying to fix Johnny, as if he’s less than a whole person. You know, he’s not fucking perfect, but he doesn’t need this-

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t love you, Johnny, he was going through his own shit-”

“You know, goodnight, Bobby, have fun at the funeral, or whatever. Thanks for the invite.”

Johnny hangs up on Bobby’s protesting voice.

They don’t talk for six months after that.

Six months, and it’s Bobby, of course, who shows up at his door, like a phone call is too impersonal for him (or maybe it was all the voicemails Johnny ignored, the blinking red light on the black box). Bobby shows up and peels him off the carpet and sweeps the cans from the coffee table into a black garbage bag (like trophies, Johnny thinks hazily, in some competition nobody would actually want to win) and Bobby makes him a real dinner and sits on the couch with him and they watch Top Gun, and Bobby puts an arm around him and Johnny ignores the fact that it’s a little gay, and the warmth of his friend settles his mind down to a low, distant static.

“So the funeral,” Johnny mumbles, as Goose and Maverick sing at the piano.

“What funeral?” Bobby frowns.

“The karate master. LaRusso’s sensei.”

Bobby laughs, gently. “That was months ago, Johnny.”

“Yeah. How was it.”

“Small. But it was nice. He was a WWII veteran, so there was an honor guard. They played taps, and the whole bit. LaRusso got the flag. Guess there was no other family.”

“How was LaRusso?”

“Sad. He looked really sad. I’m glad I went.” Bobby clears his throat. “He asked about you.”
“Yeah. What’d you tell him.”

“I told him…” Bobby sighs. “I told him you were working hard, and you were still in the Valley.”

“You didn’t tell him what a loser I am, huh?” Johnny laughs. Bobby just squeezes his shoulder.

“I told him you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Johnny snorts. “Jesus. I bet he felt sorry for you.”

“No.” Bobby shakes his head. “He said that I was lucky. Really, really lucky.”

***

September 2005

“Babe-”

Daniel looks up from his desktop, full of spreadsheets, and more red colored font than he would like. Amanda is tapping on the doorframe, peeking in.

“Hey, what’s up?” Daniel inputs the last number, clicks save.

“There’s a customer here, asking for you? She just bought an SC convertible from Mike, but she wanted to meet you. Said you guys went to high school together…”

Daniel’s heart jumps to his throat for a minute, thoughts immediately jumping to blonde curls and cinnamon sugar eyes.

“Did she say what her name was?”

“No, I should have asked- she’s blonde…tall, but not as tall as me. Sheila’s got the paperwork, I can sneak out and grab it?”

Well. That was a good sign. Ali barely broke five feet in high heels. “No, it’s fine, I’ll be right out-”

Amanda nods, and Daniel takes a second to throw on his blazer and run a hand through his hair. It might not be her, after all. But who else would it be, he didn’t really have anybody else who would remember him. Not like he made any deep, lasting friendships in his one year at West Valley.

Christ, it was probably Tracey Blatt, he knew she was still working at the school district. Maybe she’d dyed her hair or something-

Daniel walks out onto the sales floor, and the result is both a relief and a disappointment- a tall blonde, dressed in a turquoise pencil skirt, matching heels, and a loud floral blouse, whips off her sunglasses and smiles, chuckling in a low, sort of masculine laugh.

“Daniel LaRusso, you haven’t aged a day in twenty years!”
“Barbara?!” Daniel’s eyebrows shoot up as he’s pulled into a perfume clouded hug. “Wow- It’s, uh- it’s great to see you!”

She still has the same large forehead, tranquil eyebrows and wide, almond shaped eyes. A bit like a Mona Lisa, her expression some indefinite point between horribly bored and terribly amused. She had changed though, like the other few people he’d run into, liberated from the shackled boxes of high school identity. She was brighter. Radiant even.

“Honey, you look great! Is this yours?” She gestures around the room with her sunglasses, before returning the earpiece to her mouth, biting down on the white plastic with her pearlescent teeth. Probably veneers, Daniel thinks.

Daniel shrugs, pushing his tongue behind his top row of teeth. “Well, that’s the name on the building anyway-”

Barbara laughs her Encino Hills laugh, but really, she’s starting to charm him, her eyes sparkle warmly, something he’s not used to seeing from her, and it was a nice change.

“My wife Amanda and I both own it,” he amends. We opened three years ago.”

“Looks like it’s going well.” Barbara nods at the high, polished glass windows, the Lexus at the front of the showroom.

He nods. “Yeah, actually, it is. I mean, the money is here-” he shrugs. “You just have to earn people’s trust. We’re pretty good at that, I think.”

She reaches out, lays a hand on his arm. “Well, Mike was fantastic- my hair will never be the same!” she laughs, sweeping her hand over the top of her head, miming the wind.

Daniel grins, despite himself. “Thank you, I’ll let him know- hey, and you’ll love the car, it’s a lot of fun.”

“Good. Listen, sweetie, I know your wife is about to stab me with her eyes over there- gorgeous, by the way-” she winks over at Amanda, and Daniel cringes a little. “But she doesn’t have a thing to worry about, my husband Rich is at work, he’s a finance man, don’t ask me what he actually does for a living, it’s boring but it pays the bills, and then some-” she laughs in that low, bubbling way again. “But I’d love to take you two out, how about this Friday? You know, really catch up. Lemme get you my card, see and don’t bother trying to duck out, I know where to find you now, don’t I?”

“You really don’t have to do that-”

“We’ll catch up. You know I just saw Ali last month-”

“Really? What’s she up to?” Daniel lets his cover go, and he knows his curiosity has a ring of desperation to it.

Barbara winks, and slides a card into his pocket. “Well, you’ll just have to take me up to find out, now won’t you? Though we won’t go on about old flames, will we- but I see Suse all at the time, and sweet Jimmy, he’s such a doll, he’s got a whole pack of little boys. And I ran into Bobby awhile back-”

“Bobby Brown?”

She nods. “Mmmmmm. He’s losing that gorgeous hair, unfortunately. You’ll just die when I tell you what he’s doing these days.”
Daniel waits a beat. “But I’m guessing you won’t tell me till dinner, huh?”

She winks again. “You got it, baby. You know nothing in life ever comes free. Didn’t Ali Bear tell you I was a talker?” Sheila comes over with the final paperwork and liberates Daniel. He waves and promises to call, and retreats back to his office.

Daniel breaks the dinner news to Amanda, expecting a bit of a fight, but she shrugs easily. “They’re paying? Hell yeah, pick somewhere expensive, sounds like she likes to show off, judging by those shoes.”

Daniel’s not sure what to think of this, but calls the babysitter, and soon, his next Friday night is marked off. He hopes it’s worth missing the ballgame, Mike Piazza was up for free agency at the end of the season, and so this might be one of the last times to see him play. Plus they were playing the Phillies Friday. Daniel hates the Phillies.

Anyways. So that’s how Daniel found himself sitting next to Barbara at an absurdly priced Italian joint on Ventura Boulevard. The martinis, though, were fantastic. Barbara and Rich were actually both great, and Amanda seemed to be having a genuinely good time. Rich was soft-spoken, and from Ohio, originally, so his niceness was suspiciously genuine. They were currently laughing over something to do with both having worked at a college radio station. Daniel’s not sure because he’s pretty sucked into what Barbara is saying, long legs crossed, angled toward him, earnestly peppering him with high-school gossip.

What he was really trying to do was figure out how to tactfully steer this train back to who he was really interested in. He was getting the idea, though, that tact wasn’t really something Barbara would care about, or even register on her radar.

“Oh, the football player? She broke up with him halfway through college, Eric, wasn’t it? No, Eddie, it was Eddie. Drove that white Corvette- beautiful car. She was mad about him, but honestly, he wasn’t very bright. She was just so much smarter than the rest of us, you know, we should have known she’d be a doctor. I think she really loved medical school, really came into her own. She’s in Denver now, dating a ski instructor, or something. Strange name, sort of foreign sounding—”

“What about Johnny Lawrence?” Daniel blurts, throwing down all his cards. He was three martinis in anyway. Fuck it. “Is he still in the Valley?”

Barbara’s face lights up like a Christmas tree, like she’s just struck gold. “Oh yeah, baby you better believe it- he installed my pool filter last summer!”

Barbara practically puts Daniel’s expression on a plate and eats it up. “That’s right, honey. He’s blue collar now—” she lowers her voice. “And between you and me, besides the whole ‘poor boy’ thing he’s got going on, he’s still like the hottest...like seriously he’s like a 1970 Corvette Stingray LT-1-- never went out of style.”

“You know cars?” There are several things to unpack in this mess of information.

Barbara tilts her head, winks her now obviously characteristic wink. “What kinda woman doesn’t, honey, you should know that, what with your Amanda.”

Daniel grins, glancing over at his wife. “Yeah, she’s pretty great.”

“I’ll say- anyway, where was I?”

“Uh, Johnny Lawrence and a 1970 Stingray-”
"Oh yeah- like I was saying, a hot mess, that one. Both those things, I mean the eyes on that boy- are you kidding me? I mean, I wouldn’t have dated him, not with that attitude, and Ali was always the catch out of us anyways, they were like the ‘super couple-’” Barbara lets her mouth fall open in delight- “While they lasted, right?!?” She gives Daniel’s shoulder a playful little shove. “I still can’t believe you scooped her up, no offense honey, I don’t know what she was thinking, you probably weighed less than she did!”

Daniel’s not sure which part of that last bit was more insulting, the classism or the emasculation- but he ignores it, trying to get back to where he was going.

“Yeah, right. But Johnny- so, he’s working for a pool company, or...what?”

“Well, for the longest time, he was working for Bobby’s dad. They had a landscaping company, I think he sold it, though. You know I still see Bobby now and again, so I get updates.”

“So he’s not working for the landscaping company-” Daniel has given up all pretense. He feels like a cop in some corny movie, holding a bright light into Barbara’s eyes. Tell me everything you know about Johnny Lawrence!

“No, I don’t think so- I think with the pool thing, it was just a general fix-it company, I think a neighbor gave me the number-”

“Not his own company?”

“Pffff no, honey, Johnny could never handle his own business, he probably doesn’t even know how to pay his own taxes, he never was the brightest bulb in the drawer- no, he was working for this guy, I don’t remember his name. I don’t think I asked. But you know, the last big thing with Johnny was his mother. She passed a few years ago. Bobby called me, I couldn’t go, Rich and I were about to head to Chicago, Rich’s sister lives there-”

“Laura died?” Daniel doesn’t hide his shock.

Barbara starts, a little thrown. “You knew Laura?”

Daniel shakes his head, his brain buzzing. He feels a little sick. “I only met her once. She made an impression. She can’t have been very old-”

“She had Johnny young, darling, she was only maybe 50. Cancer, I think. Terrible. He was crushed, apparently, they were very close.”

“Jesus. That’s awful.”

“Anyway, I think he’s just doing odd jobs, but Bobby said he’s in some shitty apartment in Receda. Which is weird, I would have thought his mother would have left him all the money. But then, it never was hers. Ali always talked about that, it was the step-father’s money, some big movie producer. Lorimar, I think. He was always holding it over Johnny’s head, like nothing was ever truly his. The red Avanti, you probably remember that car. Johnny moved out, but Sid kept the car.”

Daniel is processing this. The food finally arrives, and he leaves his carbonara to the side. Barbara takes her fork up, twists it into her linguini.

“I’ll tell you another thing. I always thought he was a bit of a closet case.” Barbara bugs her eyes comically, pushing out another one of those low, bubbling laughs. “Say Bobby and I went on a double date, or something, we weren’t waiting on Ali to get ready, we were waiting on Johnny to get his hair just right.”
“Really?” Daniel pushes. He can’t help it, even if he does feel like a total slag, hanging off her every word, picking up scraps like a hound dog. After twenty years of wondering, Barbara is his only source for information on the guy he’s been thinking about all this time.

“Yeah, and I dunno. I guess...I always had the feeling something had happened between him and Bobby. I can’t tell you why. I mean, they were always close. I don’t know if you remember Suse’s 18th, but after that party, Johnny moved out. He went to Bobby’s place—”

“That night—” Daniel asks, disbelieving. That night. The night.

“Yeah.” Barbara nods, chewing her pasta, hand over her mouth. “Crazy, right?! Bobby said Johnny said he couldn’t take it anymore. Popped his stepdad right in the mouth, sent him to the hospital, I heard—”

“So...he was living with Bobby those last couple months—”

“Yeah. You might have noticed his sunny mood—” Barbara snorts, and rolls her eyes. “He was such an asshole to me after that, but Bobby and I split that summer anyway, so I never really saw him again. Not till the pool filter.”

“But what did you mean, you thought him and Bobby, were like—”

She shakes her head. “I really don’t know, hun. It’s probably nothing. Just a feeling I always had. They were sort of...touchy-feely, you know. Which he never was with anyone else, maybe except Ali. And Bobby was always so protective of him. I finally said something to Ali, and we had this like...weird sisterly bonding conversation over the fact our boyfriends might be...you know... But we never had any proof. We didn’t really talk about it after that, just the once.”

“Is he seeing anyone now?”

“No idea. I didn’t ask him about it. He was pretty embarrassed, I think. You know, sort of feeling his fall down the ladder, so to speak. I really put my foot in it, asking if he ever goes to the Club, I thought Barbara you cow why would you ask him that but anyway we had a nice chat. He was sort of gruff, but a real sweetie once I got him warmed up.”

She stops, as if on a thought. “Actually, honey, it’s funny, I think he asked about you! I didn’t know you were doing the car thing, so I didn’t have any information for him. But I’ve got his number, if you want it—”

“No, no,” Daniel waves his hand. “That’s okay. That might be...too weird. I don’t think he’d appreciate it.”

Barbara takes a breathing break, and sips her wine. But after a moment, she looks back over at Daniel, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“It’s funny, you two. Talk about the Prince and the Pauper.”

“About what?”

“Oh, you know- the book. Mark Twain. The rich prince-to-be and the poor peasant kid switch places for awhile. Bit like you two. Only, you didn’t switch back in the end. That’s how the book ends.”

“You’re not a reader, Daniel?” Rich calls softly from across the table, looking up from his lasagne. Amanda looks over, smiling, glowing from the wine and candlelight.
Daniel shakes his head. “No, I- I never learned to sit still that long. Always seemed like there was something else I should be doin’, you know.”

“Like what?” Barbara asks, and she’s also in that pleasantly numb, two-and-a-half-drinks-in place, a little glassy eyed, neck and hands moving a little slow as she adjusts her elbow on the table.

“Oh, the usual. Job, marriage, kids. The bills don’t pay themselves. I always thought if- if I had a family, I didn’t want them walkin’ uphill their whole life, you know. Maybe my kids’ll be spoiled someday, but they’ll- you know, they’ll never feel like- like they weren’t invited to the game they’re playing. If that makes any sense.” Daniel feels his face heat up a little. “I dunno, sorry, that’s a little too much, right, I’m a little drunk-”

He laughs it off but Amanda is looking at him tenderly, and Rich and Barb look a little sad, too. But it’s sort of sweet, when Barbara lays a hand over his, patting gently.

“You know, I should’ve said. That’s not quite how the book ends. The Prince gives the Pauper a good job, and they stay friends. Nobody has to go back to the hard times. It’s a happy ending.”

Daniel frowns. “Did you go to college for that, or something?”

Barbara lets out a loud, bright laugh. “Yes, can you believe it, a loud mouth like me, I was a lit major! I didn’t know what else to do in school, but I fell in love with my teaching assistant and just kept taking his classes, and whamo there I am, knee-deep in Melville and George Elliot. Rich didn’t believe me when I first met him, he said- “how the hell can you read, when you couldn’t possibly get a word in edgewise with yourself?” and of course I thought that was awfully clever.”

The dinner stretches on for awhile, and Daniel drinks a couple of waters to make himself feel better about driving home, but he’s still pleasantly buzzed all the way back to the Hills. He thinks briefly, about driving north of the Boulevard, up to the old stomping grounds, but knows Amanda wouldn’t be happy driving through Receda at night, and besides, they’d told the babysitter they would relieve her by 10:30. Hopefully, Samantha was asleep, and not throwing a screaming fit.

The next morning, he gets a text message (he’s still figuring out how to type these little messages out, without ending up with a bunch of nonsensical numbers and symbols) from Barbara.

It contains a phone number, and a simple message - this is johnnys number - you should call him! <3 babs

But he doesn’t call. The number sits on Daniel’s phone for three years, until he upgrades to a new smartphone. The guys at Best Buy aren’t able to salvage his old contacts, and so he starts anew, with a blank list, filling them in as he goes.

***

January 1998

Because he had yet to actually hit rock bottom, Johnny still bothered to put on a decent shirt for his
mother, a shirt Laura had bought for Johnny a year ago (Henley looks great on you! Black looks great on you! Black Henley looks really great on you!) but which he had, up until now, never bothered to wear. A fresh-from-the-shower Johnny pawed through his dismal closet and--within seconds of finding the one shirt his mother wouldn’t frown at--tore a rough little hole in the armpit by ripping the tag off.

Life was really hard sober which was why he didn’t bother to try too hard these days.

And so he hoped he looked decent sitting in the sun outside Café Bizou, showered, shaved, in his black henley, old jeans and black jacket. Sunglasses helped hide how tired he knew he looked. Life was, it turned out, a total bitch and exhausting without a lot of money. Waiting for Mom, Johnny thinks of that Tom Petty song where he says “I’m so tired of being tired” and wasn’t it just the damn truth.

“You look a little like Steve McQueen today,” Laura’s voice softer than usual, but she looks just as beautiful as usual but also a bit more tired which had been her trend for the past couple months. But still beautiful.

He kissed her cheek, and then Laura arranged herself in the patio seat opposite. Sighing with a mother’s contentment, she gave her son a once-over.

Sitting down, Johnny shook his head, “You used to say that to Dutch,” and it’s true that at certain angles Dutch really bore a striking resemblance. Dutch never wore turtlenecks, but he did love fast cars, beautiful women, and beautiful watches.

Laura laughed a little and then hummed, reaching for her menu. “And let me see those eyes, O my best beloved,” she’s winking without winking at him, her dimples coming out.

“Mom-”

“Johnny, let me see those baby blues, you’d do me good!” and then something about not being around forever--she didn't see his eyes roll--and so of course you really couldn’t say no to Laura when she asked like that.

And so he does take off the glasses and he knows she sees everything she needs to, but doesn't say anything which in Johnny's opinion is exactly what mothers should do. They just quietly know things.

The drinks arrive, the food arrives and everything is pretty much as pleasant as it could be. He should have known better.

"You remember that LaRusso boy, Johnny?"

Johnny was shaken out of his trance, had been enjoying the sunshine, the cool morning air, and this, his only day off of the week. Laying brick, mowing lawns, hanging drywall and whatever odd job he could lay his hands on--it was the kind of mindless drudge work he had never known as a kid. But it was life now, and at least every beer was hard earned. Sid, for the most part, had no hand in it, except for the unreasonable first and last month's rent required to lease a crummy little apartment in this town. Johnny had had to bend over to ask for help on that one, but he would pay the old bastard back some day. He would just have to live with himself. Unless of course Sid died first--Johnny could live with that too.

"What?" Johnny turned back to his mother, set his sweating beer down. Even as he asked, his brain was registering a name he tried pretty hard to avoid.
"LaRusso. That boy from the tournament."

"Why?" Whywhywhy. And now he had to stare down at his tacos, all the extra crap picked off because when you have to try making it on your own at eighteen, your tastes have to get simple pretty quick: peanut butter, canned soup, bologna fried in a cheap pan. These plus beer made up the majority of the Johnny Lawrence diet. Exercise and his mother's metabolism kept him from blowing up, but it all felt pretty pointless these days.

The tacos were just okay. K.I.S.S. it!! Keep It Simple Stupid Dutch used to say. But Fuck all Dutch knew, the loveable dumbass. He missed Dutch some days.

LaRusso, that name kept echoing through his life, just wouldn't go the hell away. He had seen LaRusso a few years ago (four, it was exactly four years ago) at the car lot in Tarzana. Johnny steered clear, naturally. Might have driven by once or twice, maybe.

"I just wondered whatever happened to him," and Laura sipped her mimosa innocently enough. She changes the subject, but then, god help him, she brings up the gay neighbors. This might have been prompted, Johnny thinks, by the rather overt attention paid to him by their flaming gay waiter. Laura was beyond being nice, she was even encouraging the little homo (Doesn't my son look nice in that shirt? I bought it for him! Johnny's actually very shy. He looks wonderful in blue too, don't you Johnny?) Johnny was about to get up and leave, but if he was honest Peter was doing a good job, wasn't hovering or winking or anything weird. It was just, you know, how he talked and laughed with Laura (all gays, be it known, automatically loved Laura, she was like their Streisand. But what did Johnny know about Streisand, just that the gays liked her, I mean, the lady did have a set of pipes, Johnny thinks, that's all…)

Anyways. Oh my god, the gay neighbors, "they're darling," she says, "and the absolute best neighbors we've ever had," yada yada yada about their goddamn rose garden, and surprisingly "even Sid likes them, and that's saying something." But Johnny knows Sid "likes" neighbors who are quiet, stay inside, and keep tidy lawns without being seen to do so. Really Sid doesn't actually "like" anything except money, but these gays must be invisible enough not to give a shit about. Because Johnny knows how much Sid loves complaining about "fags". Sober or drunk, Sid's colorful vocabulary covered the whole spectrum of humanity: fags, niggers, wops, polaks, wetbacks, micks, dykes. Never kikes obviously. But Johnny, even Johnny who will never join the political correctness wagon, never uses "fag" since Johnny spent most of his teenage years being called just that by Sid. Fucking Sid.

But Laura. Laura must have visited the gay neighbors (Laura said their names, but Johnny doesn't really care) some Sunday or other. She had that kind of heart to know without saying anything that it would mean a lot to a couple of queers to have someone like Laura acknowledge and welcome them to the neighborhood in broad daylight. Personally, Johnny couldn't give a shit who anyone had sex with, everyone should just keep that to themselves. Although, men were generally pretty disgusting. Johnny gets the lesbian thing--women are beautiful. But men? In general, men are gross. In general. He honestly doesn't know how Shannon tolerates some of his habits, and god knows what has kept Laura near Sid all these years. Well, money. Whatever. To each his own.

But good god, Mom could get on a subject. About the waiter again, "He's cute."

Johnny nearly chokes on his chicken taco. He asks a question he knows the answer to. "Who?"

"Peter the waiter of course! Don't you think?"

Back to his beer, god help him. "What do you mean, mom." It's not a true question, but then you
couldn't get around these things with Mom. You had to put your head down and plow right through like a man.

"I'm just saying. He's cute. You can admit when a boy is cute, can't you?"

This might be worse than their standard autopsy of how things were going with Shannon, otherwise known as the Why-You-Need-To-Dump-Shannon conversation.

Just power through. "I don't really notice stuff like that," and where oh where was good old Pete with the next round?

He can see the finish line as silence finally sets in, and he's about to bring up baseball like a genius. But Laura is quicker…

"That Daniel LaRusso was cute too."

Jesus Christ. Where the fuck was Peter, the traitor was probably flirting with another table. He'd trade Peter his own phone number for a Jack and Coke right now. Johnny palms his eyesockets instead.

"Mom--" just plead for mercy at this point.

"He reminded me of Bambi, I still remember those big brown eyes, and those dark lashes, loooooong for days! He was adorable! Kind of like a young Stallone. I tell you, those Italians--"

"LaRusso was a shrimp, he looked nothing like Stallone," and Johnny is picturing the Italian Ponyboy before he realizes he's falling into Laura's trap. Focus! "Anyway, I don't know, Mom. I think he's selling cars, or something."

Johnny looks up just in time to see his mother's whole face sort of perk up. Damn.

"Oh! Is he still in the Valley?"

"How should I know?"

"Well if you know he's selling cars--"

"Mom, lay off," and she sort of smirks knowingly.

"Okay, pal, my favorite son," which makes Johnny snort which makes Laura smile, and he could never be annoyed long.

But then…

"You know, I am thinking of trading in the Buick for something newer.."

Johnny felt his eyes open wider than his face, "You're crazy, the Skylark is an antique! That's a beautiful car! Why would you want to sell--" but then he narrows in on her, "I know what you're doing, Mom, even if I don't know why."

"Me?" Innocent face, oh baloney.

He just shakes his head, "How bout them Dodgers," forced out, but it makes Laura's dimples come out just as St. Peter arrives with his beer, and then Laura asks for "one check, please and thank you darling," so sweetly Johnny almost missed the way her face pales over as she pushes herself up out of the patio chair.
"Mom--" he's worried now, and she sits down just a moment longer.

"I'm fine, Johnny, just the sun today," but she hasn't been fine for a couple months now, little things, and Johnny now notices how little of the seared tuna steak she had eaten. And how little time they had it would turn out, how meaningful these little occasions would become in his memory, the Sunday lunches. He should have seen her more, but he didn't know, how could he? He should have known something.

He drops her off, but just before leaving she's kissing his cheek and sneaks in the last word, and Johnny doesn't even know how to respond: *You look that LaRusso boy up, Johnny. Make up for peace and time. I saw his mother last month, she was here visiting. Very nice woman. And she's out the car before you can say What the fuck?* But all he can do is drive off, and he's alone in his shithole crummy apartment again. How had she possibly remembered LaRusso, she'd met him exactly one time. The picture LaRusso took of Johnny and Laura at graduation sits on her mantle, and he would place it on his own after she died a few years later.

2001 is a bad year for everyone, September comes and goes. December is worse for Johnny because Laura dies quietly and nothing prepares him for this. It is beyond devastating. Johnny and a pregnant Shannon sit in the front row at the funeral along with Sid—he does his best to keep his distance. Only Bobby gets him through it all, and in the days after insists on staying with him so Johnny doesn't "do something stupid, buddy." Shannon is angry that Johnny keeps his distance, but these weeks are a blur—he wouldn't have been any use. Bobby lets him drink some days away, but his main instinct is just to not get out of bed. Or to stare at a TV for half a day. Stare at pictures for hours on end. Stare at a blank wall as he remembers her scent, her voice. Stare at the shopping cart as Bobby throws a few groceries in and he realizes acutely that he will never taste her cooking ever again. Hear her ringed finger sliding down the bannister at home, gentle movements in the kitchen.

They were dark days, and his best friend barely gets him through. Bobby had started on the couch, but he ended up sleeping in Johnny's bed like they had as kids, just being warm and there and not saying much. Having someone else breathing and moving in his home saved Johnny from himself. He’s better by February when Robby comes along, but the little kiddo with big green eyes doesn’t need Johnny now. He’d only make things worse, find some way to fuck it all up.

He doesn't want anything, any of her possessions, in the beginning; but then Sid sells her 1968 Buick Skylark (sky blue, Johnny had kept it running all these years) almost overnight, way before Johnny has the nerve to ask for it. This is another blow, but not one he can explain.

Material possessions don't seem to matter much except in the after, after the body is buried, after the lines of her face begin to fade just a little from memory. Even her voice slips a little in your mind. Suddenly you need the chair she sat in, the books she read, the kitchen knife she held, her earrings. You can't wear them, but she did. He doesn't get much off Sid, but a few old things. He gets photos, and an old leather jacket he'd never seen, but which he realizes later his father must have worn. Hanging in the back of her closet, hidden just so. He wants to cherish and trash it all at once. It goes in the back of his closet instead, looks like it might fit but he doesn't try it yet.

Two other things. A small photograph in particular, black and white. Two blonde heads. A beautiful girl, maybe seventeen, and a boy the same age about. He's handsome with light eyes, and there's that leather jacket, the most expensive thing in the picture, standing in front of a shack of a house. Back in Iowa, he realizes.

Laura had always told him she had no photographs of Johnny's father, "he left pretty quick, baby." But there's no doubt here--Johnny had had no idea he looked just like his father. He wishes he didn't. He immediately dismisses any resentment at Laura for hiding this, this one picture of the man (the
boy) who must have shattered her heart: knocked her up, married her, and then skedaddled who the
f*ck knew where. He looked like a nice kid here. She had never tolerated the blackening of Harry
Lawrence's name. All Johnny knew of Harry was that he drank too much, and that he hadn't stuck
around long enough to see Johnny born. And that he'd been a decent saxophone player, musical
talent of which Johnny inherited exactly zilch. Laura had been the more athletic of the two
apparently.

So a few old photographs, a leather jacket, and one other thing: an old jazz LP, *Coleman Hawkins:
Just You, Just Me*. He would have just shattered it but for an inscription in the upper corner:

To Laura,

I'm yours. Be mine?

Hope you like it, pal.

-Harry

He tried to swallow down this pain, whatever it was. He realizes distantly that tears are coming down
his face. Mom sometimes called him "pal" it was their odd endearment, never Sid's. And here's
where it was born, Mom keeping it alive just for him.

Be mine? As long as you're not pregnant, fucking hypocrite. Men could be such shit humans.
Anyways, something made him keep it, so this too went to the back of his closet. Johnny, after all,
didn't even own a record player anymore. Once in a music store he saw it on CD, but still couldn't
manage to pick it up. Some wounds never heal, and some songs cease to be played.

***

August 1994

Jerry liked Daniel to go by ‘Danny’ on the lot, and so his name tag said so, a laminated white
rectangle clipped to the lapel of his suit.

“I can’t wear this,” he’d told Jerry. “I look like I should be selling vacuum cleaners, what the hell
kinda car salesman wears a name tag?”

But Jerry had insisted, told Daniel “One less thing for the customer to remember, you want them
focused on the deal, Danny, not trying to remember your name.”
And it was Danny and not Daniel or even Dan, which he could have gotten used to, but Jerry said
his boyish looks were disarming, and so why not capitalize, press the advantage, use those big baby
brows to their full effect. “They’ll think they’re buying from their long lost son, just keep battin’
those eyelashes, kid, you’ll do alright.”

And so Daniel wore the name tag, sweating in his polyester suit in the late Los Angeles summer, and
introduced himself as ‘Danny’, and all because he needed this job, because if he didn’t make some
money quick he’d default on the business loan and the bank might start repossessing some of Mr.
Miyagi’s cars- he didn’t have to know about that, the chained up doors at Mr. Miyagi’s Little Trees
was enough for his sensei to deal with. Daniel was still waving off college applications from both
Miyagi and his mother (she was back in Jersey, years now, so she was an easy dodge) and he needed
to make money and he needed to make it fast, Mr. Miyagi wasn’t getting any younger and really,
they were both getting pretty sick of fish.

Reed Auto World in Tarzana was only the beginning. ‘Danny’ was already outselling Jerry, and the
other three sales guys on the lot. People liked Danny, and in his eight months there he’d already had
a handful of repeat customers, or referrals who didn’t want to talk to Mike or Don or Tommy, or
even Jerry Reed himself, they wanted to talk to Danny, because Danny had stayed an hour after
close to get the insurance lady to fax the updated insurance, and it was Danny who talked the bank
into dropping a couple points on the loan interest, and Danny who managed to order the factory
original floor mats that nobody even made anymore but who somehow tracked down a set by calling
an old company sales rep who knew a guy who knew a collector. Danny, although 25 years old
thanks, may have looked about 18 but he will go to bat for you, the customer, he will lay down on
the sales floor and let your wife use him as a welcome mat if her shoes were dusty, he will work
fifteen hour days on the regular and he will always answer the goddamn phone because Danny
LaRusso was a goddamn incredible salesman, and he wants your money- today!

Anyway. Daniel didn’t usually need any of that carlot jive talk, but he might today, because he was
sweating through his suit and Mr. Kamen wasn’t looking nearly impressed enough with the 1991
Chevrolet Caprice (it was white, and sure, it looked like a bathtub, but hey, the engine was the police
package- 200hp V8, 5.7L, and baby can she run!). It’s just as Daniel’s reaching deep for his
reserves of charm that he spots a blonde head across the lot and his train of thought comes to a neat,
screching halt.

“No fuckin’ way-” he mutters.

The San Fernando Valley was, admittedly, a small place. It was actually incredible they hadn’t run
into each other before now, not since graduation, and that was eleven ‘holy shit that’s more than a
decade’ years ago.

Mr. Kamen fiddles with the cockpit as Daniel pushes himself up from his casual lean on the driver’s
side window, he squints across the lot to where Mike is standing across from King Karate himself,
and he’s just that unmistakable, even at 75 yards.

“I’m just not sure about the color,” Mrs. Kamen remarks, drawing Daniel back down. “It’ll show
dust, Robert.”

Mr. Kamen ignores his wife. “Say, Danny, I think I’d like to see that Pontiac again-”

Daniel nods, watching Johnny across the lot, ballcap in hand as he mops his sleeve across his sweaty
brow. He’s wearing blue jeans and they look dirty - and his hair is cut a lot shorter than he
remembers. He wouldn’t have recognized him if Johnny Lawrence’s face wasn’t burned into his
memory- survivor’s trauma or something, he thinks, like the antelope could ever forget what the lion
looks like. He can see those pale cloudy eyes all the way from here, the sheen of sweat on his
forehead and cheekbones, skin a little pink. He’s wearing flannel too, blue flannel covered in dirt and maybe worn at the elbows, Daniel can’t tell from here, not for lack of trying, he knows he probably looks like a total yo-yo, staring with his mouth practically hung open. Johnny’s standing next to a beat up orange and white Ford truck, probably an ‘80 or an ‘81, the kind with the chrome F O R D spelled across the hood, and that big, square grille.

“Danny- the Pontiac?” Kamen cuts through Daniel’s thoughts again, and Daniel kicks himself for the distraction.

“Yeah- I mean sure! Sure you can, Mr. Kamen. Jerry’s got the keys, hold tight- d’you need some water? I’ll go get some water, gotta stay hydrated, right, that’s what they say-”

Daniel cuts across the lot to the tiny air-conditioned office. Jerry’s standing at the front desk, trying to get a good look down Karla’s shirt, and she’s chewing her pen, letting him, probably angling for a raise.

“Hey, hey, Jerry-”

“They bitin’ yet?”

“Nah, not yet, he wants to see the Pontiac again-”

“I want that Chevy gone, Danny-” Jerry pushes his black rimmed glasses down his greasy nose, but reaches for the pegboard behind the counter.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll sell it-” Daniel taps on the counter. “Hey, that guy talkin’ to Mike, what’s he lookin’ at? Lemme go over there and check in, you know Mike can’t close for shit-”

Jerry shakes his head and hands the Pontiac keys over the counter. “He’s not a customer, Danny. He works for a commercial client, we service the trucks for cheap.”

“What client?” Daniel bounces on his feet, gripping the keys, craning out the windows, he should probably wipe those down tonight, nobody else would do it.


“That guy though, does he bring the trucks in, usually?”

“I don’t know Danny, he’s just a laborer, I’ve never seen him before, and they all look the same anyway. Just get back out there. You move that Chevy today and I’ll let you go early.”

Daniel shakes his head, peeking over his shoulder to keep an eye on Mike and Johnny. “I need the money, Jerry. I’ll sell the Chevy and the Pontiac, how about that?”

Daniel points to the sky, like Babe Ruth calling the shot, and Jerry snickers, but he’s smiling, because even though there’s only three hours left in the day, he knows Daniel can do it.

Daniel skips out of the office, determined to get Kamen in the Pontiac and find an excuse to go over and talk to Johnny, however awkward that might be-

Daniel hands off the keys and remembers he promised water, and thinks he’ll send Karla over and take the opportunity to sneak over to Johnny and Mike- but he looks over, and all he sees is the taillights and a screen of exhaust, drifting across the hot, dusty lot, with Mike ambling back over, scratching at the back of his neck.
“Hey, Mike, what’d that guy want?”

“What all those commercial guys want, free labor - thinks he can come in and get a dent popped without tellin’ the boss, which means we don’t get paid- I told him, I’m not takin’ his rubber check, no freakin’ way-”

Mike continues on his way, muttering to himself, back to the air-conditioning, and Daniel remembers that once again, he’s forgotten the bottles of water, and left Mr. and Mrs. Kamen sitting in the sun to sweat.

He hoofs it back, and an hour later, the paperwork is signed on the white Chevy.

“How’d you close that one?” Jerry asks, handing the check over to Karla. “That car’s been sittin’ on the lot for a month, a total donkey.”

“I told his wife she looked good in white,” Daniel says. “It’ll match any outfit she puts on.”

Jerry tips his head back, laughs his wheezy laugh, and he even gets a crack of a smile out of Karla. Which is tough sometimes, even for Daniel.

The bell rings on the door, and Daniel turns. A middle-aged man with a mustache walks in, he stands up straight and wears cowboy boots. A trucker, or maybe just a wannabe cowboy.

“I’m not buying today,” he says. “Just looking for something for my daughter. I didn’t bring her, so don’t try to sell me anything.”

Daniel smiles, showing his crooked front teeth. “Hey, no problem.” He holds out his hand, shakes it. “I’ll just show you a few, I just got a beautiful blue ’92 Sunbird, it’s a great first car, and she’ll love the color, ocean blue. My name’s Danny, it’s really great to meet you…”

The man frowns, skeptically, but answers, “Darrell.” He hums, but shakes Daniel’s hand firmly. “Funny. You kinda remind me of my son. He’s off to college. He likes to talk.”

“Oh yeah, that’s great, where at?” Daniel smiles.

Darrell crosses his arms. “TCU.”

“That’s a good school, Fort Worth, right? I always wanted to go to Texas, best football programs in the country, am I right?”

Darrell purses his lips, but Daniel can see the twinkle in his dark brown eye. His arms uncross to rest on his hips.

“You don’t look like much of a football player.”

“Yeah, but I can kick a soccer ball around alright.” Daniel doesn’t think this guy would be too impressed with his karate title, so he saves that one for another day.

“My daughter plays soccer.” Darrell clears his throat, like he’s said too much. “I think you better just show me that Sunbird, son.”

“Yes sir, absolutely sir, I think you’re really gonna love it!” Daniel can feel the buzzing of the impending sale in the tips of his fingers, and he catches the keys from Karla.

Jerry just smiles, and shakes his head as Daniel holds the door open for Darrell, pointing to the sky behind his back.
Daniel talks some more and Darrell calls his daughter, she comes over in a taxi and she does love the color, and Darrell signs on the line a half-hour after close.

Daniel thinks, later, the blue color of the car was the same as Johnny’s jeans, and his flannel shirt, but not quite the same as his eyes, which were pretty hard to match, now that he thought about it, the kind of blue that didn’t exist on earth, only in the mid-afternoon California sky. You had to look up to see it, way up, till your neck popped.

He thinks some more, later that night, stretched out in his bedroom behind the paper walls- he thinks if he gets another chance, if Johnny comes again, he’ll run over right away, ask him what his life is like, if he still does karate, ask him where he lives and what he does and how his mother is and if he’d like to go grab a beer sometime, maybe right now-

But it’s all a pipe-dream, anyway. Johnny Lawrence would never want to be friends with him, not in any universe. They always were on opposite sides of the track.

***

May, 1987

Summer in the Valley was hot, and it had hit early this year, there was no getting around it. May was wrapping up, and Spring was most definitely over, and when the A/C gave up, Johnny and Bobby knew there wasn’t much point of rolling the windows up. So there they were, cruising down Victory Boulevard headed to the 405 in the company truck, ‘Brown & Son Landscaping’ printed on the side in sun beaten letters, letting the ninety-eight degree summer wind blow their hair around and lick the sweat from their sunburned shoulders and damp jeans. Bobby was looking as boyish as ever, pale skin slowly turning brown, regaining the life-force that Summer gives back to desk-beaten students.

No more studying at the campus library through dinnertime and weekends, no more blowing Johnny off for his new college friends. No, Johnny had Bobby by his side literally all day long, from breakfast before sunrise, all day digging out pools and laying walking paths and planting giant artichoke plants or whatever the fuck else was in style these days. Then pizza and beers in front of the TV for dinner, no excuses. It was glorious was what it was, and even just sitting next to him here in the truck after a full day’s work had Johnny vibrating with a subtle glee, despite the exhausting, sweaty day.

And Johnny, he knew it was selfish. He knew Bobby was chomping at the bit at UCLA, only 20 minutes from his parents’ house. He knew Bobby would love nothing more than to leave Johnny and their cozy little (well, it was little, anyway) apartment in Palms, and their traditional Saturday night booze fests in “San Berdoo” with Dutch and Tommy, the nights bleeding drunkenly and sleeplessly into Sunday mornings, the favorite pastime of drunk dialing Jimmy up at Stanford (he always answered if he was in, good ‘ol Jimmy missed them despite his snobby excitement to be at his fancy lawyer college). Johnny knew Bobby wanted more than that.

He just didn’t think it’d be so soon.
“You know there’s about a hundred schools in this town, you can’t find one of ‘em to teach your Bible crap here?” Johnny knows he sounds whiny, but how was he supposed to take news like this?

“I feel called, Johnny. I can’t explain it better than that.” Bobby sank languidly back into the seat, hand hanging over the steering wheel by his wrist, and Johnny can see the dark dirt jammed underneath his fingernails.

“Called to Colorado, huh.” Johnny stretches his legs down to the floor, fingers flexing over the door frame, flaking metallic orange paint. “What, Jesus doesn’t like palm trees?”

“They say you can hear God better there,” Bobby breaks into a radiant white smile, startling under his dark brown aviators. “Just the mountain breezes through the pine trees.”

Bible College. Fucking Bible College in Colorado. Why was Bobby doing this? Who the fuck knew, except Bobby, who seemed to have any number of indiscernible reasons for all the stupid shit he did. Like dating Barbara for so long. Smoking cigarettes for a summer, getting Johnny hooked, then up and quitting by fall, leaving Johnny stuck in a nicotine-filled ditch. Listening to Kreese and breaking LaRusso’s knee at the Tournament. Then throwing his belt down at Kreese’s feet and feeling the regret so keenly, that it was practically all he talked about, still, the few times he still got uproariously drunk with the rest of them.

Johnny shakes his head, squinting into the sunset, wishing he hadn’t left his sunglasses back at the warehouse.

“So you’re leavin’ me here with Dutch and Tommy.” Johnny clicks his tongue. “Perfect. I’ll be in jail this time next year. Thanks for that, really man-”

Bobby takes a hand off the wheel to shove Johnny playfully across the cab, and Johnny throws his hands up in mock defeat, Easy, Easy! Uncle, I say Uncle!

“It’s fine,” Bobby laughs, sandy hair flying around his forehead and cheekbones, slick and tan with sweat. “We can call Jimmy. He’ll bail you out. Hell, he’ll probably take your case-”

“He’s not that stupid-” Johnny cracks his neck from side to side, his shoulders were killing him, those 68lb retaining wall blocks were no joke after about 200 of them. The evening however, was looking up. A hot shower, a swig of whiskey to wash down a handful of aspirin, maybe a shared joint with Bobby. Macgyver marathon. Fuck, yeah.

“How are they doin’, anyway?”

“Who?”

“Dutch and Tommy. They both still up in SB?”

Johnny shrugs. “Yeah. Last I talked to Tommy, he was pissed ‘cause Dutch threw all his furniture in the dumpster-”

“What?!” Bobby’s forehead crinkles up prettily.

Johnny chuckles, letting his head rest back on the dusty gray upholstered seat. “He said, ‘it was all that Salvation Army cheap shit so I had to- I had to, Johnny-’” Johnny grins at the memory. “So he said he was gonna buy all new stuff, but he hasn’t gotten around to it, or he’s broke so they’re like, sitting on Tommy’s record crates instead of chairs-”

Bobby grips the wheel, laughing into the windshield. “Oh my god-”
“Like, they’re just sitting around on these plastic crates, high as fuck, watching The A-Team ‘cause Dutch did too much coke and went on a cleaning spree—”

“Those two,” Bobby shakes his head fondly. “God love ‘em—”

“See, you can’t say shit like that anymore, right, it’s weird- can you even say fuck?”

“Fuck, yeah.” Bobby grins. “I don’t start semester till August, anyway—”

“Hey, whoa, whoa, what is that?!” Johnny interrupts, heart in his throat.

Bobby slows the car down, and looks to where Johnny’s finger is pointing through the windshield. A hulking warehouse rose up over an otherwise empty gravel lot, composed mostly of rusted corrugated sheet metal and pane glass windows. A huge painted sign dominated the battered facade, looked like LaRusso had probably traced it out while standing on a wobbly ladder—Mr. Miyagi’s Little Trees. It was sort of painful to look at.

“You haven’t seen it yet? It’s been over a year. LaRusso and his sensei set it up. I don’t think they’re doin’ so hot, though...”

They roll slowly past, the windows and doors were closed up for the night, and all Johnny can think is.... what a piece of shit.

Bobby mirrors his thoughts, ducking around the steering wheel to get a better look, his sunglasses pushed up into his hair. “It’s pretty rough. Looks like a real heap, huh?”

Johnny sits in shock, eyes roving over the battered windows. He breathes, more than says, “Shit, he really went through with it, huh?”

“You knew about this?”

“No, I—” Johnny shakes himself. “Little twerp was always going on about those trees. Figures. They’ll be out of business in a year.”

Bobby lets the car idle for a minute, before shifting back into second, third, letting the wind blow back into the cab, Receda flying past the windows, giving way to Lake Balboa and the sprawling green of Beilenson Park.

“You ever see him around?” Bobby taps his fingers on the cracked plastic steering wheel. “LaRusso, I mean?”

Johnny shakes his head. “Nah.”

Bobby hums. “Maybe you should stop in sometime. Get yourself a little tree.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

Bobby grins, hair blowing in the evening wind, sun reflecting off his sunglasses. He shouts over the wind and the sun, “Matthew 5:24 - ‘Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.’”

“You want me to give him a present?”

“Forgiveness, Johnny.” Bobby grins, wide, and the heat of the Valley seems to give way, like the land itself was holding in a giant breath, and letting it go. “That’s the gift.”
June, 1985

The Valedictorian’s speech drones in Daniel’s ears, some blow-hard he’d never even seen before, up on stage jerking himself off with his own ego, pointlessly pontificating about the golden years of high school, about how thirty years from now, they’ll all be friends who would hold onto each other and the priceless experiences and values formed in the womb of West Valley High School in the golden years of 1984-85.

Daniel would bet this prick never got thrown down a ravine by a gang of dirt bikers, or humiliated at a soccer tryout by 5 guys bent on his personal social destruction.

The cause of that trouble - of all of his current troubles - sat mutely beside him, slouching in one of hundreds of metal and vinyl folding chairs stacked into repeating rows on the gym floor of West Valley High School. The Class of 1985 had over 400 students, so it was Daniel’s luck (good or bad) that there weren’t any other names between LAR and LAW. Thusly- two hours of either standing in line with Johnny Lawrence breathing down his neck, or sitting right next to him.

“So, uh...you probably heard about me and Ali.” Daniel shifts in his seat. Johnny keeps his gaze straight ahead.

“You were right about the car. She drove it all the way to UCLA to confess her love to some football player. Brought it back totally trashed. Some breakup, huh?” He huffs a laugh, slanting his eyes over at his humorless companion.

“Kind of like watching your girl pick a new date up on the beach, and getting cold-cocked when you try to talk to her about it.”

Daniel gives it a minute, pushes down his anger with his breath, the way Mr. Miyagi had taught him.

“Look. I wasn’t trying to talk about Ali-”

“Great opener.”

“Well I’ve been trying to talk to you for two months about the party- but all you do is ignore me- or I run right into ‘Bobby the Bodyguard-’”

“Listen, LaRusso,” and Daniel has his full attention now, the full brunt of the pale blue eyes and the roman-esque nose that Daniel’s seen bloody more times than not. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if you try to bring it up again, or tell anybody - you’re dead. I’ll kill you myself and let Dutch have the leftovers.”

Daniel’s gut drops, he doesn’t see any of the post-Tournament Johnny there, handing over the trophy with a note of determined pride in his voice, the Johnny he hoped he’d be seeing now that Kreese was gone and Cobra Kai was dead and in the ground.
“You’re serious. You’re really gonna bury this?”

Johnny just turns away, crosses his arms over his chest. “You heard me,” he says, in a cold, dead voice.

“Unbelievable.” Daniel shakes his head, turning fully to face the podium speech-maker, still in full bluster.

***

Daniel crosses the podium, and resists the temptation to dust his hands together, clap them loudly and separate himself from the awful memories of this year, and the disastrous results of the few good ones he’d managed to make. He can see Ali off to one side with her stuffy parents, and Barbara and Susan, and he knows he could never have fit in anyway, not in any suit he could afford.

He shoulders his way through the milling crowd, students holding rolled up diplomas, leaning into parents to face flashing bulbs, beaming smiles everywhere. Daniel wants none of this, despite his elevated status since the Tournament he doesn’t have a real friend in the place, not one in the hundreds here, no one except Miyagi, of course. Who should be here, if only Daniel could find him and his mother and drag them to the car, clean his hands of this place so he can pull his ticket from his desk drawer in his bedroom and get on that plane to Okinawa and forget the Valley for a few weeks, a few months, maybe longer.

He can still see the back of Johnny Lawrence’s blonde head, but Daniel’s eyes fall to a pretty woman next to him, blond with bright blue eyes. Not just pretty, beautiful, he thinks, like a Hollywood actress. Her hair fell over her back and shoulders in loose curls as she kept a hand protectively on Johnny’s elbow, her other hand on a black camera, the strap slung over one shoulder.

“Hey, let’s get a picture. Where’s -”

The woman, obviously Johnny’s mother, turned in circles until her seawater eyes landed right on Daniel.

“Hi-” Her smile nearly knocks Daniel unconscious. “Would you mind taking a picture of me and my son?” She asks in a soft, musical voice, proffering the camera, like Daniel had any choice.

“Uh, yeah-” Daniel answers, just as Johnny snaps, “Mom- no -”

She grabs Johnny around the shoulders, swings him to face Daniel and the camera. “Johnny, don’t be difficult-” And it takes all of Daniel’s self-discipline not to snort unattractively. “You only graduate from high school once, right?” She arranges the two of them, peeking up at the few inches Johnny had on her.

Daniel is torn between delight and horror, but pulls the camera up to hide his face, framing the two of them in the black box.

“Okay, say ‘Cheese Pizza’- hold on, where’s the button-”

“It’s the big round one on top, dumbass-”

“Johnny!”
“Hey, there we go! Ok, shoot!”

Daniel watches through the lens as a vein above Johnny’s eyebrow does something funny, and Daniel clicks off a few shots before his luck runs out- which isn’t long, when a few seconds later a heavy hand grips his shoulder in a vice from behind.

“Okay, I’ll take it from here, LaRusso-”

Bobby’s voice is soft but firm, and motions for the camera with his free hand.

Daniel shrugs out of his grip. “Alright, easy, knee-breaker, she just asked me for a picture is all-”

Bobby pales, but it’s Johnny’s mother’s voice who stops them both.

“LaRusso?” Her voice is all shock. “From the Tournament?”

Daniel hands the camera gingerly to Bobby, cheeks heating up. “Uh. Yes, ma’am. Mrs. Lawrence.”

“Laura Weinberg,” she says, holding out a hand, soft in Daniel’s own. “You can call me Laura.”

Weinberg, Daniel repeats in his head, and makes a note to ask his mother later.

He’s fully expecting a slap to the face or a severe dressing-down, anything but the warm, maternal smile. “The stories these boys tell, I thought you’d be a little bigger.”

Daniel puffs his chest and shoulders self-consciously. “I do alright.”

The smile deepens. “I’m sure you do. I was sorry to miss it- somebody forgot to tell me the date-”

“Mom-” Johnny’s bouncing on his toes in that nervous way of his. “Can we go -”

She adds, folding her hands in front of her, “You gave my son quite a shiner, Daniel.”

“Yes, ma’am. Mrs. Law- Er, Laura.” Daniel answers, hooked to her gaze. “I didn’t, uh, exactly waltz away myself.”

She laughs like bells. “You boys,” she sighs, “You don’t make it easy on your mothers, do you?”

Daniel nods awkwardly. “I guess not.”

Johnny’s eyes nearly roll to the back of his head. “Mom -”

Laura steps closer to Daniel, ignoring her son. “Is your Sensei here today? I didn’t get a chance to thank him for coming to my son’s rescue.”

“Jesus Christ -” Johnny turns away, looking up beseechingly at the heavenly gymnasium ceiling. Laura doesn’t seem to hear, directing her jewel-tone eyes straight at Daniel.

“Uh,” Daniel stumbles, distractedly. “Y-yeah, he’s over-”

“Daniel! There you are, I thought you’d skipped town, you think you’d be easy to spot in all this blonde hair, but it’s the hats - impossible!”

Daniel reluctantly pulls his eyes from a glowing Laura Weinberg and attempts to sink into the ground amidst Lucille LaRusso’s blustery entrance, but as this fails, he allows himself to be pulled limply into his mother’s arms, then passed over to Mr. Miyagi, who steadies him with knowing hands.
“Congratulations, Daniel-san. Should be proud-”

“Thanks, Mr. Miyagi- hey listen, somebody wants to meet you-”

Daniel barely gets an introduction out, and enjoys watching Miyagi get pulled uncharacteristically into her hypnotizing magnetism. Daniel hadn’t realized Mr. Miyagi even could blush, or stumble over his own words as Laura grips his strong, rough hands in her own small, pale ones, all beaming smile and crinkled eyes.

Daniel’s eyebrows almost float over his head, and he catches Johnny’s eye unexpectedly, just for a moment. _Here she goes_ , he can practically hear, before Johnny lets Bobby pull him back into the crowd, probably to join the other ex-Cobras.

Daniel looks back, and sees his mother has, of course, shoe-horned her way into the conversation.

“Quite a show they put on!” she laughs, and Daniel cringes at the volume, and studies the stark contrast between the two mothers. His own, loud and big-haired and hard-edged, against Laura’s soft-focus curves and meringue pie voice.

“Oh - and he’s left without me. He does that when I start to chatter on- I should probably go find him. It was lovely meeting you-” And the way she says it, Daniel can almost believe she actually means it.

She floats off after an exchange of farewells, and Daniel feels the collective sigh shared between the three of them, still watching the space she’d occupied, just a few moments before.

“Very pretty.” Mr. Miyagi nods decisively.

“Wow -” Lucille breathes, hands on her hips. “She was lovely- wasn’t she lovely, Daniel? Like a queen, or something. Like Grace Kelly, that’s who she reminded me of! And to think she mothered that big gorilla, I tell you, you _never can tell_ ! Your Cousin Louie, for example, that’s another one-”

Daniel tunes his mother out, craning over the crowd to catch a glimpse of Johnny and the Lovely Laura, but it’s all hats. A sea of green, square hats, as far as he can see, obscuring the Cobras from the crowd, the blondes from the brunettes, rich kids and poor kids, Encino brats and Receda rats - all one and the same.

***

April 12, 1985

Johnny gets home from the party just after midnight.

He sees the television blinking blue and white from the front windows. It would be pointless, then, wouldn’t it, to sneak up to his room. He is strangely not upset about this.

Sid doesn’t waste time, his pleased sneer zeroing in on any chinks in Johnny’s armor.
“What the hell happened to you, you look like shit!”

Johnny’s head buzzes ominously, like the reptilian half of his brain knows where this will go even if the other half doesn’t. He’s not quite here, but then he is also pretty high, which doesn’t hurt when it comes to interacting with Sid.

Laura’s usual, “Sid, please” is as effective as ever, as if she were a ghost in her own house--in Sid’s house. His mother looks cowed and Johnny wonders if this was what marriage was really about, if this was the price you pay giving yourself over to someone. Was she like this with his father, loving him so much he had to leave? Ali had never shown any signs of this weakness, Ali being almost the opposite of his mother. But then Ali also chucked him at the first sign of not coming first in Johnny’s life.

While Kreese had made sure female distractions were kept at a minimum for the Cobras, Johnny had thought he could immerse himself at the dojo and still keep Ali interested. But maybe he was incapable of finding the balance between loving too much on the one hand, and loving not quite enough on the other. Or maybe it was just in his blood, this incredible ability to fuck up everything and anything good that came into his life.

Johnny knows he is probably dripping water on the floor but can’t care now, can’t really think now.

“Went swimming.” Just keep moving, get upstairs, he needs a shower, needs to wash this whole fucking night right the fuck off.

Sid begins to stand up as if in anticipation of a Grand Ole Fight. It was perhaps his second favorite pastime after his other favorite which Johnny didn’t ever want to think about. “What, with those faggy friends of yours?”

Something snaps, and Johnny is already moving, training kicking in beautifully, and Sid is slumped back down where he was even before he can stand up properly from his king recliner. Sid appears to be knocked right the fuck out, red blood draining from his nose. Right.

Laura sort of screams but instead of checking Sid, she just freezes where she is, eyes fixed on Johnny who holds the pose, fist recocked in case the enemy recovers.

And then he is clear in his intentions, other options are options no longer, his road ahead of him had been cleared and waiting long ago, long before this night. Johnny moves with intent, he soldiers up the stairs to his room and throws a suitcase on the bed. This is the easiest thing he’s ever done.

Mom is at his bedroom door, and he knows the answer to the question before he’s even asked it. So he asks anyways.

His beautiful mother is crying, and really, she doesn’t have to say anything.

“We don’t need his money, mom. Please come with me. I’m not going to do this anymore.” He can feel his tears too, already knows she’ll never leave. “Mom-”

She crosses the room and reaches out, squeezes the cold skin of his forearms.

“You’re shaking.” She looks him up and down, tears stemming with motherly purpose. “Tell me what’s wrong. This isn’t just Sid, is it?”

“Please, we just need to go, we have to go-”

“What happened?” She pulls his chin around, sternly, and he can feel the night clock ticking, soon it
will be dawn and he needs to be out of this house, out of this skin-

“I just need to go, please mom, come with me-”

“Tell me what’s wrong, baby, I want to help you but you have to tell me what’s wrong -” she sobs at the end, a choked off thing, and she wipes at his tears with her thumbs.

He can’t stop them though, he remembers what Kreese always said about tears The moment those tears leave your eyes you lose but what was new there. He’s fucking high and he’s a loser and those are just the facts of life.

So he cries. “I-I can’t- I just messed it all up, it’s screwed up, and I’m screwed up-”

Laura pulls him down to the bed. “What’s screwed up? Is this...is this about Ali? Was she at the party tonight?” She ducks her head down, trying to catch his eye.

His head is still spinning, and he thinks he’s got to pull it to-fucking-gether , or he might just explode into about a million pieces, he can’t handle this skipping heart and the pounding head and the shame , and just the ache of it all.

“No, it wasn’t Ali, it wasn’t about her-”

Laura presses her lips together. She tries, quietly, carefully, “Is this...was this about Daniel LaRusso? Does it have to do with him?”

“What?” his head snaps around, he can feel his tears stop in some kind of fucked up survival response. “Why would you think that?”

“Oh, ” she says, “Oh, sweetie-” And it’s awful the way her face softens in that pitying way.

“Mom, stop -” he croaks.

“It’s okay, honey, it’s okay-”

“You’re not- I’m not - it’s not about him -”

“It- it’s all right. I’m not saying anything, we don’t have to say anything-” she pulls him into her chest, running her cool fingers through his hair and across his hot forehead. She rocks him for a minute, and somehow the tears for both of them stop, and she wipes the last salt from his eyes.

“I have to go,” he says. “I can’t stay here with him.”

She nods, pressing her lips together tightly and nodding, breathing a little unevenly.

“Can you call me tomorrow?” and she’s hugging him very tightly, he’s nodding into her shoulder. Even though he’s taller than her now, she makes him feel like a little kid again, and he hugs her back just as tight.

This feels like the end of everything, but also a beginning. He’s ashamed to be excited, but he can almost breathe for the first time in years, ever since Sid came into their lives. He just needs to leave this house, to go--anywhere. Bobby’s will be a start, and Daniel LaRusso will become a distant memory starting right now.

And someday soon Sid will die because he’s an old fuck, older than his beautiful mother, and the two of them will be where they were years ago--happy. It would all get better then; he would make it work.
April 11, 1985

The Tournament win brought with it many things. A fully blossomed relationship with Ali, for instance. Freddy Fernandez and the rest of the West Valley High Senior class trying to be his friend, and generally the admiration of his classmates, which was bewildering, after five months of being a social outcast. Having to hang out with Susan and Barbara.

Hanging out with Susan and Barbara didn’t mean any of them were friends - it just meant Daniel had to share breathing space with them, Barbara often giving Daniel a withering glare, and Susan literally wrinkling her nose at Daniel, as if he was something smelly her cat had dragged up the driveway. And if these two lovely ladies weren’t enough of a delight, Susan’s little sister had taken the opposite approach, and lurked a few feet away whenever Daniel was in sight, clutching her hands together and staring worshipfully at him. Not that this wasn’t flattering, but Tracey Blatt wasn’t exactly Farrah Fawcett.

Anyway. It was Susan’s birthday, and so Daniel found himself staring mournfully across the Blatt family’s balloon-infested backyard, trying to ignore Tracey fogging up her own glasses, leaning surreptitiously against a pomegranate bush.

Barbara also happened to have rekindled her “on again, off again” relationship with Bobby “illegal contact to the knee” Brown. So along with Ali, came Suse and Barbara, came Bobby, and of course, along with Bobby came the rest of the ex-Cobra Kai contingent.

Sans-Dutch, who seemed to have eschewed his love of learning for a different gang, whose hobbies included breaking and entering into people’s homes, smashing up windows of local businesses, grand theft auto, and general delinquency. Thankfully, and to Daniel’s never-ending relief (and ability to sleep at night), Dutch was currently locked up at Los Padrinos Juvenile detention center across town.

Bobby wasn’t actually that bad. He’d apologized to Daniel at least fifty times since December, and had a tendency to go out of his way to smile at Daniel between classes, wave cheerily at him in the hallways, and occasionally set his plastic lunch tray down across from Daniel and attempt awkward conversation, while Tommy shot Daniel daggers from the Cobra table. Mostly though, Tommy left Daniel alone, as did Jimmy, and strangest of all- Johnny Lawrence.

Despite his forthright passing-of-the-trophy moment, and his subsequent rescue by Miyagi, Johnny Lawrence had not returned to school excited to be Daniel’s friend. Neither had he returned to his old ways, shoving Daniel into lockers and pushing him bike-first down ravines. Instead Johnny had largely ignored Daniel, stalking across campus with his remaining phalanx of Cobras circled protectively.

“How the mighty have fallen,” Susan had sneered, and even Daniel’d felt a pang of sympathy. Barbara had grimaced, “Bobby says he hasn’t applied for any colleges.”

“Loser.” Susan snorted, and whisked a silent Ali away by the elbow, leaving Daniel leaning against his locker, free to study Johnny Lawrence a few lockers down, bruises peeking out from under his
collared polo shirt buttoned nearly to the top.

“Hey,” Daniel had said, jutting his chin out. Johnny’d looked up, then rolled his eyes and just walked away, like his time wasn’t worth the exchange. “Nice to see you, too.” Daniel muttered to himself, hands gripped around his backpack straps.

So it’s odd that as Daniel hands Ali another drink, her coat around his arm like a goddamn waiter, he looks up to see Johnny Lawrence ducking his head from side to side, trying to catch Daniel’s eye. Daniel frowns, and checks over his shoulder, only to look up to see Johnny beckoning him across the yard with an impatient wave of his hand, Bobby at his shoulder smiling encouragingly, hands shoved in his pockets.

“Hey, gimme a minute, would you?” Daniel puts an arm around Ali, and she spares a smile and a nod, and goes right back to gossiping with Barbara. He tosses her coat near the gift table and approaches the pair of them, huddled in the corner where the pool house abutted the back fence.

“Hey Daniel, how’s the knee?” Bobby glances down.

“Fine,” Daniel says, eyes on Johnny, who has turned to lean against the pool house, and is concentrating on rolling a joint, pressing the grass down with his index fingers and thumbs.

“Ever been high, LaRusso?” Johnny asks, voice low.

“Once. Or, maybe twice.” Daniel lies, shrugging his shoulders.

Johnny snorts, and dips his chin down to lick a stripe down the thin paper. “Right. Well this is the good stuff. You in or what?”

Daniel has never been high. He’s not sure about the idea of losing control over his own inhibitions. He’s seen his cousin Louie high a few times, down in the basement of the house in Newark, eyes bloodshot and laughing like a loon. And Louie...well. Louie was an idiot.

But Johnny Lawrence had essentially just issued a challenge, and Daniel LaRusso was compelled to answer.

“Yeah, just uh...let me tell Ali I’ll be gone a minute-”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “She and Babs’ll be bitchin’ about girl-shit for hours, she won’t even notice you’re gone.”

Bobby nods soberly.

Johnny rolls the joint around in his fingers, rubbing the seam of the paper. “She got you holdin’ her purse yet?”

“Yeah, ok, okay, where’re we smokin’ this stuff, right here?” Daniel rolls his shoulders, neck cracking.

“Easy, Balboa, we’re goin’ to my place, it’s empty tonight.”

“How far’s that?”

“Next street over, but we can hop the fence. Just a couple yards down.”

“And there’s not a catch? You guys aren’t gonna like, tie me to a chair and beat me up?”
Johnny quirks his eyebrows, and tucks the joint into his front pocket. “Not unless you want us to.”

Bobby rolls his eyes. “Take it easy on him, Johnny.”

“I can speak for myself, thanks.” Daniel bristles. “And no thanks, for the offer. Mr. T.” He adds, as an afterthought.

“Don’t insult me, LaRusso, I’d be Apollo Creed.”

“Yeah, yeah, ok Blondie, some Creed you’d make.”

Bobby looks around once, twice, then lifts himself up and over the back fence.

“You need a boost, LaRusso?” Johnny smirks. “Last I remember you weren’t so good at climbing fences.”

“Hey, bite me.” Daniel snaps, and pulls himself up and over the fence just fine, throwing a last look back at Ali. Johnny was right, she hadn’t noticed a thing.

After another yard, and a street over, Johnny leads the way up to a backyard fence with an electronic keypad, something Daniel’s never seen. They walk back through the darkening patio, and Daniel lets out a slow whistle. “Some house. What’s your old man do, collect taxes from the fiefdom?”

“He’s not my old man, and I don’t know what the shit’s comin’ outta your mouth, LaRusso.”

“Fiefdom, you know like the medieval-”

“You are such a fucking nerd-”

Bobby snorts, then shoots Daniel an apologetic look.

“Where’d you get this stuff anyway?”

“Dutch knows a guy in Baja.” Bobby answers, taking the joint from Johnny and lighting up. “They move this stuff over the border all the time.”

“That’s like...pretty illegal.” Daniel frowns.

“Oh my God, LaRusso,” Johnny grabs the joint from Bobby’s mouth, who is now coughing up smoke. “Think before stupid shit comes out of your mouth-“

“You know what, I don’t gotta take this shit from you guys, I’m outta here-”

Johnny grabs at his arm, but Daniel swings him off.

“Easy, easy-” Bobby says, pushing Johnny back at arm’s length.

“He’s the one being a dick here, I’m sorry but I don’t need this.”

“C’mon, Daniel,” Bobby pleads, looking back at Johnny. “We feel bad about everything. Kreese was wrong-“

“Jesus, Bobby, the whole Valley knows how sorry you are, I don’t need to hear it from you.”

Johnny looks only slightly contrite, wincing at Bobby’s elbow between his ribs.

“Yeah so I’m sorry, I guess,” Johnny blows smoke. He doesn’t sound sorry at all.
Daniel scoffs. “Right, about my ‘illegal kick’? I heard you mouthin’ off to Tommy about that, like I should have been disqualified.”

“It was illegal contact.” Johnny snaps. “The ref was wrong.”

“I think you’re forgetting about that elbow to my knee-”

“I got a warning-”

“What are you gonna do,” Daniel gets up in his face, and he can feel the hot anger wafting off Johnny. “Break my leg? What would Kreese tell you to do, Johnny?”

“HEY!” And the harshness in Bobby’s normally soft voice pulls them both out. “Chill the fuck out and have a smoke.” Bobby’s expression brooks no argument, his sweetness momentarily subsumed. Johnny snatches the joint and takes a deep toke before handing it over to Daniel, blowing out a long line of white smoke. The scent of it is heavy and cloying, and Daniel wonders how he gets himself into these situations.

He presses his lips around the damp paper and breathes in.

Johnny laughs, coughing. “You’ve got to inhale it, LaRusso, into your lungs-”

Daniel tries again, sucks in a big puff to the back of his throat, then opens his lungs up deeper, letting the hot, burning stuff into the core of his body.

He feels a searing burn deep in his trachea, and immediately his body rejects it, hacking the smoke back up in large, heaving coughs.

“Oh-” he coughs, “God, that’s,” he maybe feels part of his lungs slough off. “That really burns-” he bends over, head spinning.

“Jesus, you don’t do anything halfway, do you?” Johnny laughs, clearly delighted in Daniel’s pain.

Bobby takes the joint and slaps him on the back. “Just wait, you’re gonna have a lot of fun!”

Johnny takes another hit, bouncing on his toes. “Let’s get outta here, I’m bored outta my mind.”

Daniel waves off his next turn, staring down at his fingers, which feel off and rough, and a crown of warmth descends down over his temples, like warm jelly.

“Whoa,” he says, and blinks, rubbing his thumbs over each finger.

Bobby grins, makes an upward corkscrew motion with one hand. “Whew, whew, whew!”

Daniel coughs again, head light. “Hey, this is...crazy.” He laughs. “It’s like, it’s like my head-”

“Is high ?!” Johnny finishes, and Daniel looks up and their eyes lock into place. Johnny nods, and Daniel knows that for the first time, they are on the same plane of experience, and he thinks maybe Johnny could crawl into his head, step in through the window of his eyes. Something clicks into place, and Daniel wonders why they’ve been enemies all this time, if they can connect up so easily, like magnetic puzzle pieces.

Johnny quirks his eyebrows, and Daniel’s tongue starts to dry up, feeling heavy.

“Hey,” Johnny says, “C’mon, let’s walk down to the lake and you can show me your moves,
“LaRusso. Bobby can officiate.”

“No can do man,” Bobby shakes his head. “I gotta get back, Babs’ll kill me.”

Bobby leaves, but Daniel doesn’t really notice. He staggers backward, watching the stars breathe in and out over the top of Johnny’s house.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Johnny drifts into view, looking up, probably to see what was fascinating Daniel.

“Yeah,” Daniel breathes, and his head is on fire, every nerve hot and buzzing. “I feel weird.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. C’mon, Italian Stallion- or is it Italian Pony?” He takes a couple of mock punches, and Daniel waxes his fists off easily.

“Hey,” Daniel laughs, doubling over. “You think you’re pretty funny, don’t you Blondie?” but he follows Johnny over the fence, and the next one, and through the next three yards, laughing hysterically after the sound of barking dogs.

“They’re all those stupid little purse dogs,” Johnny shakes his head after jumping the last fence, revealing a large open area with a lake glinting darkly across the green lawn, sprinklers clicking in robotic circles.

“What park is this?”

“Back half of the Country Club. The Clubhouse is that way-” Johnny points, and Daniel notices the lace of Johnny’s shoe is untied, the camo printed high-tops. He wonders if one of those shoes left the dark bruise over his jaw that night after the Halloween dance, the one that left his jaw still clicking if he opened it too wide.

“You know,” Johnny continues, “where you tried on that plate of spaghetti?”

“Hey, that wasn’t- that’s wasn’t-,” Daniel feels the giggles well up in his stomach, he’s not even sure why, but Johnny’s already got tears in his eyes, doubled over.

“SO FUNNY - your face!”

Daniel throws his shoulder into Johnny’s stomach, sending them both tumbling in the grass. Johnny scrambles to his feet and they wrestle for a few minutes, and soon Daniel’s back is in the grass with 160 pounds of blonde asshole on his chest, but he manages to get a knee under his ribs and Johnny rolls off next to him, and pulls the joint out of his sock. They walk over to a willow tree near the lake, the long branches like slow dragging fingers on the water.

“Hey, lemme teach you something, you can do it with Ali, she’ll think it’s hot.”

“Ali doesn’t smoke.” Daniel stares at the skin over Johnny’s knuckles, roughed up from punching bags.

Johnny snorts. “She isn’t the goody two-shoes she’s telling you.”

Daniel jerks, momentarily sobered. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

Johnny shakes his head, pressing the joint back into shape and reaching for his lighter. “Just do yourself a favor and don’t let her anywhere near your car. She almost burned out the clutch on the Avanti. Twice.”

“I said don’t talk about her like that.”
“Whatever. Just c’mere. Pretend I’m me and you’re a girl.”

“What?”

“Just do it- I’ll take a hit, you open your mouth. I blow and you suck-”

“Johnny what the fuck-” But Johnny’s already inhaled, closed his lips and leaned over to Daniel. Daniel feels Johnny’s fingers wrap around the back of his neck and then their lips are pressed together, and Daniel opens his mouth partly out of instinct, partly to yell or say something- but the pressure of Johnny’s exhale hits the back of Daniel’s throat and he sucks the burning smoke down.

Johnny pulls back, grinning, licking his lips as Daniel continues to hack up his other lung. “Easy, Tiger.” he says with a teasing tone, slapping Daniel on the back. “C’mon. Let’s go for a swim.”

Daniel will remember, the next day, and years later, the surreal sight of 17 year old Johnny Lawrence peeling off his clothes down to his underwear, the moonlight reflecting off his skin and hair and the surface of the water. He will remember, later, the deep feeling of reluctance to show his own dark skin and sticky limbs, but after a few rejoinders (‘Don’t be a pussy, LaRusso, just take off your pants’), Daniel shucks off his shoes, socks, shirt and jeans, and stands on the wooden dock over the lake.

The warm evening breeze is satin-like over his skin. Closing his eyes, the sensations soak down into his pores, the breeze, the rough wood under his toes, the fragrant smell of the lake, the sound of water lapping against the dock. The moment is singular, his thoughts dim down to a low buzz, as close as he’s come to what Mr. Miyagi’s always harping on Daniel to understand- ‘Think too much, Daniel-san. Too much think mean no think at all. Mind too full, see? Clear mind.’

The whole Zen buddha stuff was working great until Daniel feels a rough shove from behind, followed by the cold, enveloping crash of water and Johnny’s hysterical laughter.

“HEY-” Daniel splutters, catching his breath, the cold shock of the water washing his skin with goosebumps. “Hey this is cold!”

Johnny jumps back in with a splash, and Daniel has to blink the water out of his eyes.

Johnny treads water in front of him, shoulders rolling in and out of the water, his blonde hair slicked back, Adonis-like.

“Lemme show you something.” Daniel says, because Johnny’s had the upper hand too long.

Daniel climbs the metal ladder out of the water, and stands, hands on his hips as Johnny hauls himself up onto the dock in one smooth, clean motion. Daniel shakes his head and calls him a show-off but tells Johnny how to stand, and talks him through a kata.

“Keep breathin’,” Daniel corrects. “You’re stiff as a board over there. You gotta stay loose.”

“This is stupid.” But he doesn't fall out of the stance, and Daniel reaches over to pull his elbow lower.

“This is how I beat you after two months of training and 40 less pounds. Must be somethin’ to it, right? Ok, step forward, twist your hips- yeah, like that!”

Johnny lets out a kiai, punching his elbow forward. “How’s that?” he asks, side-eyeing Daniel.

Daniel tries to keep his smile minimal. “Good,” he nods. “That’s pretty good.”
Johnny resets his stance and does it again, exuding the kind of power Daniel knows he’ll never be suited for, and feels a pang of jealousy.

“I’m, uh-” Johnny pauses, concentrates on pivoting his feet in the motion. “I am sorry. About the knee.”

Daniel leads the next move, swinging his wrists around his elbows. *Sand the floor,* he thinks.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Johnny follows, punching the air. “Sensei- Kreese, I mean. He was wrong. About everything.”

“Keep that elbow tucked. How’s you neck, anyway?”

“It’s fine.”

They get though the next kata, and the warm numbness in Daniel’s head has started to heat back up.

“Does this stuff last a long time?” They pivot around, stepping forward into a front kick.

Johnny laughs. “Yeah. Hours.”

Daniel shakes his head, breathes deeply. “Jesus. Alright, then.”

“You doin’ okay with it?”

“Oh, dandy.” Daniel replies. “Let’s uh, do the first one I showed you again.”

Johnny rolls his eyes, but widens his stance, resetting.

“Try to keep in sync with me.” Daniel says. “You don’t have to look right at me. Just...feel what I’m doing.”

“Is this some kinda voo-doo Miyagi shit?”

“Just try it, wise guy.”

They step, twist, elbow- *kiai!* Daniel looks over at Johnny, grinning. “See?!”

Johnny’s smiling, his hair is starting to dry and fall into his face and Daniel thinks he probably shouldn’t stare like that.

“C’mon, LaRusso. I need a break.” He flops down where he stands, and Daniel joins him, shoulder blades catching on the gaps between the damp planks of wood. They stare up at the sky, and Daniel sees once again the breath-like warping of the universe, the little white points of light moving in, and out. ‘*Breathe, Daniel-san. Breath is energy, is life- In, out- Is whole universe.*’

“Bobby said you’re not applying to colleges.” Daniel’s mouth blurs, avoiding consultation with his brain.

Daniel can feel Johnny’s shoulder pressing warmly into his arm, all the way down to the elbow.

“No.” Johnny swallows. “I’m basically a fucking idiot. I flunked the SAT. Mom’s all torn up about it, wants me to try again. But all I was good for was karate, and now that’s done. So really, I’m literally ‘good-for- nothing’.”
Johnny laughs. Daniel doesn’t, only turns to study the pinched expression, shifts so their hips are touching slightly, thinks the contact might be comforting. It’s comforting to him, anyway, grounding in a way since Daniel’s head is still floating about a foot over his body.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m not going to college either. I wanna help Mr. Miyagi run his bonsai shop.” He holds his hands up, painting the sky with a marquee. “Mr. Miyagi’s Little Trees. I’ve got it all figured out, there’s a space on Receda Boulevard.”

“Receda Boulevard?” Johnny turns his head skeptically, frowning.

“Yeah, yeah, but that area is up-and-coming, I’m telling you- I’ve got enough in my college fund for the lease, clean it up, make it look nice.”

“LaRusso, are you telling me you’re blowing the only money you have to open a tree shop in Receda with your karate master?”

“Yeah.”

Johnny raises up on one elbow, leaning over Daniel. “You’re something else.”

“Oh, yeah?” Daniel smiles, slow and wide.

“Yeah.” Johnny leans closer, and the moonlight catches in his eyes.

“Your eyes are really blue.”

“Oh, yeah?” Johnny smiles, playing along.

“Yeah,” Daniel feels soft and cool and electric all over. “Like, uh-” he swallows, the weed drying out his mouth. “Like water. California blue.”

“Are you feelin’ good, LaRusso?” Daniel can see little droplets of water still hanging onto his chest, and a dusting of freckles across his shoulders and collar bones.

“Yeah, Johnny.”

“You wanna feel even better?”

“What d’you mean?” Daniel’s smile shrinks, and he feels his heart speed up, and wonders if you can die from smoking too much grass, maybe have a heart attack, maybe your heart leaps right out of your chest, like the guy in Alien, which he wasn’t supposed to have seen, but which he had, sneaking into the theatre with Kevin and Kenny back in Newark.

“C’mon, Daniel. You know.”

Daniel sits up on his elbows, and Johnny has to back off a little so Daniel’s chin doesn’t hit him in the nose.

“Oh, I know, I know, do I? Why don’t you quit talkin’ like some kinda big shot and say what you mea-”

Johnny doesn’t say what he means, but he does do something that seems pretty purposeful, pressing his lips to Daniel’s for the second time that night, only this time there wasn’t smoke, only the aftertaste of it, that and a malty undercurrent of the beer Johnny drank at the party. There’s a tongue in his mouth and Daniel can only think that Ali never kissed like this, that this was not only different— all power and pressure and nothing sweet and tentative like Ali’s— but that this was actually better.
Way, way, better.

Johnny fumbles to get his knees under him and pushes Daniel back down on the dock, the skin of their chests pressed together, and Daniel is so very high, he doesn't know what to do with his hands, and so rests them atop Johnny’s shoulders, then up around his jaw and through his still-damp hair. He smells like lake water and salt and smoke and Daniel’s nerve endings are on fire, like he’d been dipped in gasoline instead of the lake and Johnny’d dropped a match from his fingers. It’s good, better than good, it’s the best he’s ever felt, until Johnny’s heavy hand traveling up his thigh jogs a thought loose from the back of his brain.

“Johnny,” he manages, tilting his mouth away, tapping at his shoulder. “Hey, Johnny-”

Johnny doesn’t stop, only groans and moves his mouth to Daniel’s neck to begin a concentrated effort to bite a sizeable hickey into his skin, and his hand moves up, to his hip, fingertips curling under the waistband of Daniel’s underwear.

Daniel shoves back, into his shoulders. “Johnny, stop-” and he does, immediately, sits up on his knees, eyes unfocused and lips pink and wet, staring down at Daniel in confusion.

“What’s the matter?”

Daniel gets to his feet and feels suddenly, horribly sober, standing there in his jockeys, wet and shivering. He steps around Johnny, has to use his shoulder to keep from falling back in the water, and stumbles back to dry land. He finds his jeans, his rolled up t-shirt now damp from the sprinklers still clicking away. He tries to get a leg through his pants, but his breathing has kicked up about a thousand notches, and he thinks he might be hyperventilating.

He looks up to find Johnny kneeling in front of him, still in his underwear.

“Hey, calm down-” Johnny tries to put a hand on him but Daniel bats it away with his forearm.

“W-What is this, some kinda setup? Some kinda, s-sick joke?” Daniel grips his knees, jeans half off and wrapped around one ankle.

Johnny sits back. “What are you talking about?”

“You got Tommy and Dutch hidin’ in the bushes, ready to take a picture or something?”

Johnny’s face flushes red, he looks pissed. “Dutch is in jail, you idiot, what are you talking about?”

“You know I, I’m just tryin’ to get through the year here, I’m sorry it didn’t work out with you and Ali, but I, I’m not-,” Daniel falls back on one hand, pushes himself to his feet, still trembling with the comedown, the crash of adrenaline.

“You think if you get her to think I’m a fag she’ll take you back? That’s, that’s sick you know, you don’t-” Daniel manages to get his other leg in his jeans, and gives up on his shoes and socks. His t-shirt is in one hand but he can’t figure out which way it goes, if it’s inside out, or all twisted up-

“What the fuck does this have to do with Ali? You need to sit down, you’re freaking me out-” Johnny’s face is pale now, halfway between fear and anger. “You can’t go back to the party like this.”

Daniel holds his head in his hands, and he can’t look at Johnny, not like that, wearing that expression and no shirt.
“I’m not, I need, I just need to go home.” He’s close to tears, but he damn well won’t cry in front of Johnny Lawrence. “I gotta go home, you can tell Ali- well she can get herself home.”

“Daniel-” Johnny calls, and grabs once more for his elbow. Daniel twists around instinctively and pops him in the jaw.

Daniel runs to the fence and climbs over it, out to the windy, dark paved road running quietly through Encino hills. He runs up the road to the Blatt house, and thanks God he decided to park on the street and not get blocked into the driveway, and drives home barefoot and shirtless.

He collapses into bed, head aching and falls almost immediately to sleep. The next morning his mother clucks reproachfully at the bruise on his neck.

“That Ali girl,” she says over breakfast, leaning across the table to flip Daniel’s collar back. “Not as nice as she looks, Daniel. You’ll have to watch her.” This leads to a horrible conversation about ‘protection’ and ‘responsibility’, and Daniel knows there will be a box of condoms sitting on his bed when he returns home, which he will stash in his nightstand, and probably not use for a long, long time.

He begs off early to spend all day at the dojo, and realizes too late that his new shoes are sitting by Encino lake.

He throws on his old, dirty converse, and runs out the door before his mother can ask about the missing shoes.

***

December 19, 1984

Johnny Lawrence drove himself home the night of the Tournament, a strange sense of relief flooding through his chest as he left the boys talking and smoking at Bobby’s house. Kreese they had left snarling on the asphalt; and Dutch—his brother, but always the wild card--Jimmy said Dutch just turned away as Kreese laid into Johnny-the-loser, Johnny who suddenly was nothing to Kreese. Less than nothing. Dutch just shook his head and walked home.

Thankfully, Mom and Sid were out late again. He killed the Studebaker Avanti in the driveway, suddenly too exhausted to move. He could have slept over at Bobby’s but couldn’t bear company now, could barely stand his own company now. LaRusso would be celebrating with his hero sensei, and with Ali. Johnny rubbed his palms over his face, wincing as he tilted his head back against the headrest. Jesus. His head was killing him, his neck was worse. There would be bruises tomorrow. He felt very old and very young all at once. He pulled his hands away from his face and stared down at his shaky palms, across them his own dry blood still smeared from the match. He must look like shit. Swallowing painfully, Johnny exited the car, heaving out and up on his feet, pausing to steady himself.
He keyed his way inside and headed for the fridge grabbing frozen peas and a Corona Extra, Sid’s latest trending poison. Johnny still didn’t particularly like the taste, but half the fun was stealing it from Sid anyway. Fuck Sid.

He was starving but couldn’t be bothered, just slowly made his way a bit unsteadily to his room, dumping his bag and flipping his own tv on before toeing off his shoes and crawling—jacket, jeans, and all—over his bed where he collapsed against soft pillows, peas laid gingerly across his neck, cold beer against his forehead. Star Trek’s Captain Kirk was romancing some babe in a tiny uniform dress, such a weird damn show, but way back Johnny remembered enjoying it just a few years ago, and realized suddenly he had hardly watched television like this since Cobra Kai took over his life. Was this what being a loser felt like?

He remembered his first Halloween with Sid, his mom had let him dress as Kirk--this was before he had friends, Johnny knows--and the withering look Sid had given him. Not far from Kreese tonight.

Kreese's voice echoing in his head, You're nothing, you lost, You're a loser

Johnny winces in memory as he drinks half his beer down, keeping his eyes closed, letting Kreese’s words sink in fully. He still felt the asphalt on his knees after being tossed down so easily, trying to catch his breath, knowing that LaRusso was watching every humiliation, this the worst of his life. Collapsed against a car, Kreese bent over in front of him, Johnny just felt numb. Movement in his periphery drew his eyes to LaRusso who was watching his sensei’s return with something like disbelief and pride.

Then LaRusso looked down, right at Johnny, right into him, and he felt something break a little inside. Johnny could never hide anything, his heart on his display with his flushed red cheeks. Daniel’s brow furrowed as if in disbelief or maybe something else.

Maybe at how pathetic Johnny looked sprawled at LaRusso's feet, and not for the first time that night. And yet if Johnny were honest, he knew there was sympathy there too, more than he deserved. Johnny had had to shut his eyes then because he already felt tears coming, they were there, and he almost thought he heard someone say his name just as the old Asian master called Daniel-san back to where he belonged, back with the good guys. How or when were you supposed to realize you weren't necessarily one of those?

He finishes his beer now which is good because he's too exhausted to hold it. Star Trek ends with Kirk shooting Spock a weird look after a weird back massage moment which was honestly pretty gay but also almost made Johnny smile but not quite yet.

Tomorrow Johnny will wake up with soppy peas on wet sheets, he will feel like a 60-yr old man who fell down a cliff or some stairs. He will have to dress in a way that conceals the marbling skin across his neck and shoulders. His nose is so tender. He will pull his headband off and put it where old things fade away, with kid photos and old toys. He will not be sure what to do after the last bell rings at school. Mom's conversation endless over the SAT he will test poorly on.

There is no horizon anymore.
Note on Geography: 'Encino Lake' here is a small recreational lake on the grounds of the Encino Oaks Country Club. It's fictional, as is the club, and is not to be confused with Lake Balboa, or Encino Reservoir. This would be somewhere in close proximity to Johnny, Ali, and the Blatt House in the Encino Hills, and presumably not too far from the future LaRusso house. So yes, this is the same dock/lake that Sam and Robby visit in the previous chapter.

ALSO THIS IS IMPORTANT!! TRACEY BLATT WAS THE INVENTION OF LIBERTINE PAST. Ok so we all know Counselor Blatt, and the actress has said that her canon name is Rachel (Dream-Beyond-the-Fantasy actually asked Erin Bradley Dangar on twitter! )

HOWEVER if you read Libertine's "Foreigner", you get the backstory to why we should all ignore that and pretend her name is Tracey Blatt. It was so goddamn funny I had to ask permission to borrow Tracey's first name.

Please god. Read all of LibertinePast's stuff. She deserves your comments and kudos and you deserve to read the funniest, Wittiest sexy banter that is present in everything she writes.
Part IV: The End (Different, But Same)

Chapter Summary

The End...

(Until the Epilogue ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“You are fettered,” said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

- Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*
Sunday morning
Brings the dawn in
It's just a restless feeling
By my side

Early dawning
Sunday morning
It's just the wasted years
So close behind

- Sunday Morning, The Velvet Underground

Daniel doesn’t recall much of the drive home. He parks the car somewhere in the dark driveway and floats through the front door, up the carpeted stairway. He drifts down the darkened hallway to Samantha’s room, sees her breathing heavily in a lump under her down comforter, and he sits lightly on the edge of the bed and kisses her cool temple, brushing her hair back. Heavy breathing pulls his
eyes downward- Robby is curled up on the floor under a pile of fleece blankets in the space between her bed and the far wall, his white socked feet peeking out from under the blankets, sneakers toed off to one side.

He eases the door shut and moves down the hallway to Anthony’s bedroom, Halo posters and cluttered desk lit dimly by the racecar nightlight Anthony still used. His son is passed out on his stomach, snoring softly, next to Amanda. She had cleaned off her makeup, and was wearing an old LaRusso Auto t-shirt and cotton pyjama bottoms. She’s laying on her side, a hand curled up close to the rise and fall of Anthony’s back.

He ends up in the empty master bedroom, peels off his clothes and holds his body under shower spray for an indefinite period of time, towels the water from his skin and dresses and sits on the bed, watching the alarm clock tick closer to four. He listens to the wind against the house, the weight of the walls settling around him. Over ten years in this house, he remembers signing the check for the deposit, more money than his mother had ever made in any one year. Remembers walking into its empty shell back then, setting down the heavy boxes and staring up at the high ceilings. So much room to hold all the life they were making. Room for Samantha’s toys and Anthony’s crib and Amanda’s desk and even a dojo for Daniel.

It was the beginning of everything, back then.

He gets up and walks back down the stairs and through the kitchen, passing the dining table. A stack of mail, Amanda’s laptop, one of Anthony’s gameboys. Daniel reaches out to thumb through an open notebook, the one full of lesson plans he’d given to Sam and Robby, and he recognizes Sam’s neat handwriting scrawled across pink and yellow post-it notes, footnotes and questions she’d marked to ask him about.

Close eye. Trust.

In the quiet dark of the kitchen Daniel closes his eyes, he thinks about choices and promises, about squished grapes in the middle of the road. He thinks about his daughter’s impossible blue eyes and his son’s laugh and the way the light had hit Amanda’s hair the first time he ever saw her, Mandy from the Lot, they used to joke.

Make perfect picture.

He thinks about Robby’s sad sideways smile. And the smell of Johnny Lawrence’s skin, and the taste of him, and his warm steady weight and the rare sound of his laughter, and his tears, too. He can see Johnny with his arms wrapped around Robby, see him soaking wet in the Pacific Ocean carrying Anthony on his back, see his wide surprised eyes as a fifteen-year-old Daniel pushed a blueberry pie into his chest. He can see him with Jimmy and Bobby carrying Tommy in a box across the brown grass at San Bernardino cemetery.

Wipe mind clean. Nothing exist, whole world.

He thinks about passions, about principles. About miracles, a weak roller off Mookie Wilson’s bat streaking across the field at Shea Stadium in 1986, hopping a freakish angle under Bill Buckner’s glove to send Ray Knight home. His own arms floating high above his head with a kick to Johnny Lawrence’s jaw that never should have landed, the angle was so impossible.

He can hear Mr. Miyagi’s voice, gently, see his hand cutting a low arc through the air, tracing out the shape of Daniel’s life: past, present, and future.

Open eye.
When he opens his eyes, the sun breaks through the kitchen window, and Amanda is leaning on the wall opposite, wrapped in a blanket, eyes soft and large.

*Remember picture?*

“We need to talk,” he says, voice a little shaky.

*Make like picture.*

***

Johnny wakes up in the dark.

Disoriented, he tries to turn over to see the alarm clock, but ends up twisted up in his sheets, and realizes he’s still buried down under his pillow and blankets. He throws the covers off with one arm, his limbs still heavy and sunken down into the mattress. Daylight slices into his eyes, and the alarm clock cheerily proclaims 11am.

He retreats back under the pillow, already missing the quiet, anesthetic blankness of sleep. He had slept without dreams, without sensation. Thoughtless and numb, like the time he’d gotten his wisdom teeth removed during Spring Break of his senior year. He’d missed all the beach parties that week, which was okay really, because he hadn’t had to watch LaRusso and Ali hanging off of each other, strolling down the shoreline, sweet as candy, enough to make him sick. Anyway, it’s like that now, waking up with no sense of elapsed time, like somebody had just sliced the last eight hours from memory, taped the remaining ends together with scotch tape. Gone.

Now, however, the memories from the night before are starting to creep in, little flashes of LaRusso’s stricken look and his tears and his pleading words, three words *I love you* hit the back of Johnny’s aching brain, and he groans and presses his hands to his ears. Five more *why wouldn’t you let me* and he can’t take these echoing thoughts, so he throws the rest of the covers off and heads to the shower and tries to cover the dynne of noise with the sound of water on the cheap plastic tub.

He walks straight back to his bedroom, uninterested in food, and thinks he might just crawl back under the covers for the rest of the day when he hears an insistent buzz from his phone on the nightstand. Stupid thing probably needed another update. Or maybe it’s LaRusso and his stupid un-shut-upable mouth. Johnny almost ignores it, but it might be Robby.

It isn’t Robby.

*From: Miguel, 11:08am - hey sensei u got kick practice today w/ anthony right? if u havnt left yet mind if i come along, feeling pretty bored and lame today. let me know mom made breakfast tacos this a.m. i can bring some over we can eat on the way.*

It’s a relief, really. Maybe he can go a whole day without having to deal with any fallout from the whole mess. With any luck, shit will have hit the fan at the LaRusso household and mini-LaRusso won’t show up for practice, and maybe by early afternoon Johnny can be back in front of the TV with a beer in his hand. Maybe Diaz will want to keep him company and they can be pathetic together.
He sighs, pinches his temples, sitting on his bed with a towel wrapped around his waist. He ignores Miguel and pulls up a new text, thumbs hovering over the little keyboard.

*Hey Robby just wanted to check on u make sure u and sam got home okay-*

He pauses, stomach rolling, empty and acidic. He thinks about the horrified look on Robby’s face, the stuttering way he’d talked to him last night, fingers wrapped around Samantha LaRusso’s wrist, arm taut and stretched out towards the door. He’d barely been able to look at Johnny.

*He’s done with you,* he thinks loathingly. *You messed it all up, just like you do with everything good.*

Johnny feels ill enough to delete the message, throw the phone down on the bed and head for the toilet. He bends over the cold porcelain, spine arched over the stale water, and tries to throw up, throat sore and aching. But nothing come up, he’s empty. He rubs the cold sweat from his forehead back into his hair, and feels his chest heaving, trying to summon something up, get something out -

Faintly, ears ringing, he hears the apartment door open and close, and soft footsteps pad closer until black and white converse sneakers appear in the corner of his vision. Someone crouches down, and lays a warm hand on his back.

“C’mon, Sensei,” Miguel gently mumbles, awkwardly patting his shoulder. “Let’s go. You don’t want to be late.”

***

Warm late-morning light filled Samantha’s room as Robby pushed the door open, a bowl of oatmeal in one hand, thumb wrapped around a banana in a tenuous grip, the other hand holding a chilly carton of coconut water. Easing the food onto the nightstand, Robby reaches a hand out to Samantha’s shoulder, shaking her gently.

“Sam,” he calls. “Breakfast-”

Robby hears a muffled groan, and Sam’s head disappears underneath her comforter. He sits down on the edge of the mattress and tries again.

“Sam, c’mon. You gotta eat something-”

“'m not hungry ,” the comforter says.

Robby breathes a little tentative laugh, loosening the tightness in his chest, still knotted up from the weight of the night previous. He reaches over and pulls back the covers just enough to drop the coconut water into the blanket cave.

“Drink up, LaRusso,” he pitches his voice for lightness. “You gotta re-hydrate.”

Sam finally pushes herself up into daylight, pressing the carton to her forehead, hair and remaining makeup still a mess. He watches her for a minute, just breathing, swallowing, with the cold cardboard pressed to her skin, eyes glued to her comforter.
“I didn’t dream any of that, did I?”

She looks up at him, eyelashes clumpy and black with mascara. Robby shakes his head, and Sam sets the drink down, fingers worrying at the watch still strapped around her wrist.

“I shouldn’t be mad at him.” She has to clear her throat, and Robby reaches over to crack open the water. She takes a drink, chin shaking minutely. “Thanks,” she whispers, and reaches out for the cap, screws it back shut, watery eyes staring out at the morning sun.

“You’re allowed to be mad, Sam.” His hand itches to brush her hair back, but they’re not like that anymore.

“I’m just like him. I did the same thing to you.” Her mouth pinches down in an unhappy line, eyes still low.

Robby tips his head back, already exhausted.

“It’s fine, Sam.”

Sam’s fingers are sprawled across her temples and forehead. “It’s not fine. I’ve been a coward. I...I knew I wasn’t over him. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

He turns from her wide blue eyes to the sun rising through the window, feels the warmth of this house around him, this family that has taken him in, pulled him into its embrace like he was blood, like he was family, when everything, everything else should have made him a stranger, even an enemy.

He finds, now, that the hurt of her rejection wasn’t quite as bad as he’d thought. Maybe it was because he’s been expecting it for months now, if he was honest with himself. And maybe it was because they were still here, in this house, this refuge- and she was looking at him like he still meant something.

“What are we gonna do, Robby?” she shakes her head, fingers once again rubbing over the watch strap, the water bottle forgotten.

He breathes, in and out, trying to push down the bad, find some calm. “You said last night. The world is how you make it, right?”

She looks up, eyes soft. “Yeah?”

“Then let’s make it how we want to make it,” he shakes his head. “No more lies. No more pretending.”

She nods, tears running down her face, getting out a choked off Yeah, despite her shaky smile and salt-red cheeks, and she pulls him in for a hug.

He thinks no matter what happens and no matter where she goes, he’ll always feel the earth shift under her feet, and he will always move his own weight in counterbalance.

***
Sam steps into the shower, turns the water all the way to hot, and lets the spray and the steam peel away the runny makeup and sweat, all of the previous night’s turmoil swirling down the drain. She towels off and dresses and looks herself over, wiping a clear streak across the foggy mirror. She hacks the tangles from her hair, sets the comb down and leans forward, staring into her own tired eyes. The oatmeal was starting to settle in her stomach, but her head was still aching dully, strange and light. The air around her felt staticky, off somehow. Like a film had been peeled back from over her vision.

*The world is how you make it,* she thinks again, and she knows, somehow, that this is one of the most important days of her life.

She opens the door, still soaking the water from her hair with a towel around her shoulders and finds her father on his knee in front of Robby and Anthony, her mother leaning on the doorframe, lips between her teeth. She walks into her mother’s embrace *hey sweetie* and pulls in the scent of warm lotion and soap and floral shampoo, and closes her eyes behind her mother’s cool fingers brushing her wet hair behind her ear.

She hears her father murmur into Anthony’s ear and press a kiss to his forehead, and he turns to Robby. Sam lets go of her mother’s hand and takes her father’s, and she sees her own soul looking back at her in his familiar brown eyes.

“We’re gonna be upstairs for a little while. Your mother and I need to talk,” he holds her hand in one of his, and Robby’s in the other. “I’ve made some mistakes…and I’ve lied…to you guys, and to myself. For a long time, now. It’s time to stop all of that.”

He swallows, and it almost breaks her, seeing him like this.

“No, no- it’s okay, baby. We’re gonna figure this out, alright?” He nods very quickly, and pulls her in for a hug, hands brushing across her face and down her arms. “But you guys’ll have to be on your own this morning, okay? Get out of the house, get your brother something to eat, use the credit card, whatever.”

He turns to Robby, pleading eyes. “Just take care of each other, okay? All three of you.”

Robby nods, and her father pulls him in for a hug, kissing his forehead in turn, and she catches a whispered *I’m so proud of you.*

Her mother gives Anthony a last hug and pulls them all in with a last kiss, and they’re gone, the last few minutes seem unreal, passed by in a blur.

Anthony wipes his eyes. His backpack was on the floor, she can see handwraps and a corner of his gi poking out from a gap in the zipper.

“You got class today?” she asks him. The house is quiet like death.

He stares at the door, looking a little shell-shocked. “Are they getting a divorce?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and picks up his backpack for him. “But I’ll drive you to your lesson. It’s
better than sitting around here.”

Anthony’s face wrinkles in disbelief, refreshingly normal.

“Seriously. You’re gonna drive me-- on a weekend?!”

“Yeah,” she nods. “And I want to talk to your Sensei.”

Anthony groans, but Robby’s eyes get very wide. “What? Sam, why?”

“I have questions,” she says, already walking through the house, picking up the key fob from the kitchen counter. She turns to Robby, fingerling the keys. “No more lies, Robby. No more pretending. Are you coming with me?”

Robby turns, looks back upstairs where her mom and dad would be, shut behind a solid oak door.

“I think I’ll stay here,” he finally answers, softly, hands in his pockets. “Just in case your dad needs something.”

She nods, and turns to Anthony. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

***

Breakfast hadn’t settled well.

Miguel didn’t want to drive (Miguel knew things about Johnny’s life, like how much the paint job had cost, and the ‘liability-only’ insurance policy Johnny had cheaped out on), and Johnny could see his fingers pressed white into the steering wheel. But Johnny’s head was still spinning, and the whiskey wasn’t mixing well with the tacos, and the morning light was shooting daggers to the back of his skull despite the blackout sunglasses.

So he makes Miguel drive, and Johnny tilts the seat as far back as possible and balls up his hoody and throws it over his face to try and block out the daylight. But Miguel’s stuttering foot on the brake pedal and stiff-armed driving skills just make him feel carsick, and so Johnny has to pull his seat back up and rest his forehead on the window until they finally pull into the strip-mall parking lot. Johnny thinks it’s finally over, closing his eyes in sweet relief, when the car suddenly jerks to a stomach-sloshing halt. Johnny’s about to yell at him, What the hell’s wrong with you?! but he sees pretty quickly what the problem is, sitting thirty or so feet in front of the idling Challenger’s black grill.

Anthony LaRusso is settled, fat ass down on a parking bumper, right in front of the dojo. But that’s not what caused Miguel’s foot to lock up on the brake pedal. The problem is Samantha LaRusso sitting right beside her brother, wearing no makeup and no sweet smile, just pale skin and those startling eyes.

“Oh shit,” Miguel hisses, gripping the wheel.

“Just park the damn car, Diaz.” Johnny would feel nervous, but he’s run quite the gamut in the past 24hrs, and he’s sick of feeling under the thumb of his own stupid emotions, and holy hell if there ever was a God- maybe Samantha LaRusso’s presence had more to do with Diaz than with Johnny.

These hopes are summarily dashed.
Johnny pushes up and out of the car, still safely hidden behind his sunglasses, duffel bag slung around his shoulder. Miguel jangles the keys nervously in his palm, trying to look cool. He clears his throat, and leans a hip awkwardly on the car, and Johnny barely manages not to swat at his head for risking a scratch.

“Hey, Sam,” he says, and Johnny’s proud of him for not stuttering. “What, uh. What are you doing here?”

Samantha stands and walks right up to Johnny, chin tilted up. She’s still gripping a set of keys between her fingers, and Johnny doesn’t miss the black and silver watch still strapped around her wrist.

“I need to talk to you.”

Fuck. Just his luck.

“Of course you do. Where’s your dad?”

“At home, talking to mom. He doesn’t know I’m here.”

Johnny tips his head back, giving a silent groan, and asks a probably non-existent God, whymewhywhymewhyme.

Instead he says, “Well that bodes well for me.”

He shuffles over to the door, taking the keys from Miguel, and lets the poor kid mumble awkwardly to both LaRusso. It takes him a minute to sort the door key from the confused, shiny metallic jumble, but he gets it, and steadies his hand to shove the key into the lock.

He grips the handle, but before he can turn the key over in the lock, the door pulls free.

“Goddammit,” he mutters. He must have forgotten to lock up after yesterday, probably too sloppy after almost a six-pack deep.

Funny, because he could’ve sworn the door was locked up tight when he left with Miguel. Memory, you know, he hears, Daniel’s voice echoing in his head. He shakes his thoughts clear, and pulls the door open, letting Diaz trip all over himself to hold the door for Sam and her brother. Suckup.

He shuffles ahead through the empty dojo, headache already steadily climbing back to full power. “Diaz can warm your brother up. Office is this way.”

He leads the fairer LaRusso back to the office, throws his bag off to one side, and throws a last longing look at the beer fridge. She shuts the door behind her, and folds herself down into the chair in front of the desk, hands spread on the tops of her thighs.

He sits, and sighs, and tosses his sunglasses reluctantly down on the desk.

“So,” he says. “Let’s get this over with.”

***
Daniel watches the Q7 pull out of the driveway, almost his whole world stacked neatly behind four doors and a pane of glass.

Amanda studies him, sitting with his elbows on his knees on the edge of the window seat across the room, beautiful and stark in a pair of soft jeans and a lightweight charcoal knit sweater she’d bought for his birthday five years ago. She thinks he looks so young, not far from the lanky dark-eyed sales manager she’d met at her first job out of college, working in the finance department at the BMW dealership. She would see him hot-stepping around the lot, loud-laughing, fast-talking and unbelievably cute. (And she didn’t know until their first date, nearly choking on sashimi—a full decade older than her and he looked barely legal!)

She paces, heart in her throat, and so tight now, she’s not sure how she’ll get through this, not sure she’ll actually be able to produce audible words.

“The-” she croaks, and has to swallow and breathe, concentrate on opening up her chest. “The worst. Out of all of this. It was the lying, Daniel.”

He nods, eyes wet, she can tell he was biting down on the insides of his cheeks, an old habit when he was angry or on the verge of tears. She keeps pacing, not giving him the room to speak, and it was heartbreaking too, that he knows her well enough to know the play she’s calling without instruction.

The opposite isn’t true, though. Now she’s wondering if she ever knew him at all.

She tells him as much.

“That’s not true,” he croaks out, and his eyes are so sad.

“This didn’t just happen--” she rounds on him, pushing the words through her gritted teeth. “You know...everything...about me. It’s always been like this, I’ve told you about every relationship I’ve ever had, how I grew up, all the shit with my family. I gave myself to you, and you’ve never done the same for me. I didn’t ask you because I knew there were things you didn’t want to tell me, and I respected that-- because I thought those things were in the past--”

“I thought they were in the past, I didn’t expect any of this--”

“You drove him home in May, Daniel, that was months ago-- and I knew something was up, I knew it, and I should have have trusted myself. I gave you every chance to tell me...and you never took it. I thought we were an open book by now, but you haven’t been the same since that dojo opened.”

He seems to absorb this, to his credit it seems like he’s actually listening to her. “I don’t...I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say to you. Just...tell me what you want to know. Anything, I’ll do it--”

“I don’t want an apology,” she circles the room again, cutting him off. “The only thing I want now is the truth. No bullshit, Daniel. No more lies.”

“Okay,” he nods, looking up at her. “Yes. I can do that.”

She rolls her lips between her teeth, pacing.

“When did it start?”

His mouth hangs open, before he catches up. “It was May, back in May, like you said. I took him home-”
She shakes her head. “No. I didn’t ask when you slept with him. When did it start?”

He breathes in and out, long and slow. “I...” he gapes for words.

“Daniel-” she snaps again, she’s about done--

“1985,” he shoots out, a few tears rolling now. “I was sixteen...some things happened, and I never dealt with it like I should have. I thought I could just...push it down, and all the good things in my life-- you, and the kids, and the job. I thought it would all balance out, and I could move on.” He chokes out the last few words, forehead in his hands again.

The moment is heavy with the truth, and she struggles for air in her corner of the room. Thirty years, she thinks. Nearly a lifetime.

When she speaks again, she can hear her own voice curl inward, tightening within her throat. “I just don’t know....why you thought you couldn't tell me.”

“I just...” he struggles, pushing away excuses, maybe looking for something that was deeply true. “I thought I was protecting you from my mistakes.”

“Do you love him?”

He just sits there, breathing for a minute.

She shakes her head. “Say it, Daniel, I need you to say it-”

“I know, and I know you’re frustrated, but I’m trying to tell you the truth, and it’s not just cut and dry, I do love you-”

“But-”

She can see him, his chest is caving in, he’s hanging on the edge of a cliff, fingers curled desperately over the edge. “I do love you-”

She needs to push him, Jesus she’s sick of doing all the work.

“Cut the bullshit, Daniel, I swear to God, one more lie to me, or to yourself, and I’ll take the kids and put them in the car, and I’ll drive them all the way to my parents’ house--”

“I love him.” And when he says it, finally-- it’s not like she expects. It’s not like it is in the movies, ecstatic, fingers gripping a radio under an open window; through the roar of a rainstorm; shouted across an airport terminal.

It’s whispered, painful-- because it means the end of so much.

“I wanna be with him. I want to teach karate, and I don’t want to lose you and the kids, and I want too much, and it’s all impossible. It’s selfish, I don’t know why it wasn’t enough, and I feel like-- I feel like I wish I could just wake up and be normal again. I don’t know...”

She shakes her head, a couple of tears starting. “Daniel...we have...all these curtains. This house, the kids, the business, the club- all these beautiful curtains hanging up. But it’s not a home--” Her voice rises, strained and cutting through the quiet morning air, “it’s not a marriage if you don’t want to be here--”

“I know,” he chokes, miserably.
She kneels down in front of him, and pulls his hands from his eyes, wrapping her cold fingers around his warm skin.

She remembers, eighteen year ago, Daniel falling to one knee in the middle of the dealership floor, he’d proposed to her half-apologetic, *I’m sorry it’s not more romantic, but I couldn’t wait, babe, I couldn’t wait to start my life with you.* Her mother had thrown a fit when Amanda told the story, proffering the diamond ring, several carats too small according to her father (they had never liked Daniel, which had always been part of his appeal).

She thinks, knowing Daniel, and knowing what she knows now, that his words back then could’ve been a lie. And she thinks equally that they could have been true. Maybe she’ll never know.

But.

*But.* She thinks of her beautiful daughter, and her beautiful son, and she can pick out every little part of them and label them-- *this one from Daniel and this piece from Amanda.* Samantha with her mother’s brain, her ability to keep a cool head and sometimes overthink problems into oblivion-- but the heart that beat in her chest was all her father’s, for better or worse, unable to not feel *everything.* Anthony’s defensive humor came from her, most of his personality is hers, terrifyingly enough-- but his cockiness, and his courage-- these she can safely say came from Daniel. *Oh,* and some pieces are just so purely *Samantha* and *Anthony,* she thinks maybe they just dropped right from the sky. It was all a sublime, indescribable chemistry, the way one person emerges from two.

The opposite reaction is happening, now. One marriage dissolving back to two individuals. *Unstable bonds,* she remembers, months ago flipping through Samantha’s chemistry textbook. Something about valence shells that were too empty, or too full.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I wanted it to work,” he whispers. “I never wanted out, it wasn’t like that.” He squeezes her hands, head tilted in regret.

She nods, face wet. It sounded like the truth. And for all of the lies these past few months, maybe there was another part of it all. That all this time, all this time she’d known the truth, and only hadn’t wanted to admit it. Every time he’d said his name-- (*Johnny* this, and *Johnny* that, and hadn’t the name sounded strange coming out of his mouth, almost like he was careful to shave something musical from two syllables that should have been so simple?)-- *every time* the truth was written all over his face and cut into the color of his words. It was right there for the taking, if only she’d wanted to reach out and grab it. Instead she’d turned her head the other way, maybe bought them a little more time.

She breathes in, and out, and remembers the rolling green vineyards of Mendocino County, the smell of pear trees, a black lab they’d had when she was a kid, old and gray whiskered and copper-eyed. Long flat roads through cathedrals of redwood trees, and the logging trucks rumbling down highway 101. The light that lit her childhood was always a burnished gold, because it ages, doesn’t it, thirty-some years down the dusty old road. Life felt so long, sometimes.

She finds her lips moving. “My mother told me once, that I had a spirit made of water. That I could fit into whatever shape you poured me into. She said, *‘You’ll never be the happiest girl in the room, Mandy, but you’ll never be the saddest, either.’* I never had to struggle with balance, like you. And it was easy to fit into this life.”

She lets go of one of his hands so she can wipe the tears from her own face. The sun is breaking through the clouds outside, turning the pool a deep-hearted teal, the same color of her daughter’s eyes, given to Amanda by her own parents.
“I love you,” she whispers, and looks up. “But I won’t keep your heart tied down. Or mine. We make a plan. Today. You tell me what you want, and I tell you what I want, and we make a plan. Because we’re out of time. There isn’t any more to waste.”

He squeezes her hands, his skin hot like fire.

She hopes Johnny Lawrence has a soul of earth; a deep enough heat sink to keep her husband’s burning heart alight, and firm enough to keep the soles of his feet steady and sure.

She thinks she should feel a deeper sadness, that she was coming to the end of this long journey with him.

Instead, she reaches deep and feels a little stir of cool anticipation in the river of her soul. She was already moving downstream, turning around the next bend in the river.

***

She looks like her mother.

And younger this time, without all the makeup and eyeliner. Paler, drawn, less polished. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, she wore a plain navy t-shirt and jeans that gave her blue eyes a bruised, haunted depth, staring sidelong across the room.

Johnny’s not sure what to say, so he doesn’t for awhile, just taking cautious glances at her profile, eyes dropping to the watch dangling loose around her wrist.

“How’s Robby?” His mouth opens of its own accord when the silence becomes intolerable.

She bites at the inside of her cheek, and Johnny’s chest spasms like her dad, just like her dad and Johnny wishes keenly he’d stayed under the safety of his covers.

“I cheated on him,” she says, closed fist angled warily in front of her mouth. Her voice is hollowed out, quieter than he’d expected.

“Oh. Uh--”

“With Miguel.”

*It happens, or welcome to high school, kid*-- a few responses click through Johnny’s mind, as if this were a normal conversation, maybe between a student and teacher, or a father and daughter.

“How’s he, uh...taking it? Robby, I mean.”

“He says he’ll forgive me. That we’ll stay friends.” Her mouth presses down. “I’ve never had a friend like that.”

“He’s a good kid,” he says dumbly, feeling stupidly like he’s gotten away with it all. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

“It seems like I never do the right thing.” Her eyes travel down, still avoidant. “Aisha probably told
She fidgets around for a minute, and this really is pretty intolerable, a morose teenage girl across from him, either fishing for compliments or sympathy or a verbal beat-down, he’s not really sure.

“Dad was always easy on me,” she swallows, still staring at her lap. “Sometimes I wish he would’ve been tougher. Maybe I’d be stronger. A better person. I...I’m afraid, a lot of the time. Of what people think about me. If they like me.”

“He loves you,” Johnny blurts, which gets her eyes finally up, like deep-blue bullets.

“Robby thinks he’s going to lose us.” She peers at him. He slouches down in his chair.

“Well,” he grimaces, “that’s up to you guys I guess.”

“There’s a lot out of my control,” he sees her eyes light up, a little flicker of anger.

“You should really just talk about this with your dad.” Johnny glances longingly at the beer fridge.

Sam leans in, incredulous, “You don’t get to just bow out here—”

“Kid, I’m trying to get out of your way. I wanna make things right--”

“This is happening, and it’s happening to all of us and we have to help each other get through it and figure out how we...how we...” She gestures, hands wheeling, “keep it together and make it work--”

Johnny snorts. His headache has gotten worse. “That’s adorable. Talk to me in thirty years, you should be over the disappointment by then.”

“I don’t think you’ve gotten over a thing in your whole life,” she snaps.

Johnny bites his tongue, keeping himself in check, because this was all getting out of hand. “Look... part of this is your business because it’s your family. But you don’t know me.”

“You’re afraid,” she leans forward. “My dad’s afraid, too. Everybody is, especially of the truth, or none of us would be here.”

“You want the truth?” Johnny rolls his jaw, steadying his voice, regretting what he’s about to say. “Fine. The truth is that nobody gets over anything. And people use each other in all kinds of ways, whether they know it or not, and they fuck each other over to get what they want, and most of the time it doesn’t work. You use people, and they use you, and somebody always gets hurt. Being an adult means you ignore it. You stop thinking about it so you can keep going. That’s all it is.”

“So growing up means your heart dies. You kill it.”

“Or it kills you. One or the other, you pick,” Johnny ends harshly, more bitterly than he means.

She ignores him, leans forward, jaw clenched. “Whatever this is with my dad. It didn’t just start-”

“Look,” Johnny fumbles, “Whatever you think- it’s- it wasn’t anything, it’s over-”

“Is it?” she pushes. “Do you love him? Does he love you?”

Ohhh no, Johnny can’t even say this to himself without a physical cringe, he’s not going to spill his guts to Daniel LaRusso’s tearful teenage daughter. He really needs that beer now. “ That doesn’t, that’s not-- that doesn’t matter--”
“It’s the only thing that matters—”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. You know, you’re just so goddamn young. You have no idea, and you won’t, not for decades—”

“That’s bullshit, that’s just an excuse that adults use— you have today, you have choices just like I do, you could die tomorrow and so could I and it’s the only thing that matters —”

But all this teenage We can change the world! crap is wearing on Johnny, and he just sits there because it’s the least he can do for Samantha LaRusso since he’s pretty much ruined her childhood with this whole gay affair. He deflates, calls uncle, whatever.

“What do you want from me? You want to give me the homewrecker lecture? You want to tell me to stay away from your dad? Your brother? It doesn’t matter, it’s done already.”

“I want the truth,” she hisses, standing up and pushing her chair back. “I want you to answer my questions without hiding from yourself. I want one goddamn adult around here to act like one. I want somebody to show me it’s possible to go through life without feeling like a coward, without lying to yourself until it sounds like the truth— I want to know that it’s possible to be brave, to say you love somebody and mean it, to say what’s important and take it— and keep it— and not let it go at the first sign that it’s not exactly what the world expects from you.

“I want to know someone around here who can walk around with their chin up, and look their kids in the eye, and say ‘This is how you live. This is how you do it, and I’m not ashamed of it because this is my heart and this is who I am and this is the truth, and I don’t have to be afraid anymore.’ I want something real. I want to know there’s a point to all of this.”

She’s heaving, pacing, before she stops to breathe. She looks like her dad, all worked up.

He’s supposed to say something here, so he does. “To what.”

“Life,” she whispers, chin shaking a little. “Getting out of bed to go to school, to go to college to get a job I probably hate, to make enough money to buy a house. Find somebody to marry, to have kids. All so I can get tired of my marriage and run into somebody from another life who reminds me of who I used to be. Cheat on my husband and lie so I can get away from a family that makes me feel like I can’t breathe—”

“Jesus,” Johnny groans under his hands. “Look, your dad...whatever happened with him and me...you’ve got to believe it has nothing to do with you, or your brother, or even your mom. He never meant to hurt any of you. We made a mistake, but he made the right choice in the end. I’m sure he’s making it right with your mother right now, and you’re all gonna be okay. Things’ll go back to normal.”

“Normal was a lie,” she shakes her head.

“It’s not your choice. That’s up to them. Look, just. Take your brother and go home, you need to be there when your parents get done.”

She sinks down into the back of her chair, deflated, almost defeated.

“Look, I...” he shakes his head, leaning forward, regretting everything, every bit of the past few months, seeing this poor girl curled in on herself.

“You shouldn’t listen to me. I’m fucking old and bitter.”
She leans her elbows on her knees, breathing.

“It’s gonna be fine,” he pleads. “C’mon. You should get your brother out of here, your parents won’t want you here--”

She looks up at him, pins him to the wall with that deep blue stare. “Do you love him?”

He wants to say No, he wants to say I don’t know, or hedge. Anything to avoid cracking open that raw, aching kernel of what just might be the awful truth, sitting darkly near the center of his chest.

He remembers being eighteen, pissed off at the world, asking his mother for the millionth time why don’t you leave him? Why would you be with somebody you don’t love? and her constant echo back of, ‘It’s my choice, Johnny, it’s my choice.’

Years down the line, after a heartbreak or two he thought he’d finally understood her. Understood that sometimes being an adult means being unhappy by your own hand-- that sometimes you pick your own poison, that sometimes protecting your family means you stay away even if all you really want is to run and grab them and never let go. It meant knowing they were better off without you. This sobering, depressing thought had finally settled over him in middle age, that maybe his father had made the same call, keeping Johnny’s best interests at heart. A very mature call. The kind of call only an adult was capable of making. And there was sort of a dark appeal to the thought, wasn’t there? ‘Like father, like son.’

But the way she’s looking at him now-- it all rings hollow, and he wonders why he never grabbed his mother by the wrist and dragged her out of that miserable old house and hit the road and never turned back. He knows now that his mother had been wrong-- she’d spent the better part of her youth miserable and loveless-- and the abject tragedy of that sinks down on Johnny’s shoulders like a yoke, and he knows the only way forward is the path illuminated by Samantha LaRusso’s raw blue gaze.

Her heart wasn’t dead yet, and he’s only now seeing the moment to save his own.

He thinks the words in his head, and he thinks he can do it and damn the consequences and anyway she had asked for the truth-- had demanded it--

Miguel pushes into the office.

“Sensei--” he pauses, catching Johnny’s glare. Probably his red eyes, too. “Um, sorry, it’s just-- did you ask Sensei Kreese to come back?”

“What? No-- ” Shocked, Johnny pushes his chair back, a black shiver running down his spine.

“Well I’m pretty sure he’s here, in the back room.”

Johnny stands, walks to the center of the empty dojo, and looks toward the back wall. He can hear the bellow of voices conducted through the closed metal doors. He feels the shiver again, the slow creep of dread twisting through his belly.

He can feel Miguel at his shoulder, and Sam and Anthony hovering nearby.

“Stay in the office,” he tells Miguel, the words drop tonelessly from his mouth, eyes still on the back wall. “Lock the door.”

Miguel nods, and tugs a protesting Samantha back by the elbow. Johnny hears them argue, at a distance, his feet already dragging slow and inevitable toward the door; back into the dark, dim
green; back into the belly of the beast.

***

“Sam, stop--”

Miguel’s day wasn’t going great so far.

“I just want to hear--”

“Sensei Lawrence said to keep the door locked, you need to get back.”

“Sensei Lawrence isn’t my Sensei, knock it off, Miguel.”

Really not great. He’d fled the party last night with Aisha, grateful they’d parked almost a half-mile down the road from Moon’s house, making their getaway relatively easy and inconspicuous amid the chaotic exodus. And his morning had actually started a little giddy, anticipation sparking under his skin, lips still burning from the kiss with Sam.

But as the sun rose and the events of the night began to solidify, the spark was quickly extinguished as his thoughts turned guiltily back to Tory, and that whole clusterfuck of a situation.

He still hadn’t heard a word from her. And at this point, he wasn’t even really sure where they stood. It seemed like the past month she was blowing him off constantly, for work, or extra practice, or even smoking weed with Hawk and Mitch, which she knew he and Aisha had no interest in. Not like you put up much of a fight, he thought guiltily.

But still. He would have much preferred to break it off nice and clean and avoid the icky feeling tied up with his hangover this morning.

On top of all that (and dealing with his mopey, still-drunk Sensei this morning), he had really hoped his first re-encounter with Sam post-kiss would have been on his own terms-- maybe he’d show up to her house with flowers, maybe he would have waited the weekend out and cornered her at school with a new stuffed octopus, maybe-- well. Anything was more ideal than bickering in the Cobra Kai dojo-- a place he knew she hated -- with her little brother making smart remarks from the sidelines and totally ruining the moment for an apology.

Sam slaps Miguel’s hand away from the door, and he sighs as she cracks the door open wide enough to stick her head through, fingers curling around the door frame. The younger LaRusso was following suit, crouched down on his hands and knees on the floor, peeking head-first into the main dojo.

“You can’t even understand what they’re saying.” Miguel crossed his arms over his chest, glaring.

“There’s no point--”

“Did Dad say anything about this Kreese guy to you?” Sam ignores Miguel, speaking down at her brother.
Anthony shook his head, still halfway out the door. “Not really. But he freaked out the one time I saw him here. He was super pissed.”

Sam frowns. “He didn’t tell me anything either.” She turns her sharp gaze back to Miguel, and his heart leaps a little in excitement and fear. “What’s the deal with this guy?”

Miguel shrugs, a little nervous. “He’s Sensei’s old teacher. Sensei kicked him out though. He didn’t say why, just that he didn’t have our best interests at heart. And...” Miguel hesitates, and Sam kind of floats closer. “I dunno. He...Kreese, I mean. His methods were just a little...harsh. Or, extreme, maybe.”

“More extreme than ‘Strike First, Strike Hard, No Mercy’?” she snorts.

He shakes his head. “You don’t even know what that means, Sam. Sensei Lawrence’s Cobra Kai is different than Kreese’s.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Sam is already straining to look back toward the door. Miguel’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He sees a missed call from Aisha, which is odd. She almost always texts...

“Maybe we should go check on him,” Anthony mumbles, frowning. “Robby’s like our brother, right? So Johnny’s like...sort of family.”

Sam matches her brother’s frown, and looks back out to the dojo.

“You know what Mom and Dad are talking about, right?” she mutters, quietly, voice a little strange, and Miguel feels like he’s heard too much.

“I’m not stupid,” Anthony mutters back. “I know he’s cheating on her.”

“I didn’t say you were.” Sam’s voice is tight, and Miguel looks between them.

“Wait, Sam, what?! Your Dad--”

She shakes her head, ignoring him. Anthony cuts in.

“Well you don’t have to explain it to me. I saw them making out after practice. Right over there-- ” Anthony points importantly to the far corner of the room.

“You WHAT?” Sam’s eyes go wide.

“They were totally sucking face, it was gross--” Anthony’s face wrinkles up.

“Making out with who?” Miguel flounders.

“Shut up Miguel--” Sam snaps, and looks back down at her brother. “You saw them? Why didn’t you say something?!”

“Yeah, whatever, I didn’t want you to freak out-- you would’ve told Mom and she’d make me quit karate--”

“Ohmygod, Anthony, what is wrong with you?!”

A text pops up, Aisha finally, and Miguel temporarily tears his eyes from Sam, and squints to read:

*hey i got a weird vm from Hawk- sthg about kreese?? did he call u? i think something going down at the dojo- tory not answering her phone either- i think u should call or check in on sensei*
A sudden crash and shouting startles them all, Johnny’s voice audible among others. Miguel jerks his eyes from the phone, about to pull the LaRussos back into the office so he could lock them in and go see what the hell was going on--

But they were already halfway across the dojo floor, Sam’s hand was stretched out toward the door handle and Anthony was hot on her heels.

“Shit--” Miguel curses, and shoves his phone back into his jeans, hurrying after the two siblings, preparing himself for the verbal (and maybe physical) beatdown from his Sensei when this was all over. He wonders what the hell could be going on behind that door-- why Hawk had called Aisha, and not him-- and who the hell had Sam’s Dad been making out with at the Cobra Kai dojo?

Sensei had been right. These LaRussos were trouble-with-a-capital-T.

***

“You can’t do this.”

“Of course I can. And I will. I founded Cobra Kai, and it belongs to me--”

Sam pulls the door open wide, but Miguel shoulders past her first, hurrying into the center of the room. Kreese’s voice comes to a halt, but there’s a pleased, predatory look that pulls eerily at the corners of his mouth.

“Class. We have visitors,” he croons softly, crossing his arms.

“What’s going on?” Miguel ignores Sam and Anthony at his back and looks hurriedly up at his Sensei. “What is this?”

“I’d be happy to fill you in, Mr. Diaz. Hawk here didn’t seem to think you would show up for class today.”

Miguel turns to Hawk across the room to find his friend leveling him with a glare.

“Nobody called me,” Miguel stepped warily in front of his Sensei, putting a warning hand out to keep him back, but his teacher didn’t seem entirely present. His gaze was fixed on Kreese.

“Didn’t think you’d have the nerve, after last night,” Tory calls from Kreese’s other side, throwing a nasty turn of her chin toward Sam. “Much less bring little miss Becky-With-The-Good-Hair--”

“That’s enough,” Kreese corrects gently, shutting Tory up instantly, and steps towards Miguel through the squared-off shoulders of his classmates.

“We’re glad to see you, Mr. Diaz. We feel it’s time for a little talk.”

“What?” Miguel suppresses the urge to shiver under Kreese’s icy stare.

“About your best interests, son.” Kreese looks up, and Miguel follows his gaze back to Sam and Anthony, hovering near the door looking nervous and out of place. “And about...corrupting influences.”
Miguel feels himself start to shrink up involuntarily, wilt a little, and there’s a tight, slow ratcheting pressure around his chest, one he hasn’t felt since Sensei Lawrence had thrown his inhaler against the dojo wall, shattered his problem into pieces so small he didn’t have to pay them attention anymore.

“I-I don’t...know what you mean--”

“Your Sensei has betrayed the trust of this dojo. I’m assuming control of Cobra Kai.”

“You can’t do that--” Miguel sputters, looking back at his teacher. “He can’t do that!”

“Your Sensei isn’t so good at paperwork. And he hasn’t exactly...endeared himself to his landlord, either.” Kreese smiles, strange, almost comforting, but the air temperature goes down a few degrees.

“C’mon, Mr. Diaz,” Kreese gestures him forward, but Miguel’s feet are like cement. “It’s not your fault. This is for Johnny’s own good. Sometimes we have to learn life lessons the hard way.”

“Touch him and you die.” Miguel nearly collapses in relief, watching his Sensei flicker back to life and step between him and danger, Johnny’s shoulder pushing him to safety, back and away from Kreese.

“Johnny,” Kreese smiles tightly, and his eyes are full of something that might be close to sadness, and grips the lapels of his gi. “It’s over. And like I said. One day you’ll thank me.”

They’re eye to eye now.

“You can still learn from this, Johnny. It’s a hard lesson, but I don’t let my students become losers.” Kreese presses, low and soft, in that threateningly paternal way that gave Miguel the creeps. Like the snake in the Jungle Book movie, and he’s watched Hawk get pulled into it more than once, a heavy hand on his shoulder, like a mouse cuddling up to a cat’s paw.

“You’re sick. I should never have trusted you.” Miguel’s never seen his teacher like this, angry, yes, but also strange and vulnerable, he can see that he’s scared just under the skin. No one else might have seen it, but Miguel knows him better. “That was a mistake.”

“You were nothing.” Kreese hisses. “I made you into what you are, and you don’t get to blame me just because you failed to heed your lessons--”

“I know what you did;” Johnny seethes.

Kreese flexes his jaw, any latent regret evaporated away. “Enlighten me, Mr. Lawrence.”

“The ‘85 Tournament. You still bitter a 98 pound teenager foiled your skeezy little plans?”

“Was that part of your pillow talk with Daniel LaRusso?” Kreese leans closer, letting his words slice whisper-loud through the pin-drop silence of the room.

And something about the way he says the words, each one deliberate, soft yet surgical, turns something in Miguel’s head, and he hears Sam’s voice from earlier you saw them? Why didn’t you say something?!

Miguel turns, head twisting back over his shoulder, and finds Sam’s eyes. The air of the room turns to water, and the voices around him drown out into garbled noise, and all he can see is Sam. Sam and her death-pale skin and wide sad eyes. He feels his Sensei’s shoulder slip past, and Miguel realizes at a distance it’s because he’s staggered backwards, he’s struggling to push himself back up,
palms touching the ground for support.

“Miguel--”

Mom and Dad...

...I know he’s cheating on her

Miguel.

...sucking face, it was totally gross!

“Miguel!”

Miguel shudders back to the present, all he can smell is Sam’s shampoo and her lotioned skin, his eyes click up and he lifts his chin and finds her fingers wrapped securely around his shoulders, holding him up on his feet.

He can’t hear anything but her voice and the pounding of his own heart. She’s shaking him, eyes desperate.

“Sam,” he breathes her name, weak, like a question.

“Get it together,” her voice shaky. “We need to get out of here--”

“You knew,” he says.

She nods, a little frantic. “Robby and I put it together last night. Miguel, we need to get Johnny out of here, do you understand?”

“He...he took my mom out to dinner last night, he kissed her goodnight...”

Sam growls, frustrated. “Miguel, later--”

She nods, a little frantic. “Robby and I put it together last night. Miguel, we need to get Johnny out of here, do you understand?”

“Get it together,” her voice shaky. “We need to get out of here--”

“Sam,” he breathes her name, weak, like a question.

“Get it together,” her voice shaky. “We need to get out of here--”

“You knew,” he says.

She nods, a little frantic. “Robby and I put it together last night. Miguel, we need to get Johnny out of here, do you understand?”

“He...he took my mom out to dinner last night, he kissed her goodnight...”

Sam growls, frustrated. “Miguel, later--”

Sam is cut off as the voices around them surge back to full volume, Kreese is circling a shell-shocked Sensei Lawrence, Miguel’s not sure how long he zoned out, but the class is flanked around Kreese. Hawk looks fully gone, eyes nearly black, glaring in his old teacher’s slackening face.

“Fall in,” Kreese purrs to the class, still circling, and the students snap into formation, eyes fixed straight ahead. Kreese keeps his sights on Johnny.

“Sensei Lawrence betrayed Cobra Kai. He forged an alliance with a competing dojo, encouraging our students to leave. He has been selfish, secretive, and he deceived us all. Very clearly, he does not keep his students’ best interests at heart. Neither does he believe in our way. The way of the fist.”

Kreese raises his chin, continues his list of transgressions.

“His son, Robby Keene, does not train in our way.

“He has been teaching Daniel LaRusso’s son--” Kreese looks down at Anthony. “Not in our way.”

He paces.

“He trains with the enemy--”

He circles.
“He stands with the enemy--”

He hisses, getting close to Johnny’s face. “He sleeps with the enemy.”

Kreese steps away, turning back to his students. Johnny looks pale, almost green with shock.

“A man trains, stands, and sleeps with the enemy. What does that make him?”

“THE ENEMY, SIR!” Hawk, Tory, and the others shout back, like a gunshot. They look robotic, almost like zombies.

“And what does the enemy deserve, class?”

“NO MERCY, SIR!”

Kreese ratchets up the volume, pacing down the lines. “WHAT do we study here?”

“THE WAY OF THE FIST, SIR!”

“And what is that way?”

“STRIKE FIRST! STRIKE HARD! NO MERCY!”

“I can’t hear you--” and as the class echoes back louder, Kreese turns, shakes his head to Johnny, mutters lowly. “Don’t kid yourself. You always were the loser.”

Miguel feels his skin fade to numb, the whole scene has been shocking, the revelation about his Sensei and Sam’s dad, everything. But the worst, the cutting part is the broken look on his Sensei’s face.

Miguel searches Hawk and Tory’s faces for some kind of flash, something human, something to show they were sorry for this, this coup--

The class thunders, again-- “STRIKE FIRST! STRIKE HARD! NO MERCY!”

Miguel feels Sam’s hands squeeze tight on his shoulders, and he knows he has to get them, all of them out of here. He reaches out and grabs his Sensei’s wrist, starts to drag him back, back out of this dark and nauseating space.

“C’mon, Sensei, let’s go--” It seems to be working, his teacher seems to sort of shake himself, he looks back down at Miguel, then Sam, and he turns back to see Anthony still standing hesitantly by the door.

“MIGUEL!” Miguel’s tug on Johnny’s wrist flags, and he looks over to where his old best friend is stepping forward, arms wide.

“Forget him--” Hawk points to Sensei, face drawn and a little desperate. Miguel can still see Eli, trapped under all that bitterness and anger. “He’s a traitor. You need to stay here with us.”

Miguel scoffs, shakes his head. “No way, man.”

It’s Eli now, with tears at the corners of his eyes. Not falling, just threatening, sitting in his eyelids almost like a cocked fist, ready to swing out for the punch. “We were brothers,” his voice cracks. “Cobra Kai for life--”

“Not this Cobra Kai. Not his Cobra Kai.” Miguel checks Kreese’s roving position, then looks back,
trying to pitch his voice in a way that might break through. “Come with us,” he pleads, gaze between Hawk and Tory both.

Sam grabs at Miguel’s wrist, words slipping from her tight jaw, urgent. “We need to leave, right now.”

Miguel shakes his head, if he can just get through to Hawk and Tory, maybe they’ll all follow, maybe they can still salvage this. “You guys, c’mon. You know this is wrong, just come with us-”

Tory shakes her head and bypasses Miguel, glaring straight into Sam’s eyes. “Like father like daughter, right?”

“Excuse me?” Sam turns, her fingers dropping from Miguel’s wrist, shouldering past Johnny to face Tory. Kreese drifts back behind his students, still prowling, arms crossed.

“Sam--” Miguel grabs at her elbow, but she throws him off.

Tory raises an eyebrow, giving Sam an ungenerous once-over. “You know the fact that you’re both cheaters- doesn’t surprise me. I do have one question though.”

She steps closer, right up in Sam’s face, sparing a glance up to Johnny. “Who gives better head, you or your Da-”

Sam slaps Tory hard across the face, and the room explodes.

***

Johnny gets them out, and Sam takes the steering wheel and uses it like her father taught her.

Miguel is buckled in beside her, gripping the dash around a tight corner, looking a little green. They’d left the Challenger sitting in the parking lot, Johnny hadn’t looked back, just told her to get her keys out and hauled Anthony in the back seat and she got the keys in the ignition with shaky fingers and swung around the parking lot in a wide circle, the rest of the Cobras shouting from the sidewalk in front of the dojo.

She feels her heart start to slow down, and tries to let a little pressure off of the gas pedal and ease onto the brakes at the next stoplight. She looks up in the rearview mirror, Johnny has his mouth in his hand, staring out the window. His face is calm but she can see his chest heaving up and down, breathing in and out through his nose, trying not to show anything. Anthony in his seatbelt next to him looks okay, maybe a little shell-shocked and miraculously unbruised for how bad it could have gotten. She’d been too busy with Tory, Miguel lunging at Hawk from the corner of her eye, to keep Anthony from running straight at Kreese, face set and yelling out a kid-fierce war-cry, his fist pulled back and set at crotch-level. Johnny’d been busy trying to get between Hawk and Miguel, but not too busy to pivot and scoop Anthony up mid-jump. She’d turned to see the save, and taken a direct hit to the nose. The blood was still dripping onto her jeans, a large smear on the front of her shirt from using it like a dishrag for her face.

Miguel finally relaxes back into his seat at the stoplight, a cut above his eyebrow and a nasty brown bloom spreading over his cheekbone and jaw from Hawk’s roundhouse.
“Where are we going?” Miguel’s voice is rough, a little ragged.

“We’re taking Johnny home.” The light turns green and she tries not to rear-end the suburban in front of them.

“You need directions?” She can see him reach up for the handle above the widow. He told her once they were called the “oh shit” handle. She’d driven them to the movies in the Q7. This car. They’d watched one of the Ironman movies. She can’t remember which one, hadn’t really cared, had only paid attention to holding his warm hand, his fingers a little sweaty laced around hers, their wrists pressed close on the armrest between them. She remembers the warm, safe feeling of his thumb rubbing softly over the back of her hand, sweet and careful and nothing more. Nothing like Kyler and his big pushy hands on her thigh. She remembers dropping him off and kissing him in the parking lot, he hadn’t wanted kiss her in front of the apartment because ‘my ya-ya’s probably watching, she likes to keep a lookout from that front window’- so they kissed against the car in the dark.

“I remember where it is,” she swallows.

“Oh. Okay,” he nods, fingers tapping at his jeans.

She sits up a little in the seat and reaches for her back pocket, fumbles the phone out and holds it across the console.

“Here, take this, the password is still the same--”

“Um, okay, what do you want?” He takes her phone, fingers pausing halfway through the password at the background picture of her and Robby, smiling and wet. That’d taken the photo after their first successful run-through of the wheel without her dad talking them through it. Selfie style, the photo contained their happy smiling faces pressed close, high angle, you could see the wet wood of the wheel and the dark pond water in the background.

She might have to change that, now.

“I need you to call Robby.”

“What? You call him, he’s your boyfriend.” Miguel twists his face up in that adorable way, when he was contrary, or disbelieving, or making fun of her for a particularly bad joke.

“We’re--” she glances a little nervously up at Johnny in the mirror. He hadn’t moved.

“We’re not dating.” She clears her throat. “We talked last night and this morning. We’re just friends.”

“Oh,” Miguel’s face smooths out, and he looks back down at the phone.

“A-anyway, I’ve gotta drive, and I’m still a little shaky. I don’t wanna cause an accident. So I need you to call him. He’s on my favorites list.”

“He’s on my favorites list--” he mimics her voice back to her, but there’s a cautious glow to him now, and his mouth curls up at the corners. She snorts and reaches across to smack his shoulder.

“Just call him, King Karate.” She purses her lips, trying not to smile too hard.

“What do you want me to say?” He’s already dialed, holding the phone to his ear.
“Just...tell him what happened. Tell him we’re headed to Johnny’s. And tell him to meet us here.”

“Okay--” Miguel grimaces, but presses the phone to his ear.

“Oh-- and tell him--”

The line clicks through, and Miguel’s eyes get wide, she can hear Robby calling her name through the speaker.

“What?” he mouths, and she hears Robby again, faint and tinny. She pauses, mouth open, and catalogues everything about him in this moment-- his wide, kind brown eyes, his skin like brown sugar. The bruise on his face earned from jumping in-between her and Tory. His well-worn off-brand jeans and the same black converse he’d always worn back when they were dating. His hair, that gorgeous shiny black mess that she loved running her fingers through, soft and smelling like coconut shampoo and cheap ivory soap.

“Sam--” he calls, pulling her back.

“Tell him to bring my Dad,” she finishes, and turns back to the road, and lets Miguel fumble his way through the explanation.

She glances back up into the rear-view mirror. Johnny was still slumped despondently down in the back seat, hand over his eyes now. She sees Anthony staring, and reaches a tentative hand out to pat Johnny’s knee.

“It’s okay, Sensei,” her brother swallows. “You don’t need that place. It kind of smelled funny in there, anyway.”

Johnny lifts his head from the window, slides his eyes over to her brother. Sam checks the road again, straightens the wheels.

“And that guy’s a real jerk, huh? You wouldn’t want to work anywhere with him.”

Johnny stays silent, eyes back staring through the window.

“Plus, now you can fix that stupid paint job on your car. It looked really dumb.”

Johnny huffs out a laugh, and reaches over to ruffle Anthony’s hair. “Yeah, kid,” he manages, voice rough. “Maybe you’re right.”

The traffic opens up a little and Sam presses the gas pedal down.

They come down the stairs, startling Robby from his post on the couch in the front room, phone slack in his hand. Morning had warmed into afternoon, and it was almost one o’clock. He must had dozed off.

They’re standing at the bottom of the staircase now, as Robby rises slightly from his seat, craning to
see. Amanda’s fully dressed now, makeup and everything. They don’t look all that upset, Mr. LaRusso looked a little drawn, but better than the last time Robby had seen him. A little lighter, almost smiling. They embrace, and Amanda grabs her purse from the kitchen counter and head toward the door. Robby tries to straighten, act a little less like he’d been watching.

She checks her steps when she sees him, and comes over to run a hand down his face and pulls him in for a hug.

“I’ll be back in a little bit,” she tells him, voice soft. And smiling without more explanation, she leaves, the door clicking softly shut behind her. Robby watches her go through the square window cut into the door, her steps light and brisk.

“Kiddo, what are you still doing here?” Robby jumps, he’d almost forgotten about his mentor.

“I just...thought you might want some company, or backup. I dunno. I just--” he breathes heavily. “I didn’t think you should be on your own, you know? You’re always in my corner, I just...thought somebody should be in yours.” He winces. It had sounded a lot less stupid in his head.

Mr. LaRusso looks a little taken aback, and Robby wonders for a second why he didn’t just get in the car with Sam and face his father like he probably should have, but then he’s pulled into a big hug, and he’s pretty glad he stayed.

“I don’t deserve you, kiddo,” his mentor tells him, and Robby’s throat gets a little tight.

He feels his face heat up as he pulls back from the hug. “Well, um. You’ve done a lot for me. I just...want you to know that...that I really appreciate it. A lot. And I hope everything goes okay with Aman- I mean, with Mrs. LaRusso--”

“Robby,” he says, a smile pulling at his face. “It went fine. Better than fine. And I owe you and Sam an apology, and an explanation--”

“No, it’s-- it’s okay. You don’t owe us anything.” Robby waves him off with a little laugh. Truth be told, he’s not really sure how many of the details he wants.

“I do. But...that’s okay. It’s been a pretty stressful morning, right? Where’s Sam and Antony, maybe we can all get something to eat--”

Robby’s phone starts to jingle, an annoying trumpet-heavy bippy-boppy nonsense song from *Grease* he’d let Sam program as her ‘special ringtone.’ She liked it because apparently it was ‘about friendship.’

“Hold on, it’s Sam--” Robby mumbles, fumbling for the answer button before the singer gets to that horrible second line, ‘Like rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong.’

Sometimes he wonders how he met this crazy girl and became best friends with her. He always remembers, but sometimes it takes him a minute.

“Hey Sam,” he holds the receiver to his ear, and is immediately greeted by road noise, he can hear her in the background *tell my Dad*, something like that.

“Sam--” he calls, pressing his finger into his ear. “I can barely hear you-- are you okay?”

He probably shouldn’t have said it like that, Mr. LaRusso’s eyes get all big and alarmed, and he makes grabby fingers for the phone.
“Sam --” he calls, louder, one last time before he lets her father have it.

“Hey, uh...it’s Miguel. Um, Diaz--”

“Diaz?! ” Robby attempts to calm Mr. L back down from his panicky look, using only his eyebrows and exaggerated nodding. It’s not terribly effective.

“Where’s Sam, why are you--”

“She’s fine, she’s right here. She’s just driving so she wanted me to call.” Diaz was speaking pretty fast, and he still had that stupid lispy thing going on left over from his braces.

“Oh-- she’s driving, and she’s fine?” Robby nods reassuringly at her father, who slumps his shoulders in relief. “Okay, um, but why-- ? What? You’re heading to my Dad’s place--” Robby looks up, Mr. LaRusso is already picking his keys from the hook in the kitchen, grabbing for a jacket.

“Who....what? Kreese?”

Daniel freezes, hand on the door, staring at Robby, mouth dropping. He turns back and strides over to Robby, and plucks the phone from Robby’s hand.

“Miguel-- whoa, Miguel, calm down-- ” Robby grabs the keys from Daniel’s fingers and leads the way out to the car as his mentor speaks into the phone. They drop down into the Audi, and Robby braces his hand on the passenger seat behind Mr. L’s head as he backs down the inclined driveway.

Daniel switches the phone to his other hand as he buckles his seatbelt.

“I need you to slow down, Miguel.” Robby knows the technique, the calming timbre in his teacher’s voice, he always used his name a lot when he was talking Robby down. “Just breathe....okay. Now. I need you to tell me where you, and what happened. Can you do that for me? Take your time, Miguel.”

Robby points the car down the familiar route to his father’s apartment. He thinks about the last time he’d seen him, and the shattered look on his face. Robby takes a big breath in through his nose, out through his mouth like Mr. LaRusso had taught him. He takes a second breath, then a third. His fingers loosen on the wheel, and he concentrates on keeping his speed in check and the tires between the white lines.

He hopes Sam made good on her promise to make the world out how she pictured it, and feels a tiny little bloom of hope in his chest, that maybe they’d be okay after all. Sam was a pretty tough act to beat. If anybody could change the world, he thinks it might be her.

He looks over at Mr. L, curled forward, listening to Diaz relate whatever was going on. From the look on his face, it certainly wasn’t good. The little bloom of hope dims a little, and he realizes what he was feeling for his father. For the first time in a long time-- the first time he can remember, it was something other than the old tired anger, disappointment. It wasn’t sadness, or regret.

It was worry. He was worried about his father.

His fingers squeeze tight on the wheel, and he tries to breathe in and out, and keep a balanced pressure on the gas pedal.
It’s maybe twenty minutes to Receda Heights apartment complex from the LaRusso home, on a good day. On a really good day, maybe seventeen. On a late Sunday afternoon in August, Robby Keene maneuvers Daniel LaRusso’s black Audi A7 across the Encino Hills and down to Receda— he cuts through Beilenson Park and over the little brown ribbon of the Los Angeles River, he guides them through green lights all the way to his father’s apartment, traffic opening up for the pair of them like the Red Sea for Moses— in twelve minutes flat.

Daniel doesn’t remember most of the drive, especially after the phone call with Miguel. He couldn’t quite get the whole story from the kid’s meandering babble. He gathered there was some kind of fight, and Kreese was there— Daniel had tried to get him to hand the phone over to Johnny, but Miguel’d only said that ‘Sensei doesn’t feel much like talking’, in the stilted way that told him he was getting stonewalled.

He remembers the dream he’s had months ago, the one with Kreese’s arm in a vice around Johnny’s neck, *I own him, LaRusso. I own him.*

“You ready, Mr. L?”

Daniel turns, pulled back by Robby’s voice. The car was parked and quiet, the keys pulled from the ignition. Daniel nods, and they push the doors open. Sam had parked the red Q7 right in Johnny’s usual spot, and the Challenger was nowhere in sight.

Robby knocks quietly at the door, fumbling out his spare key, but the knob turns over in his hand, and they push inside.

Daniel stares over Robby’s shoulder, and thinks for a second they’d stepped into the wrong apartment. A short, gray-haired hispanic woman was standing in front of the TV, gesturing remote-in-hand, to his son. Anthony was talking loudly, pointing at the large flat screen.

“YOU HAVE TO PUSH INPUT--” Anthony tries to grab the remote from the woman, but she clucks and holds the remote close to her face, glasses on the end of her nose. Anthony reaches a finger up and over to point helpfully. “See, that’s the DVD controls, you have to turn on the cable box, but you have to push INPUT first-- no, just-- here, if you just give it to me--”

“Anthony--”

Anthony whips his head around, his grabby hands stilling in mid-air. “Oh, hey Dad-- can you show Rosa how this works, she won’t listen, I don’t think she speaks very good english-- OW!”

Rosa pops Anthony lightly over the head with the remote, chuckling.

“Anthony, where is your sister?”

“She’s in the back, I think Carmen’s fixing her nose of something.”

“What’s wrong with her nose?”

“Dad, you wouldn’t believe-- there was this big fight, and that girl Tory totally called Sam a whore,
and so Sam slapped her, and then Miguel like shoved her and then Hawk-- you know, the dude with the big hair-- he was like waaaaahhhhh don’t touch her and so he gets in it with Miguel, and then Tory gets up and tries to punch Sam, and like EVERYBODY jumps in, it was the craziest thing-- and I tried to sneak in and ninja-punch that Kreese guy in the balls, he was such a dick, but Johnny kind of ruined it before I could get him but if he wouldn’t have I totally would have caught him by surprise-- DAD it was SO CRAZY --”

Robby left and headed toward the bathroom about halfway through Anthony’s recitation. Daniel finally makes sure Anthony wasn’t otherwise hurt of upset (he was not) and follows Robby back to see his daughter, heart picking up a little.

Sam was sitting up on the counter, head tipped up near the ceiling, trying to talk down to a distraught Robby, tended to by Carmen who was gently pinching her nose and dabbing at it with gauze and alcohol swabs. A pile of used pink-tinted cotton sat off to one side. Miguel sat nearby on the closed toilet seat, arms resting on his knees.

“...so then she-- she was totally up in my face, and I won’t even repeat what she said, Robby--”

“Chin down, cariño. There.” Carmen pulled another alcohol pad out, and started to clean a small cut over Sam’s eyebrow.

“Oh, honey--” Daniel catalogs the damage, feeling faintly nauseous, his beautiful daughter cut up and bleeding.

“Dad--” Sam sees him, blue eyes wide-- and then bursts into tears. Carmen pulls her gloved hands back and lets him in, and he pulls his daughter into his arms, lets her tears soak the shoulder of his sweater.

“Ohmygod, are you okay? Sweetheart, what happened, why were you even over there?”

“Dad...it was horrible,” she sobs. “They took it from him.”

“Honey, what? They took what? From who?”

“The dojo, Cobra Kai, they took it --”

“Kreese?” Daniel presses, putting the pieces together. “Honey, calm down baby, you’re bleeding again--”

She sniffs, pulls her fingers away. “Oh, shit--” she sags, and it’s a sign of how tired she was. Samantha didn’t curse, at least not in front of him.

“Here,” Carmen hands over a tissue, and Sam presses it to her nose, mumbling a tearful thank you.

“Thanks, Carmen.” Daniel feels it to his bones, stupidly grateful that this woman had been here for his daughter when he hadn’t.

“Here,” Carmen hands over a tissue, and Sam presses it to her nose, mumbling a tearful thank you.

“Thanks, Carmen.” Daniel feels it to his bones, stupidly grateful that this woman had been here for his daughter when he hadn’t.

“Dad,” she tries again. “Kreese. He had some kind of paperwork that he said meant the dojo was his. And he got all the students on his side except Miguel and Aisha, and I guess that really short kid--”

“Bert,” Miguel supplies.

“Yeah, Miguel says Aisha called Bert, too, but they didn’t know about this whole showdown, and we were just kind of accidentally there--”
“What were you guys doing there, anyway?”

She stops, her eyes shift over to Robby for a moment, then she looks down at him. “Well Anthony had his lesson with Johnny.”

“Uh huh.” There’s more, he knows.

“Well. I just...I knew enough about what was going on. And I wanted to talk to him.”

She takes a breath, and then reaches over to her wrist, starts unclasping her watch--

It’s his watch. The one he thought he’d lost.

“You left it here,” she says quietly, the silver face flat in her palm. “Your jersey, too. Robby and I found it last night. We...we sort of know what’s--” she starts to struggle again, breathing in and out like he taught her, blinking back tears. “--what’s happening, and. Whatever happens, we-- just really love you ,” she manages, whisper soft, shaky fingers pressing into his shoulder.

He pulls her in again and takes another kleenex from Carmen and wipes at her tears and her bloody nose, his little girl.

He finally backs out of the room and lets Carmen and Miguel fuss over her, and he finds himself a few feet down the hall in front of Johnny’s closed door with Robby at his shoulder.

“Diaz said he shut himself in there and hasn’t come out. Said he didn't want to talk to anybody,” Robby murmurs, shoving his hands in pockets.

“He’ll want to talk to talk to you.” Daniel presses his palm flat against the cheap hollow-core door.

“Last night...Sam and I stopped by and...I think he kinda knew that we...that we knew. You know.” Robby’s keeps his green gaze focused on the door instead of Daniel. “Anyway, the last time we talked, I mean. I’m just not sure he’s ready to see me.”

“Robby. You’re his son. You’re the love of his life.”

He snorts, does that sideways grimace, shrugging into himself. “I...I dunno. I just think maybe I should go until he feels better, you know. We’re on kinda shaky ground as it is, him and me.”

“Robby.” He reaches out, squeezes his shoulder, gets him to look up and see those big green gems.

“Yeah?”

“Stay a few minutes, okay? He’ll want to see you.”

“Okay,” he nods, pushing off the wall. “Do you uh...want a minute with him first?”

Daniel bites his lip. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Robby smiles, showing that sideways dimple. “Course not. And...anyway. He’ll want to see you.”

Daniel’s heart nearly busts open, it felt so big, because god he loved this kid.

“Thank you, Robby.”

Robby nods, shrugs it off. “I’ll go check on Anthony. He’s probably driving ya-ya crazy, or vise-versa.”
“Who?” Daniel frowns.

“Ya-ya. I guess it’s like...‘Granny’ in Spanish.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Diaz told me. I asked. She’s a really nice lady.”

Daniel watches, grinning, as Robby walks back down the hallway.

He finally turns the doorknob and steps into the dark room, closing the door gently shut behind him.

There’s a lump of blankets in the middle of the bed, but he can see a little peek of blonde near the top where a pillow should be. He crosses the room, rounds the bed, and sits gently down on the edge, right next to where the warm pile of comforter was breathing up and down.

He gently pulls a corner of the navy comforter back, and peeks inside.

***

“Go away.”

“I just got here.”

“Fuck off, LaRusso. I’m tryin’ to sleep.”

Johnny yanks the covers over his head, retreating back into the stuffy, uncomfortably warm darkness where he’d started his day, before everything had totally exploded right in his own stupid face.

He probably should have seen this coming.

He probably should have let Miguel look at the lease agreement Zarkarian had initially sent over, before telling Johnny a month later ‘not to worry about it’ and that Johnny’s down payment and first month’s rent were ‘good enough for him.’

He should have called ‘bullshit’ on Kreese showing up in town and ‘mysteriously hearing’ that Cobra Kai was back. And Kreese actually being really helpful and ‘organizing paperwork’ after hours. Looking back, there were more red flags than a goddamned Cambodian minefield. Fucking dumb-fuck.

And all Kreese had to do was whisper a little sweet talk in Johnny’s ear. I am the guy who always rooted for you, and there ain’t nothing I’d like more in this world than to have another chance-- and who could forget the classic you were always the better fighter, the ‘repaired’ second-place trophy held aloft. Johnny hadn’t even wanted to look closely enough in case he couldn’t spot glue lines and cracks. How could he have even thought for a second-- there was no way it was the original!! What, like Kreese drove back that night and picked up the pieces with his bloody fingers?! Of course it was a cheap replacement, and of course Kreese had used it to buy Johnny’s sympathy-- and of course Johnny had fallen for it. Like Kreese knew he would.

And LaRusso, too.
This is maybe the worst out of all of it. That LaRusso had seen it coming when Johnny was so blind. That LaRusso had told him one bad apple, and I don’t trust him, Johnny, and how could you let that back into your life?! LaRusso was intolerable on most days, but Johnny can’t imagine what he would say now. That not only was he right about everything— that Johnny had put himself in danger, and all of his students, and Miguel— but that he’d failed Robby (again) and put LaRusso’s kids in danger, too. Sam was down the hallway bleeding and crying because Johnny hadn’t been able to see what was right in front of his face. For months.

He hears LaRusso sigh deeply on the other side of the blanket.

“Your son’s out there, waiting for you. He’s worried about you.”

“He hates me.”

“He loves you. Very much. He’s worried about you.”

“What do you want.”

He can hear LaRusso sigh again, probably with his head tipped up, almost losing the words to the ceiling, “Where do I start?”

Johnny can feel LaRusso rest his arm on Johnny’s other side, caging him in.

“Johnny. C’mon. Talk to me.”

Johnny stays silent, thinking he’d very much like some fresh air. That, and he should probably stop acting like such a pussy.

“What do you want.”

“I...about the dojo, about Kreese, about Robby, about— about us, I don’t know...”

He kind of trails off. Johnny lets him flounder some more.

“...and I’m really sorry about what happened today. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

There are several more beats of silence, and Johnny feels LaRusso pick his arm back up, the cheap mattress sucking itself back into shape. Johnny’s pretty sick of re-breathing his own morning breath and it was getting pretty hot. Those are the only two reasons he flips back the covers, sucking in the sweet, cool outside air. LaRusso is still sitting on the bed, but he’s facing away from Johnny, hands twisted together in his lap, and he was wearing a black sweater that made him look really good.

“You’re an asshole,” Johnny frowns, which gets LaRusso to look over, and his face brightens up in the worst way, like just because Johnny deemed him worthy enough to talk to without a blanket between them was cause for celebration or something. Like he hadn’t just heard Johnny call him an asshole. Or like he didn’t really think Johnny meant it. Goddammit.

“Hey there, sunshine--” he grins, with the crinkles around his eyes and shit. Ugh.

“Don’t call me that.” Johnny looks over at the bedside table, and thankfully finds the glass of water Miguel had brought him that morning, still half-full. He starts to reach for it but LaRusso gets to it first and hands it to him. And then while he’s drinking it he keeps looking at Johnny all soft and affectionate. Ugh.

So he says, “And don’t look at me like that. It’s weird.”
LaRusso takes the glass back. “Well maybe I can’t help it.”

“Yeah I know. It’s cause you’re a weirdo.”

“Johnny--”

“Look, man, I’ve had a shitty day. I just want to sleep.”

“So do I, I was up all night. And don’t, don’t *do that*--”

“What?” he bites.

“Talk to me like last night didn’t happen.”

“Like what didn’t happen, you left pretty quick if I remember right.”

He seems to pause at that, take a breath in, and out.

“Yeah, I know. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Amanda and I talked.”

“Yeah, man, well I don’t really want to hear about your problems with your wife.”

“She’s not-- well she won’t be my wife pretty soon. We’re calling the lawyer tomorrow to start the paperwork.”

A little ringing sound starts somewhere in Johnny’s head, he’s pretty tired but his brain isn’t really working right, probably, and he might kind of be on ‘LaRusso autopilot’ right now, arguing effortlessly just for the sake of argument, disagreeing with whatever because he’s not really sure Daniel’s words are processing all the way through.

“Uh huh. Well that’s great for you, LaRusso--”

“Did you even *hear me*?” He holds up his left hand, fingers spread wide, the back of his hand a few inches from Johnny’s nose.

No ring.

“I told Amanda everything, and it’s over. Johnny, it’s--”

He shakes his head, like Johnny doesn’t have a clue.

“-- do you even...I mean, it’s not just me. It can’t be.”

“So you’re getting a divorce.”

“Uh huh.” Daniel leans in, puts his hand down on the bed again by Johnny’s ribcage.

“Why.” He’s pretty close. He really does look good in black, with it matching his hair and his eyes, and his eyelashes and everything.

“Johnny.” He tilts his head. *Closer*.

“Why?”

“I’m in love with somebody else.” Daniel shifts his weight onto his elbows, and crawls up on the bed, *rolls on top of and over Johnny*, like he’s some kind of cat trying to find a comfy place to sit his dumb ass down. Johnny can’t help it though, can’t do anything more than just watch him, and his
head tracks around, glued to Daniel’s stupid face.

“What poor son of a bitch did you sucker into that deal,” he says, trying to keep his voice steady.

Daniel grins, like he knows he’s got Johnny in a corner. “I tried to tell him. Twice. But he wouldn’t listen. He’s kind of an asshole, actually—”

“You left,” Johnny whispers, and their foreheads meet.

“I know,” he says softly. “I drove home to tell her.”

“You could have just said so, dumbass. I thought you took off for good.”

“I didn’t want to waste any more time, Johnny. Not even another night.”

Wasted time. The absurdity of the whole situation hits Johnny. Two fifty year old men, both fathers, obsessed with a sport barely anybody cared about anymore, hanging a potential relationship on the thinnest of hooks— a kick and a kiss thirty years ago, maybe a few passing ships in the night of the decades between then and now. And if they started this now, what did they have to gain? More than likely a few passionate months before disaster struck again. Maybe a year. Maybe more. The very dimmest of possibilities, ten or twenty years before one of them kicked the bucket and left the other to wander the last years depressed and alone. Putting it all together, it probably wasn’t worth the effort or the heartache.

Maybe if they’d started this the first chance they’d gotten— but probably, they’d have burned out by now, young and angry. And there’d be no Robby. No Sam, or Anthony.

So what do they have before them. What’s on the table. What’s up for grabs? Ten or twenty years. Good years, maybe. Maybe. Johnny can’t remember the last time he’d had a good year, much less ten of them strung together. The little spark of possibility catches in his head, just the tiniest flame, nothing more than a glowing matchstick.

Maybe, he thinks. Maybe.

“Johnny,” he hears, and looks over the few inches between him and Daniel, laid out next to him on the bed, and Daniel’s fingers are pushing through the hair at the nape of his neck. “What are you thinking?”

LaRusso’s always known which buttons to push, but this isn’t even one Johnny has to think about, pushing their mouths together. It’s the easiest thing in the world, closing the space between. There was hardly any of it left, anyway.

Johnny pulls him into his arms and feels the guy melt soft and easy, feels his hand on his neck without the cold metallic bite of a ring, just uninterrupted warmth. There’s an annoying moment when they sort of realize Johnny’s still under the covers and Daniel’s on the outside, but Johnny fixes that right quick in a hurry, flipping the covers back and rolling on top, it was too fucking hot under there anyway.

Speaking of hot, it was a pretty smokin’ smooth move if Johnny says so himself. Daniel ruins it in typical fashion however, by laughing before Johnny can get his lips back on him.

“You don’t have pants on—”

“Nobody sleeps in pants. Now shut the hell up—”
“But you kept your shirt on. And your socks.” Daniel’s eyebrows go up, grinning, like he said something clever. “Nobody fucks with their socks on.”

“Wanna bet?” Ah. There it is. Johnny pulls back the collar of LaRusso’s sweater. The old bruise was gone. He can fix that.

“No, Johnny--” LaRusso starts to push Johnny gently back from his neck, which nearly gives Johnny a goddamn heart attack, which must show on his face because LaRusso grabs him quick and pulls him back in.

“Nono, I only mean-- the kids are outside. And Carmen--”

Johnny frowns, finger paused on Daniel’s collar. “So? They figured it out. Fuck ‘em.” He looks back down at LaRusso’s collar bone. Now where was he....

But stupid LaRusso diverts him, pulls his jaw back around for another kiss, which wasn’t so bad.

LaRusso mumbles into his lips. “You gotta go out there. Say hi to your son. And I gotta get the kids home.”

“Mmmhmm. Later.” Johny mumbles back, and runs his hands up under LaRusso’s sweater. He’s giving off unbelievable amounts of heat, soft and pliable like clay, Johnny thinks he could push and pull him into whatever shape he wanted.

“Okay,” he nods, sighs agreeably.

It’s turning Johnny on fast and crazy, how submissive and agreeable LaRusso is being, totally different from all the other times, and Johnny’s really into it until he realizes that it’s mostly because LaRusso is about to fucking fall asleep. Right in the middle of all the hotness. His eyelids haven’t opened back up again for the past thirty seconds and he’s barely putting any effort in to the kiss. Johnny pulls back, a little dizzy and a whole lot annoyed.

Daniel breathes in deeply, flutters his eyelids. “Why’d you stop?”

“Jesus. Are you kidding me? When was the last time you slept, LaRusso?”

“Friday night,” he sighs, sinking down into the covers next to Johnny, a little disappointing actually because now their faces aren’t so close anymore.

“Yeah, right.”

“I haven’t,” he says, temple on Johnny’s arm. “I think I’m seeing things.”

Daniel’s eyelids close and open again, slow and heavy.

“Like what.”

“Like a half-naked Johnny Lawrence.”

“In your dreams.”

“Exactly,” he breathes and Johnny watches Daniel’s eyes close shut. His breath draws deeper, chest moving slowly up and down.

“Such an asshole,” Johnny mutters, studying his eyelashes, breathing in the smell of his shampoo. He hadn’t shaved this morning, either, there was just the smallest bit of stubble across his cheeks and
He should be more annoyed, he thinks. But the afternoon is looking up. He picks up LaRusso’s limp left hand, studies the pale circle of skin on his fourth finger. Wonders how the conversation went. He hadn’t even asked.

There’d be time for that, though. Tonight, tomorrow. The next day.

*This is the one you picked. And this is the one you get to keep,* he thinks. The one he’s been chasing since he was seventeen.

He tucks LaRusso in and pulls on jeans and steps outside. Sam and Miguel, and Carmen and Rosa, they’re crammed on the couch, watching the TV and laughing. Rosa had brought some kind of food over, there were plates stacked on the coffee table. Anthony was on the floor in front of the yellow recliner, eating something, his head back against Robby’s knees, sitting in the chair. Robby’s not watching the TV. He’s staring at Johnny, a raw, open green stare. He stands, pushing a squawking Anthony out of the way.

Johnny swallows as Robby meets him at the opening to the hallway.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Robby, I’m--” he starts, throat already tight. “Look, I’m really sorry. About everything--”

He can’t finish, can’t find the words. Because Robby throws his arms around his neck. Johnny tugs him in, holds him tight, cradles the back of his head in his hand, blinking tears down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry about Cobra Kai,” Robby says, muffled into his shoulder.

“He can have it,” Johnny says, and tucks his head down into his son’s neck, and holds him.

He thinks briefly about the dojo he’d started a year ago, about all the things he’s gained and all the things he’s lost, and he thinks none of that matters because he has what he needs right here in his arms, and the rest of his heart is beating just a few feet down a carpeted hallway.

Right now, he doesn’t need anything else.

Right now, the rest is just details, and it can wait.

*Thank God,* but it can wait.

***

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for being along the ride. 101k words is a whole lot to read and commit to, and I thank you, and Elise_51 thanks you-- and our Daniel and Johnny, too.
Stayed tuned for an epilogue!

Also, my Dutch story, "Take It on the Run" takes place in the same universe. If you need more of these two bickering idiots, read that thing. Bit angsty, but I always have happy endings.
Part V: Epilogue
And I'm in for the long run
Wherever it goes
Ridin' the river
Wherever it goes
And I know that look that's on your face
There's somethin' lucky about this place
There's somethin' good comin'
For you and me
Somethin' good comin'
There has to be

-Tom Petty, “Something Good Coming”

Chapter 1: Layla and Majnun
I pass by these walls, the walls of Layla

And I kiss this wall and that wall

It's not Love of the walls that has enraptured my heart

But of the One who dwells within them

***

Sunday, August 5th, 2018

She came and got him, pulled him right off the lot, leaving a bewildered customer and a screaming Tom Cole in her rear-view mirror.

She told him with shaky fingers on the steering wheel. “Daniel and I are getting a divorce. We’ll transition him out of the CEO position so he can concentrate on the dojo, and I’ll take over all executive responsibility. But I’ll need your help.” She turned to him, still breathing hard and a little pale with shock, “I need you now.”

He lets his head fall back against the seat rest, and lets out a breath he thinks he’s been holding for
almost two months. She’s wearing blue and it makes her eyes glow and with the way the sun backlit her through the windshield, she almost looks like she did when he first met her, the Summer of 2000.

Daniel back then was unstoppable, working insane hours as GM at Valley BMW, running on coffee and his irrepressible positivity. He’d plucked Anoush from a Ford Dealership in Glendale, waved his hands and shared his dreams and Anoush was like Rene Zellweger in Jerry Maguire, he would have followed Daniel anywhere.

He fell for Daniel but he fell for Amanda, too, 22 years old and a total knockout. With her knack for numbers, her looks, her sense of humor— nobody could resist Amanda in the box. Once they got in that little room, just her and the computer— Anoush didn’t blame them for buying every extra warranty package available. She was the best, and nobody in F&I could touch her numbers.

When Daniel and Amanda got married, they were the ultimate super-couple, and when they pulled Anoush into the GM’s office one night after close and told him the grand plans— the acquisition and the new name and more lines, more possibilities— he was all in. He would have signed in blood.

Eighteen years he’s known them both, and he was in love with both of them, maybe even just the idea of them, for that whole time. Maybe even still, Danny and Mandy, even the name had a ring to it, like a TV show.

But when had it started? How long had he looked at her as more than his boss? Maybe the Christmas party he’d found her crying, had blown off his chance to sleep with Cyndi the new service receptionist. Maybe it had been her stepping into an altercation with a jerk customer, kicking the guy off the lot after he’d called Anoush ‘Osama’ and spit in his face. Maybe it was just a growing thing, the fact that the worst day of his week was always Sunday, her day off, and the best part was always their Friday ‘executive lunches’, most of which Daniel was too busy to make so it was just the two of them getting slightly tipsy on cocktails and each other's laughter. It was effortless talking to her, in a way it never was with other women. Maybe the ease had come with the safety. She hadn't ever been an option, cradled in the perfect marriage with Daniel.

He twists around in his seat, watching Cole’s disappear in the back window, and wonders if it’ll be worth it to try and get his jacket back.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” he breathes, and finally their eyes meet across the console. “You know I was two weeks away from getting free bobas?”

She just looks at him, and then she laughs, his favorite sound, dipping her head briefly between her arms, hands still on the wheel.

“You know they’ve got a probationary program—” he pushes, feeling his own smile so wide, and his skin erupts into tingles, because this was happening, and he was right here with her, at home in the passenger seat with her at the wheel. “They don’t just give those out, you know...you’ve got to earn them!”

They slow to a stop, and she takes a hand off the wheel to wipe under her eyes with one knuckle, he notices her fingers are shaking a little. He grabs her hand, and she rolls her lips between her teeth.

“You know I’m with you,” he says. “You don’t have to ask.”

“You know we never deserved you,” she says, tilting her head, and she has to wipe at her eyes again.
“Make it up to me,” he says, chest filling up with something like helium, feeling bold. “Go out with me.”

A car honks behind them. Green light. Her face wrinkles up, shocked from his words and annoyed at the jerk in the Jeep. She gives the guy the finger and wrangles the wheel around and pulls them into the nearest parking lot, a Dunkin’ Donuts. She slams the shifter into park and hides her mouth behind her left hand, and Anoush sees she’s already taken the ring off. Which should be a good sign, it should give him hope.

But a couple of tears roll down her cheek, and he can’t take it, he barely got through the car ride last night, they’d driven around, eating McDonalds while she cried and they talked for hours.

“Amanda,” he begs. “Mandy, c’mon, don’t cry— I didn’t mean it, we don’t have to be anything, just— I just want you happy— ”

Her blue eyes, crazy blue, like his mother’s topaz earrings, lock onto him.

“Why do you want me?” she asks. “Why really?”

“I...” he struggles.

“Is it the boss thing, or the fact that I was unavailable all these years? Because it won’t be like that anymore, the grass might not be so green— ”

“Amanda— ”

“—and it’s gonna get messy, even if we both stay amicable. There’s the kids, custody stuff, and the business, we’ll have to figure how how to do this and not freak out the board and the shareholders, I mean it’s his name on the building for Christssake— ”

“Amanda— ”

“—and the house. We’ve got like twenty years left on the mortgage, we should never have refinanced— and I told him we should have gotten a prenup, he’s the one that was so goddamn sure about everything, and I was just so young, you know— ”

“Mandy,” he says, and she finally shuts up.

“What?” she snaps. He loves that tone. He loves everything about her.

“You’re the best part of my day. Always. For eighteen years. That’s why.”

She rolls her eyes, has to wipe the tears away. “You’re such a suckup— ” she has to whisper though, so she doesn’t cry more, and he knows she’s full of shit.

“I just have one more question, though,” he reaches over to help wipe more tears, and she sort of leans her face into his hand, and he nearly cracks in half.

“Name it, Sundance,” she sniffs, and grins. He doesn’t even mind that the old nickname was christened by Daniel two days into the job at BMW, some old movie reference.

“How much are you offering?” he pours all his sincerity into it, trying not to ruin it by laughing. “Because the benefits at Cole were practically unbeatable, I mean the timeshare in Turks and Caicos— ”

She shuts him up, grabs his face and presses their lips together, and he sighs into her mouth. He laces
his fingers with hers, pulls them down off his jaw and untangles one to push into her hair, his thumb pressing into the silky-soft skin of her cheek. He thinks about all the shitty dates he’s been on, all these years, all the hope he’d read into a profile picture or a list of favorite foods, and all the disappointment. Strings of dates and strings of women he couldn’t remember the names of. All the cold nights alone in bed, all the sad takeout meals eaten in front of the tv. All the smiles cracked over his text chain with this woman, grinning into the little bright screen in the dark, the constant feelings of his own inadequacies, that he would never find a woman like her, that the search for something close was both hopeless and pointless.

He almost can’t let himself believe that it’s happening— that it all might be paying off, now. That it was really her, her hair and her dangling earrings brushing over the backs of his hands and her soft sighs into his lips.

She pulls back, just enough to allow a little space to mutter, “We’ve got great benefits. Way better than Cole’s.”

“Oh, really?” he grins. “Sell me, LaRusso.” The name doesn’t bother him. It’s still her.

“Executive lunches,” she nods, the afternoon light catches in her eyes like a kaleidoscope, blue and green and gold, as insane as it sounds. “Corner office, big window, you can see the mattress store next door.” She grins because she knows he knows it’s her old office at Sherman Oaks. “All the coffee you want— and it’s good coffee...Oh! Don’t forget Sushi Saturdays— ”

“What’s the boba situation?” He mutters, still so close, he can’t help it, he’s drunk on the smell of her skin.

“No boba,” she laughs, low and deep in her throat, her nose wrinkles up a little, god.

“No way,” he pulls back, really tries to sell it, shaking his head, but he can’t stop smiling, like it’s not even under his control anymore. “That’s a deal killer.”

“I’ll throw in dinner,” she laughs. “That new place on Sepulveda Boulevard.”

“That’s so not fair,” he says into her lips. “You know I’m a whore for tapas.”

They go to his place and they talk and they don’t go out for dinner. He cooks and they kiss and she falls asleep on his couch awhile later, and he’s not even a little disappointed.

He covers her with an afghan and picks her shoes up, sets them carefully by the door.

“I knew you’d be back,” she says, as he crouches down, fingers in her hair.

She takes his hand, softly, softly.

He stays like that for awhile, holding her hand, bent down and the muscles in his legs ache like fire. But he can’t stop watching her, the rise and fall of her chest, the minute fluttering of her eyelashes.

He remembers his father telling him that the Eric Clapton song, Layla, was really ripped off an old Persian myth (a thousand years before that Shakespeare hack wrote about Romeo and Juliet, he would brag) about a genie-possessed boy in love with another man’s wife. In desperation, the boy would go to her dwelling, kissing the walls she slept behind. It was as close as he could get. He flees to the desert, mad, and she dies of heartbreak. He comes back, but it’s too late, and he dies on her grave, carving his last poetry into the stone.

He squeezes Amanda’s hand, rests his forehead on her knuckles, and listens to her breath. He thinks
the boy was a fool for kissing walls, when he should have climbed over them.

***

Friday, August 31st, 2018

Everything in the after of their separation is experimental. Letting Anoush take her out on the town, Daniel moving his stuff over to Mr. Miyagi’s old place, watching Robby and Sam navigate friendship with Miguel Diaz hovering at Sam’s shoulder. Trying not to call Daniel ‘Babe’ anymore, paperwork from the lawyers. One of the worst, having to announce the impending changes to the dealership staff— What does that mean? Does the name change? Are we getting fired? What about the billboards? He’s like...our whole schtick! She’s riding the wave of so much change, she wouldn’t be surprised to look down and see her feet floating off the ground.

And she knows Daniel is struggling, too. He had always been terrible alone, afraid to be in a room with just his thoughts and nothing to distract him. Especially after he lost Miyagi, silence was suffocating to him, depressing. She’d always predicted that an empty nest would be devastating to him, and she’s not at all sure that he’s ready to leave it prematurely.

He’s still in and out, for his own sanity, mostly, but she’s also grateful for his familiar presence. Twice a week Daniel wakes up at Miyagi-do and works at the dealership till late afternoon before he drives the A7 to the old house and cooks dinner for the kids while Amanda eats out with Anoush or works late.

They’re trying to give each other enough space.

She finds herself torn— What’s the balance point between holding the family together and making enough room for change? She pictures their life like a disc of pizza dough. Daniel’s flour-dusty hands pulling it larger, finding enough material to tease outward from the center, applying enough pressure to make a decent size pie without ripping big holes in the thing.

A couple of weeks in it’s one of Daniel’s nights, and she’s on the phone with Anoush, he’s asking her where she wants to eat tonight. Anoush was one of those going out people, she knew he could cook but he spent half his income eating dinner at favorite haunts or whatever hot new place was on the radar. She’s feeling guilty, because she can hardly cook and her nights with the kids have been quiet and raw. She has to keep Daniel’s chair out of her peripheral vision, and it’s almost worse when Anoush comes over because she has to hurry to sit down in Daniel’s place before he inadvertently offends the kids. She doesn’t want to replace their father, or have them thinking she’s happy about upending their old world.

Anyway it’s a Friday night and she’s got Anoush in her ear when she sees Daniel pull up in the black sedan. She tells Anoush to hold on and steps out to the driveway to meet him, figure out if it would be weird if she stayed for dinner, maybe invited Anoush over, too. But Johnny and Robby pile out of the car and Daniel’s sheepishly asking her if it would be weird to have everybody stay tonight, make a giant pot of pasta and a big green salad. Robby greets her sweaty and smiling and
shoulders past, and Johnny kicks at the pavement behind Daniel’s shoulder and avoids her eyes (she does find a little comfort there, that at least he felt bad about it, even if she’s glad it’s all out in the open now).

“What d’you think? It’ll be like a big, extended...family reunion. Like ‘Friday Family Dinner’. Sort of. We used to do that all the time.”

His eyebrows lift and his chin tilts ever-so-slightly toward a hopeful angle. They hadn’t done ‘Friday Family Dinner’ since Daniel opened his karate dojo, lost all sense of balance, fell headfirst into a midlife crisis and started sleeping with Johnny Lawrence.

Her mouth drops a little, and she looks at Johnny. He looks a little like he wants to die. She thinks, this could be fun.

She lifts the phone back to her ear, smiles into the speaker.

“Why don’t you come out here, tonight? I think we’re all staying in.”

Daniel kisses her cheek and leads Johnny inside, shouts over his shoulder that Sam and Miguel are on their way back from school.

“Who’s we?” Anoush asks, curious but his tone is a little absent. He’s still running reports from the office. She answers a little coyly, tells him to bring something red.

He’s there an hour later, and the house is like a church of chattering voices, clinking glass, steam-rich smells from Daniel’s cooking. She meets him in the hall, peering curiously around as he shoulders off his jacket. He’s got a bottle of wine in one hand, and he’s wearing a dark forest-green sweater that sets off the coffee-dark eyes.

“Daniel’s here?” he mutters, brushing his lips against her cheek.

“Yeah,” she answers. “C’mon.”

She takes his hand and leads him into the kitchen. Johnny, Anthony, and Robby are all seated at the breakfast bar while Sam and Miguel have been doled out various tasks, Daniel’s sous-chefs. Daniel is laughing and glowing and so happy, it looks like the good mood has even rubbed off on Johnny, chattering across the counter with Daniel.

She shoulders past Daniel for the corkscrew and opens the bottle and hands a full glass to Anoush. He looks exceedingly grateful and quickly gets pulled into shop talk with Robby, one eye trained warily on Johnny. Daniel’s already a half-glass in, she can tell by the color of his cheeks. She offers some to Johnny and he stammers to accept, and is immediately teased by a tipsy Daniel you told me wine was for girls—

She watches Anoush, in this house with her children and her soon-to-be-ex-husband, her husband’s lover, and his son, and her daughter’s boyfriend. All these people, and they looked anything but torn apart.

She meets Anoush out on the step, hours later, Sam is dropping Miguel back home and Daniel and Johnny had already left, Johnny plucking the keys from Daniel’s wine-slow fingers. Robby and Anthony were playing videogames inside. She likes the way the porch lights make the pre-maturely silver hairs turn gold, like alchemy.

It’s a little chilly, and he shoulders deeper into his jacket as she closes the door behind her, shutting out the boys’ chatter and tv noise.
“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” she asks him, and he reaches out, plays with the tips of her fingers.

“Nah,” he shakes his head. He had such a great smile. “Kinda reminded me of home, actually.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You should come meet them sometime.” He steps closer, their fingers are still tangled together. “My parents are alright, but you might not survive my cousins.”

“I survived Jersey Italians at Thanksgiving. I survived Louie,” she jokes, and he laughs.

“Seriously, though. You should meet them.” He’s a little hesitant, eyes still down on their hands.

“Not sure a forty year-old divorcée is what your mother dreamed about—”

“It’s what I dreamed about—”

“Oh yeah? I can see you now, a ten-year-old in windpants staring up at a poster of Anne Bancroft—”

“Coo-coo-ca-chu, baby,” he grins, and kisses her. “You only wish you could see me in windpants.”

And so, without any need for discussion, ‘Friday Family Dinners’ resume. Bigger, and maybe even better, than before.

***

Chapter 2: Patroclus and Achilles
“I could recognize him by touch alone, by smell; I would know him blind, by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. I would know him in death, at the end of the world.”

— Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*

***

Johnny doesn’t remember his dreams.

The dreams fade as he wakes, a few cobwebs still clinging to his brain, only to evaporate within minutes like fine mist. He doesn’t try to keep them, only breathes deeply and lets them go.

When he was a kid, his mother told him to write them down in a journal as soon as he woke up so that he can read through them in the morning. *They’re important*, she would say. *Dreams tell us about ourselves.*

He asks if she keeps a journal too, but she only smiles and says she used to, back when she was little. She’s not sure where it is anymore, where she put it last. She lost it a long time ago.

He concludes early in life, that it must be better to forget.
Daniel’s had the same recurring dream since he was sixteen.

He doesn’t have it often, not like every night, or even every month. But it would pop up every year or two, startling him out of whatever domestic stability he had managed to carve out, leaving him shaky and feverish for the next week.

A lot of it he knows is straight from memory, the real thing— the moonlight, and the dark shadows and black water. Johnny’s lamp-lit blue eyes and silver-washed skin. Daniel is laying on the dock, cold damp wood under his back and Johnny’s hot chest heaving above.

But it’s bizarre, just one long, repeating, static moment frozen in time, where instead of the kiss, or Daniel pushing back— all he can see is one solid, interminable vision of Johnny just breathing above him, heavy and frantic, staring into his eyes, inches away like he’s waiting for Daniel to push him away or pull him back in.

It’s so vivid, so real— that he can flex his fingertips on Johnny’s shoulders, count the barely-there freckles and feel drops of lake water. He stays stuck and paralyzed in the dream for what feels like hours, until he finally jerks awake, exhausted and sick to his stomach.

It’s unsettling, and freaky. Like a nightmare.

Daniel has the dream dozens of times over thirty years, but the last time he has it is a cool May night in 2018. He wakes up in the dark, takes a cold shower, and spends the day trying to forget the color of Johnny’s eyes. He sells one car and spends the rest of the day in his office, staring blankly at spreadsheets, pretending to work.

That night, he comes home in a fog, makes dinner, says goodnight to Robby, and opens his front door to find Johnny Lawrence on his doorstep with a note for Robby in his hand, too drunk to drive home.

That night, Daniel drives Johnny home and kills the engine dead and stares over at him in the dark of the quiet car. All he can see is Johnny clouded in moonlight, like a ghost, like an apparition in his head, and he knows he’d do anything to break the stillness between them. He doesn’t think about it, just does it, leans over and grabs the back of his neck and pulls him in, connecting them together.

He wonders now, if all those years, he wasn’t really dreaming. Maybe it was a premonition.

Maybe he was seeing the future.
The toughest part about sparring against LaRusso was finding him and keeping him in one spot.

They’re sparring at the Miyagi house, small and blue and across the old railroad tracks, sometime late in the afternoon in September.

He was all feints and angles, ducking and moving around the mat like water. Johnny’s been working at getting his speed back up, and he knows he’s in better shape than LaRusso, but chasing the guy around the mat, throwing machine-gun kicks isn’t getting him anywhere. LaRusso circles tightly to avoid him, chasing at Johnny’s back.

Johnny finally gets tired and frustrated enough to football tackle him to the ground, arms around his ribs, as they go down he can feel Daniel’s fingers tighten around his biceps, and Johnny hears the back of his head smack on the tatami and his breath knock clean out of his lungs.

“You okay?” Johnny heaves, pushing up a couple of inches, studying Daniel’s crinkled up face, his sweaty t-shirt sticking to his chest. “C’mon. Don’t be a baby,” he adds, pretty much keeping the worry out of his voice.

Daniel finally opens his eyes. “That didn’t count,” he groans, sucking the air back in, Johnny can feel his ribs expanding. He lets go of Johnny’s arms, pushes up on Johnny’s chest. Johnny stays put.

“You tappin’ out, LaRusso?” He can feel himself grinning stupid and almost giddy.

“I’m too old for this shit, now get off of me you big gorilla— ”

Johnny laughs, shifting to pin LaRusso’s hands against his chest. “No, no,” he shakes his head. “You want out, call ‘Uncle’!”

Daniel shakes his head, still breathing hard but he’s smiling. “No way.”

Johnny admits later, he definitely let his guard down, sort of staring down transfixed, and he kisses him and lets LaRusso’s hands go and LaRusso kisses him back and pushes his hips up. Which is great, except that it gives LaRusso enough leverage to get his feet under him, bridge-up and twist out of Johnny’s grip, so fast that Johnny nearly smacks his chin on the floor.

“What was that, fucking judo?” Johnny rubs his jaw, sitting up on his knees as Daniel strides out of the room.

He doesn’t answer, just looks back over his shoulder, laughing.

He’s laughing, and he has the gall to wink—

Johnny gets up and sprints after him and chases him down the hallway and over the back of the couch.

He gets LaRusso right where he wants him, and keeps him there awhile.

***
Johnny is still the most attractive person Daniel’s ever seen. And it was easy to believe.

He’s in incredible shape for his age, he’s tall, and buff, and he’s got ethereal blue eyes and a full head of sandy blonde hair, and when he chooses to, he’s got a smile that could knock you right out of your socks. He’s Robert Redford, if Robert Redford knew anything about martial arts and could pound his fist through a stack of flaming rocks.

So Johnny Lawrence is actually hotter than Robert Redford. It’s stupid.

So he understands the attraction, on a physical level. But he’s also crazy about Johnny on levels he still can’t wrap his head around.

Johnny Lawrence, many, many times over is still a complete and total dick— he says things without thinking about the consequences, and without consideration of anybody’s feelings. He has no filter. He has no tact, and no social graces.

He looks awkward in a tie and his eyes dart around if Daniel tries to bring him someplace “too fancy,” which is anywhere more upscale than a fast-food joint.

He doesn’t like holding hands unless he’s too tired to care and it’s just the two of them, like if they’re in the car or maybe watching a movie. He doesn’t call Daniel ‘Daniel’ as much as he would like, certainly nothing so tender as ‘babe’, which Daniel tried to use once and earned a snappy ‘no fuckin’ way, Chachi, I’m not that gay.’

He’s rough and difficult and aggressive and still, still— even after everything, Daniel knows that he misses Cobra Kai, misses the brash colors of it and the orderly tenants and the straight understandable lines of “The Way of the Fist” and the fratty fun of it all. He probably always will, no matter how often Daniel tries to sell the more modest appeals of Miyagi-do (Still waters run deep, Daniel chides, and Johnny only rolls his eyes and asks for one good reason that doesn’t involve breathing or rivers or trees).

He thinks that Johnny even misses Kreese, some days.

With Amanda, the friendship had always been the easiest part. The sex was okay, he’d thought it was normal to feel the undercurrent of obligation beneath the genuine affection. And normal that sometimes he had his moments of doubt, especially in those dark months after Mr. Miyagi had died and taken a piece of Daniel with him.

It’s different with Johnny. Even if he has doubts that the relationship could last (he tries not to think like that), Daniel has no doubts about his feelings. It’s bone-deep, centered around the epicenter of his heart and the bottom of his gut. And it’s almost frustrating because now they’ve started, Daniel knows there won’t ever be anybody else that makes him feel like this.

People talked about true love like it was this freeing thing, but it’s almost the opposite of liberation, because he knows there is nothing he can do about it. He’s a slave to feeling.

He had chosen Amanda, reasoned out when to ask her out for a first date, when to make the right moves to take her to bed, and when to propose. And they had decided when was a good time for kids.

But loving Johnny didn’t feel anything close to optional. He just does. It’s so intense, it’s almost painful for Daniel to even look at him for very long, because all he can think about is how much time they wasted.

He tells this to Johnny, one night in bed, a little whiny and a lot morose, “I just wish we’d started this
years ago.”

Johnny just looks at him like he’s an idiot, and shakes his head and says, “It wouldn't have worked back then.”

He smacks Daniel on the back of the head and tells him to hold his feet down while he does sit-ups.

Daniel rubs the back of his head and glares at him, but does as asked, because you don’t say no to a front-row seat to shirtless Johnny Lawrence doing sit-ups.

***

Johnny has no idea why he finds Daniel LaRusso attractive.

He looks, still— so much like a girl, that Johnny maybe finds some comfort that it might mean he’s a little less gay. Daniel is so skinny, he has practically no muscle definition (visible anyway, the little fucker is way stronger than he looks). His hair looks ridiculous most of the time, he combs it to the side like a total dork. Unless he’s in car salesman mode, he’s usually dressed like a soccer mom, in athletic pants, probably because he’s embarrassed about his chicken legs. He only wears shorts on the hottest of days. He owns a short-sleeve sweater— and he wears it! Often! In front of other people!

But. Contrary to his own logic, Johnny likes it all. And he wouldn’t admit it, not on pain of death, not even if there was a fire—

But Daniel LaRusso is (probably) sexier than he has any goddamn right to be. Like... (ok fine, so definitely) sexier than anybody Johnny’s ever dated. Ever. Including Ali Mills.

Johnny really does sort of miss the normal-ness of dating a girl. Daniel always wants to take him out, and Johnny finds eating at restaurants with another guy weird. He won’t be caught dead hand-holding and swinging arm-in-arm down the street. He’s not big on PDA, especially around the kids, or god forbid Amanda LaRusso and her curry-powdered pool boy.

But he never got to do karate with a girl (he tried a few times with Shannon, but she had no sense of humor and inevitably those trials ended either in tears or with a knee in Johnny’s groin). He certainly never got laid this often (or this well) with a girl, not even close— LaRusso may have looked like a girl but he sure didn’t fuck like one. He was always down for it. And let’s just say he knew the ‘male territory’ really, really well.

He’s got those bambi eyes and pretty (there’s no other word) eyelashes and his nose scrunches up when he laughs (and that laugh!) and he gets those crinkles around his eyes and really, Johnny can’t get enough of that dark skin. He maps it out with his fingers like a fucking cartographer getting paid double-time.

He likes that LaRusso doesn’t take it easy on him, he doesn’t pull punches which means Johnny doesn’t have to either. They still call each other names and shove each other into walls and Johnny sweeps his foot and trips Daniel going out the front door for work, and Daniel does the same to Johnny when he’s groggily trying to get out of bed.

They just work— in a way that Johnny’s never found with anybody else.
He likes LaRusso.

He really likes him.

He’s doomed, is what he is.

***

Saturday, October 13, 2018

“What are you getting her?”

“I’m letting her spend all day today with her friends at the beach. Why, what are you getting her.” Daniel tilts the phone between his cheek and shoulder, taking the cuts of fish wrapped in brown paper from the meat counter lady, nodding in thanks.

“You realize now we’re divorced that this is a competition. Go big or go home, Daddy-o”

He snorts, hands pausing on the grocery cart handle. “I know what you’re gonna say.”

“It’s her ‘Sweet Sixteen’, she’s expecting it— ”

“She already gets to drive whatever she wants off the lot.”

“Well, maybe we should get something she can call her own.”

“You know, not all sixteen-year-old girls get luxury cars for their birthday— ”

“What d’you want to get her?”

“I dunno, what’ve we got in the trade-in lot?”

“Why would we do that? She loved the convertible, let’s just do the paperwork on one of those, we’ve got a 2019 in white at Woodland Hills— ”

“That’s a $50,000 car— ”

He can practically hear her pursed lips through the speaker.

“Is this because of Johnny? Did he say something?”

“What? No, he’s got nothing to do with it— ”

“Did he bust your balls for spoiling your daughter?”

“His opinion has nothing to do with how I raise my daughter— ”
“Because I remember a conversation last year about a birthday trip to Japan.”

“To be fair, that was more for me than her.”

She laughs across the connection. “Oh. I know.”

“I just...I don’t want her to think everything in life is gonna be handed to her—”

He should have gone to Whole Foods. The produce here really was sub-par.

“Babe...” she pauses. “Jesus. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, you know I do it too,” he pushes the cart down the next aisle, watching a harried looking mother trying to corral her three kids, putting a box of those sugary fruit snacks back on the shelf. He hears Amanda’s heeled feet clicking on tile, she was still at the dealership.

“Yes,” she agrees wryly. “I just have to watch it around Anoush. He worries.”

“I think he’d have stroke calling me anything other than ‘LaRusso’.”

“He’s adjusting. We all are.”

“Right.” Daniel shakes his head, sets a jar of fresh ginger in the cart. “Anyway. It’s fine, have Jason pull the paperwork. Do I need to sign?”

“Yes, we can still do it out of the joint account.” She pauses. “I already had him pull the paperwork, I’ll send it over this afternoon.”

He stops, pulling the cart off to one side of the aisle. “You’ve already got the bow on it, don’t you?”

“Her favorite color, baby blue.”

“Well at least put my name on the card.” He grins, despite himself. Samantha was going to freak.

“Already done.”

“Just do me a favor, don’t let Anoush take credit.”

“I said I’d let him drive it up to surprise her—”

“Oh, c’mon—”

“He just wants to score some points, Daniel, let him—”

“She’s known him all her life, why does he need to score points?!”

“Well, it’s weird for him now. This’ll give him something to do.”

“Isn’t he busy? You know, with all his new responsibilities?!”

“Oh, he’s all caught up. He’s quite the GM, Daniel.”

“Uh huh.” Daniel allows himself to sulk. “Probably easier without me I guess.”
“Oh, don’t pout. You hated everything about that job. You always wanted to be on the floor talking to customers. You don’t miss the board room.”

“Yeah, okay, you got me there. Still.”

“I know,” she says, knowingly. “You need an ice pack for that ego?”

“Har-har. Okay well what about Christmas? We already told mom we’d do Jersey this year.”

Amanda does that low, sardonic humming laugh he knows so well. “Ooohhh, Daniel. One of the biggest perks of this whole thing is that I no longer have to deal with your mother.”

“I haven’t even told her about the divorce yet.”

“Or your boyfriend.”

“This really isn’t funny—”

“Uh huh. Sure it isn’t. And you’re really running the clock down, LaRusso, it’s been two months. She’s gonna be pissed as it is—”

“I know. But I really think we should both tell her, you know, like a united front—”

“Good luck, Daniel.”

He groans.

“Anyway we’re doing Christmas in Hawaii. Anoush already bought tickets. You can take the kids to Jersey with Johnny.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a minute—”

“I’m doing Christmas on the beach, Daniel. Cocktails with little umbrellas.”

“Just listen—we should spring it on her easy, together. What if we all went up there, you can bring Anoush, too, she loves Anoush, it’ll be like a whole family thing, Robby would come with—”

“Little umbrellas, Daniel.”

“Amanda—”

“Hey, remember that time you cheated on me after eighteen years and didn’t tell me about it for three months?”

“Oh, c’mon—”

“And then I was nice enough not to take your children away from you?”

Daniel contemplates in silence, staring at the contents of his cart.

“Yes.”

“Right. You owe me, LaRusso.”

“I know,” he sighs. He does know.

“Daniel.”
“Mmmhmm.”

“It’ll be fine. She’s your mother. You’re her only son. She loves you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you already gave her grandkids,” she snorts. “It’s not like she can hold that against you— ”

“You’d be surprised.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“No,” he smiles, pinching at his temples. “You wouldn’t.”

“It’ll be okay. You should call her.”

“I know.”

“Like. Today.”

“Alright, alright.”

They say their goodbyes, he promises to be there tomorrow by noon, and hangs up. He pushes the cart up to the front and joins the shortest line he can find, right behind the exasperated mother with three kids. The youngest, a little girl barely out of diapers, drops a box of cookies from her plastic kid-seat in the cart. He bends to pick the package up, and hands it to the apologetic mother.

“Thank you,” she sets the cookies on the moving rubber belt. “She, uh, doesn’t quite have her grip down yet,” she smiles tiredly at the little girl’s grabby fingers.

“She’s adorable,” Daniel nods, grinning at the big gray baby eyes.

“She drives me crazy,” she shakes her head, finishes emptying her cart.

“They grow up fast.”

“You got kids?” she asks, digging a credit card out of her wallet.

“Yeah,” he nods, setting his own things on the counter. “My oldest is turning sixteen tomorrow.”

“Wow, I can’t imagine,” she says shaking her head. “Do they get any easier?”

“Sort of,” he frowns. “Some things get easier. Some things get harder. They still drive you crazy.”

“Glad I’m not the only one,” she laughs. She’s got a great smile, it makes her look less exhausted. She gestures to his cart. “You got a big birthday dinner?”

“Yeah. She likes sushi.”

“So there’s hope. I can’t get mine off pizza rolls and fish sticks.”

“We had that phase. I’ve still got a fifty-year-old on that diet.”

She grins, tapping a number into the keypad, glancing between him and the checkout lady, then down at his left hand. “Your girlfriend’s not into sushi?”

“Ahh,” he pauses, mouth open. He hasn’t had to do this a whole lot yet. “He... eats like a ten-year-
old. We’re workin’ on it.”

“Ah,” she nods, smile a little crooked now, and not un-kind. Re-apprising. “He’s lucky to have a cook in the house, then.”

“I like to think so.”

“I’d kill for that. My husband is useless without a can-opener and a microwave,” she runs a hand back through her hair, has to pull a pack of gum from one of her kid’s hands.

“There’s still time to learn,” Daniel shrugs, finishing setting his own things on the belt.

“We’re workin’ on it,” she smiles with a wink. The bagger finishes with her groceries, and she takes her receipt with a quick thank you, and pushes her cart forward.

“Anyway, um,” she turns back, her kids hanging off the cart. “It was nice talking to you. Good luck with your daughter. And your overgrown ten-year-old.”

She winks again, and waves goodbye.

He pays for his groceries, carries the bags out to the Audi. He almost turns the wrong way, back toward Encino, but switches his blinker over in time and takes the other direction, back to Receda.

He decides not to follow Amanda’s advice. He’ll call his mother tomorrow. Or maybe the next day. Right now, all he wants to do is get home, put the fish in marinade, and go see his boyfriend. Partner. Lover.

Eesh. Nothing sounded right.

He just wants to get home to Johnny.

Now. That one, he likes the sound of.

***

Johnny’s not a fearful person.

Karate taught him that with a little effort, he could shape his mind and body into a capable weapon. Kreese had pounded the idea in early that fearful people were just the un-prepared. Weakness was simply the result of a lack of work and poor self-discipline.

He supposes that he does worry, though. He worries about Robby, about screwing up all the progress they’ve made. He worries about the thing with LaRusso going wrong. Or the thing with LaRusso going right but causing resentment in Robby, or things going south between LaRusso and his kids, because of something Johnny did. Ruining Daniel’s life just by being with him.

Sometimes he has a sleepless night, but mostly he sleeps just fine.

And there’s this one nightmare, one he’s had off and on for a long time. A memory gone wrong, Kreese in the parking lot, grabbing him and swinging him around, cutting off air like a slow-moving vice, and Johnny prying weakly, uselessly at his big meaty arm.
Before, he used to wake up in a cold sweat, sucking in big breaths of oxygen. He used to hold his head in his hands, get up and towel the sweat off his skin and count numbers until his heart gradually paced back down to normal. He used to mutter things under his breath. Stupid things only he would hear, because there wasn’t anybody else around to hear them.

*It’s just a dream, it’s just a dream, you’re fine, jesus christ, don’t be such a pussy.*

*It’s not real. Just a stupid dream.*

Nightmare. Whatever.

He still has them, once in awhile.

Only now, he wakes with a start, cold-sweat and all. But before he can throw the covers off LaRusso is groggily pulling him back in, muttering nonsense words and pushing his nose into the space between Johnny’s shoulder blades. Still half asleep, running a hand down Johnny’s sweaty arm.

*’S just a dream, gback to sleep. A deep sigh, something about Bon Jovi and stay back, I’ll kick his ass.*

These days, instead of getting up and pacing and having to give himself a pep-talk, Johnny lays back down.

He closes his eyes, breathes deeply and in tandem with another, and goes back to sleep.

***

The truth is, Daniel is afraid more often than he isn’t.

He’s afraid Johnny might lapse back to drinking, go for a drive, and never come back.

He’s afraid that Samantha or Anthony, maybe both of them, will grow to resent him for breaking up the marriage. He’s afraid Amanda and Anoush won’t work out, and their happiness will be out of balance, leaving Amanda to resent what he has with Johnny.

Maybe Johnny will get sick of Daniel, and break up with him. Maybe he’ll get too weirded out by the whole gay part. Getting looks from strangers at restaurants and from people that recognize Daniel from TV, maybe Daniel and Amanda’s old country club friends (acquaintances).

Maybe Johnny will find it easier to go back to women, maybe Carmen. And Daniel will be truly alone.

The first night he spends at the dojo—he moves a few things over, puts a new mattress in Mr. Miyagi’s old room and a decent espresso machine in the kitchen, and watches tv until midnight—Daniel wakes up with a weight in his stomach, and he regrets *everything*.

He thinks for a few horrible hours that he’s made a mistake, maybe the worst mistake of his entire life.

He misses Amanda, and he thinks about how he might never find Sam in her pyjamas in the dusky morning light of the kitchen, messy hair and bunny slippers. He thinks how he doesn't have a decent
room for her or Anthony to stay over, and anyway why in the world would they want to stay in this weird little house in Receda when they have their old bedrooms twenty minutes away? Just logistically, it doesn’t make any sense.

He’s made himself the parent they can only visit, and never come home to.

He pulls his phone out in the dark, at almost 3 in the morning, and stares at his text chain with Johnny, and he almost calls.

The next morning, Johnny comes over to help him move a few more things out of the house while Amanda was at work. He rumbles up in the car (he got the Challenger back and spent another couple grand repainting the stupid thing, this time all black), all glorious garish noise in the soft tranquility that’s nearly smothering Daniel to death. He steps out of the car and takes one look at him and must see the dark circles under his eyes and he doesn’t need to ask Daniel for the truth.

He **must** see, because Johnny insists they stop off at his apartment so he can grab a duffle bag full of stuff before they go back to the dojo to unload the truck.

“You owe me dinner, LaRusso—” he puffs, all sweaty biceps and his t-shirt sticking to his chest and Daniel has to concentrate so he doesn’t drop the heavy oak dresser on his toes.

“Deal,” he groans, hefting the thing up and over the threshold of the front door.

They return the truck late in the afternoon and by the time they get back Daniel’s they’re too tired to cook and so they order Chinese and end up horsing around in the dojo which leads to making out which leads to testing out the new queen-sized mattress in the bedroom (the room’s too small for a king).

“This bed is fucking nice,” Johnny says after, and he turns over, pushing his fingers into the quilted surface and sort of bounces up and down experimentally. There isn’t any sheets on it yet, just Johnny Lawrence in his boxers on the white pillow-top surface. It’s quite a sight.

It **is** fucking nice, and it had better be because Daniel paid way too much for the stupid thing.

Still, it’s one more item on the list he imagines is in Johnny’s head, similar to the list he has in his own head: ‘**Reasons to Stay**’, stenciled in at the top. It’s important, somehow, in these strange middling days between leaving Amanda and settling in with Johnny that he keeps track of it all. Why he’s leaving, and where he’s going.

What he’s **doing**.

The second night he spends at the dojo, Daniel sleeps all the way through. He wakes up at dawn in a sweaty tangle, unsure which legs are his. His arm is rubbery and numb, asleep with the weight of Johnny’s snoring head cutting the circulation off.

He eases his arm free, flexing the blood back into his fingers. The regret is gone with the morning mist, and he can’t believe how lucky he is.
It’s November, and Johnny hasn’t slept in his own bed in two months.

He has his reasons.

For one, his mattress isn’t really good for two people doing anything other than fucking. It was fine if it was just Johnny sleeping in it, but there was a big Johnny-sized divot in the middle. Which meant two people ended rolling downhill into each other, squished uncomfortably together and then it would get too hot, and both people woke up sweating with sore backs, and one person was always more vocal and bitchy about it than the other person.  

(LaRusso, always LaRusso)

And also he knows exactly how much LaRusso paid for his stupid new bed because even if he’s still Mr. ‘I-understand-computers-and-always-have-the-latest-iphone’ he still keeps paper receipts folded up in his wallet like an old man and Johnny might have accidentally looked while LaRusso was still in the shower.

It was expensive.

So he sorta feels obligated to help LaRusso get his money’s-worth out of the damn thing. And really. It was a fucking nice bed.

He’s not sure what, if anything, it means that he’s only been stopping by his apartment in the afternoons to pick up clean clothes and do laundry. Or why the dim lighting suddenly looked depressing after all the sunshine-bathed rooms at the dojo, and the carpeting especially dingy next to the memory of natural-stained oak floorboards.

Or when he started to like the quiet. Something about the trees wrapping around the little blue house like a muffler, he was getting the best sleep of his life. He never used to mind the city sounds, but the last night he stayed over at the apartment the street noise was practically deafening.

He almost wants to shoot himself the week after Kreese takes the dojo. He’s depressed and LaRusso won’t let him drink like he wants to, and there wasn't anything to fill his empty afternoons. But of course there was still Miguel and Aisha. And Bert, hilariously enough. And Anthony LaRusso texts all the kids from the youth class and Johnny gets all of them back. So Johnny gets the Cobras he likes best anyways, three times a week and the little ones on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He gets Robby, too.

Well. Not for karate, not all the way. And now he thinks about it he can’t call any of them ‘Cobras’ anymore. But Robby comes over in the mornings with Sam and the Miyagi-do kids at god-awful times during the week (Johnny never holds his classes earlier than 3 o’clock, there was no point now that school was back in session, anyway) and at more human hours over the weekend. Lots of times it overlaps with Johnny’s class so that Saturdays become a combined class. Robby and Miguel still kind of walk a little stiffly around each other, and Johnny sees Diaz look the other way whenever Sam throws her arms around Robby (and vise-versa) but all in all, they’re working it out. Johnny’s kids stare at the Miyagi kids during the kata stuff and against Johnny’s advice they just sort of join in. Johnny doesn’t really blame them, he knows all about LaRusso’s sheepish nerdy dad-charm. And
Daniel tends to shut up when Johnny talks about economy of movement and pressing strategic advantage and how to preserve power during transitional movements. Samantha in particular seems eager to work on her kicks (and she’s a secret Cobra, Johnny knows).

Or would’ve been. Whatever.

Whatever it is they’re forming, it’s working. Miguel finally keeps a decent guard up and Robby’s kicks and punches become something the other kids literally flinch away from. Sam is a monster and Bert learns to let his opponents come to him. Evenings routinely include straggling teenagers that want to ‘hang out’, who don’t even belong to Johnny or Daniel.

Robby still keeps his room at the LaRusso’s (Amanda’s house, he has to keep correcting in his head) because the dojo is far enough West to be out of the school district, and really there’s just not quite enough room. But there is a small room with thin walls that Daniel had been using for storage before, and it’s about big enough for a full-sized bed. They have to clean out a bunch of Daniel’s shit (books about Japan and all kinds of pots that Daniel won’t throw away and weird old clothes like a shiny red bathrobe looking thing that Johnny finds and Daniel snatches away and Johnny laughs at him because he’s such a weirdo!) So they clean it out and it’s ready for a bed. It’ll be cool, it’s got drawers and stuff. As soon as Johnny brings himself to put it together from it’s stupid IKEA parts, delivered in a tiny box and broken up ridiculously piecemeal as only Europeans could think to do.

And so Johnny’s sitting on the couch in sweatpants and a hoodie with a cup of coffee in his hand on a chilly morning in November, working his way up to the task. He doesn’t have much else to do today besides his youth class at 3:30. LaRusso is leaving soon, he still has to put his hours in at the North Hollywood branch. He’s making breakfast right now in the kitchen while Johnny watches Hogan’s Heroes at 8:30 in the morning. He’s only up because LaRusso said he would make him bacon if he got out of bed.

He remembers a fight he’d had with LaRusso, maybe the first week he’d started sleeping over, back in August. LaRusso had woken up all annoyingly peppy and made some remark in the post-coital glow about wow, who would have thought we’d be here and Johnny said something like check back with me in a month see how you feel.

It went something like this:

Daniel frowns, follows him out into the kitchen. “Yeah. What’s that supposed to mean? Hey, c’mon, get a glass—”

Johnny shuts the fridge and takes a swig straight out of the carton.

“It means, Danielle—that nobody can tell the future. For instance, when you married Amanda you were probably skippin’ down the sidewalk, whistling Madonna songs thinkin’ life couldn’t possibly get better—but years go by, and it isn’t so blissful anymore, and pretty soon you’re seducing your son’s 50-year-old karate teacher so you can get out of your shitty marriage.”

Johnny quirks his eyebrows and takes another pointed swig of milk, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Daniel approaches Johnny and cages him in at the counter between his arms. He does that thing where he works his jaw around, running his tongue across the rows of his teeth.

“You done?”

“For now.”

“That generally how you look at the world?”
“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“You sabotage a lot of your relationships?”

“Everyone so far.” Johnny’s mouth twitches, but Daniel’s leveling with one of those looks of his, the ‘East Coast I mean business’ look, that Johnny tells him makes him look like either Robert De Niro or a pissed off hockey mom.

“Alright. You think you can shut your mouth and listen to me for a minute?”

“Maybe,” Johnny waffles.

“Ok. I didn’t kiss you in that car to get out of my marriage, I didn’t sleep with you because you were there, and I sure as hell didn’t risk my relationship with my kids for some kind of knee-jerk, midlife crisis affair—”

Daniel had gotten himself worked up and flustered in a way Johnny found unfairly attractive, his accent kicking in, saying ‘because’ like ‘bee-COSS”, like Billy Crystal at the end of When Harry Met Sally which Johnny had only seen because Shannon had forcibly pushed him down on the couch one night in a misguided attempt to show Johnny examples of how romance was supposed to work, When Harry Met Sally and Dirty Dancing and Moonstruck.

Anyway. To continue:

“I put that all on the line because it was worth the risk— because I’ve been thinking about what I missed out on 30 years ago, and because I’ve been ignoring for a long time the feeling that I wasn’t with the person I was supposed to be with. And I couldn’t live like that anymore.”

Daniel lets out a breath, and Johnny takes one in.

“I...I don’t regret my marriage. We had some good years, I got two great kids out of the deal, I wouldn’t ever change that. And...I’ll always love Amanda. She’s beautiful, and smart, and a great business partner—”

“Yeah, okay, I get the idea—”

“But she’s not you, John. I never felt this way before— about anybody. You’re it for me. That’s not gonna change in a week, or a month, or a year. You’ve got me for as long as you’ll have me.”

Johnny puts down the carton of milk, letting out his own breath. He turns to study Daniel, the dip between his eyebrows, still the same stupid, skinny dork he’d always been, maddeningly impossible to ignore, to look away from.

“You done?”

Daniel raises an eyebrow. “For now.”


Daniel grins, their faces still hovering close. “Breakfast I can do.”

“Great.” Johnny ducks out from under Daniel’s arm, and takes off for the couch. “Make it quick, LaRusso, TJ Hooker is on at 9.”

He almost misses the muttered (but he’s not angry, Johnny can tell the difference these days) “Such a dick—”
So he got breakfast then, and he’s getting another one now, *TJ Hooker* is still coming on at 9, and who knows how many of these mornings he’ll get, if only he doesn’t purposefully screw this into the ground. He thinks he can do it. Or at least that LaRusso will tell it to him straight if he starts to fuck it up.

Daniel comes over in his shirt and tie, sets a plate down on the coffee table and Johnny looks up to say ‘thanks’ and earns a quick kiss. LaRusso says “bye” and runs a hand through Johnny’s hair and turns to the door, swinging his laptop bag/briefcase/manpurse over one shoulder, grabbing his keys and jacket on his way out.

Johnny reaches for his fork and tosses over his shoulder, as thoughtless as anything he’s ever said— “Bye, love you.”

It stops LaRusso in his tracks, and Johnny freezes with his fork of eggs halfway to his mouth, sort of cringing but not daring to take it back. He knows how often Daniel’s been censoring himself, because he knows Johnny still couldn’t bring himself to say it back.

Johnny waits, tensed up, and slowly turns to look and see if LaRusso is looking.

He’s not. He’s still got his hand on the door knob. And as cool and casual as Johnny knows Daniel is trying with every fiber in his romantic-Italian-Sinatra-loving being— he says back, “I love you, too” and Johnny can tell he’s biting back a smile by the timber of his voice.

And he leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Johnny lets out a breath and thanks god for small mercies. He wouldn’t have been able to handle it if Daniel had done like he’d almost certainly wanted to, and turned around and jumped for joy *you DO love me!! Happy day!!* and clapped his hands like a teenage girl and kissed Johnny sloppily on the cheek.

Johnny respects the shit out of him for keeping it together.

He shrugs to himself, and eats his fork-full of eggs and chews his bacon (fucking *perfectly* cooked, every time, *how does he do it??*) and watches William Shatner chase after some poor black kid and slam him Kirk-style against a pickup truck and the kid calls Shatner *suckah!* and Johnny laughs when Shatner’s skinny guidolike partner says (who hilariously looks like LaRusso, just a little) “*for god’s sake you said you wanted him alive!!*” like the corniest, dumbest ‘80s shit ever.

He thinks he’s having about as good a morning as he could ask for. He’d just put a pep in LaRusso’s step. Robby was still talking about moving in. He’d lost Cobra Kai, but he had also ditched Kreese.

And just last week he’d gotten the hard part over with and told Bobby about the gay thing, and the LaRusso part— and Bobby had laughed right in his face, and basically told Johnny what an underwhelming surprise it was. And also that Jimmy now owed him fifty bucks. Johnny texted Jimmy a picture of his middle finger, and Jimmy texted back *Congratulations!!* and a bunch of hearts and Bobby’s phone made a little *boop* when Jimmy’s venmo thing went through (Bobby had to explain Venmo. And he hasn’t told Dutch anything, he’ll save that for another day, maybe *never*).

Anyway. Even accounting for those two chuckleheads giving Johnny a bunch of shit, he has to admit that things are good. Better than good.

He only wishes Tommy was alive, that he could give him a call to tell him the good news, that he has made it right this time, and that failure is the last thing on his mind.

He can feel it. The echo of Daniel’s hands moving in the kitchen, Robby’s bed waiting to be made.
The fullness of his life breathing in and out, all around him.
He looks out the living room window, and it’s all horizon.

***

THE END

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!