without a flashlight in the dark

by jurassicqueer (gaybirdkid)

Summary

The lights go out. Steve keeps his eyes fixed just left of the thing, can just barely make out a shoulder and sort-of head in the light of the moon, and tries to swallow back the sickening feeling of being hunted. He wants to run for his house but he can’t. He can’t, because if he takes his eyes off the thing for even a second, he won’t know where it is, and that’s scarier than seeing it.

But then- then Steve’s vision blurs for just a moment too long, and when he blinks away the tears and looks, it’s gone.

Steve lunges for the house doors. When the patio lights flicker back on, the poolside is empty, and Steve Harrington is missing. No one notices.

Or: Steve Harrington gets dragged into the Upside Down instead of Barb Holland. Someone else comes out.

Notes
ive been dreaming of this au since the first season came out. i asked myself "what if nancy stuck by barb? what if things went pear shaped, and no one was around to see it, and instead of barb...it was steve who got dragged into the upside down?"

there are four chapters, and each one will cover about 2 episodes of the first season. i'm rewatching the episodes as i go to keep things somewhat in line with canon.

work title is from "a word on statistics"
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/149909/a-word-on-statistics

See the end of the work for more notes.
The night was going so, so well, until it wasn’t.

Steve cleaned the house up- not that it isn’t usually clean, but he swept through it like an anxious, excited hurricane, until it looked cleaner than it did when his parents were last home- and he hung lights up around the pool, got out some beers and water, set up snacks in the kitchen. Usually he wasn’t this fussy, but Nancy was coming over, finally, and he didn’t even care if Tommy and Carol were there or one of Nancy’s friends came too, because Nancy.

Maybe he has a bit of an unhealthy amount of love for her. Maybe it’s more attachment and fondness than any of his other flings, for how new their relationship is. Maybe, maybe, maybe- but Nancy makes him feel warm and important and like he deserves things, so in the end, it’s all worth it.

But then it’s Barb who comes over. Barb, who is smart and viciously witty and always unimpressed by him. Tommy and Carol are the same assholes as they always are, and Steve is just a little too quick to drink and too slow to think, to speak, and when Barb’s blood drips onto the ground to raucous laughter, Nancy comes to a different decision.

The two girls storm off in a huff; Nancy giving a glare over her shoulder at Steve that says we’ll definitely be speaking about this soon, and Tommy and Carol’s too-loud words echoing off the too-bright pool until they go back inside to do whatever they do behind closed doors, and Steve is all alone. He’s all alone by the side of the pool with just the eerie woods and pool lights to keep him company.

He honestly should have expected this. He’s known for a while that he’d do something to disappoint Nancy- that’s how it always is with his parents- and things have been going so well. It’s just that Steve’s been so happy. Maybe it’s that. Maybe he’s been so happy, too happy, and the universe decided to kick his ass for it. Maybe he’s meant to be miserable.

And then there’s a flicker of something- the lights falter, dim for a moment, and Steve blinks at the wall of trees around his property. Did he- is something there? He could swear that something had
moved in the underbrush.

Steve tells himself it’s a deer- wants it to be a deer, because it’ll make him feel better if it is- but there’s something tight and cold in his gut that says it isn’t. He opens his eyes a little wider as the lights shudder again and catches a silhouette in the periphery of his vision. This time he pushes himself to his feet and stumbles, because that- that wasn’t a fucking deer, that was upright and too tall and too much like a human, too much like a not-quite-human- enough, and that cold thing in his gut is spreading, and Steve is terrified.

The lights go out. Steve keeps his eyes fixed just left of the thing, can just barely make out a shoulder and sort-of head in the light of the moon, and tries to swallow back the sickening feeling of being hunted. He wants to run for his house- he wants to run for the safety of the doors, the lights, but he can’t. He can’t, because if he moves, if he takes his eyes off the thing for even a second, he won’t know where it is, and that’s even scarier than seeing it.

But then- then Steve’s vision blurs for just a moment too long, and when he blinks away the tears and looks, it’s gone. It’s gone.

Steve lunges for the patio doors. His shoes kick away half-empty beer bottles; he slams his knee off of a deck chair, but he doesn’t feel or hear any of it. His breath is too loud in his ears and his heartbeat is too fast, too desperate-prey-animal-fast, because something is here.

When the patio lights flicker back on, the poolside is empty, and Steve Harrington is missing. No one notices.

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Only one person notes Steve is absent on Wednesday morning- and it’s his homeroom teacher, who marks down his name with a sigh and no significant amount of surprise.

Nancy doesn’t realize Steve is gone until lunch. She had figured he was angry with her or something because she had tried to call him last night after she and Barb left, and he hadn’t picked up. Now, as she passes Tommy and Carol at their lunch table and sees it’s just the two of them, something heavy curls up in her chest and makes itself at home.

“Barb, have you seen Steve today?” Nancy asks, leaning next to Barb’s locker after seventh period and peeking around her to check the hallway every once in a while. They’ve got one more period and Nancy hasn’t seen Steve at all.

“He’s usually hanging around you, not me.” Barb says, her tone half-dismissive, and Nancy glances down the hall again and spots Jonathon Byers scuttling around the corner. She remembers the posters he put up for his missing brother, remembers the tired, worn look in his eyes, and-

“Nance, listen.” Barb suddenly says, turning to her with a set look in her eyes. “You guys just got together. Steve’s skipped school before. Maybe he didn’t bother to tell you.”

“Barb–” Nancy rolls her head against the locker and rubs her hand over her brow. She doesn’t want to believe it- she doesn’t want to think that Steve is that kind of guy, but the alternative is- what? He’s missing? Gone in the night, just like poor, little Will Byers?

“Okay.” She sighs. Barb smiles at her and squeezes her arm.

Barb isn’t smiling that Friday before school when Nancy comes to her in tears because Steve still
hasn’t come to school, Tommy and Carol blew her off with poorly concealed concern, and when they drive by his house it’s still and empty and dark.

And then- and then they get back in time for third period, and the entire school is in a tizzy because Jonathon Byers was taking photos of the party on Tuesday like a creeper, and Nancy can only muster up a disappointed glare at Tommy and Carol and Nicole, because Steve is still missing. The torn photos that Carol stuffs in her hands goes into her bag to be forgotten.

That night, Will Byers’ body is pulled out of the quarry lake, and anyone who might have noticed Steve Harrington is missing quickly find their minds occupied by other things.

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He comes to spitting up pool water. His leg is on fire, hot lines where the- where he was grabbed and dragged, and Steve is rolling onto his side and struggling to his feet before he even realizes where he is.

There’s thick vines criss crossing under his feet, mold and grime that’s rubbed onto his clothes, and Steve stumbles to the wall of the- it’s his pool, he’s in his pool but not his pool- and pushes the vines and roots aside until he finds the steps.

He can hear the thing breathing behind him, making disturbing little gurgling noises, and Steve wants to puke, wants to panic with the terrible fear in his stomach, but he can’t. If he stops or hesitates for even a moment he’s going to die, he knows this, knows he has to run.

Something catches on his heel, rips new scorching injuries down his calf, but Steve throws himself out of reach. The thing, the not-quite-animal-not-quite-human screeches as Steve escapes it. Despite the throbbing scratches up and down his lower legs, he pushes himself up and takes off. His house is cold and dark and wrong in front of him, and Steve throws himself through the door and locks it behind himself.

He doesn’t feel safe- knows he isn’t, because the monster is still out in his yard and it can probably just rip through the door or window- so he tears through his house as fast as he can with a grubby duffel bag in one hand and his old metal baseball bat in the other. Food, oily clothes, and the cracked first aid kit all go in the bag, and Steve only stops long enough to change into sneakers before he’s sprinting from his house again.

Steve wants to stick to the woods and the meager protection the trees offer, but he knows that for however harder it makes spotting him, it makes it even harder to spot the monster in return. So he compromises and runs along the edge of the road and the forest- runs from his house, from the monster, and doesn’t stop until his breathes come in shallow wheezes and his chest is almost ripping open from cramps.

The air is harder to breathe here, he realizes, thick and humid and cold, and Steve half wishes he had brought his old asthma inhaler from middle school. He walks only long enough to calm down his breathing and sip one of the water bottles he had grabbed. Then he’s back to jogging- curving with the long road that leads along the edge of town.

Now that he’s not out of his mind with panic, Steve takes the chance to really look, and feels his stomach turn. Everything is an eerie, washed out blue. The trees and plants are all half rotting, and something like ash spirals from the air lazily. He can barely make out where one shadow ends and the next begins. He feels like he’s the only living thing for miles. The only real noise is a low thrumming, a rhythmic noise like the darkness has a heartbeat.
“Hello?” He calls, coming to a stop. The air is heavy around him, and his voice reverberates off of the damp ground mutely. His stomach turns over. His hair stands up, clammy with sweat and fear, and Steve glances all around him before picking up his pace again.

“Focus, Harrington.” He mumbles to himself. The words fall flat through the air. “You were in boy scouts- find somewhere safe to build a shelter. Find a source of water. Find food. You’ll make it out of here.”

The road stretches on ahead of him into the bleary twilight, and Steve runs on.

Chapter End Notes

ill update on the weekends probably? so look for chapter two sometimes next weekend. all four chapters are already written, so hopefully i wont be late or miss an update!!
behind the spread of the sickness

Chapter Summary

Steve opens his eyes to a washed out orange vest and cold fingers prodding at his neck.

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“You were the last person to see him.” Nancy says, thrusts the photo into Jonathon’s face, and then points out the strange figure in the corner of the photo. Jonathon blinks at her with something like fear.

Chapter Notes

theres already a fic of this i KNOW and it is so fucking good. if youre interested in another fic like this, whose timeline is farther along (into the second season), ill link the fic in the end notes

chapter title is from "life form"
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148257/life-form

"I haul myself, I haul myself, I haul my dragging structure along the river furrow’s muddy, sloppily overlapping slopes.

...But time runs on time and starvation and the weakness carries me in across the gray regions. And the soul’s dark night will slowly be lowered through me."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time is practically nonexistent here. Steve’s watch stops working the moment he arrives, and the general fucking atmosphere is always dim and ashy and rotten. There isn’t a sun or moon or stars that Steve can see so he has to rely on landmarks to find his way around this weird mirror version of Hawkins.

He keeps moving. Steve doesn’t know how the monster tracks its prey, doesn’t know if it’s smell or hearing, but he doesn’t want to slow down long enough to find out. For what he can only guess as days, he doesn’t sleep.

Most of Hawkins bears the smeared footprints of his trainers by the time he passes out. He’s in the grocery store, searching for the least corroded soup cans he can find, when the entire world wiggles under his feet and spins. He blinks again and finds himself on the floor, looking towards the doors.

He blinks a few more times, lets his watering eyes clear the grime and dirt and ash. He’s so- he’s so tired, exhausted from not sleeping. He feels worse than any of the times he’s pulled an all nighter or his worse hangovers. Steve’s vision blurs and darkens like he’s going to fall asleep, and he can’t-

Steve opens his eyes to a washed out orange vest and cold fingers prodding at his neck.
If he wasn’t exhausted and worn thin by running for his life for days straight, he would have panicked. He would have grabbed for the handle of his bat and swung it as hard as he could, but instead all he manages is to roll onto his back and blink up at the scrawny kid crouching over him.

“It got you too, huh?” He asks, and Steve rubs a trembling hand over his eyes.

“You’re Will Byers.” He says, and Will is nodding when he pulls his hand away.

The kid doesn’t look good- Steve can’t really expect that he would, because even just being here for as short a time as he has been, he knows he’s lost weight, hasn’t slept. Will is thin and washed out, his eyes bruised and sunken, huddled in his too-big vest for warmth. Steve’s never been around kids much before, but it pulls hard at his heart strings.

“You hurt?” He asks the kid. He looks surprised for a moment before shaking his head slowly. Steve pushes himself up and gives him a once over himself, relieved at the lack of blood or open wounds.

“You are,” Will says, points at the bloody, crusty bandages over his jeans. The injuries from when he was taken haven’t healed right, not how they should. Steve shrugs.

“I’ll live. Have you managed to get food and water?” Will tangles his fingers together and shrugs, scoots a little closer to Steve, and he realizes that the kid must be terrified and starved for any kind of reassurance or comfort, not interested in playing twenty questions.

“Well,” Steve says, tries to inject some levity into his tone as he slings an arm over Will’s shoulders, “I’ve got your choice of chicken noodle soup, tomato soup, and beef stew, and some fresh water to wash it all down.”

Will looks startled and too small at the words and comfort, but he presses a little closer and shyly takes the can of tomato. They split the greasy soup between the two of them, almost choking on the aftertaste of rot, and when they’ve both finished they case the rest of the store in silence. Nothing else is edible.

Two cans of food, a packet of crackers, and half a bottle of water isn’t the worst off they could be, but Steve eyes the jut of Will’s jaw and his bony wrists and feels worry fester. The kid needs to eat more- needs to eat a lot more- and he’s barely got enough for himself.

The water is the most worrying of it all, though. Steve knows you can go weeks with only a little food. You can’t last long without drinkable water, though, and he hasn’t seen a source of water that looks remotely clean since he got here.

“I’ve been hiding near my house.” Will says as they leave the store. He sticks close to Steve, almost close enough to trip him, but he doesn’t mind. The closeness- the warmth- of another person is the best thing he’s felt in a while.

“The monster ever follow you there?” Steve asks, his arm bumping in Will’s shoulder again, and gives up on being subtle. He throws his arm around the kid’s shoulders and tugs him tight to his side. Will gives him that surprised, flustered look again, before lifting his arm to cling to Steve’s sleeve.

“Sometimes. Usually when I talk to my mom.” He tells him, and that pulls Steve up short.

“You can talk to her?” Steve asks, incredulous, and his voice echoes off of the corroded buildings around them. Will glances around nervously and nods, and Steve starts walking again.

“If it- maybe it tracks by hearing? We should be as quiet as we can, then.” Steve says, his voice just a little lower, and Will nods and leans into him. The kid is already pretty quiet, so it’s just Steve’s loud
mouth to worry about. They pass most of the walk by Will telling him about the lights, and how he can get echoes from the other side if he stands in just the right spot and listens hard.

Will starts to lag about a mile to his house, so Steve carries him on his back and slings his bag around his neck and shoulder to hang down in front of him. Will takes the bat with the instructions to swing first and look later. After a while, the kid starts humming the Clash sleepily, and Steve bobs his head to the beat.

“Now the king told the boogie men you have to let that raga drop…the oil down the desert way has been shaken to the top….”

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Chief Hopper has been having a very, very bad week. First with Will Byers going missing and his mother- Lord, his mother- and then Will Byers’ body turning up under mysterious and suspicious circumstances, and now this.

Two teenagers sit outside his office, as if he doesn’t already have enough on his plate, now knowing that the trooper that found Will’s body was told when and where to be, and that the Byers boy’s body isn’t an actual body. He cleans his raw and bloody hands off with a rag and jerks his head to his office. The two girls follow him in.

“All right,” he says, downing a mouthful of lukewarm coffee and turning to look at them. “What are your names, and what is this about?”

“Nancy Wheeler and Barb Holland.” The brown-haired one says, gesturing at herself and then the redhead, her gaze fixed on Hopper with an unnerving look.

“Steve Harrington has been missing since Tuesday night.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

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With his friend missing and a strange girl living in his basement, Mike Wheeler admittedly has more concerning things to think about than his big sister’s strangely absent boyfriend. After he’s sure Will is alive, all of his time and energy goes to proving it to his friends and figuring out a way to help him—so, obviously, that leads to him, Lucas, Dustin and Eleven breaking into the school’s AV club to get access to the radio.

El takes a few minutes to focus, and then there’s static— a noise like someone is rolling a can back and forth— a voice, and—

“-eve, I don’t-- you should drink that…”

“That’s!” Lucas’ head whips around to stare at Mike over El’s head. He shushes him quickly.

“--otta make sure it’s safe for you, squirt. Don’t want-- sick--”

“Is that- who is he talking to?” Dusting whispers, leaning closer, and Mike feels sick to his stomach.

“That’s… I think that’s Steve.” Mike says. He meets Dustin’s wide eyes. “Nancy’s boyfriend.”

“Will!” Lucas shouts, startling everyone except El. “Steve! Can you hear us? We’re here! Will!”

“I wasn’t the-- puked last night, you--”
“Why can’t they hear us?” Dustin asks, looking to Mike. “Why is it- it’s one way, why is it-?”

“Shit-- hear that? Will--”

Growling comes through the radio, low and pitchy, and there’s a rustle of clothes and limbs on the other end of the radio. Lucas and Dustin’s yelling picks up desperately, but Mike can only stare at the radio over El’s head because- because he didn’t know Steve was missing, he didn’t know that more than just Will had been taken, and this-

The radio pops, sparks, and goes out with a splutter of flames.

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Steve’s never been happier he goes on runs almost every day. Even hungry, tired and carrying a five foot kid, they make good time getting away from the Byers’ house. The monster, beast, thing moves slower than Steve would have expected.

“Still doing okay?” Steve pants, his lungs burning and cramping worse than they should. The air is poison and rot in his chest.

“I’m okay- you need to stop.” Will says, voice almost silent under the crunch and slurp of the decaying ground. Steve’s jeans are heavy and stiff from the blue-brown mud.

“Little further kid, just-” Steve’s vision goes dark and spotty, his limbs getting tangled up, and they both crash into the undergrowth when Steve falls. His chest aches around coughs that dredge up a foul sludge in the back of his throat.

“Steve, drink some water. We can keep going in a minute.” Will shoves the water at his face and Steve takes it, and even with his sore throat, he doesn’t want to drink. The water is a muddy, viscous mix, filtered through several shirts from a stream and no less disgusting for it. Even so, he swallows as much as he can stand.

“Where to next, munchkin?” Steve asks, and his voice is hoarse and torn up, but the nickname still gets him a smile from Will.

“There’s someplace I think we can go- we might be safe there, for a little while.” Will says, scooting closer to Steve, and hesitantly clasps the older boy’s hand in his. His wrist is so, so tiny next to his, Steve realizes.

“Where ever you think is best, Will the Wise.” Steve says, smiles at him, and Will flushes and laughs.

He’ll keep this kid alive. Even if he dies doing it- he’ll drag himself through the sickness in his lungs, hold on tight to the kid, until he makes it out.

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Jonathon is at the funeral home, and it makes Nancy feel like the worst person in the world, but she and Barb still corner him behind the casket showing. A taped up photo of Steve sitting by the edge of the pool is clutched in her hand.

“You were the last person to see him.” Nancy says, thrusts the photo into Jonathon’s face, and then points out the strange figure in the corner of the photo. Jonathon blinks at her with something like fear.
“Steve is missing.” Barb says, her hands in her pockets and shoulders hunched in. She looks uncomfortable but determined by Nancy’s side. “This photo you took- it’s the last thing anyone’s seen of him, and there’s some kind of animal in the shot.”

“What did you see?” Nancy says, leans in closer to make herself as intimidating as possible, and Jonathon’s face screws up in a scowl.

“My baby brother is dead and I’m- I’m picking out his coffin, and you’re asking me about Harrington’s pool party?” He asks, voice thick with tears and anger, and Nancy blinks away her own tears.

“I know, I know! But I don’t want Steve’s body to be the next one we find, so please- please, Jonathon, just tell me what you saw.” Nancy pleads, voice cracking, and Barb places a hand on her shoulder.

Jonathon’s face twists like he wants to argue, wants to shout, but instead he takes the photo from Nancy and stares at it. He rubs his thumb over the strange figure with a frown.

“I was looking for Will.” He says after a moment of silence. “Sometimes- sometimes the camera sees things you don’t. I just… The woods Will disappeared in borders Harrington’s, so I-”

“Jonathon.” Nancy cuts in, her voice hard and trembling. Jonathon blinks at her and takes a deep breath.

“I saw the- the argument, or whatever, and I took some photos. It was a reflex. He just- after you two left, he just sat there, looking into the woods. I took that photo, looked down at it, heard some beer cans move, and when I looked back up he was gone.” Jonathon looks at Nancy uneasily, flinches away from the tears gathering in her eyelashes. She presses her lips together and Barb tugs her closer.

“You didn’t see an animal or anything like the photo?” Barb asks, gives Nancy a moment to compose herself. Jonathon shakes his head, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the figure, because- because it looks kind of like what his mom had described. The arms, the lack of a face… It’s too human to be an animal, but not human enough.

“It could be a distortion.” Jonathon says, but he doesn’t sound convinced, and Nancy jumps on it.

“Do you have any other photos of it?” She asks, rubbing her hand under her nose, and Jonathon shares a look with Barb and shakes his head.

“I can magnify and clean up this one, though.” He says. Nancy and Barb share a look and nod together.

It’s nothing perfectly clear or post worthy, but the thing they see in the photo in the dark room is proof enough that Steve didn’t run away or disappear on his own. It’s proof enough for them to get a map, mark down the thing’s homerange, and make a plan. If they can find this thing, maybe they can find Steve before he’s a cold body, too.

Somewhere a short distance from them, just a step to the left and upside down, Steve and Will huddle together in a small fort and breathe through the poison in their lungs. Two hunters go missing, and for the price of two other lives, they survive another night.
here's the other fic where steve goes into the upside down instead of barb:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/12972576/chapters/29656911
a riled fly, frantic to escape

Chapter Summary

The voice comes again. It sounds like- it sounds like a kid. It sounds like a little kid, and if another one is going to be stuck here too, Steve will have a fucking heart attack before anything else can finish him off.

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“Is he dying?” She asks, looks between Mrs. Byers and the chief.

“Tell him- tell him to stay safe, and that his mom- I’m coming, okay? I’m coming for both of them, just-” Mrs. Byers doesn’t even spare a glance, her eyes wide and voice shaking, and Chief Hopper glances at Barb and Nancy with his dark eyes.

Chapter Notes

chapter title is from "philomela's tongue says"
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/149724/philomelas-tongue-says

"you could mistake grief for a diamond
the way it shines when cut into, like fish
eyes in a boat’s drain. The eyes fly
into death seeing everything"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A funeral is held for the body of Will Byers’ that is not Will Byers. Jim Hopper breaks into the lab just outside of Hawkins. A gaggle of children learn of parallel universes and head off towards magnetic north. In the Byers’ backyard, three teenagers gather in front of a stump with a can on it and a revolver.

“None of us have formal training, and that makes this a horrible idea.” Barb says. Nancy takes the revolver from Jonathon, eyes it, takes aim, and fires. A can is hit, and Nancy turns to her friend with a smile.

“One can hit does not a marksman make.” Barb mutters under her breath, and Nancy laughs before shooting down the other two cans. Without needing a vote, Nancy takes the gun and bullets, Jonathon makes a few modifications to a baseball bat, and Barb takes a crowbar from the Byers’ shed.

“This is really, really stupid.” Barb notes, following the other two into the forest, and neither Nancy nor Jonathon can find it within themselves to argue. By this point, the sun has started creeping towards the horizon, and the air grows cold with the oncoming night. The three of them pull out the flashlights they brought with them.
The search is quiet, for the most part. None of them are sure what they’re looking for so they just keep an eye out for anything. They move in steadily increasing arcs, until Jonathon comes across a glowing red tree trunk, and the three of them share a look.

“I’ll go in.” Nancy says, to both Barb and Jonathon’s objections.

“I’m the best with the gun, and I’m small enough to fit in it!” Nancy argues, and no one else can come up with a good enough argument to keep her out, other than the fact that it’s a pulsating, red tree trunk with goo coming out of it.

“Hold on, first.” Barb says, tugging a massive ball of red yarn out of her bag. She knots one end around Nancy’s wrist and holds tight. “You’ll be able to find your way back, even if you can’t hear us.”

The red yarn and the gun are enough to settle Nancy’s racing heart somewhat, so she drags herself through the slimy-sticky-clinging mold and slime until she comes out the other side of the tree and into another world.

When she tells the other two about what it was like, about the monster prowling between the dim trees, she can’t help but imagine Will and Steve trapped there for days. It only takes one look to know that the other two are thinking the same.

Will and Steve don’t have a gun, though, and they don’t have a long line of red yarn to lead them out of the labyrinth and back into the real world.

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“Doing okay, buddy?” Steve asks. His voice is barely more than a whisper at this point.

“Feel tired. Sick.” Will mumbles back. He’s wane and clammy, curled into Steve’s chest. They’re wrapped under soggy and damp blankets inside his fort.

“Have some more water.” Steve says, pushes the bottle from his trembling hand to Will’s. They haven’t had anything to eat for too long, and Steve can almost see Will wasting away by the minute. Will only manages a few sips before he holds it up to Steve.

“Not thirsty.” Steve whispers. When Will places his head back on his chest, he can hear the way his breath rattles in his lungs, too shallow and wet. Steve has been carrying him everywhere they go, running for hours when the monster gets too close, and the last few times he’s coughed and gagged up blood and slime.

Will grabs one of Steve’s hands- he’s the only warm thing here, the only thing that makes him feel alive still- and curls around it, tight enough that he can feel the bones through his vest and jacket. Will knows he’s gotten skinnier and paler, but Steve- Steve, who was a fit, healthy high schooler when he arrived, who has always looked strong and fit, looks like he’s dying. He’s thin and worn out and his skin has gone grey with sickness. His hands always shake, and his lungs rattle in the cage of his prominent ribs, and Will is guilty every time he needs to be carried or held.

Steve has no one to hold or carry him. Will can be there, hold his hand, talk to him, but Steve is the one who carries their bags and their weapon and Will, when he gets too weak or tired. Steve can’t lean on him, not really.

“Hey, don’t get so deep in your head.” Steve mutters, drags his hand through Will’s dirty hair. “Take a nap, okay? Then you can watch.”
The kid nods and mumbles something. He’s out within a few minutes, shaking even in his sleep, and Steve presses his forehead against his head and squeezes his eyes shut. Fuck. 

Fuck. He’s never been dying before, never been hurt so bad as this- but his savta, his grandma, had died from lung cancer, and Steve wonders if this is what it feels like.

A few hot tears escape his eyes and Steve blinks furiously, his throat working and aching, trying to keep himself from having a fucking breakdown. He’s all Will’s got out here- and sure, the kid could probably make it on his own, probably do better without Steve slowing him down, because he’s smart. He’s the kind of smart and clever that’ll take him places.

He reminds Steve a bit of Tommy, before the other boy got cruel and mean and hungry for popularity. He was the smarter of the two. He had quick hands and quick eyes, noticed things people didn’t want him to. Steve’s always been dumber but he grew faster- got taller than everyone else faster, and got smacked by his father enough to know where to hit and make it hurt.

Steve’s just- he’s dumb. He gets it. Nancy was always telling him how much of an idiot he is, and pointing out his little mistakes, his horrible writing and spelling and the way he mixes up words and letters, and that’s fine. That never mattered much because he’s decent at other things, and Nancy made him feel so whole and important and warm otherwise that he- he ignored all the rest of it.

And now, dying from the rot in his lungs, Steve wonders if it really was worth it. He’s been chased around a fucking shadow version of Hawkins by a literal faceless monster, drank water that looks like it came from a sewer, become best friends with a middle schooler whose older brother Steve barely paid attention to, and really- was everything as important as he made it out to be?

Was all the popularity that important? His spot on the basketball team, missing Shabbat months in a row, all his half-assed grades and papers, his desperate bids for his parents’ affection? Gutting himself, over and over and over again, because Nancy gave him some of the attention he was starving for?

Here he is, actually starving, and Nancy has barely crossed his mind. Fucking hell, he almost wants to hate her- wants to blame her for all of this, for leaving him alone by the pool, because if she hadn’t left- well, if she hadn’t left, he wouldn’t have been taken, right? It might have been Nancy, or Barb instead, or Will might be all alone here. If Steve had shown up a little later, or Will didn’t come looking for him, Will might have died- Steve might have died.

Laying in the tepid dark, feeling his lungs struggle for one more corrupt breath, Steve knows he is going to die. Maybe not tonight or tomorrow, or however this fucked up place works in terms of time- but soon. If the monster doesn’t get him he’s going to die from polluted water, or from lack of food, or from the poison in his lungs. Maybe before all of this he would have been terrified at the thought. Maybe he should have done things differently. Maybe, maybe…. Maybe he can get Will out alive.

“Steve.”

“Fuck this-” Steve tries to snarl, jerks in place as if he could run. If he’s going to start hallucinating- if he’s hearing fucking voices like a loony, he’ll go find something sharp to kill himself on his own. He’s not going to let himself go crazy in front of Will.

“Not crazy, Steve.” The voice comes again. It sounds like- it sounds like a kid. It sounds like a little kid, and if another one is going to be stuck here too, Steve will have a fucking heart attack before anything else can finish him off.
Between one blink and another a figure appears. It is a little kid: hair shorn, too young to be distinguishable by features, but when they kneel in front of him, Steve thinks it might be a little girl based on her dress and face.

“Please, Adonai, not another one--” Steve whispers. His voice catches in his throat. “I can’t-- not another, please, I’m not strong enough--”

“Your mom- Will’s mom is coming. They are coming for you.” A hand drops onto Steve’s, as real as he or Will are in this hell, and it’s enough to halt his tears.

“Stay here. They’re coming.” The little girl leans in, her eyes big and earnest and afraid, and Steve lifts a weak, shaking hand to brush along her buzzd skull.

“Hurry, okay?” He says hoarsely. “Hurry. Stay safe.”

The girl’s eyes widen and her grip grows tighter- but then she disappears like wisps blown apart in a strong breeze, and Steve hears growling on that wind.

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“--Adonai, not another-- please, I-- not strong enough--”

“That’s Steve!” Nancy cries, lunging towards Eleven, but Barb catches her around the shoulders and pulls her back.

“He’s not strong enough?” She asks, looks between Mrs. Byers and the chief. “Is he dying?”

“Tell him- tell him to stay safe, and that his mom- I’m coming, okay? I’m coming for both of them, just--” Mrs. Byers doesn’t even spare a glance, her eyes wide and voice shaking, and Chief Hopper glances at Barb and Nancy with his dark eyes.

“--okay? Hurry. Stay safe.” Steve’s voice is hoarse and ragged and a whisper of what it should be, and Nancy presses a shaking hand to her mouth.

“He was- he was always shy about it, but that- the name he said, he was praying.” She manages, voice wobbling, and Jonathon squeezes her hand.

The walkie talkie goes out in a growl of static, and Eleven thrashes herself awake with a terrified cry. Mrs. Byers pulls her close and cradles her, strokes her shorn hair with tearful eyes.

“Will is safe.” El manages. Her voice is thick with tears. “He is sleeping. Steve protects.”

Jonathon and Mrs. Byers both shudder in relief at that, and Hopper pushes himself to his feet with a groan. His face is set.

“Where is this Castle Byers?” He asks, and when El goes to her friends and Mrs. Byers talks with him on the other side of the gym, Barb, Nancy and Jonathon hold their own little huddle.

“I think we can all agree that the adults are going to do something dangerous and irresponsible, and we need to come up with something equally dangerous and irresponsible.” Barb says, her hands rubbing Nancy’s shoulders, but despite her unsure and wavering tone, her face is determined.

“That monster is still out there.” Nancy says, and Jonathon nods his head resolutely.

“We need to draw it out and get it away from them.” She says, glancing at her two friends, and remembers the gutted deer they found in the woods. “I think- I have an idea. We need bait, and we
need to get back to the station.”

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“Darling, you got to… let me know, now… Should I stay? Or… should I go? If you say… that you are mine… I'll be here 'til… the end of time… “

Chapter End Notes

steve is jewish in this fic because i said so. get fucked.

shabbat is the weekly holy day (like sunday for christians....ish), adonai is a term to refer to the lord (bc His name is holy), and savta is a hebrew term for grandmother.
Did the thicket not return what we gave?

Chapter Summary

The bear trap, gasoline cans, and Christmas lights are painfully out of place in the middle of the Harrington’s stylish living room.

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They find Will. They don’t find Steve.

Chapter Notes

this is it lads. this was supposed to be posted yesterday, but i just about died from allergies, and subsequently knocked myself out for several hours with benadryl.

chapter title is from "elegy with a brush hook and machete"

"through chokecherry and wild honey locust, water vines crawling behind us. But I don’t know of any Hell that followed that wasn’t there before."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The growls are enough to paralyze Steve with fear. He’s heard them so many times; on the verge of sleep, vomiting up more bile and slime, carrying Will when he’s too tired to walk. They don’t always see the monster. Sometimes they just hear it, sometimes it’s just noticeable by where it disturbs the undergrowth.

He doesn’t see it, this time.

It rumbles, growls, paces around the fort they’re curled in. Steve wraps himself around Will as tight as he can get and buries his face in his greasy hair, keeps his eyes wide open and tracking the monster’s path. He can’t breathe for the fear; can’t move, even if he wasn’t exhausted and starving.

Will claps a hand around Steve’s wrist, almost scaring the shit out of him, and Steve clutches him a little tighter. The growling subsides- quiets, like the beast is moving away, and Steve feels his muscles relax a little in relief.

And then the wall of the fort explodes inwards.

That long-fingered grip closes around the back of his thigh and wrenches him backwards, pulling Steve from Will and the fort in one movement. His flesh opens under its claws.

“Will! Run, Will!” Steve yells- tries to. His voice is too weak.

Like it’s a passing thought, the beast flings its claws out in a wide arc- tearing through Steve’s sweater, his skin, until he could swear it tore along his bones. It hurts, it burns, brands along his
ribcage and his back, but Steve still stumbles to his feet and lunges for his bat.

His hands are sweaty and shaky when they close around it. He swings blindly, feels a glancing impact and swings again- it’s so dark and he’s blinded by the pain and Will- where’s Will-

It lashes out again and Steve would dodge, would fling himself aside, but he’s starvation-slow and tired. Instead, it catches him in the shoulder, the neck, tears lines down his arm and his jaw. He hits the ground hard and gasps against the mud, feels his entire body go fuzzy and shaky.

The beast is a giant against the dark horizon. Steve watches it, twitches his fingers for the handle of his bat and feels cold in the decayed leaves. He can hear Will crying and yelling- but he can’t do anything. He can’t, with his vision going grey and dark.

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“We’ve got the trap set up, the lights, the weapons…” Barb says, hands on her hips. She frowns at the other two. “This is still a horrible idea.” Nancy hands out a handful of knives and stands in the center of the room.

“Barb, you don’t have to be here for this. You guys can both go.” Jonathon says. His hands flex around the knife handle. He doesn’t look away from the far wall.

“Stop talking, Jonathon.” Nancy says, her voice hard, but she too can’t help but look around. The bear trap, gasoline cans, and Christmas lights are painfully out of place in the middle of the Harrington’s stylish living room.

“We’re going to do this. We’re going to stay. As soon as that thing shows up, we’re going to kill it.” Nancy tells him, and Barb looks nervous and frowny, but she nods in agreement. Jonathon rubs his forehead before he sighs and nods as well.

“Dump the meat out?” He asks. Barb kicks over the bucket at her feet and several pounds of raw, bloody beef spills onto the floor. The three of them share a look and then open their palms with their knives, wincing and cringing.

After they bandage their hands, wait in silence until the anticipation is almost physical, after they start to fear that everything was pointless- the lights flicker. The lights flicker and the wall by the pool bows in, cracks. It pulsates like it’s almost liquid- and then gives.

The faceless monster chitters, the petals of it’s head rippling at all the blood and meat, as it steps onto the carpeted floor. Nancy can hear Barb’s breathing coming wheezy and hard behind her, and she fires the gun-

It hardly shudders at the impact, squealing low and pitchy as it throws itself across the room. Nancy dodges and falls hard over the edge of the coffee table, sees Barb lunge the other way- and watches the monster land on top of Jonathon. His bat bounces out of his hand.

“Jonathon!” She screams, fumbles with the gun to try and re-aim it in the flickering chaos. The monster convulses, chatters, leans closer to Jonathon’s face- and then it jerks away. Barb swings again, the nail bat landing with sickening smack-thuds, and pushes the beast back. It stumbles and trips- and steps into the bear trap.

“The lighter! Jonathon, the lighter!” Nancy yells, grabbing Barb’s shaking hand as she steps away. Jonathon flicks the lighter open and throws it; for a moment, the flame seems to whirl in slow motion, bright and intense, before it lands. With a woomf and a flush of heat the gasoline catches fire, and the monster goes up in flames.
It squeals and thrashes in the bear trap. After a few moments it seems to fold inwards on itself, smaller and smaller until it’s gone, and Jonathon drenches the side of the room in fire extinguisher.

They can only hope it was enough.

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They find Will. They don’t find Steve.

Will is surrounded by corpses, skin a washed out blue-grey and riddled with darker veins. He looks like he’s been dead, skinny and sallow like he starved to death. Until Hopper gets him breathing again, he really thinks the boy is going to die like Sarah did- too small, a tube down his throat.

But he doesn’t die.

He doesn’t die, and the first thing he says is “where’s Steve?”, and Hopper remembers that two boys went missing.

They’ve only found one.

He wasn’t at Castle Byers; Hopper had noticed the blood splattered and pooled on the ground, and he had hoped it was anything but from the boys, but Will tells him what happened and- well. It was a lot of blood.

But the bat was missing and so was Steve, so Hopper carries Will on his back and gives Joyce his gun, and they set out again. Will is wheezing through the extra oxygen mask loud enough that at first- past the bank, a few hundred yards from the grocery store- Hopper doesn’t hear it. He doesn’t hear it until Joyce grabs him in a mother-strong grip around his arm and stops him.

He thinks it’s going to be the monster or some new threat- but instead, he hears the low sound of someone breathing heavily, crying, and the shuffle of shoes.

“Steve!” Will yells, hands grasping weakly at Hopper’s suit, and the noises stop-

“Will?” Comes a hoarse, ragged voice, barely loud enough to hear. “Will!”

Steve limps out of the grocery store door and falls to his knees. It’s hard to distinguish what’s mud and blood on him, but the kid is clearly in bad shape. One arm hangs limp, grasping the bat with a few fingers, while the other wraps around his ribs and holds some bundle of fabric to his side. Harrington’s face is pale and sunken and bears an ugly wound on his left jaw. He looks at Will like a drowning man looks at a buoy.

And then he falls.

Between one blink and another, Joyce is by his side, her voice soothing and gentle as she rolls the teenager onto his back. He looks worse up close- looks almost as much of a corpse as Will did. His clothes are tacky and slippery with blood.

“They both need a hospital now.” Hopper says, and it takes some switching, but eventually Joyce gets Will on her back and Hopper scoops Steve into his arms. He’s way too light for his size.

They make the best time they can manage carrying the boys. Will can hardly keep his eyes open but he doesn’t look away from Steve’s drawn, unconscious face. It might have been heartwarming in
any other situation.

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The hospital waiting room is crowded. Mike, Lucas and Dustin huddle in one corner; their parents fill the seats ringing the room. Hopper and Joyce take the seats nearest the door, and Barbara Holland, Nancy Wheeler and Joyce’s oldest son take the seats next to them. Hopper does his best to ignore the smell of gasoline and blood on them.

“I just don’t” Joyce frets, working her fingers over the worn box she holds in her lap. “Where are Steve’s parents? Why aren’t they here?”

It takes Hopper a moment to realize what she’s said- the last time he was in a hospital, his baby girl was dying in front of him. The smell and lights are nauseating. He blinks a few times before burying his face in his hands with a groan.

“I never called them.” He mumbles. Joyce makes a confused noise. “He- I listed him as missing, after I checked his house and talked to his classmates, but I never got around to calling his parents. They don’t know.”

Joyce sets her small hand on his arm and rubs it gently, trying at reassuring, and Hopper can’t help but laugh. Alternate dimensions, monsters crawling through the dark, and missing kids- and he’s freaking out about Harrington’s absent parents?

“Byers?” A doctor says, leaning into the waiting room, and Joyce squeezes Hopper’s arm once more before scrambling to her feet. Jonathon scurries by her side after the doctor, and Hopper leans back in his seat and takes a deep breath.

It’s a little while longer- Will wakes up, the kids rush into his room making entirely too much noise- before a doctor comes out calling Steve’s name. He doesn’t blink when Hopper is the one following him back, just sighs and scrubs a hand through his mussed hair. There’s blood smeared along the bottom of his shirt.

“Steve is currently unconscious.” The doctor says. Hopper makes a noncommittal grunt.

“Look, Chief-” The doctor suddenly stops in the empty hallway and turns to meet his eyes. “The kid needed two hundred and seven stitches. We can call that a bear attack, like you said, but we both know there aren’t any brownies this side of the Mississippi, and a black bear wouldn’t manage that. Bear or not, you’re going to need to fish that thing out of the woods and take care of it.” He waits until Hopper nods before continuing on towards Steve’s room.

“He came in hypothermic, 88 degree body temp, multiple lacerations, dehydrated and malnourished, showing symptoms of toxic air inhalation and secondary drowning.” The doctor says, flipping idly through the sheaf of papers in his hands, and Hopper frowns and holds up a hand.

“Secondary drowning?” He asks.

“At some point in the past two weeks, he inhaled pool water- most likely, that is, based on the trace amounts of chlorine- and suffered from symptoms such as difficulty breathing or speaking, low energy, coughing and chest pain. His lungs are also damaged from inhaling some form of toxic gas or chemicals.” The doctor explains. Hopper rubs his ragged beard and wishes desperately for a drink. They come to Steve’s room in a few steps and the doctor hands Hopper a face mask before opening the door. Hopper is almost bowled over by the memories- Sarah wheezing on her back, clutching her stuffed toy, small and pale and still- and it takes the doctor stepping past him to free him.
Steve is still on the bed. His eyes are dark bruises in his pale face. He’s swathed in bandages, around his throat and the side of his jaw, his arm and shoulder. The collar of his gown gapes enough for Hopper to see the ridges of his breastbone. Blankets are tucked carefully around him and the long tube leading to the oxygen mask on his face.

“How long are you expecting him?” Hopper asks. He can’t get his eyes off the thick bandages padding Steve’s gaunt jaw and neck.

“A week, minimum.” The doctor says. “He’ll need special restrictions on his diet- the Byers boy, too- to keep from overloading his system, all that…”

“After a week, assuming he’s doing alright, he’ll be able to go home?” Hopper cuts in, and the doctor nods and takes a moment to rearrange Steve’s miscellaneous tubes.

“He’ll need a strict diet to gain weight and prevent refeeding syndrome, he’ll get an inhaler to help breathe, a regime to clean his injuries and prevent infection. Adults will have to help-”

“Okay, hold on a minute-” Hopper says, his hands coming up. The doctor quirks an eyebrow. “What the hell is ‘refeeding syndrome’?”

“In the absence or lack of sufficient food, the body makes changes to survive. The stomach muscles shrink, it stops producing bile, and other bodily systems adapt.” The doctor says. “Steve will need to start on liquids only, and then fruits and vegetables, and slowly work his way back up to a rounded diet. Otherwise, the food will overwhelm his body and produce toxins.”

“Okay, okay.” Hopper growls, scrubbing his hands through his hair. “Break it down for me- everything the kids been through, what he’s gonna need from here on out.”

“You don’t want to wait for his parents?” The doctor asks.

“We’ll be waiting for a real long time for that.” Hopper scoffs. The doctor appraises him for a moment before sighing and nodding. They’re in that room for quite a while.

Unbeknownst to Hopper, this may be the first child he’s effectively adopting, but it will not be his last.

Chapter End Notes

and that's that! i hope everyone enjoyed this. i'm not sure if i'll do a second part to go along with season 2, or season 3 (i am so fucking excited oh my god)...

but if another part is something you guys want, let me know! i'll give it some thought!!

my tumblr is @kukurosaki

EDIT: i posted this......this morning? and i have gotten so many beautiful responses and comments......its crazy. so! yes! ill make this a series and do season 2 and 3 (and season 4?), and have interlude oneshots! so keep an eye out for that! :)
you can find me on my tumblr @kukurosaki

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!