i was a lonely soul (but that's the old me)

by scoutshonour

Summary

Jonathan, Joyce, Will, and El pack their things and move to Illinois. It’s the start of a lot of new things: new schools, new relationships, and new feelings. And maybe some healing.

These are the baby steps that Jonathan takes with his family to get through the school year and to graduation.
last summer, during my month-long trip to my parents’ home country, i wrote still turning out, the longest stoncy fic i had written at the time. i’m continuing that this year prior to and during my five week stay with my mom in her home country with this fic!
ti’m sure there a lot of inaccuracies re: distances, how moving works, how the fallout of the fire would go, but i did my best, and apologize for all mistakes.
while this is a stoncy fic, the byers’ family and all of the relationships within are also the heart of this story. this fic is super important and personal to me. i’m a little nervous, but the only way to get through that is to push through it.
so, without further ado, here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This isn’t the first time that Jonathan wakes up to his mom crying in the middle of the night.
At first, he has no idea who it is. He quickly rules Will out after hearing Will’s heavy snores from his bedroom.

Sliding out from underneath his covers and tiptoeing out of his room, he selfishly hopes it isn’t El. How would he comfort her? What could he possibly do for her? He’s never had a loss that huge, never had a father whose absence would hurt this badly, never had to live away from his family.

But, standing in the hallway, he hates that he immediately recognizes the sound of Joyce’s sobbing. He’s heard it too many times since Will went missing to not know it by heart.

He walks towards her room. Cracks the door open. “Mom?”

She’s sitting on the edge of her bed, hugging her knees to her chest. “Honey, I’m alright,” she whispers hoarsely. “Go back to sleep.”

How can he? She’s crying in the dark.

He steps inside and closes the door behind him. “Couldn’t sleep,” he lies, sitting next to her. Tentatively, he touches her shoulder. “Can I get you anything?”

She sniffs and covers his hand with hers. She’s always been the warmest person he knows. Every time Lonnie made him cry, he’d go running into her arms, and she’d hold him long after he stopped sniffling. She’d stroke his back, murmur comforting words, and hold him, soothing him with her warmth. It’s been a long time since Lonnie’s made him cry, but not that long since they’ve held each other. And even though he’s comforting her, he’s still relieved to melt in her arms.

“All I need is you. If you don’t mind staying here,” she says.

“Of course. I’m — I’m sorry, mom.”

“Don’t be. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know, but it’s not fair.”

She laughs wetly. That’s when he hugs her properly, tears already welling in his eyes. “I have you kids. I’ll be alright, so don’t you worry about me.”

He buries his head in her shoulder. He’s got more than a foot of height on her, but he feels small in her arms, like he’s still that kid who believes his mom can fix everything. His faith in her never weakened. His faith in the world did.

She pulls away and holds him by the shoulders. “I need to ask you something.”

“Yeah?” His heart’s already in his throat.

She smiles tightly. “How would you feel about moving? Be honest. I’m only thinking about it right now.”

Hawkins has never been their home. Not really. It’s the root cause of most of their problems. For him, this town created Lonnie, robbed Joyce of a good husband, and Jonathan and Will of a good father. It’s where they lost Will, where they had his funeral, where he was hurt and traumatized, over and over again. It’s where Joyce lost Bob, and now Hopper. It’s where he had to watch the two people he loved most suffer, where they struggled to live, from paying bills to barely escaping death.

It’s a town that hurt them long before it tried killing them, calling them trash and filth.
Sure, it’s brought them good. He thinks of his brother’s friends waiting with him for Will in the hospital, and the camera tucked away in his bedroom from Nancy and Steve. But does it measure up to the trauma? To the ghosts that’ll always plague his family? To the life they could have without the reminders of everything they’ve lost?

He thinks of his relationship with Nancy. There are some things that time and distance have no power over, and that includes them. Nancy’s a part of him, always and literally, with the scar on his palm. They graduate high school in a year. After that, they can be together again. What’s one year in the grand scheme of things?

He looks at Joyce. She’s waiting for an answer.

They’d be leaving so much behind. But maybe that’s the point. Leaving the pain in the hopes that they can come back from this. Maybe they can heal.

And maybe that means starting over.

He goes over all of this carefully in his head. But honestly it comes down to one thing: it’s what his mom wants, what she probably needs.

So it’s easy to tell her, “I’d be okay with it.” He doesn’t know who holds who after that. Just that he falls asleep and, for the first time in awhile, feels like she can fix everything again.

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He wakes up before she does. It’s eight am on a Saturday, so he doesn’t wake her. Just slips out of bed and quietly makes his way out of her room.

It’s been nine days since Hopper died. She’s doing better than she was when Bob died. Sleeping more, showering more, eating the meals that Jonathan and Will make her more. It all feels routine now. He doesn’t like how familiar she is with grief and loss.

He brushes his teeth. Washes and dries his face. Walks into the kitchen. Nearly trips when he sees El at their dining table, reading a comic book.

Jonathan clears his throat so she knows he’s there. “Hey. You hungry?”

She shrugs noncommittally, looking up from her comic book. She hasn’t spoken much since she’s been at their house. He doesn’t blame her, but he wishes there was something he could do.

“Are you thirsty?”

Another shrug.

It’s okay. He can work with that.

Saturdays are usually Waffle Day. He pours a cup of orange juice and sets it in front of her before getting started.

He can’t stand the silence. To anyone else, it would be peaceful, but for him, it’s unbearable, especially today. He’s always hated it since Will first came back. It left room for bad memories, and right now, all he can think of is being thrown and tossed in the hospital, of his body bending and
breaking, of the deafening sound of Tom’s body hitting the floor —

“Is it okay if I play music?”

If El notices the urgency in his voice, she doesn’t comment on it. “Okay.” Her voice is hoarse, but it’s still her voice. Despite what he was just thinking about, he cracks a smile.

While El’s mouth isn’t smiling, her eyes are.

“I’m sorry for hurting you.” He winces at his attempt at making conversation, but there’s no going back. “When I was trying to get the Mind Flayer out of your leg?” He’s been wracked with guilt since it happened. While it’s a terrible idea to bring that night back up, he hasn’t been alone with her once and is still trying to figure out his footing with her.

She cants her head to the side. “You were trying to help.”

“Yeah, but I hurt you.”

“It’s okay.” She rubs the bags underneath her eyes. “Um. What’re you making?”

“Waffles,” he replies. “I hope you like them.”

“I will.” Recognition lights up her eyes, but she doesn’t say anything further, just nods and sinks into the seat. It’s the longest conversation they’ve had. It feels like a step forward.

He darts into the living room to grab his cassette player. He returns and presses play. It’s a Bowie song.

“Dad liked that one.” El’s voice breaks, but her face doesn’t.

His heart twists, bursting with feeling. He can’t tell if it’s a good one or not. “Do you like it?”

“I don’t know what I like.”

“That’s okay,” he says quickly. “Most people don’t. But you’ll figure it out.”

“Figure it out,” she repeats. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

He turns his back to her, somewhat reluctantly, and goes back to making the waffles. The music sets his mind to rest, loosening the tightness in his shoulders. He holds back from singing along, until he catches the faint sound of her voice, the words barely a whisper.

So he says the next lyric, loud enough that she’s sure to hear it.

El raises her voice, and suddenly, they’re singing together. It’s certainly not quiet anymore. The absence of bad memories make room for a new and good memory to form, one that he’ll tuck away for later when he needs a smile, and one that he knows is another step forward.
“I’m meeting with the insurance company today.” Joyce shoves a bagel into Jonathan’s hands and sits across from him at their dining table.

He swallows back another I’m not hungry and takes a bite. He didn’t eat breakfast or lunch today, and he’s fine, honestly, there’s no need to fuss, but he doesn’t want to worry her. “What about?”

“Hopper’s life insurance.”

He chokes on his bagel. “Jesus.”

“Yeah.” She blows out a heavy breath, fidgeting with the straps of her purse. “All of the money is El’s, of course, but there’s lots to sort out. Y’know we’re also getting paid?”

“From Hopper’s life insurance?”

“Nope.” She shakes her head. “Compensation for being caught in the ‘fire’. It’s for our injuries and emotional pain. All of Will’s friends, Nancy and Steve too, will hear about that soon enough for themselves. Should help cover the cost of the move.”

“Speaking of, when are you telling Will and El?”

“I want to give it another week. It’s too soon for her. I also need to talk to Murray.”

Jonathan chokes again and puts his bagel down, struggling to catch his breath. “Why?”

“Well, I —” She sighs and claps a hand over Jonathan’s shoulder. “I’m thinking of moving near him.”

“For what reason?”

Her mouth tugs into a smile at his incredulity. “I trust him. He’s lonely, and I’m —”

“Mom, that is disgusting, what’re you —”

“Oh, gross, can you relax? That’s not what I meant! I meant that it’d be good to have him around. He needs a fresh start too, you know?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says, his shoulders sagging with relief. “Sorry for overreacting.”

“Make it up to me by finishing your bagel already.”

He rolls his eyes to get another smile out of her. He shoves the rest of the bagel into his mouth and wipes the crumbs off his hands.

“When are you supposed to be at the Wheelers?”

Jonathan checks the clock. “At — oh no, five minutes ago. Hey, GUYS! We’ve gotta go!”

Will and El come running into the kitchen, much calmer than Jonathan.

“Why are you panicking? It’s fine,” Will says. “Nancy won’t yell at you or anything.”

He can’t explain that he wants to enjoy what he’ll miss in a few months, so he forces a shrug. Grabbing the keys off of the table, he waves to Joyce. “Bye, mom!”

“Bye, mom!”
“Bye, Will’s mom!”

Jonathan’s starting the car when Will says, “You don’t have to call her my mom.”

Jonathan stills. He’s still clutching the key. Will and El don’t really talk. He tried getting details out of Mike through Nancy, but all Mike offered was that she doesn’t know him well and Will wishes things could go back to the way they were. Jonathan gets it.

The past nine days, they haven’t spoken much, if at all. It’s worried Joyce, but Jonathan told her to give it time. Maybe nine days is all it takes.

“She’s not my mom,” El says blankly.

Or maybe not.

The rest of the drive is short and silent. Five minutes later, he parks in the Wheeler’s driveway. The kids run out of the car and into the house the second the car’s turned off.

When Jonathan enters the house, he finds Mike standing in between Will and El, looking brighter than Jonathan’s ever seen. “Hey, Jonathan!”

“Hey, bud.” Jonathan smiles and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“You can ask where Nancy is, it’s fine,” Mike says easily. “She’s in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” Jonathan walks past them, smile widening at Will and El’s laughter from something Mike whispered. He half-jogs towards the kitchen, atoms buzzing at the prospect of seeing Nancy.

He saw her two days ago and he already misses her. He has no idea how he’ll handle moving.

He leans against the kitchen’s entryway and eases at the sight of Nancy moving in front of the counter. “Hey.”

Nancy whirls around. She drops the several styrofoam cups squeezed in her hands. “Hey!” Avoiding the cups on the floor, she meets him for a hug, slotting her arms around his neck.

His arms curl around her waist. He smiles into her hair. “Sorry we’re late.”

“Ah, yes, a whopping five minutes late.” She nestles her head on shoulder, brushing her lips against his neck. “What am I gonna do with you?”

“Whatever you want,” he says automatically. “Did I actually say that?”

She laughs. “Yes. That’s good to know.”

He pulls away to cup her jaw. His breath catches at the sight of her eyes sparkling up into his. “Like you didn’t already know that.”

She leans forward to kiss him, brief and chaste like she just needs to feel him. He needs it too.

“Hey.”

“You said that already.”

“I’m saying it again.”

“Okay. Hey.” His smile turns wistful. It hurts his chest to look at her, to know that he’ll have to tell
her that he’s moving, eventually, that at some point, he’s going to have to say goodbye.

“You okay?” She tips his chin up, her eyebrows furrowed.

He swallows past the lump in his throat, managing a nod. “Better now that I’m with you.”

She leans her forehead against his. “You wanna talk?”

“I’m okay. Really. Are you okay?”

“I’m great,” she says, smiling slyly. “So no talking then.”

You’re so lame, he thinks fondly, kissing her back with earnest. The kids are downstairs and the stairway creeks loudly enough that they’ll hear them coming the second they start their ascent, unless they get too distracted. He already knows Nancy’s parents aren’t home. They’re fine.

Nancy tugs on his shirt, pulling him backwards until she’s up against the counter. “Wait, let me —” She pushes herself onto the counter and wraps her legs around his waist. She’s perfectly at eye-level.

“You’re so short.” He laughs at her eye-roll and ducks in to kiss her again, feeling her smile against his mouth, and suddenly he’s laughing too, the kiss eager and clumsy. Her hands are warm on his face, and he needs to be closer, so he covers her hands with his.

“Hey, is there — oh.”

Jonathan steps away, raising his hands instinctively. He glances at Nancy and winces at her disheveled hair and smudged lip-gloss. His entire face is red, but he forces himself to meet Steve’s eyes.

Steve stands by the kitchen’s entryway. A blush has crept up his neck and across his face, worse than Jonathan and Nancy. He won’t meet their eyes. Jonathan’s never seen him this nervous before.“I see now what happened to the cups. Sorry for interrupting.”

“It’s fine,” Nancy insists, lowering herself off the counter. “How’s, uh —”


“No, it’s okay! I probably would’ve asked how you were anyway —”

“Still, I shouldn’t have interrupted —”

“And I thought I was awkward.” Jonathan only half-meant to say that aloud. She laces their fingers and gives him a reassuring squeeze. The air feels lighter after that, making it easier to breathe.

“You still are.” Steve flashes Jonathan a teasing smile. He fully enters the kitchen and stops until he’s a foot away from them.

“I’m not awkward,” Nancy says.

“No, I’m pretty sure I was calling both of you awkward.” Jonathan nudges her. “You’re not as bad as him.” It makes Nancy chuckle, while Steve scoffs and dramatically clutches his chest.

“What’d I do to you, man?” Steve’s joking, but Jonathan’s pretty sure that everyone’s reminded of the answer to that question from nearly two years.

And now it’s officially awkward.
Nancy breaks the silence. “See, you are more worse than me.” She beams at Steve’s flustered smile, poking his foot with hers.

Jonathan shoots her a grateful smile. “And me.”

“No,” Steve and Nancy say at the same time. Jonathan laughs.

“No, I didn’t!”

“I distinctly remember you screaming.”

“I distinctly remember me not screaming.”

“I can ask Mike for confirmation? He saw the entire thing since he got home at that exact moment.”

“Okay, maybe not, it’s not — alright, fine, I fell!”

Jonathan’s body shakes with laughter. Maybe he should be annoyed that his girlfriend is fondly recalling a story with her ex about when they were dating, but it was eons ago. They’re friends now. All of them. It’s good like this. Better, even.

“What’re you laughing at?” Steve points his bottle of Coke at Jonathan, his smile wide and infectious. It used to irritate Jonathan. Steve’s dazzling smile always screamed arrogance, like he knew something you didn’t, like he knew he looked good, like he knew he could get anything he wanted.

It’s different now. Softer. Warmer. Inviting. But Jonathan also could’ve been projecting. Maybe he thought it meant those things, because he never had Steve smiling at him.

“You,” Jonathan says.

Because one of Nancy’s many life goals seems to be to embarrass both boys, she adds, “You’re also pretty clumsy, Jonathan. Not a week goes by where you can’t put pants on without falling on your floor.”

Steve laughs, leaning his head against the cabinet. They’re sitting on the kitchen floor, the styrofoam cups surrounding them as they share a bottle of Coke, laugh over stories, and make fun of each other. Steve passes Nancy the bottle. “Really?”

Nancy nods. She presses the bottle to her lips for a quick sip. “It’s cute, though. The both of you can save the world, and have the grace of, well, each other.” This makes everyone laugh.

Jonathan pokes her stomach. “Not all of us can be gun-wielding, journalistic badasses.”

“Wouldn’t want you that way, anyway.” Her tone is light with an undercurrent of meaning. He wonders if she deliberately reassures him like this, if she knows how much he needs it. Then, if she knows that he loves her for it. “I like my weird photographer boyfriend the way he is.”
“Your weird and *awkward* photographer boyfriend.”

She pokes him back. “Right.”

“You guys don’t know how to flirt.” Steve’s teasing, but his face is all soft with a glint in his eyes.

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Who’s in a relationship again and who isn’t?”

Without thinking, Jonathan says, “Isn’t he dating Robin?”

“What?”

“What?”

Jonathan freezes. He looks back and forth between Nancy and Steve, not knowing who to address first. They have identical expressions: mouths hanging open, eyes wide, eyebrows pinched together. “I mean. I shouldn’t have assumed, I’m sorry! Can you guys like. Stop staring at me like that, please?”

“We’re not dating,” Steve says, sounding panicked. “She’s my friend. That’s all. I swear.”

“Oh. Okay,” Nancy exhales. “I mean, it’d be cool if you were. Not that you need my permission, that’s not what I —”


Jonathan doesn’t know what to do or say. He feels like he’s on the brink of understanding, like if the moment plays out, he’ll get it, too.

But then Dustin bursts into the kitchen, hands on his hip, and glares at Steve. “Steve!”

Steve straightens. “Dustin! What?”

“We asked you to get us cups, man. I’m parched. *Parched.*”

Jonathan stifles a laugh. He meets Nancy’s eyes, his gaze warming at how she giggles into the back of her hand, her eyes bright.

Steve gestures to the cups on the floor. When Dustin continues to stare pointedly at him, Steve flicks a cup across the room. “Here are the cups. Knock yourself out.”

Dustin glares for another second, before throwing his hands up into the air out of frustration and bending down. “Hey, Jonathan.”

“Hey, Dustin. Sorry we distracted Steve.”

“I’m not sorry,” Steve says. “Y’know, they don’t only ask me to hangout so I can get them things.”

“Yes, Dustin, we do it to make fun of him,” Nancy says. She laughs as Steve groans and hides his face behind his hands. “I mean, come on. Look at that face. Look at how red you are. It’s a compliment!”

Steve peeks at Nancy through the crack in his hands. “Really?”

“Really,” she says sincerely. “Red like a tomato. I like tomatoes!”
“You know what, I change my mind,” Jonathan says. “She is more awkward than you, Steve.”

“That wasn’t awkward!” Nancy protests. “Dustin, what do you think?”

Dustin’s mouth falls open. The six cups gathered in his hands threaten to topple over. “Nancy, I respect you.”

“Okay, but —”

“I plead the fifth!” He zooms out of the kitchen. A cup falls out of his hands, but he doesn’t stop to retrieve it. The stairway creaks loudly after the door to the basement slams shut.

“It’s cute,” Jonathan insists. Their fingers are still laced, so he raises her hand and kisses her knuckle. It always makes her light up; it’s one of his favourite things to do. “Your face is almost as red as Steve’s.”

“Am I really that red?” Steve asks.

“Yes,” Jonathan and Nancy say.

Steve lowers his hands from his face and crosses his legs. “Pass me the bottle, Byers.”

Something weird knots in Jonathan’s chest, but he pushes past it and gives Steve the bottle. He kind of assumed they were past the last name thing, but maybe not. Maybe he’s just his ex’s boyfriend to him.

It’s a lot to get from one word. That could be why Jonathan blurts out, “I’m moving.”

Nancy’s hand goes limp in his. “What?”

The bottle crashes to the floor. Steve doesn’t look down at it, his hands trembling, face crestfallen. “You’re joking, right?”

“Jonathan, what’re you talking about?” The urgency in Nancy’s voice tugs at his heart.

“C’mon, man. Stop fucking with us.”

Jonathan explains as quickly as he can. “So. Yeah.” Midway through his explanation, he hugged his legs to his chest, and is now squeezing so tightly it hurts. “Someone, please say something?”

“Did you want to?” Nancy’s voice is steady, but her eyes are watering.

“I didn’t want to leave you. That’s not —”

“But you wanted to?”

“Nancy, c’mon —” He touches her wrist and she jerks away, tears streaming down her face.

“I need a minute, okay?” She rubs her red eyes and hides her face behind her hands. “Y’know what, I’ll be back.” She jumps onto her feet and races out of the room so quickly that he’s left watching her go, his eyes stinging with tears.

Steve clears his throat. “She’ll come back. She doesn’t want you to see her upset. That’s all.” He scoots closer to Jonathan, leaving an inch between them.

Jonathan swallows. Steve’s right, but it still hurts.
“She’ll get it soon,” Steve continues. He mirrors Jonathan and pulls his knees to his chest. “I get it. Wanting to leave Hawkins. The fuck’s this town done for us, right? It’s screwed you and your family over the most. You guys deserve a fresh start.”

The knot in his chest eases. “Thanks.” He stares at the pieces of glass on the floor and the spilt Coke. They’ll clean it up eventually.

“We’ll, uh. Miss you.”

Jonathan tears his gaze away from the floor and to Steve. “Really?”

Steve smiles, just barely. “Yeah.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What?”

“Can you repeat that?”

“The fuck are you — oh. Oh. You’re a dick. You just wanna hear me say I’ll miss you, huh?”

Jonathan smiles back. He finds himself inching towards Steve. “Yeah.”

Steve’s shoulders relax. He shakes his head and stares at the ceiling. Exhaling deeply, he shuts his eyes. “I’ll miss you, man.”

So Jonathan closes his eyes and replies, “I’ll miss you too.”

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Steve’s collecting the shards of glass and Jonathan’s wiping the stain with a damp paper towel when Nancy returns.

Just like that, Jonathan drops the paper towel and meets Nancy halfway, his arms tight and secure around her waist. “I’m sorry for —”

“No, don’t be. I get it, okay? I do. I’m sorry.” She presses a kiss against his jaw. “Do you know when?”

“Labour Day weekend.”

Her breath catches. “Still have two months. And then it’s what, just a year until we’re done high school? That’s nothing.”

“That’s nothing,” he agrees, burying his face in her hair. “We’ve done harder things.”

“Yeah. This won’t be easy, but it won’t be impossible.”

“Yeah! And I love you, so —”

Nancy pulls away from his shoulder to look up at him. She smiles slowly, her eyes brightening. “You what?”
“I — oh. I said that?”

“You did.”

“You want me to, um, say it again?”

“I do.”

His heart flutters. He tucks a strand of hair away from her face, stares right back into her eyes, and says, “I love you, Nancy.”

She leans her head against his chest, right on his heart. He’s pretty sure his heart skipped a beat. Also pretty sure that she can tell. “I love you too,” she says and presses a kiss against his shoulder.

If he wasn’t certain before that they would be alright, then he is now.

They could hold each other forever, he thinks. He doesn’t really get to test out that theory because Steve says, “I’m glad that you’re comfortable enough to have that big moment in front of me.”

Jonathan and Nancy crane their heads towards Steve.

Steve stops twirling his broom. “Oh. You forgot I was here, right?”

“I like your version better,” Nancy says. “It’s nicer.”

“ Makes us look better,” Jonathan jokes.

“Disasters, the both of you,” Steve says, but he’s laughing, and soon enough, they’re all laughing.

Jonathan doesn’t remember it ever being this easy between them. Since October, he and Nancy kept their distance, not wanting to rub their relationship in his face, but they didn’t stay too far away. There were hello’s and banter whenever they bumped into each other at school or at Nancy’s house, when Steve hung out with the kids. But it was short, brief enough that Jonathan remembered who they were to each other. I hit you. I’m dating your ex.

But they’re always going to mean something to each other. Certain things have that effect. Fighting interdimensional monsters is one of those things.

While he’d never be grateful for it or this goddamn town, he won’t look back on this period of time with complete scorn. Good came from it. A crack of light in the form of Nancy Wheeler and Steve Harrington.

Maybe their friendship has an expiry date. He’ll move near Murray. He’ll only see Steve on holidays and they’ll fall back into the brief banter, but that’s okay. They have the next two months.

Things don’t need to last forever. Most of the times, they don’t. But Jonathan’s made his peace with it.

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So he gets his two months. It consists of Steve forcing him to listen to Journey, and Nancy staying over and trying to make breakfast. Jonathan listens to the band and eats Nancy’s burnt toast anyway,
because he likes them too much not to.

It also consists of watching his mother start putting the pieces back together with every decision regarding their move. She chooses a small, four bedroom house in Illinois that’s only made possible by the compensation money and Murray’s help.

Then there’s seeing Will and El soak up the rest of their summer with their friends, playing D&D in Nancy’s basement. At the same time, Nancy and Steve urge Jonathan to dance with them in Nancy’s room. He denies, says whatever song Steve’s playing is trashy, and flushes whenever Nancy brings up how gracefully he apparently danced at the Snowball. They always eventually get him to join them.

He does have to sit through Joyce telling Will and El about the move. It’s hard to watch.

Joyce tells them not to worry — not about how hard it will be to start over at a new school, in a new place, away from the people that’s gotten them through the past two years. She tells them that they’ll take things one day at a time, together, and figure it out.

Will’s looking at Jonathan the way he did when he was younger, after their parents fought and he needed Jonathan to tell him something reassuring. El’s looking at the blue band on her wrist, her eyes red.

“We’ll figure it out,” Jonathan echoes, looking at Joyce and desperately wanting to believe her. “If we have each other, then we’ll be okay.”

“It’s just hard here in Hawkins.” Joyce smiles through the tremor in her voice. “And I feel like we can’t heal if we’re here. Do you guys understand?”

Will’s face screws up like he’s trying hard not to cry. He leans across the table and rubs Joyce’s arm. “Whatever you want.”

Joyce sighs in relief. She takes Will’s hand, then Jonathan’s, and looks at El. “What do you say, hon?”

“Your choice,” El says numbly.

“I won’t do it if you don’t want to,” Joyce says softly.

They all look at her. El fidgets with the band on her wrist, breathing deeply. “Okay. It’s okay.”

They talk for another ten minutes. Joyce explains where they’re moving, says she wants to drive them up next weekend to look at the house she likes, and asks if they have questions. After that, she goes for a shower and Will goes into the kitchen to get them snacks.

Jonathan doesn’t move. “Are you sure you’re okay with it?”

El doesn’t look at him. “Yeah.”

“It’s fine if you aren’t.”

“I’m fine,” she says shortly.

“I know ... I know none of this is easy. You haven’t gotten to make a lot of choices, and it’s not right, it’s not fair, and I don’t know how to help. But I want to. All of us do. You don’t know us well and we don’t know you well, but we’d like to. I’d like to. A lot. You saved my brother’s life, yeah,
but you’re kind of remarkable, you know? And my mom already loves you, lights up whenever you’re around, and Will won’t say it, but he thinks you’re cool. It probably doesn’t feel like it, but we’re a family, and we’re here for you. You can always talk to me, if you want to, or if you’re hungry or if you just wanna drive around. You can always talk to my mom, too, because she misses your dad a lot too. And Will, well. He’ll come around, and you guys can have your own things to do. I feel like I’m talking a lot, and I don’t know if I’m saying the right thing, but I’m saying something. And I hope it helps.”

He lets out a long breath. And waits.

El places her hand on top of his. She sniffsles. He’s about to apologize for making her cry, but she says, “Thank you, Jonathan. You’re a good brother. And you make good waffles.”

He laughs. “I’ll make you as many waffles as you want.”

“I wished I knew how to cook.”

“I can teach you?”

He must be on a roll with saying the right thing, because she smiles. “Really?”

“Of course. You’ll probably end up making better waffles than me, but that’s all good.”

She laughs. Later, it’ll hit him that this is the first time he’s heard her laugh and the first time he’s made her laugh. He’ll hope it won’t be the last. But right now, he just laughs back. Another step forward.

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“Jesus, man, why do you have so much shit?”

“Do you really have a leg to stand on when the entire top cabinet of your washroom is dedicated to your Farrah Fawcett Spray?”

“Nance.” Steve lines another one of Jonathan’s photo albums into a box, spreading his legs out on Jonathan’s floor. “Sometimes, I’m grateful to have someone who knows me this well. This is not one of those times.”

Nancy sticks her tongue out at him as Jonathan passes her another folded shirts. She packs without needing to look down at the box in front of her, darting her gaze between Jonathan and Steve.

“An entire cabinet, huh?” Jonathan says, folding a yellow sweater and smirking at Steve. “Good to know.”

Steve sighs. “I liked it better when you were too shy to make fun of me.”

“Did you really?” Jonathan asks.

Steve groans. He lays down, his back on the floor, and kicks the air. “No.”

“We’re here to pack.” Nancy takes the yellow sweater from Jonathan. She organizes it neatly into the box. “You said you’d help.”
“It’s fine,” Jonathan says. “He’s still too hurt over the cabinet comment, so give the baby a second.”

Nancy laughs so hard she snorts. It’s a nice, human sound; she deserves to have a million more of them, Jonathan thinks, his heart swelling.


“We could take a break,” Nancy suggests.

Jonathan nearly asks what happened to we’re here to pack, but he loses his train of thought when Nancy lays her head in his lap. His eyes crinkle with a smile as he looks down at her. Carding his fingers through her hair is a habit at this point, so he does it without having to think about it. “I like that idea.”

“You like all of my ideas.” She turns her head and kisses the back of his hand. “Even my stupid ones.”

“Even your stupid ones. I like that you can admit that.”

She chuckles, her breath warm against his hand. “Shut up.”

“Oh yeah? Come up here and make me.”

Nancy grins lazily. “You’re getting better at flirting.”

“When was I ever bad at it?” He jokes. Despite his words, he bends down and meets her in the middle for a kiss.

Steve clears his throat. He stands up, dusting his pants and staring at a spot on the ceiling. “I’m gonna grab some drinks. You guys want?”

They break apart quickly, both wiping their mouths. Jonathan winces and glances at Nancy. “Sure?”

“That’d be nice, yeah,” she says, voice squeaky.

Steve’s still not looking at them. He taps his hands against his thighs and nods, all but running out of Jonathan’s room. He closes the door behind him.

Nancy sits up next to them, stretching her legs out in front of her. “Well.” She smiles abashedly at Jonathan. “You still have lipgloss on your mouth. Here, let me.”

As flustered as he is, he can’t help but appreciate the contact. He waits for her to finish wiping his mouth and lets a few, heavy seconds sit between them to say, “We should talk about that, right?”

“Right,” she agrees. “The thing is, I feel like Steve thinks we forget he’s there. But I don’t forget. I mean, I could never. And I think that’s worse.”

A piece of the puzzle clicks together, but the image is still hazy. “You want him to see us?”

“Not, no, not that. It’s like. It doesn’t feel weird to kiss you in front of him.” Nancy bites her lip. He touches her shoulder and nods encouragingly. “It feels right.”

Another piece. Jonathan’s lips part in surprise. “Nancy, do you still —”

The door flies open. “The dip-shits drank all the soda, but I managed to snag the last bottle. Hope it’s okay if we share?” He looks down at them, only a few inches away, the bottle held in his
outstretched hand. The nervousness in his voice worries Jonathan. Why wouldn’t it be alright? They shared a Coke in Nancy’s kitchen two months ago, have done it a million times since.

For whatever reason, Steve’s worried they’ll say no.

“Of course,” Jonathan says. Steve’s shaky smile as he steps back to close the door makes Jonathan feel like he’s won something.

Nancy gestures to the space directly in front of her and Jonathan. “Come pack here. So, um. We can share easier.”

“Yeah, course.” Steve moves past them to grab the box he’d been packing.

She looks at Jonathan and worries her lip between her teeth, her body tense.

_I still love you_, he wants to say. _It's okay. It doesn’t change anything for me._

But Steve’s only a foot away from them, and God, is this the conversation they should have two days before he’s out of Hawkins?

He touches his scar to hers and squeezes her hand. Nancy squeezes back. He never got to finish his question. She never got to answer. But there’s enough of the puzzle that he can make out the image now.

Steve lugs the box over and lowers it to the spot in front of them. He sits, wrapping his legs around the box, and tips the bottle towards Nancy. “Nance?”

Nancy softens at the nickname. “Yeah, thanks.” She grabs the bottle, and Jonathan can see it, the moment their fingers brush, the moment the touch lingers, the moment they look at each other, a million things unspoken in the glint in their eyes, none of which Jonathan understood but all of which he could feel bursting in his chest.

It’s just a moment. It passes. Nancy takes the bottle. Steve coughs and packs another mixtape into the box.

Jonathan thinks he’s feeling jealous. Except he knows what that’s like. He spent most of sophomore and the beginning of junior year pining, aching, and _breaking_ whenever he saw them kiss, saw Steve make her laugh, and saw Nancy make him smile.

But this is different. It runs deeper. His hands are sticky, and his heart’s pounding, and his mind’s telling him that you aren’t jealous if you want to see that again.

He ducks his head and resumes folding his clothes. They’re uncharacteristically quiet for a few minutes until Steve burps, Nancy tells him he’s disgusting but doesn’t finish the word because _she_ burps, and Jonathan tells them they’re both gross.

Sometimes Jonathan wakes up in the middle of the night and the only thing that can put him to rest is seeing Will, asleep in his room. Of course it happens on their last night in Hawkins. Tomorrow morning, they leave. It’s only now starting to sink in, with most of their things packed, their furniture
all pushed into the front of the house save for their beds.

So when his mind tells him to avoid bumping into his cabinet, he shortly remembers that there’s no point. It’s not there anymore.

Decisively ignoring the deep ache in his chest at the thought, he walks into Will’s room. Squints at Will’s bed. Tries not to fall apart when he doesn’t see Will in his bed.

His ears ring. He can’t feel his legs. He whirls around and races down the hall to wake his mother — Only to find Will standing by the doorway of her room.

“Will?”

Will jumps. “Jonathan, you scared me,” he says, rubbing his eyes.

“You scared me! I didn’t see you in your bed. I — I thought —”

Will frowns, gently leading Jonathan away from the doorway. He speaks in a hushed whisper. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay, bud. I know. But what’re you doing?”

“It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I went to mom’s room, but she’s there.”

Will doesn’t say who, but Jonathan knows. He peeks into Joyce’s room anyway and finds Joyce cuddling El. A blanket is slung over both their bodies. They look more peaceful than Jonathan’s seen them in weeks.

Jonathan turns to Will and asks, “Can I make you hot cocoa?”

Six minutes later, Jonathan passes a mug brimming with hot chocolate and marshmallows to Will. They sit on the counter, swinging their legs back and forth.

“What’s wrong?” Jonathan asks. “You can tell me anything. I won’t judge.”

Will licks a melted marshmallow. “It’s just — I feel like everything’s changing. All my friends have girlfriends, and they’re too busy to do the things we used to, and we’re moving and that’s — that’s the spot that I would take with mom whenever I couldn’t sleep, y’know? I know that El hasn’t done anything, but it’s hard not to feel that way. It’s stupid, I told you. I have to grow up eventually, and it’s not fair to be complaining when you never got the chance to, when you had to deal with me, but … I don’t want to grow up. I don’t want things to change. I’m really scared.”

Jonathan’s heart aches. Pulling Will into his arms after setting both of their cups down next to him is half for Will, half for himself. “It’s okay to cry.” He rubs up and down Will’s back, trying to keep his voice steady. “Let it out.”

“I’m getting snot on your shirt,” Will sniffs.

“It’s okay. I don’t like this shirt.”

“Liar! Nancy gave it to you for Christmas. It’s your favourite.”
“Okay, yeah,” he says, stroking Will’s hair. “But I can wash it out.”

“God, why am I crying? I’m thirteen, what thirteen year old boy cries —”

Jonathan flinches. It’s scary how much of Lonnie he hears in Will. “Hey,” he says firmly. He leans back to look Will in the eye, absentmindedly reaching out to wipe his cheek. “There’s nothing wrong with crying. It’s better to let it out than to keep it inside. Sure, crying doesn’t fix anything, but it lets you acknowledge what you’re feeling as real, and it lets you feel your pain so that it’s not as heavy anymore. I know it’s hard, but ... but everything he said was wrong. He wasn’t right about us. He wasn’t right about you. He wasn’t right about anything, actually.”

The mention of Lonnie hangs heavy in the air. Will’s breath catches. He doesn’t say anything for awhile, just holds onto Jonathan tighter. The hot cocoa will go cold, but that’s okay. They can always make more.

Will draws back. He nods slowly, his face softer.

“Can I address the rest of what you said?” Jonathan asks carefully, nudging Will’s mug forward.

Will picks it up, smiling tiredly. He takes a sip. “Okay. Impart your big brother wisdom.”

“Your friends love you. I know they’re growing up, and it feels like they’re moving on from you, but people grow up, you know? But that doesn’t mean you grow apart. It must not help, the move and all, but ... but your friendship’s survived the Upside Down, and the lab, and it’ll survive so much more.”

Will fiddles with the mug and nods. “That’s good,” he says, making Jonathan laugh into his sleeve, “keep going.”

“It’s good that you know that El’s not to blame, and you’re entitled to feel whatever you want, but you gotta give her a chance. She isn’t going anywhere. When we move, all we have is each other, and that includes her. We’re all she has.” Jonathan thinks of Joyce holding El, of El comfortable enough to go into her room to sleep. He’s glad that El knows she can lean on them.

Will heaves a long sigh. “Yeah, I know.” His eyes flick to Jonathan. His smile returns as he lightly taps Jonathan’s foot with his own. “Now, onto that last part.”

“Onto the last part,” he says, smiling back. “I’ll be honest with you. I don’t think I got the childhood that everyone has, but I don’t blame anyone but Dad for it. Least of all you. You’re what kept me going. You have to know that. I mean, c’mon. You’re my brother. You’re my —” Jonathan’s heart swells so big that it feels like it’ll burst out of his chest. “You’re my best friend. And given the chance, I’d choose all of it. The Upside Down, the Mind Flayer, every bit of bullshit we’ve dealt with since you went missing — I’d choose it again if it meant you’d be okay.”

They’re both smiling through their tears. Jonathan has to remind himself not to crush Will in his arms when Will rushes right back into his arms.

“I’m going to make it up to you,” Will says into Jonathan’s shoulder. “I promise.”

Jonathan chuckles. “Sounds good, bud.”

“I’ll paint your new room black.”

“Contrary to popular belief, black is not my favourite colour.”
“Fine, then, yellow,” Will says correctly. “I’ll make you mixtapes. I’ll —”

“Just be happy,” Jonathan interrupts. He pulls back to look at Will, pushing his hair away from his forehead. “That’s all I want.”

“You too, then,” Will says fiercely.

It doesn’t sound easy. New house, new school, new town, away from Nancy, Steve, and the kids, away from the only good that came out of this mess. They’re leaving Hawkins and some ghosts behind, but not all of them. Jonathan’s hands won’t ever be clean. He still gets jumpy passing by Hawkins Hospital. Will things like that truly change in a new town?

He’s still killed someone. That doesn’t change no matter where he is.

As though Will can read his thoughts, he says gently, “You still deserve it. I know you think you don’t, that you’re not a good person anymore, but you do. You are.”

Maybe this could change in a new town; he could learn to believe it.

“I’ll work on that,” Jonathan says, “and you work on being friends with El.”

“Whoa, wait. How do I know if you really think that or not?”

“I could never lie to you.”

Will hums. “Okay. Sounds good. Shake on it?”

They shake hands and finish up their drinks.

“You gonna be okay to sleep on your own?” Jonathan stands at the foot of Will’s bed, watching him crawl underneath his cover.

“Yes, Dad, I’ll be fine.”

Jonathan goodnaturedly rolls his eyes. “Good.”

He doesn’t know how to explain that all he needed to be fine was to see Will, safe and sound, so he just nods and says, for whatever reason, “I’ll be fine, son.”

Will snorts out a laugh. “Good.”

Jonathan turns around. His hand lingers on the light switch. “Just one more thing?”

Will nods through a yawn.

“Growing up is really scary,” he starts. “I don’t think I’m qualified to say much on this because I’m not finished growing up, but ... it’s not fun. It’s especially not fun for us, because we already have enough to be scared of, and now we need to be afraid of the future? It’s total crap, but everyone does it eventually. Growing up is about change, and change is scary, but it can be a good thing. It’s how you move forward. It’s how you move on. But not everything changes. I really believe some things last forever. I know your friendships will.”

“What about you and Nancy?”
He outlines the scar on his palm. “Definitely,” he says without a trace of hesitation. “And this family. Hate to say it, but you’re stuck with us.”

Will chuckles at the joke. “Give me some credit. I was never worried about that. I’ve always known I have you and mom. Always will.”

Jonathan beams at his younger brother, wondering what he ever did to deserve someone so full of light. “Night. I’ll see you in the morning.” He turns the light off and heads back into his room. The second his body hits his bed, he’s out.

It’s a dreamless sleep; the most peaceful kind.

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His body aches as he stands in what used to be his bedroom. Every part of him from the posters, to his shelf of mixtapes, to the photos he had hung up have been stripped away. He and Steve just moved the mattress out.

It’s completely empty.

He wraps his arms around himself, trying to squeeze out the strange hollowness residing in his chest.

“Hey,” Nancy says from the door. “Is that everything?”

“I guess so. Seventeen years of my life, packed up in one day.”

He hears her step towards him, feels her lips on his shoulder, her arms looping around his waist. It’s easy to melt into her. His shoulders relax and his body loosens. He could crumble, right here, fall into a million pieces, and she’d help him clean up the mess and put everything back together. He won’t. But the thought that he could and that she’d still be here makes him want to cry in the best way possible.

“What if I just,” she whispers, tucking her head into his shoulder. They sway back and forth. “Don’t let you go?”

He smiles. "I think,” he says softly, turning around and swinging their joined hands, “the new owners might kick us out.”

“You could stay in our basement.”

“You could stay in our basement.”

“Your dad’d love that.”

Her fingers twine with his. “We could hide you in a tent. Like El.” Her smile falls, her chin starting to quake.

“Hey.” He rests his forehead against hers, reminding both of them really that, “It’s gonna be okay.”

She nods again, but she’s still tense, so he raises their hands and gently flips her palm so that it faces up. “As a wise man once said,” he says, his thumb circling her scar, “we’ve got shared trauma.”

She smiles. Her index finger curls around his. “So what’s a little more, right?”
He lifts her hand to kiss her knuckle. “What’s a little more?” He’s not sure who leans in first. They embrace in a fervent kiss, gripping each other tight enough that Jonathan thinks he won’t ever let go, either.

After, she tucks her head back into his shoulder. “You’re really going to call Murray a wise man, though?”

He laughs and rubs his thumb over her shoulder, back and forth in soothing motions. “Gotta give him some credit if my mom trusts him enough to move near him.”

He can’t see her, but he can tell she’s narrowing her eyes. “If he says anything weird to you or her or the kids, call me. I’ll drive up there. Scare him.”

“You can’t go scaring my neighbour, Nancy.”

She laughs and squeezes him tighter. “Oh, God, please. I cannot believe that fuckface will see you more than I will.”

“You jealous?”

“I’m big enough to say that I am, yeah.”

He kisses the shell of her ear. “I’m all yours. I mean, we basically have matching tattoos.”

“Matching trauma, too,” she says, making him snort. “You can call me. Whenever. In the middle of the night, if you can’t sleep, if you have a nightmare.”

“Same goes for you. We’re going to get through this. All of it. Have you had any nightmares?”

“No yet. But I can’t look at the fire extinguisher in my house, so if we have a fire, I’m screwed.”

“Mike can always do it. What are siblings for, right?”

“Right. Y’know, I’m kind of worried for him. Losing El and Will ...”

“Just be there for him. You can help fill that void, and I’m sure he wants that more than you know.”

Nancy’s arms tighten around him. “We’ll visit you guys together. Three hours in a car with him might be the death of me, but it’ll be worth it to see you.”

“I appreciate the sacrifice,” he teases. He knows how much Nancy would appreciate the time with Mike.

“HEY, MAN, IT’S TIME TO —” Steve stops shouting when his eyes land on Jonathan and Nancy, the two still wrapped in each other’s embrace, rocking back and forth steadily. He doesn’t venture further past the door.

Jonathan and Nancy disentangle, but don’t let go of each other’s hands. “Hey,” Jonathan says, wiping his eyes with his other hand.

“Time to go? Already?” Nancy grips Jonathan’s hand even tighter.

He doesn’t care about the room or the house or Hawkins. None of it matters. But he can’t say goodbye to Nancy or —

“Steve?” She presses.
Steve blinks. He rubs his hand down his face and smiles sadly. “Yeah, Nance. It is.”

Jonathan inhales, sucking the air into his lungs until he feels it in his chest. He lets it sit there for a moment. Exhales. “We can do this. Let’s go.”

He and Nancy step forward, together, at the same time. When they reach the door, Steve doesn’t move from the doorframe.

“Uh, Steve,” Jonathan says. “I need to go.”

Steve balls his hands into fists. Once upon a time, Jonathan would’ve thought he’d get hit and would be ready to hit back, but now he’s just worried. He doesn’t know when he became someone who actively worried about Steve Harrington. He fights the strong urge to reach out, unclench Steve’s fingers, and pull them into his own.

Which. Is new.

“Steve,” Jonathan repeats, half to get Steve to move out of the way, and half to ignore how he really wants to hold Steve’s hand.

“Look, I can’t do this outside in front of everyone else, so I’m just going to do it here, and like. I’m sorry if it’s weird, because it totally is, but you’re leaving, and that fuckin’ sucks, man.” Steve launches himself at Jonathan, flinging his arms around Jonathan’s neck and pulling him close.

“Oh,” Jonathan breathes. His skin warms at the contact. His atoms buzz. He has a half-baked thought about how perfectly they fit into each other.

He meets Nancy’s eyes over Steve’s shoulder. She’s smiling like she knows something he doesn’t, which is probably the case. HUG HIM BACK, she mouths. Her eyes go a little panicked as Jonathan stands there, suffocated in the best way possible.

Right. He had been so stunned, so touched that he forgot.

Jonathan hugs him back, cupping the back of Steve’s head. He smells Farrah Fawcett spray, so he inhales again, desperately wanting to remember this. He doesn’t want to let go.

But Steve pulls away. He clears his throat and smooths his hands over his jeans. “Let’s go?”

Jonathan bumps his shoulder against Steve’s, still warm all over. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

For the last time, the three walk side by side out of the house. Jonathan thinks of the first time they were here together. So much has changed since then that he doesn’t miss it, not really. But he appreciates how young, almost innocent he was. Slicing palms, getting into fistfights, doing stupid things for love, and stupid things for stupid reasons.

Those were different times, but those weren’t better days. He’s better now.

Stepping out of the front door is easy.

Will and El are already saying goodbye to the kids. Joyce opens her arms to Nancy. The two hug. Jonathan’s thinking about who to say goodbye to first, but Lucas makes that decision by running into Jonathan’s arms.

It takes ages to say goodbye, which is unsurprising since Jonathan, Will, and El ignore Joyce’s third it’s time to go.
Nancy laughs wetly. She kisses the corner of his mouth. “You should listen to her. She’s tough.”

“I know. But I’m — okay, I’m not tougher, but I need another second.”

“You said that a minute ago.”

“And?” He shuts his eyes and breathes her in, scared that his last moment in Hawkins could be his last moment with her. “I can say goodbye to this stupid house and this stupid town, but you — I don’t know if I can.”

“Hey. Look at me.”

He forces his eyes open. The blue in her eyes will always knock the air out of his lungs. “I’m returning the favour. Giving you a Jonathan Byers pep-talk. You can do this. I know you. I know that you deserve a fresh start, a chance to live without being haunted by all of the bullshit you’ve had to deal with. Just ten months, then you and I are out of here. We’ll get our one bedroom apartment in New York, and it’ll be shitty, but it won’t matter, because we’ll be together. And you’ll be better. Illinois will treat you better.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“I’ll kick its ass,” she says so seriously he laughs. “Ten months.”

“Ten months.” Saying it aloud makes it less daunting. He’s survived worse. He can do this. “Don’t get into too much trouble without me.”

Nancy’s hands move behind his neck, mouth brushing against his. “You’re most of my impulse control.”

“That — that means nothing to me. I can never get you to stop doing what you plan on.”

“Exactly. So I’m screwed. Maybe Steve’ll help.”

They look at Steve at the same time. Steve’s already looking at them, his legs bouncing like he wants to join them. He waves, and they laugh.

“I doubt that,” Jonathan says.

“Did he just insult me?” Steve calls out.

“Shockingly, no,” Nancy says.

“Jonathan.”

Jonathan looks up at the sound of Joyce’s voice. She stands behind the moving truck, holding Will and El with each arm as they lean on her shoulders. “It’s time.”

The kids are looking at him, all lined up on the sidewalk behind Steve.

“If you’re not here for Thanksgiving, man,” Steve says, voice thick, “I’ll —”


Steve laughs as he wipes his eyes. “Fuck you, man.”
Nancy’s hands drift to her sides. “He’ll cry. Harder than he is right now.”

“Yeah,” Steve mumbles, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I will. Cry so hard.”

Jonathan understands what Steve’s really saying, so he says, “I’ll miss you, too.”

Before he can gauge Steve’s reaction, Nancy cups his face and kisses him fervently. He’s not sure whose tears he’s feeling. Hers or his.

“Call me when you can.”

“I will,” he promises. He’s certain that if he doesn’t move now, he never will, so he forces himself to let go of her hand, to walk away from them, and to step into his car.

He pauses before climbing into the driver’s seat. He looks at Steve and Nancy, who stand next to each other on the pavement, their hands brushing, but not fully touching, cheeks slick with tears. “If we’ve fight monsters and won, then we can do this, right?”

They all laugh.

“You’re gonna be great out there, Byers,” Steve says. “So I won’t bother saying good luck.”

“It’s gonna be okay. You’re gonna be okay.” He knows what Nancy means, that they’re both thinking about how they each killed someone in the hospital. She pointedly traces the shape of her scar, and he touches his without having to think about it.

It only makes it harder to step into the car, but he forces himself to do it.

“Already put the mixtape in,” Will says. He doesn’t touch the stream of tears running down his face.

“You okay, bud?”

“No, but I will be. It’s okay to cry, so I’m crying,” Will says determinedly. “I’m crying, and I’m still valid!”

Jonathan smiles tearfully at the sight of his brother sobbing and yelling words of affirmation.

“You’re valid, too,” Will says firmly.

Jonathan starts the car. “I am?”

“Yeah. Gotta say it, though.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m valid,” Jonathan mumbles, checking the rearview mirror.

“You gotta shout.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Nothing happens. But I’ll be disappointed.”

“I can’t handle your disappointment. Alright. Here goes nothing,” Jonathan clears his throat and grins at Will. “I am valid! I AM VALID!”

“Yes, you ARE!” Nancy shouts.

Jonathan laughs. He turns around and looks at Nancy and Steve. Just smiles and memorizes how the
light catches their faces, the sparkle in Nancy’s eyes, the colour in Steve’s face as they smile back.

Joyce honks. It’s a question. Are you ready?

Jonathan honks back.

He follows Joyce’s truck. His car blares *Should I Stay or Should I Go* and Will sings proudly along through his tears. Jonathan smiles at him as he drives away from his house, beginning his departure from Hawkins and his arrival to Illinois.

He doesn’t stop crying, but he doesn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

this was supposed to be a one-shot, but then it took me almost 10k to get to the move, so five parts instead!

if you would like, a reblog for this fic’s [the photoset](#) is greatly appreciated. come say hi on tumblr! comments/kudos are also greatly appreciated. i would love to know what you think!

i hope you have a lovely day. thank you for reading. :)}
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

posting this (and the rest of the chapters) during vacation, so apologies for any and all typos!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I should’ve taken the drinks,” Jonathan says, watching Will struggle with carrying all four fountain drinks by himself.

The moving truck and Jonathan’s car had been unloaded and left in the house. The final thing to bring in was the large McDonalds order they bought the second they spotted one in Illinois. Most of the fries were finished, but the burgers and drinks remained.

“Don’t you trust me?” Will says, oblivious to another drop of Jonathan’s Coke spilling onto the pavement.

“I’d trust you more if you weren’t spilling my drink.”

“I’m not spilling it! It’s dripping.”

“Means the same thing,” El cuts in. “I’ve got it.” She takes two of the drinks out of Will’s hands and marches past them.

“Maybe if you —”

Jonathan ahems loudly. He tilts his head towards El and raises his eyebrows, tightly holding onto their bags of McDonalds. “Remember what we talked about?”

Will stops in his tracks. They watch El walk into the house and say something to Joyce. Will sighs. “Unfortunately, yeah. I’d call it off I didn’t care about you so much.”

“Thank you for your sacrifice,” Jonathan says. “Now, c’mon. We gotta unpack.”

Unpack can mean a lot of things. To the Byers, it means laying on Joyce’s bed, positioned by the front door, and digging into their fast food.

“We should move everything else,” Joyce says. She dips her french fry into her ketchup.

“We already brought everything into the house.” Jonathan doesn’t bother getting up. He raises his leg and makes a circle with his foot, gesturing to their boxes of things scattered across the foyer of their house, leading into the kitchen.

“We deserve a break.” El’s laying next to Jonathan, her feet by his head, the chicken nuggets on her lap. “You deserve a break, Joyce.”

Joyce leans against the headboard. She narrows her eyes. “Did you three orchestrate this?”
“No,” they reply.

“We’re just tired,” Jonathan says. “I know it’s only noon, but it’s been a long day.”

“Fair enough.” Joyce combs her fingers through El’s hair in an automatic, mindless gesture. “So, are you two excited for your first day of high school? Three more days!”

“Yay,” El says dryly.

“I’ve heard so many great stories from Jonathan.” Will groans into his hands.

“You did this,” Joyce accuses. She points a finger at Jonathan. “You turned them into moody, sullen teens.”

“I take no responsibility. They’re your kids,” Jonathan smiles and pokes Joyce’s knee with his foot. He has to raise his leg over Will’s head to do so, narrowly missing him by an inch.

Joyce smiles at El, then at Will. “They are.” She bends down to stroke Will’s hair.

Will pretends to scowl. He leans into Joyce’s touch. His shoulder bumps against El’s in the process. “He’s your kid too.”

“I’m not really a kid, though, am I?” Jonathan lolls his head to the side and catches sight of all three of them. El’s now sat up, her foot resting against Will’s thigh. Will’s shifted so that his head’s in Joyce’s lap, his foot brushed against Jonathan’s shoulder. It’s cozy. It’s warm. It’s a sight that makes him want to grab his camera.

But he doesn’t want to remove himself from it. He can’t, really, not since El’s placed a stack of napkins on his chest.

“Oh, but you are a kid, honey. No matter what, you’re still a kid,” Joyce says softly.

For whatever reason, Jonathan’s eyes water. He doesn’t make an effort to wipe them. Just nods and says, “Okay, mom.”

El’s hand darts out to Jonathan’s hair. She palms the back of his head, moving her hand back and forth. “Oh,” she says when he stares up at her, dumbfounded. “Sorry. I saw her doing it, so I —”

“Hey, I don’t mind. It’s all good. Feels nice,” Jonathan adds genuinely.

She smiles and resumes stroking his hair.

Jonathan looks, as best as he can while laying down, around the house. It’s slightly bigger than their house in Hawkins. Still one floor, but more windows, more cabinets, more space. The first thing Joyce did when they came inside was opening a window. “We need to let the light in,” she said.

Sunlight, warm and welcoming, is cast on his face. Kids playing outside laugh. A bird flies past their window. The wind provides a calm, serene lull.

He’s not sure how long he’s soaking up their new neighbourhood. When he looks back at the bed, Will and El are asleep with their heads in Joyce’s lap. Their foreheads are pressed together.

Joyce’s already looking at him when he looks at her. “Hey. Thought you dozed off.”

Jonathan shakes his head. “Just taking everything in.”
“What do you think?”

“I think,” he says slowly, touching her knee. “That you made a good choice.”

Joyce hums. She grasps his finger lightly. “I make a lot of good choices. For example, you.”

He laughs, struggling to stay quiet. “You’re so cheesy. And Dad said I wasn’t planned.” He can’t remember what prompted Lonnie to say that. He was drunk, watching television, and just told a five year-old Jonathan that he was an accident, a mistake. Lonnie was right in that Jonathan wasn’t planned. When Jonathan repeated the information to Joyce, she sighed, said that Lonnie shouldn’t have said that, that she loved him, that she wanted him.

Joyce’s face softens. “You were still a choice. And I’d choose you again and again and again, always.”

“It’s your fault that I’m such a crier,” he says through his tears. “I love you.”

She laughs wetly. “I love you, too.” She trails her fingers up to his hair and winds her fingers through. “You gonna be okay at your new school?”

“Sure. I’ll have these two with me. It’s only another year.”

“One more year till NYU.”

His chest tightens at the mention of his lifelong dream. “If I get in.”

“When you get in. You’ve got the grades, a portfolio, and we talked about you joining yearbook this year, didn’t we?”

“Is my future really important enough that I have to join yearbook?”

“I’m laughing, because you’re obviously joking, right?”

He smiles. “I’ll be alright. We’ll all be alright. You too.”

“I know. Go to sleep. Your senior year starts soon, I start my new job soon, and who knows when we’ll get to waste the day away like this again?”

“Mkay, mom.” He closes his eyes. Surrounded by his family, it’s easy to drift off.

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“I can’t find my backpack!”

“It’s on your back, Will.”

“Y’know what, El —”

“Remember, it’s Jane at school,” Jonathan reminds him, sliding a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Will, another in front of El. “And be nice.”

“I was going to say thank you.” Will pokes his breakfast with his fork before taking a large bite.
For the dozenth time, El fidgets with the blue hair-tie holding her hair up. “Were you really?”

Will passes El a fork. “Really.”

“Oh.” She accepts the fork. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Will says, too chirpy for eight in the morning.

“I was talking to Jonathan,” El says.

“Really?”

El’s mouth curves into a smile. “Nope! But still, thank you, Jonathan.”

Jonathan has to remind himself not to ruffle El’s hair. Joyce spent ten minutes combing through the knots and helping her choose a headband to wear. “No problem.”

“I’m not eating until you’re eating,” Will says. He kicks the seat in between him and El out.

Jonathan sits. As Joyce zooms into the kitchen, he shouts, “I’ll eat when MOM EATS!”

Joyce yanks on her navy uniform shirt. Her new job is at the local elementary school as a receptionist. Murray helped get her the gig. Jonathan had wondered what connections he could possibly have with the school, but the pay was above minimum wage and was good enough that Joyce tackled Murray into a hug when they had dinner yesterday and thanked him profusely.

“Stop being ridiculous,” Joyce says, mock-stern. “It’s your first day of school and you need to eat. El, aren’t they being silly?”

El looks at Jonathan.

Jonathan shakes his head vehemently. He gestures to her plate and makes an ‘X’ with his fingers.

“Not eating if you aren’t,” she decides.


El nods. “Please?”

That’s enough for Joyce to grab another plate of scrambled eggs and two forks. She pulls up a chair in between Jonathan and El, thrusting one fork into Jonathan’s hands. “Let’s eat then.”

Will asks Jonathan a dozen questions. He answers in between bites. Yes, we’ll get your schedule first thing. Yes, you can sit with me. No, seniors don’t attack freshmen, but if someone hurts you, I’ll happily fight —

Joyce ahems. “You won’t fight on your first day of school.”

“I can take them,” El says.

“But aren’t your powers gone?” Will asks. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have —”

“It’s okay.” El sips her orange juice. “I still have fists.”

Joyce snorts out a laugh. “Thought we moved here to get away from danger?”

“I’m not letting someone hurt Will,” El says like it’s very obvious. She continues eating her plate of
breakfast, oblivious to the awe on Will’s face.

Five minutes later, after everyone’s finished, Joyce says it’s time to go. They pile in the car, Joyce in the driver’s seat, Jonathan in the passenger, and Will and El in the back.

“It’s going to be fun,” Joyce says, pulling out of the driveway. “And if not, then it’ll be over soon.”

“Three o’clock, right?” El’s shaking. Jonathan had almost forgotten that this is her first day of school, period.

“Three o’clock,” he confirms. “I’ll meet you at your locker and we’ll walk home. I think I know the way back.”

Will sits straight. “And if we get lost?”

“Then it’s an adventure,” Jonathan says, making Will groan, El laugh, and Joyce smile.

She tells them to have a good day, kisses each of their cheeks, and gives them a collective *I love you* that they return in near-unison.

The three stand at the sidewalk, staring up at Silver Springs High School. Jonathan thumbs the strap of his backpack. He toes the hole in his shoe. “We can do it.”

The kids nod. Together, they walk inside.

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Jonathan nearly cries out in relief when they discover that Will and El have three out of their four classes together.

“This one’s gym,” Jonathan says, recognizing the course code. “That’s not co-ed. But it’s running and games and it’ll be easy to make friends.”

“It’s only an hour and fifteen minutes,” Will adds to El, whose face has turned white, her hands squeezing the paper so hard Jonathan’s surprised it hasn’t crumpled. “And I’ll see you for last period English.”

Jonathan doesn’t look at his own timetable. His first priority is getting them to class.

There’s no student guide, no teacher to show them around, not even a map. Jonathan’s not surprised.

Their math class is on the third floor, but at least it’s the first classroom at the top of the stairway.

“Here we are.” Jonathan gently pulls them to the side and pats their shoulders. “You can do this, okay? Remember that everyone is new and feels at least a little of what you’re feeling too. You have each other. You have me. And if today sucks, then hey, it’s only one day. Tomorrow will always be different and could always be better.”

“You’ve witnessed your first Jonathan Byers pep talk,” Will whispers, for some reason, to El.

El looks confused. She smiles anyway. “More to come?”
“Oh, hell yeah,” Jonathan says. His eyes crinkle with a smile. “If you ever need one, say the word.”

The first bell rings. Jonathan pushes down his own panic and nods at Will and El. “Will, Jane,” he says coyly, “see you at lunch.”

“See you!” They call out.

He watches them step into the classroom, their heads held high. He’s so proud of them. He’s so confident in them. He’s so —

Late.

People flood the hallway. He squeezes past a tall, gangly kid that reminds him of Mike and sprints down the stairs, only to remember that he hasn’t looked at the timetable clutched in his hands. It has him on the first floor, though, his homeroom English, so he sprints and, by some miracle, makes it before the national anthem.

There’s only one empty table at the back. Seniors fill the classroom. The room buzzes with conversation. No one looks at him. It’s reassuringly familiar.

After the national anthem, the announcements begin. The teacher doesn’t look up from her desk, not even to scold the class into quieting down to hear the announcements.

Jonathan finally looks at the rest of his timetable. He has Chemistry after this, then lunch, Math, and Photography. It’s bearable.

He thinks of Nancy, of what class she’s in, of the notes she’s already started taking. His mind drifts to Steve, if his interview with the arcade went well or not. He’ll call Nancy and ask. He’ll listen to every detail she’ll offer, then ask for more.

When she inevitably asks him about his day and presses for more, he’ll tell her nothing really happened. Nothing except —

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His photography teacher is a guy in his late thirties. He says he doesn’t mind if they drop the Mr. and call him Frankfort. Frankfort’s glasses are big, his friendly smile even bigger. He’s charming with a lot of energy in him, his eyes alight in a way that’s clear he’s speaking from the heart. His intro to the class and to himself is interesting enough that Jonathan, in his exhausted state, can keep up.

Frankfort opens the floor to questions. After a few questions are asked and no one else’s hands raise, ten minutes of class remain.

“Free time, then,” Frankfort announces, clapping his hands. “Tomorrow: name-tags. Brush up on your art skills, folks. If you have any questions you want to ask me privately or anything you want to say at all, I’ll be at my desk.”

There’s a set of math problems, review from junior year, that Jonathan could start. He’s fishing his textbook out of his backpack when the girl to his right clears her throat.

He turns his head, still bent over with his hand inside his backpack. “Yeah?”
Her brown eyes match her brown skin. She plays with her hair, so long that it reaches her stomach. She’s wearing a baggy sweatshirt, despite the humid weather, and shorts that stop at her knees. "Just wanted to say hi," she says, her voice barely above a murmur. “Since we’ll be sitting together for the semester.”

“Oh. Hi.” He sits up and outstretches his hand. “Jonathan.”

“Olive.” She shakes his hand gingerly, staring at the floor. “You’re new, right?”

“Yup. Are you?”

“No.”

"Oh," is all he says. She doesn’t say another word. He’s forgotten how to speak to people, apparently, so he pulls his textbook and notebook out.

He’s two questions in when Olive gets up to speak to Frankfort. The piece of paper she was writing on falls to the floor. She doesn’t notice.

He picks the sheet up for her. He doesn’t mean to pry, but out of the corner of his eye, he catches a familiar, intense face. So she wasn’t writing, but doodling. Looking at the drawing is like looking in the mirror.

It’s a shaded sketch of Jonathan glaring at his textbook. She nailed the bags of exhaustion underneath his eyes, the unkemptness of his hair, and the stiff way he holds himself. There’s something enchanting about his eyes. A glint that he might be making up, but stands out. It feels purposeful.

He puts it down on her desk and returns to his set of questions. But when she returns, he has to say something. “You’re really good at drawing.”

She grips the edge of her chair. Her jaw clenches. “You saw it?”

“Sorry. You dropped it when you got up, but, um, it’s really good. My brother likes art. Are the art classes any good here?”

Olive looks at him, her face hard, but her eyes soft. “Not too bad. He’ll be alright. Tell him to hold onto it. He doesn’t have to do anything with it if he doesn’t want to, but it’s a good thing to have when everything else —” Her eyes widen. “Sorry. That’s a lot of information.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he says automatically. “What were you going to say?”

For a brief moment, she smiles. “It’s a good thing to have when everything else has gone to shit.”

The bell rings. His first day of senior year is over.

“Well.” Olive shoves the piece of paper into her backpack. “I’ll see you around, I guess.”

“Can I keep that, actually?”

“You want my bio homework?”

Jonathan’s mouth twitches into a smile. “The drawing of my face. But technically, yeah.”

She pulls the drawing out and slides it onto the desk. “See ya, man.”

That night, he puts the drawing up, by the developed pictures of his family, Nancy, and Steve, taped
in his room. It goes directly underneath the one of Steve drooling on a pillow.

“She sounds nice,” Nancy says on the phone. “I like that you have a friend.”

“What about you?” Jonathan asks. He absentmindedly twirls the cord around his arm.

“Robin invited me to sit with her band friends. It was nice, I guess? I liked not being alone. But — this is going to sound irrational.”

“Okay.”

“It’s going to sound stupid.”

“It won’t, but okay.”

“It will!”

“I won’t judge you. C’mon.”

“Okay, but I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“I have no impression, because you aren’t saying anything.” If she were here right now, he’d wrap his arms around her, press his lips against her forehead, and rest his chin on top of her head. But he can’t, so instead he says, “You can tell me anything.”

She sighs the sigh designated for whenever Jonathan’s right. “I feel like Robin hates me, because I’m the girl that broke Steve’s heart.”

“Wait, what? There’s a lot to unpack there.”

“So let’s throw the damn suitcase away.”

“Nancy,” he says softly, “both of you did things that weren’t fair. That fight wasn’t your fault, and you’re both great friends now. He’s great for you, and you’re great for him! You’re not a bad person. Steve doesn’t think that, not after everything. He’d never tell Robin that. And you know — okay, this is going to sound stupid.”

“Jonathan Byers,” Nancy says. “What happened to you can tell me anything?”

“I’m a coward, so next —”

“You can tell me anything. You’re not a coward. And I will drive up there myself if you don’t tell me.”

“So I won’t tell you. What? Nancy, I would sell an organ if that meant you could be here right now, so I’ll happily not tell you if that’s all it takes.”

“Dramatic,” Nancy laughs, a distant echo of Steve. She hums, her voice softening as she continues, “Would you really?”
“I only need one kidney anyway,” Jonathan says, one-hundred percent serious.

She laughs again. The sound makes him smile. “Tell me and I’ll drive out here by mid-October.”

His heart somersaults. “Really?”

“Really.”

“But your mom —”

“Knows she can’t control me.”

“Okay, fine.” He presses his back against the hallway’s wall and shuts his eyes. He needs to phrase this properly. “Steve’s totally still in love with you.”

“WHAT!?”

Jonathan winces. So maybe that wasn’t the most tactful way to go about it. “Steve’s totally —”

“I heard you the first time!” Nancy shrieks. “What’re you talking about!?”

“I mean, it’s kind of obvious? He looks at you whenever he makes a joke to see if you laugh —”

“He does the same thing to you!”

“He calls you beautiful and compliments you all the time.”

“Remember how he said that you don’t need a cigarette to be smokin’, Byers?”

“Nancy, it’s different for guys. He doesn’t mean any of that.” His voice comes out smaller than expected. He prays that Nancy doesn’t hear the edge of hurt in his voice that even he barely understands. “It’s fine if you don’t believe me. I’m not jealous or anything.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m secure in our relationship, but I’ll be honest. Sometimes ... sometimes I don’t see why you’d be with me and not him, sometimes, and I know, okay, I know you love me, and it has nothing to do with my trust for you, but more, like — Steve’s charming, and sweet, and funny, and beautiful. And he’s in Hawkins.” His heart’s thumping, his ears ringing. Having this conversation on the phone makes it easier. He couldn’t bear for Nancy to see his face.

“But you’re here,” Nancy says in a small voice.

“I’m in Illinois,” Jonathan says, confused.

“I’m pointing to my heart.”

Sometimes Nancy will do little things that pull Jonathan out of whatever’s going on, because he needs a second to calm down from how much he loves her. She’ll wrinkle her nose as she yawns, or lick the side of his jaw when he talks during a movie to provide commentary, or say things like that, things that are more her pointing out a fact than trying to comfort him. She’s just saying what’s on her mind. What’s true to her. What’s true, period.

“Nancy,” Jonathan manages, choked up.

“I’m in love with you,” Nancy says firmly. “And it’s okay if you feel that way, but I’m going to give
your insecurities a terrible time. I’m going to make it hard for you to believe that.”

“I’m sorry,” he hiccups. “You shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

“And you shouldn’t have to deal with a girlfriend that drags you into a bunch of shit that could get us killed, but we love who we love. It’s a feeling, sure, but it’s also a choice. You’re a choice.”

He holds the phone away from his face to catch his breath. He overflows with emotion, warm and tingly all over. Next time he hears the word choice, he’s just going to sob on the spot. If it’s his Chemistry teacher talking about their multiple choice quiz in two weeks, then she can deal with that.

After he’s sure he won’t cry, he presses the phone back to his ear. “I love you, and I love that you drag me into dangerous shit, and I choose all of it. Even that. Thank you.”


After the phone-call, he showers and heads back to his room to toss his clothes into his laundry bin. He spots the picture of Steve in his peripheral vision.

He should call.

He should say something.

Or, he could let Steve live his life, free from the tethers of his past.

That’s what Jonathan’s trying to do. It’s only fair.

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September drags.

The only highlights of his school day are his lunches with El and Will, and Photography class. He and Olive don’t speak. They smirk at each other when Frankfort says something corny, and she always gets up in class once, leaving her sheet close enough to Jonathan that can get a view of her latest doodle.

One day, in the middle of September and in the school’s cafeteria, Will says to Jonathan, “Y’know they think we’re twins?”

Jonathan picks his stale bread apart with his fingers. “Really?”

“I’m Jane Byers, remember?” El smiles as she says it, passing Jonathan her carrot sticks. “Don’t really mind, but they say we look the same.”

Jonathan bites into a carrot stick. “I could see it.”

“But her nose —”

“And Will’s eyes —”

“El’s smile —”
“Never-mind, you look nothing alike, and I clearly need glasses,” Jonathan teases. He breaks another carrot stick in half.

El taps his forehead. “You do.”

Will snorts. “You’d look so weird with —”

“Are you really eating with your siblings? You don’t have any friends?”

The look of pure joy on Will’s face falls. His shoulders hunch up to his ears and his legs clamp shut.

Jonathan’s never wanted to hurt a kid. But as two fourteen year-olds standing and sneering behind his brother, he’s starting to think he’s not above attacking children.

The second boy flicks Will’s ear. “It’s cause you freak the rest of the guys out. Everyone in fourth period P.E. is scared to be in the locker room with you, you fucking fairy.”

“Hey,” Jonathan says sternly. He refrains from glaring at the boys. “You two should go.”

The first boy scoffs. He’s tall for his age, but not taller than Jonathan, his face littered with acne and his teeth with braces. So young, and already so full of hate. It makes Jonathan pissed, but also unbearably sad. “I’m not scared of a fag.”

Will rushes to his feet. He swings around and shoves the boy backwards with a deep scowl on his face. “Don’t talk to him like that!”

“Will, don’t —” Jonathan tries saying, but Will pushes him again.

“That’s what queers do, right? Stick up for each other? That’s real nice,” the second boy says. “We stick up for each other too. If you push him, you push me.”

“If you want me to shove you, you can just ask!” Will fumes, raising his hands. “Is that it? Or do you want more?”


“Yeah, Will, don’t,” the first boy parrots, making his voice higher. “Even if you’re a pervert who —”

Jonathan’s seen El stop the Mind Flayer, remove it from her leg, and knows she’s saved Will before. Still. Her punching both kids in quick succession without making a sound is still jarring.

El doesn’t say a word. Blood stains her fists, but she’s not looking at it. She’s looking at Will. “Are you okay?”

Will doesn’t get to answer. The teacher storming up to them makes sure of that.

It’s complete bullshit.

They don’t let Jonathan into the principal’s office. They only tell him that his siblings were sent home. He gets to speak to Joyce in the office, but she tells him to finish his school day, which is
impossible.

He’s so out of it in Photography that Olive actually *speaks* to him.

“Hey. Frankfort told us to start planning our pictures for tomorrow,” Olive whispers. “That was five minutes ago.”

Jonathan looks around. Half of the class is talking, while the other other half does homework for a different class. “Sorry. I’m distracted.”

Olive bites her lip. She looks at his chin, not his eyes, but it’s an improvement from staring at the floor. “Your siblings got into a fight, right? My brother’s a freshman. Those dip-shits pick on him too.”

“Why?”

She rolls her eyes and touches her cheek. “They like to pronounce our last name incorrectly. Make jokes about his lunch smelling weird, since we’re Indian. The creativity is astounding.”


She shrugs, fiddling with her pencil. “My brother appreciated your sister hitting those kids. He’s been yapping on about your brother since school started, so I think he’s now obsessed with them both, which. I mean. Okay.”

“Really? He hasn’t talked to Will.”

“He’s shy. And before you say it, yes, it’s hereditary.”

Jonathan stifles a chuckle. “Wasn’t going to say it.”

“Sure you weren’t.” She lowers her pencil onto the table. “My brother doesn’t have a place to sit at lunch. If it’s cool ... if you don’t mind ...”

“I’ll save him a seat tomorrow,” Jonathan promises.

Olive meets his eyes. Her mouth hangs open for a brief second before she closes it. “Thanks.”

“I’ll save you a seat. If you want.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“What’s his name?”

“Because my mom thought she was doing something, my brother’s named Oliver.”

Jonathan chuckles this time. “That’s cute.”

“It’s gross,” she says, but she’s smiling.

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El and Will return to school tomorrow. Those two asshole kids don’t show up at their table.
A short brown boy with a buzz-cut walks up behind Will during lunch. He taps Will’s shoulder.

Will groans. “If you’re going to call me a queer, then you have to accept that my sister will kick the — oh. Oliver, right?”

Will’s blushing as Oliver smiles brightly. “Is it okay if I sit?” Oliver asks. He raises his tray.

“Are you going to call me names?” Will smiles tentatively, his voice softening as his hands unclench out of fists.

“Just Will,” Oliver says with a grin. He scratches the back of his neck. “If that’s okay.”

Will nods earnestly. He scoots over and pats the space next to him. “That’s fine. Guys, this is Oliver! You already know El, and this is my brother, Jonathan.”

Jonathan catches El’s eye. They grin.

“Nice to meet you, Oliver,” Jonathan says, shaking Oliver’s hand. “I know your sister.”

“Oh, I know! You’re her friend. She’s talked about you before. She thinks you’re really nice,” Oliver says brightly.

Jonathan lights up like a Christmas tree.

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“Why are you in my living room?”

Murray looks up from the newspaper in his hands to Jonathan, the kids racing by them and into the kitchen. “I’m helping make dinner tonight.”

Jonathan doesn’t move a muscle. “Why.”

“I’m making you dinner.”

“Why.”

“We had a fun time last year, didn’t we?” Murray lowers his legs off of the sofa. He cocks his head to the side to the empty space he’s left.

Jonathan reluctantly sits next to Murray. “We had a time, yes.”

Murray laughs and lightly slaps Jonathan’s back. “Your mother and I are friends. If she likes me, then I must be good.”

“You’re not bad,” he relents. Murray really isn’t. But Jonathan can’t outright say his guardedness towards Murray is because of —

“Daddy issues, right?”

Jonathan’s so thankful that the doorbell rings that he doesn’t even wonder who would possibly be at the door. “I’ve got it!”
He jogs to the front door. Swinging the door open, he says, “Hey, mom, I didn’t think you’d get off work so — Steve?”

It’s only been three weeks, but seeing Steve, real and solid and five inches away from him, steals Jonathan’s breath. Steve doesn’t respond. He’s doing what Jonathan’s doing; taking in the sight of the person in front of him.

Steve looks good. His hair’s messy, like he’s tugged it in every direction, his jeans are tight and cut off at his ankles, his skin’s bright and full of colour, and the bags underneath his eyes aren’t concerning.

But the fact that he’s here right now is.

“Can we go on a drive or somethin’?” Steve asks.

Jonathan fishes the keys out of his pockets without hesitation. “Sure thing.”

They’ve been driving aimlessly for three minutes when Jonathan says, “So. You’re in Illinois.”

Steve gazes out of the window like he doesn’t want to look at him. “Yup.”

“How come?” Jonathan struggles to keep his eyes on the road and not on Steve.

“Wanted to see your cute face, Byers.”

Jonathan blushes, suddenly thankful that Steve isn’t looking at him. “I could’ve sent you a picture.”

“Like you could’ve called me?”

It’s a miracle that Jonathan doesn’t crash the car. His heart thuds in his chest so loudly that it’s difficult to get the rest of his words out. “What’re you talking about?”

Steve slumps in the passenger seat, his legs bouncing. “You’ve called Nance every night. I get it, y’know, she’s your girlfriend, but —”

“How d’ya know I call her so much?”

It shocks Steve enough that Steve finally looks into Jonathan’s eyes. His pink lips part. “We’re talking,” he mumbles, immediately shifting his gaze to the road. “She visits me at the arcade. Drops Mike off, stays while he’s there to talk to me.”

“You got the job? Congrats!”

“You’d know if you called.”

“Steve ...”

“Dude, I — look, I’m sorry if me talking to Nance is weird and I’m even sorrier for showing up here unannounced, but I thought we were closer than that? We fought monsters together. Who else can you say that with?”
Jonathan grips the steering wheel. He refuses to cry again. “A friendship out of obligation isn’t one worth having.”

“Oblig — hey, dumbass, I drove three hours to see you! Unless —”

“Stop. Of course I don’t feel obligated.”

“Then what is it?”

“You deserve a life, y’know,” Jonathan says quietly. His voice cracks in a way he’s getting familiar to. He accepts it; if he cries, then fuck it, he cries. “I’m a reminder of what happened. You don’t need that.”

“Fuck you.”

Jonathan flinches. He cranes his head to look at Steve, his chin trembling and his eyes watering, and is baffled to see the expression mirrored back at him.

“You don’t decide what I need and don’t need.” Steve roughly wipes his cheeks. He rests his hand on the edge of Jonathan’s seat. “What if I — okay, I’m not gonna say I need you, because that’s a lot, but —”

“It’s okay,” Jonathan interrupts. His smile is uncontrollable. “You don’t need to say it. You drove three hours to see my cute face.”

Steve laughs wetly and flips him off. “It’s a nice face, Byers. Shut up.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, no, I was kidding.”

Jonathan smiles again. His back feels lighter, like a huge weight’s been lifted off of it. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed. If it means anything, I missed talking to you.” A lot, he doesn’t say. But he works to get this next part out, breathing in and out a few times before admitting, “Kept staring at that picture of you on my wall.”

Steve sits up. “What picture?”

“Remember when we were watching that garbage film —”

“Tarzan was not bad. Please get a heart.”

“Well, it was bad enough that you fell asleep on Nancy’s shoulder. Got a picture. Don’t ya remember? I showed you it after.”

“And you kept it?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Steve replies quickly. He leans into the seat, his shoulders sagging, and his legs stilling. “I’m sorry too. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve had a weird week. Lots of shitty dreams and so much fucking paranoia. I’m fine, I am, but I needed something familiar. Nance’s at a family
dinner right now, some new thing Mrs. Wheeler’s getting them into, like they all make it together. I’m sure Nance told you. And Robin’s got this like, band team activity, or whatever.”

Jonathan’s heart warms. “I’m something familiar?”

“No shit,” Steve says softly. His hand brushes against Jonathan’s thigh. “God, I’m a huge idiot; how’ve you been? How’s the move? How’s everyone?”

“Good,” Jonathan says, taking a turn and effectively doing a loop, circling back to his house.

Steve laughs. “C’mon. Give me more. Any friends?”

“One,” he admits. “Her name’s Olive. She’s in my Photography class and her brother’s friends with Will.”

“Cool. I’m glad you have a friend.”

“Me too. What about you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Steve,” Jonathan says, surprised by the desperation in his voice. “Really. Be honest with me.”

Steve’s hand on Jonathan’s seat inches closer. His fingers brush against Jonathan’s thigh and momentarily distracts Jonathan. “I promise you that I’m okay. I’ll tell you when I’m not.”

Jonathan exhales. “Good. Great. What about the arcade? How’s that going?”

“The arcade is... an arcade full of hyperactive kids, the shit-heads, Robin, and occasionally Nance. I’m having a blast. Working with Robin is great, too.”

Jonathan raises an eyebrow.

“Dude, we’re not dating.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Your face did!”

Jonathan tenses. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Steve answers.

“Do you still love her?”

The air in the car shifts. Jonathan sucks in a breath hard enough that it reaches his chest. He doesn’t need to say Nancy’s name; who else would he be talking about?

Jonathan would be scared that he ruined their friendship if it weren’t for the fact that Steve’s hand doesn’t move from his thigh.

“I don’t think I could stop,” Steve admits finally. “It’s part of me. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This doesn’t change anything between us. You know that, right?”

Steve’s eyes gleam. “Thank you.”
Jonathan shrugs as casually as possible. “You’re my friend,” he says, his voice more tender than the words warrant.

Steve doesn’t reply. But his lips curve into the faintest of smiles.

Jonathan drives them back to the house. He manages to convince Steve to stay for dinner. Steve asks the family a million questions and smiles that infectious smile of his, making Jonathan smile so much throughout the dinner that his cheeks hurt.

They finish dinner at eight. They shuffle away from the kitchen where everyone’s cleaning up and towards the front door.

Steve leans against the door. His face is flushed with laughter, his limbs looser than they were when he first got here. “I should go, man.”

Jonathan pointedly ignores how much he hates that idea. “Are you sure? You can stay the night, if you want.”

“Well tomorrow,” Steve says apologetically. “I had a nice time.”

Jonathan smiles tentatively. “Me too. Can I hug you?”

Steve laughs. “Yeah, man. Of course.” They meet in the middle, fitting perfectly in each other’s arms. Jonathan breathes him in and soaks in the feeling of Steve in his grasp, letting himself enjoy holding him and being held by him.

Steve sits his chin on Jonathan’s head. “You better call me.” His voice comes out slightly muffled, too serious to be a joke.

But Jonathan doesn’t make fun of him. There’s a static in the air, electric and pulsing between them, and he doesn’t want to do anything to ruin it. “Or else you’ll drive up to Illinois? I dunno, sounds good to me.”

It makes Steve chuckle like he wanted. Of course Jonathan’s not serious.

The next day, after his call with Nancy, he calls Steve.

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Nancy and Steve visit in the middle of October.

They don’t tell him in advance. He tears up when he sees them at his doorstep, stunned into silence. Nancy kisses his tears away and leaps into his arms. Steve thrusts a stack of movies into his hands, says Keith loves them and gave extra copies away at the arcade.

It’s a great day. He drives them around Illinois, takes them for ice cream where Nancy teases Steve by reciting all of his lines from his Scoops Ahoy job, and makes them dinner. El and Will keep to themselves. Jonathan figures they want him to have as much time with Nancy and Steve as possible.

“You’re a cook and a photographer?” Steve says through the mouthful of the most basic pasta recipe possible. “Nance, do you understand how lucky you are?”
“I do,” Nancy says genuinely. “Thank God I don’t have to learn how to cook.”

“You’re cleaning, then,” Jonathan says, rubbing his hand up and down over the leg she’d swung on his lap.

“Deal.” Nancy foots Steve’s thigh with her other leg. “You can do all the backyard stuff. Change the tires, fix the car, all that fun stuff.”

“That’s not as much as cleaning and cooking, though,” Steve points out. “I can split some of the cleaning with you?”

“Sure. We’ll take turns with the bathroom. And you can take out the trash?”

“I’ll forget, though.”

“I’ll remind you,” Jonathan chimes in.

They spend the next ten minutes, splitting hypothetical chores and discussing the kind of place they would live in over pasta. Jonathan only notices Joyce lingering at the end of the hallway and watching them with a smile when Nancy asks for seconds.

It’s not as hard to say goodbye when he knows he’ll see them in a month.

“I love you,” Jonathan says against the shell of Nancy’s ear. They hold each other, their bodies close enough that he can hear her breathing.

She winds her fingers through his hair. “I love you too.”

He and Steve automatically move in for a hug. There are no words. They just squeeze each other tightly for awhile.

“I’ll call,” Jonathan calls out as Nancy and Steve head back into Steve’s car.

“Good!” They shout back.

After they drive off and he shuts the door, he returns to the kitchen. His family’s eating the rest of his pasta. A small container of pasta sits at the end of the table. Jonathan peers at the note left on it in Joyce’s scrawl. MURRAY, JONATHAN MADE PASTA, AND IT’S EXCELLENT!

“I’m glad they surprised you,” Joyce says. She sits in between Will and El at the table.

Jonathan looks up from the note. “Me too.”

“I figured only Nancy would come,” Will says. “I’m glad Steve came too. You smile twice as much with both of them around.”

Jonathan ducks his head to hide his blush. He pulls the sit in between Joyce and El out. “I do?”


Joyce’s smiling knowingly at him.

“What?” he asks.

“I like you happy. You deserve it,” she says.
Will kicks him from underneath the table. He pointedly raises his eyebrows. Jonathan scoffs good-naturedly; of course he remembers their promise. Will’s talking more with El, helping her with homework, engaging her in his conversations with Oliver. Jonathan’s just been pushing the negative self-talk away. Tells himself first thing every morning and last thing every night that he did what he had to do, that he wouldn’t think of Nancy as a bad person, and that Will and Nancy and the kids are safe because of that. He can’t tell if it’s working. He is able to recite those lines like clockwork, though. That has to mean something.

And he’s smiling more. Has five minute conversations with Olive. Gets straight As. (Photography’s his best mark.) Takes Will and El for ice cream every Friday night. Makes dinner for Joyce and Murray with Will and El every Monday.

He’s doing okay.

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Frankfort’s showing off everyone’s assignments, praising assignment after assignment to his earnest, half-asleep fifth period class.

“Now this one was taken outside of school’s ground. I gave Harley permission to go to the hospital her aunt works at. Look at how she used the space, the ...”

It’s mid-October when Jonathan has his first panic attack since the Starcourt incident.

The picture isn’t graphic. It’s a scalpel held in a gloved hand. But it’s enough that Jonathan jumps out of his seat and runs past the door. Before the ringing in his ears gets too loud, he hears Olive say,

“Oh, can he go into the washroom?”

He runs into the boy’s washroom and into a stall. He feels like throwing up, but nothing rises in his throat. The floor feels like it’s shaking, like it’ll swallow him whole. He can’t hear anything, except for the sound of Tom’s body hitting the floor. He can’t hear anything, except for his own screams. He can’t see anything, except for Tom, dead.

He does what his mother suggested: 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique.

Five things you can see: the tiles, the toilet, the ceiling, the door lock, and the MR. HARRELSON SUX DICK written in pen on the door.

Four things you can touch: the stall, the toilet flush, the soap, and a paper towel.

Three things you can hear: his feet tapping against the floor, a math teacher yelling distantly, and his breathing.

Two things you can smell: chlorine and the sterile-smelling soap.

One thing you taste: the salt of his tears.

His chest isn’t as tight. The ground is steady again. But he still sits on the toilet with his hands braced
on his forehead, preparing to apologize to Frankfort and explain what happened in class.

Footsteps echo in the washroom. “Jonathan?”

He opens the stall door and gawks at the sight of Olive. “This is the boys’ washroom.”

“It is.”

“You’re here.”

“Yeah.” She’s hugging her chest and breathing shakily. “You just ran out of there. Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she says with a hard edge that takes him a moment to realize is worry.

“The picture of the hospital, it brought up bad memories. Is Frankfort mad?”

Olive shakes her head. “Just worried.”

“He asked you to get me?”

“Nope.”


“We’ve established this.”

“Sure,” he says. “Is it okay if we sit for awhile?”

“Sure.”

They sit outside, on the floor, for five minutes in complete silence. Olive nestles her head against Jonathan’s shoulder and doesn’t say a word. He’s thankful.

“We should go back,” Olive says.

He ignores the dread piling in his stomach and nods. Rising to his feet, he tells himself that Frankfort won’t care. Frankfort’s a pushover, and Jonathan has never spoken out or handed an assignment in late.

The class is working on something, probably the reflection for their recent assignment, when they return.

Olive gently nudges Jonathan towards Frankfort’s desk.


Frankfort looks at Jonathan and smiles. “Let’s talk in the hallway.” He leads Jonathan to an empty corner of the hallway. “What happened there, Jon?”

Jonathan grinds his teeth at the nickname. He crosses his arms and thinks of a lie, then gives up. “I don’t have good experiences with hospitals.”

He waits for Frankfort to tell him it’s not an excuse to run out of class, but all he says is, “That’s my fault. It won’t happen again. I promise.”
Jonathan can only manage a nod, too shocked to speak.

Frankfort smiles, but it doesn’t mask the pity in his eyes. “Anything else you want to talk about? It stays here.”

What the fuck, right?

“The hospital thing came from something bad that happened back home. Kind of why we moved here. I’m having a hard time adjusting. I thought I was okay, but I saw that, and … clearly, I’m not okay.”

Frankfort nods, pursing his lips. “Well, getting better isn’t linear. Having a bad day or a freak or does not negate the work you’ve done to get better. Better isn’t an endpoint, but something you keep working towards. There’s no finish line. And that sucks, but that also means there’s no time limit.”

Jonathan clenches his jaw to keep from crying. His throat isn’t working, so he nods again, his eyes conveying his silent plea for Frankfort to keep speaking.

Frankfort’s smile becomes less suffocating as he nods back. “You’re a good kid. I see you, and I see a kid who could be a photojournalist or run exhibits or be a forensic scientist or whatever else you would want. Whatever happened back in your hometown, that doesn’t change who you are. You still have your heart, and you still have your impressive brain. You’re more than your trauma. Sure, it’s a part of you, but it’s not all there is.”

“But you don’t know me. You’re just, just saying that —”

“You’re right,” Frankfort says. “I don’t know you well. But I see the kid who hands his work in with a bit of his heart, and who asks Olive how she’s doing and about her every doodle, and who walks his siblings to class. I see that kid, and I know he’s great.”

And that’s the thing that sets the tears off. Jonathan’s a blubering mess, but there’s a peaceful quiet in his mind that’s completely unfamiliar.

“Do you want me to leave, Jonathan?”

He shakes his head. They stand in the hallway until Jonathan stops crying. Frankfort hands him a tissue, waits for his eyes to stop being red and for the tears to stop, and then they walk back into class.

“Thank you,” Jonathan blurts out.

Frankfort settles back at his desk. “Anytime.”

Jonathan returns to his seat next to Olive.

“Here.” She slides a drawing across the table.

He carefully lifts it up towards his face. It’s of him laughing, his head tilted back and hands clasped together. She got the eye-crinkle down. His face is bright, alive in a way he’s never seen in mirrors or pictures.

“Thank you, Olive.”

Olive doesn’t even look at him. She bumps her foot against his and rests it there.

Jonathan holds the drawing to his chest, knowing that as soon as he gets home that afternoon, it goes
up on his wall.

Halloween comes by faster than he expects.

He doesn’t even realize Halloween’s approaching until Steve asks him over the phone, “Would it be weird if I invited Nance to a movie marathon with me and Robin?”

“They’re friends, aren’t they?” Jonathan says. El rushes by past him, laughing over her shoulder as Will chases her. Joyce will pretend to be annoyed by the ruckus, and El will say that they’re practicing for P.E.

“They are, but that’s not what I meant. I mean, like. For her and me. C’mon, you remember what happened at Halloween last year?”

Jonathan stiffens. “I do. But I don’t think it’d be weird. You’re friends. She values your friendship.”

“I know, but, dude, you remember what you asked me when I drove up to see you?”

“I do,” Jonathan says carefully. Somehow, talking about the feelings his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend still has for her isn’t as weird as his friendship with said ex-boyfriend. But then he decides that it’s weirder that none of this is weird at all. “Are you scared of that feeling not going away?”

“Yeah. I’m going to die alone, in love with my best friend’s girlfriend.”

Jonathan knows he’s an absolute dick, but he can’t help but light up at that comment. “I’m your best friend?”

“Not anymore. I just said I’m going to die alone and that’s your response?”

“I’m sorry,” Jonathan says sincerely, even though Steve’s tone was teasing. “I wish I could offer you more advice. But I think some things just take time. Someday you’ll wake up, and you won’t feel that way anymore, and you’ll fall in love with someone else without having realized it, and it’ll be as good as it was with her.”

Steve’s quiet for a long time. The only sound from his line is his breathing. Jonathan finds it immensely reassuring, content to listen to Steve inhale and exhale for a minute, the sounds of his life, of his big, beating heart.

“I’m happy she has you,” Steve finally says. “And I’m happy you have her.”

Jonathan asks Steve a bunch of questions about Halloween. They don’t talk about Steve’s feelings for Nancy again.

A week before Halloween, Frankfort tells them he’ll bump grades up by one percent at the end of the semester for whoever dresses up.

At the end of class, Olive nudges Jonathan. “You dressing up?”
He shrugs as he tucks his folder for Photography into his backpack. “I’m already getting a ninety-nine, I don’t think —”

“A ninety-nine?” Olive repeats, her jaw dropping. “That’s insane. You wanna go into photography?”

His cheeks heat up. “Yeah. NYU’s the dream, but that’s probably all it will be.” He yelps when she thwacks his arm with her hand, bewildered by the glare she’s sending him.

“Don’t say shit like that. Dreams are life if you don’t wake up.”

“Are you stoned?”

“I wish.” She puffs out a breath. “ Seriously. Don’t trash-talk yourself. The world’s already mean enough. We don’t need that added cruelty, especially not from ourselves.”

Jonathan considers her words, and how they hit him right in the chest and make a tightness in his muscles loosen up. “Thank you,” he says sincerely. “What about you? Pursuing art?”

“Art business. Under my mom’s conditions. But I’m lucky, and I know she’s taking a risk on me. This entire country’s a risk for her, so letting me do what I want, even if she’s still getting a say in it, is how I know she not only trusts me, but has faith in me. I’m grateful.”

It’s the most she’s ever spoken to him, and the most personal she’s ever gotten. “Sounds like you really love her,” he says, smiling.

“Yes,” she says in typical-Olive fashion. She slings her backpack over her back and pushes her chair into her desk. Completely baffling him, she adds, “Let me know if you want to match,” and walks out without letting him respond.

He grins on his way to El and Will’s lockers.

A few days later, Joyce and Murray take Will costume shopping. El wasn’t feeling well, said her stomach hurt and that she’d be okay with Will choosing. They were roughly the same size anyway.

Jonathan’s in the kitchen, music playing from his cassette player, and pencil between his fingers as he suffers through his Chemistry homework when he hears El scream.

“El? El!”

His pencil falls to the floor. He runs out of his chair so quickly that he almost falls, but he doesn’t look back and speeds down the hall. “El, where are you? What’s wrong!?”

“Something’s wrong,” she sobs. It’s coming from the washroom.

He twists the doorknob, but it’s locked. His fist bangs against the door. “El? What happened?”

“I’d been feeling sick all day, but I didn’t know ... I went to the washroom, and saw it. Jonathan, there’s so much blood. I can’t — if it’s happening again — I don’t have my powers.” She hiccups.

His heart breaks. Illinois was supposed to keep them safe from danger, was supposed to let them not have to be brave for once. “It’s not happening again,” he promises with more conviction than he
feels; he’s telling himself this as much as he’s telling her. “I’ll drive you to the hospital. It’ll be okay. I swear.” He firmly ignores the stab of panic at the mere thought of returning to the hospital. If it’s for El, then he’ll do it.

“Can I come in?” His forehead slumps against the door. “I can help.”

“No, you can’t see!”

“Why not?”

“It’s ... down there.”

And Jonathan officially feels like the world’s biggest idiot. “Do you know what a period is?”

“A what?”

“It’s normal for girls,” he says slowly.

“WHY?”

Good question.

Jonathan knows the bare minimum about periods. Joyce thought it was important that her boys both knew what a period was, what to do, how to help, and how not to be a dick about it, which is where Jonathan gets this explanation from. “Every girl gets one at around your age. It comes once a month, usually for a week. It’s your body’s way of saying, hey, you’re not pregnant! And for some women, it hurts. For some, it doesn’t. It’s different for everyone. It might seem weird and gross, having blood down there, and it’s probably really scary. But it won’t always feel like that. It’s normal. You shouldn’t feel bad about it, and anyone that makes you feel like that or acts like it’s gross is an asshole. Does that make sense?”

She doesn’t say anything for a few moments. He worries that he said all the wrong things, but eventually, he hears her soft, barely audible, “Yes. Thank you. It’s really weird though. For the rest of my life, I’m going to bleed for twelve weeks every year?”

“Not the rest of your life. If you choose to have kids, it stops when you’re pregnant.”

“So carrying and pushing a baby out of me for no period. Pain for no pain.”

He sighs empathetically. “Yeah. Oh, and it stops at some point! When you’re older. Like, fifty or sixty.”

“So Joyce’s stopped?”

Jonathan laughs. “How old do you think she is?”

El giggles over the sound of her own footsteps. The sound pries a smile out of Jonathan. “But won’t it ruin all of your underwear and clothes?”

“There are, like, ways to stop that from happening. My mom uses these things called pads? There are some underneath the cabinet. It’s in a purple box. Can you find it or do you want me to show you?”

“Hold on.” More footsteps, followed by the clattering of the cabinets opening. “It looks like a tissue? The pad?”

“Yup. Open it up and I think you put it on your underwear.”
He steps away from the washroom to give her some privacy. Leaning against the wall on the adjacent side of the washroom, he waits.

A minute later, she steps out, drying her hands on her pants. “I think I’m okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Now that I know I’m not dying.”

Jonathan grins. “Good. Chocolate’s supposed to help. You want some?”

Despite Jonathan’s protests that she should eat all of the chocolate herself, he splits a bag of M&Ms with El on their sofa much to El’s insistence. They pass the bag back and forth, waiting for Will, Joyce, and Murray to return home.

“One you miss them?” El asks abruptly. “Nancy and Steve.”

With my entire heart, he almost says, but decides that’s too melodramatic. “A lot. Do you miss Mike and your friends?”

She nods. “My only friends at school right now are Will and Oliver, and it’s nice, but Will lives with me, and Oliver only likes me ’cuz he likes Will. I ... I was really excited about going to school with everyone, and now I can’t even do that. Dad was super excited too. He said I’d like school and having something to do other than kiss Mike.” El laughs at the memory.

He waits for the other shoe to drop. For her to sob, shut down, run out. But she stays next to him, chewing on her M&Ms, her eyes, at most, misty.

“I miss him,” she says.

“I’m sorry. It’s a dumb thing to say, but I am.”

“It is dumb, but thank you.”

Jonathan bites back a laugh. “Tell me a story about him,” he prompts. She gives him a confused look, but obliges. Half an hour passes. El’s telling her a story about how Hopper got stuck in a hole in the ceiling, Jonathan’s laughing at all the right parts, and right as it ends, the door’s kicked open.

Will runs into the living room and jumps onto the sofa. “Are you ready to be the Luke to my Leia?”

El’s eyes widen in recognition. She grins as she clammers up to her knees, waving her hands in the air excitedly. “Star Wars! I got the reference!”

“You got the reference!”

Jonathan smiles at them as they geek out and buzz with joy over their Halloween costumes, something that every kid deserves to be excited about. He half-jogs towards the front door where Joyce is shoving a twenty dollar bill into Murray’s chest.

“This joker paid for the costumes when I was in the washroom!” Joyce exclaims to Jonathan. “Tell him to take the money.”

“Take the money?” He says to Murray who shakes his head.

“Joyce, it’s not a problem! Jonathan agrees with me.”
“I don’t.”

“Aha!” Joyce says triumphantly. She crosses her arms and smirks up at Murray. “I’ll get it back to you somehow. I’m a spy.”

“Think there’s a height requirement for that, don’t you?” Murray drawls.

Even Jonathan can’t stifle back his snort of laughter. He meets Murray’s eyes and they exchange a smile.

Joyce just rolls her eyes and turns to Jonathan. “How’d it go?”

“El, um. Well. Had her. You know.” It’s not that he’s embarrassed to say period. It’s that Murray’s right there, and it doesn’t seem like a thing to blurt out in front of him.

Joyce claps a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God! And you handled it, right? Gave her one of my pads?”

“Yup. You should talk to her, though, give her the biological — oof.” For a moment, he stands there, frozen as his mother flings her arms around his neck, crushing him into a hug.

She rubs his back. “You’re a good kid. I’ll come back and thank you for an hour after I talk to El, but you’re better than you know.” She lowers from her tiptoes to cup his face. Smiling at him again, she races into the living room.

Murray’s grinning at him. “She’s right, you know. I’ll see you Thursday night at dinner.”

Jonathan’s too dumbfounded to reply. He nods and locks the door after Murray leaves, hoping Murray didn’t notice his blush.

“And what’re you?”

“I’m a crime scene photographer,” Jonathan says at the door of his Photography classroom. He taps his beloved camera, the one Nancy and Steve gave him, hanging from his neck, then taps the drops of red scattered on his chin. Olive did something with makeup for him at lunch, finally taking him up on his offer to sit with him, his siblings, and her brother, Oliver. “That’s blood. Because I was at a crime scene.”

“He’s wearing all black, too,” Olive adds. She’s already seated at their desk in the middle row, dressed as Alison from The Breakfast Club.

Frankfort raises an eyebrow, his smile amused. “They typically wear white.”

The kid behind Jonathan, dressed as Superman with the cape and everything, makes an impatient noise.

“I work at night,” Jonathan says. “C’mon, you’re really going to have us grovel for one percent?”

Frankfort playfully rolls his eyes. He gestures for Jonathan to come inside. “Fair enough,” he says. The white border he’s attached around his torso and head bump against his the wall. He’s dressed up as a picture, which has so far made half the class groan, and the other half laugh.
Jonathan finds it brilliantly stupid.

Jonathan thanks Frankfort and shuffles hastily to get into his seat. He slings his backpack across his chair and angles himself towards Olive.

She bumps her fist against his. “Nice one.”

“We’re, uh, good for tonight, right?”

“Evil Dead, your house. Can’t wait.”

Later, as Olive and Oliver arrive at their house, the latter going trick or treating with Will and El, Joyce asks to take pictures.

It kind of physically pains Jonathan to watch his mom struggle with the camera. Just as he’s about to jog towards her and show her what to do, Olive rushes forward instead. She pokes Oliver’s cheek on her way to Joyce. “Like this. It’s okay,” she says before Joyce can make a self-deprecating comment about her skills with a camera. “My mom can’t do it either. I mean, Jonathan and I have to take a class to use this thing well.”

It’s surprising but also not to see how patient and kind she is with Joyce.

“You’re costume looks great, buddy,” Jonathan says to Oliver for the third time.

Oliver beams for the third time. “Han’s my favourite!”

“Ew, does that mean you’re the Han to El’s Leia?” Will asks.

El rolls her eyes as she plays with the two buns Murray had helped her into making earlier. He wanted to stay for photos, but he had a list-minute thing that he wouldn’t tell any of the kids about. When the kids asked Joyce, she zipped her lips, shrugged, and said, “I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“We both know that I’m not the Leia here,” El says.

“El.” Will elbows her.

“I don’t get it,” Oliver says.

“Good job at teaching my mom, Olive!” Jonathan says loudly to distract all three kids.

The five crowd back together, posing for a picture while Oliver and Will demand their older siblings smile.

“Why did mom pay for braces, then?” Oliver huffs, flicking Olive’s forehead.

“Mom gave birth to you,” Will says fiercely, “so you owe her a smile!”

Joyce cracks up laughing. A flash goes off. “I’m telling Murray you said that, Will. Olive, Jonathan, smile like that! Perfect.”

As he smiles for the rest of the pictures, sticky and hot from all the laughing and the people, he registers a weird warmth in his chest. Later, when he’s laying with Olive on the sofa, about to start Evil Dead, and she asks to see the pictures they took from earlier, he realizes what the feeling is. It’s happiness.
Thanksgiving comes by faster than he expected.

They stay with the Wheelers. Karen allows Jonathan to stay in Nancy’s room, saying that she trusts them.

On the first night, right after Karen says this, Nancy shuts the door behind him into her room. She tugs on Jonathan’s sleeve and says, “Big mistake of her,” right before kissing him.

Everyone’s still in the house, Will, Mike, and El in the basement, and Karen and Joyce in the kitchen, both groups loud enough that Jonathan and Nancy can hear it from Nancy’s room, so they don’t do anything beyond kissing. But Jonathan casually says he brought condoms, and Nancy casually says that there’ll be an hour in the night when no one’s home.

They cuddle on Nancy’s bed. He lays his head on her shoulder. With her arm around his neck, his around her waist, and her steady breathing, he’s lulled into a calmness he’s only known with her.

“I cannot believe you didn’t tell me about you coaching El through her first period on the phone,” Nancy says, mock-indignant.

He tips his chin up to nudge her nose with his. “It felt like an in person story! And seeing the look on your face when I told you was worth it.”

Nancy lightly flicks the top of his head, only to press a kiss to the spot immediately. “Don’t sweet-talk your way out of this.”

“Is it sweet-talking if you’re being genuine?”

“More sweet-talking. What’d I just say?”

He laughs. Abruptly, he rolls his head over so he can look into Nancy’s eyes. The blue in them steals his breath away. He momentarily forgets what he wanted to say. “Can I tell you something?”

Nancy’s smile fades. She nods and cups his jaw. “Always.”

He leans his forehead against hers, revelling in the tenderness of her touch. “There was a brief moment when I thought that it was back again. The Mind Flayer. I thought that it’d somehow found us, found El, in Illinois, and that it’d never really be over. Which, it probably won’t be, but I was really scared. For her, of course, but also that we could never really live. So her getting her period was a huge relief and I feel like a jackass, and honestly, really weird, for saying I’m glad she got it, but yeah.”

Nancy’s body shakes with laughter. “Not weird at all. I mean, I guess that’s solid proof that you get to live your life, which is true. I’m still sorry that happened. All of this shit always manages to creep into the small, mundane moments of our life, and it’s not fair, but most things aren’t,” she says bitterly. She gazes into Jonathan’s eyes, her face softening. “You, though, getting your fresh start, is. I’m happy you’re happy.”

He tilts his chin up to kiss her nose. “Are you happy, though?”

“I think so. Honestly, it’s been awhile, that I forgot what it felt like. After you left, I was ... numb? Numb from missing you, numb from seeing Mike miss El and Will, numb from what happened in
the hospital. But then I watched Winnie the Pooh with Holly two weeks after you left, and started bawling. I don’t even remember what happened, but Holly hugged me, and I felt all of it pour out of me. Like water breaking the dam or whatever. And I wasn’t okay, but it was better than not feeling any of it? And Robin’s been a big help. We matched for Halloween. She was Catwoman, I was Wonder Woman. I’d forgotten how fucking great a girl friend is. She’s great, y’know? Nancy opens her mouth to add something else, but quickly bites her lip. She looks away from his eyes to the pillow above his head.

“That’s great. I’m really happy you’re both close, and that you’re in a good place,” he says earnestly, right before he captures her lips into his in a chaste, brief kiss. He draws back and leans their foreheads together. “Whatever it is you’re thinking, you can tell me. We can tell each other anything, right?”

“Right.” She presses another kiss to his lips and sighs. “Well, it’s ... okay, it’s a lot, so you have to promise to listen to the entire thing and not interrupt me?”

“What if I have a question?”

“Raise your hand so you don’t forget it and I’ll answer after.”

“Can I write them down?”

Nancy narrows her eyes and gestures to the position they’re in: her leg snug between his, her fingers in his hair, his hand holding her face. “You really want to get up?”

“No,” he says, rubbing his thumb over her cheek. “Okay. Go ahead.”

She closes her eyes. Draws in a heavy breath. And out comes the words in a quick rush. “I’m happy, and you’re a big part of that, but Steve is, too. We’ve gotten really close as friends, as close as we were last year, and — Jonathan! How do you possibly have a question?”

He doesn’t lower his hand. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says quickly. Her eyes well with tears. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry that I can’t love properly, that I can’t be a good girlfriend to you.”

“Nancy, are you breaking up with me?” Jonathan stammers, dizzy and sick at the thought.

Her eyebrows knit together. “What? No! I thought you would.”

“Why?”

“Because, Jonathan, I — I still love Steve,” Nancy says quietly. Her chin trembles, tears spilling out of her eyes.

“Oh,” he says. Then, “Yeah, I know.”

“What?”

“I mean, I figured? I’m not mad! It’s okay! If you want to be with him, that’s fine —”

“I love you —”

“And I love you,” Jonathan says. He wipes the next tear rolling down her cheek with his index finger, grateful when she does the same for his stray tear. “Which means I want you to be happy.”
“Jesus, this is not a breakup, and I’m not finished? I had this whole speech planned with thoughtful metaphors and quotes, but my mind’s blanking, and I forgot that happens when I’m looking at your eyes, so I’m just going to ask you a question. I’m not accusing. You don’t have to answer.”

He nods. “Okay. What is it?”

Nancy touches the small of his back and pulls him closer. With her other hand, she presses her scar to his heart. “Are you in love with Steve?”

The question floods his mind with Steve’s bright smile. With him fondly calling Jonathan Byers. With him out of breath as he answers the phone because he didn’t want to miss Jonathan’s call. With him letting his hand rest on Jonathan’s thigh. With him calling Jonathan’s face cute as if he weren’t so cute that it was frustrating. With him driving to Illinois when he had work the next day because Jonathan hadn’t called him in three weeks.

It’s not his proudest moment: his girlfriend asking him if he’s in love with her ex-boyfriend serving as his lightbulb moment. But Nancy’s more than his girlfriend. Steve’s more than his girlfriend’s ex. And now that the lightbulb’s on, he can see everything.

“Oh,” he says, bright and bursting with the revelation. “Fuck. I’m totally, undeniably, and completely in love with him, aren’t I?”

Nancy kisses him then, passionate and warm and messy, and he grins as he kisses her back, for now stupidly giddy that she’s okay with him, that they’re okay, and that they both love the same charismatic and charming dork.

“I still like girls,” he says in between kisses. His mind buffers as Nancy’s hand trails past his hip. “I still ... you ...”

“I know. It’s okay to like both. I do,” Nancy says breathlessly. She’s trying to sound casual, but he can tell that she’s holding her breath.

“Oh. That’s cool.”

She laughs against his mouth.

“Stupid thing to say,” he amends, laughing with her. He carefully pries her fingers away from his chest to kiss her knuckle. “But thank you for trusting me. I’m really glad you told me and that you felt comfortable enough to.”

“Super appreciative for the support, but uh.” Nancy kisses him again, longer, deeper, and slower. “Steve?”

Warmth pools in his belly. It’s ridiculous what the sound of his name in her breathy voice does to him. “Steve,” he says unintelligibly. “He loves you, but I don’t know about me.”

“Hey.” Another kiss. “I know what he looks like when he’s in love. You gave me some of the signs yourself. Always looking at you to make sure you laugh at his jokes. Calls you beautiful. Plus, those three weeks you didn’t call drove him crazy. He had to drive here to see you! It was his idea to surprise you in October. And he let it slip that he likes how you smell.”

Jonathan laughs, his chest all light and fluttery. “I like how you smell.”

Nancy beams. “And you’re in love with me. I present a great case, don’t I?”
“You’re an aspiring lawyer. No doubt you’re getting into Columbia. You’re good at this stuff. Nancy, I —”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. And you have to know that if he doesn’t want you, then I couldn’t —”

Jonathan sits up, suddenly dizzy. “What’re you talking about?”

Nancy shifts up, onto her knees to join him. She squeezes his shoulder reassuringly. “We want him. He wants us. Ergo a relationship.”

“How would that work? We couldn’t go out together, no PDA if we wanted, no marriage, no —”

She grabs his hands and looks at him with an intensity that makes him unable to look away from her. If he wanted to. “We live in a stupid world with corrupt governments, and evil men that hurt children, and shitty dads, and — and bullshit. This world takes and takes. It took my best friend, took your brother, and took Hopper. It’s not taking this. I’m not letting it. I love you, and I love him, and if you two let yourselves, you could love each other.”

“Columbia will be lucky to have you,” Jonathan says both dumbly and dazedly.

“Jonathan.” She’s smiling.

He kisses her again. It’s their softest and longest kiss of the day. “Okay,” he exhales. Steve could perfectly fit here. Maybe behind Jonathan, with his arms looped around Jonathan’s waist, as he leans over his shoulder to kiss Nancy. The final puzzle piece. The puzzle isn’t complete, the final piece not slotted in yet, but he finally sees the image, so of course he says, “I’m in. There are stranger things than three people dating, right?”

Nancy’s laugh is his favourite sound. “This’ll be good. Trust me.”

“I do. Always will.”

“Always, huh? Sounds like a promise.”

“Well, I’m not asking for your hand in marriage, but I know that this is the real thing. Plus, you’re very likely going to rule the world in the distant future, and you could make this stupid world better. You already have.”

She loops her arm around his neck, giddy and relaxed and content. “I’ve done it all with you. I think if anyone can make the world a kinder, better place, it’s you. You’ve done the same to me.”

“You’re so sappy.”

“You started the sap-fest!”

He tickles her then, and they’re both bursting with laughter, squirming in her bed. They quickly tire. As they settle back onto the bed, Nancy mumbles into his neck that Illinois has turned his stamina into shit.

They don’t speak. They don’t have to. They hold each other, and that’s enough.
The rest of Thanksgiving is a blur.

He has no real feelings about returning to Hawkins. It’s all in the people. That same night, he reunites with the kids, all four of them, Max, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin, barrel right into him. He falls over, but it doesn’t hurt. Not one bit.

Steve lets himself into the Wheelers’ house. Jonathan spots him from the top of the stairs and speeds down the stairs to run into Steve’s arms.

Steve hugs him back immediately. When they draw apart, Jonathan focusses on the glint in Steve’s eyes as Steve says, “You look good, man.”

Jonathan grins, holding Steve by the shoulders. “You too. Like, really good.”

Steve’s cheeks heat up. He ducks his head. “I get it, I’m irresistible, but like, your girlfriend’s right there.”

Nancy hugs Jonathan from behind, tucking her chin into the crook of his neck. “Can’t get mad at Jonathan for having eyes.”

“Nance, did you ... wow. Wow.” Steve’s breathless, the light in his eyes brightening. “Well? You’re not gonna defend your honour, insist that I look like a toad or somethin’?”


And with the look on Steve’s face — well, he might kind of maybe understand what Nancy was saying about Steve being in love with him too.

It’s only a few weeks later that his family returns to Hawkins for Christmas. Joyce forces Murray to come with them, says he can stay at the motel on the outskirts of town.

Jonathan already gave Olive her gift. It was a reasonably affordable set of watercolour paint. Honestly, the only reason he could afford that and the rest of his gifts were because Joyce forced the kids to keep a set amount of the compensation earned from the fire. He’s considering getting a part-time job, even though Joyce insists they’ll be fine for the year. His grades are good enough for a scholarship, so he won’t have to worry about later next year, when money will inevitably get tight again for his family back in Illinois.

But that’s next year.

He also gave Olive a framed photo from Halloween. She thanked him and held the gifts to her chest.

In turn, she gifted him a picture Frankfort took of them on Halloween at school, and a painting of him. It’s of him smiling and holding his camera, the yellow of his sweater bright like the sun. The colours are warm and inviting, a world on its own. He thanked her profusely and tried not to cry.

They stay at the Wheelers’ again. The second they step inside after their long drive, there’s cheering and screaming and —
“Is that a banner?” Murray squints at the large banner held by all of the kids, Max at one end, and Lucas at the other.

It reads WELCOME HOME, BYERS FAMILY with El, Jonathan, Joyce, and Will in smaller letters, followed by ... and MURRAY in a messier scrawl. It’s red and green with a heart on the right corner and a tree on the left side.

Mike stands in the middle behind the banner. He carries Holly on his shoulders. “It took us a ridiculous amount of time. If you’re thinking that heart looks like a butt, it’s because it does.” He coughs and throws an irritated at look to Dustin on his left.

Dustin elbows Mike. “I told you I was sorry for getting the paint on my ass and my ass on the banner! Besides, isn’t it more meaningful that way?”

El drops her duffel bag onto the floor with a shocked laugh. “No,” she says, and runs into Dustin’s arms.

The banner falls to the floor as the kids gather around Will and E and hound them with enthusiastic questions and greetings.

Karen steps around the hoard of children to greet Karen and Murray. “You made it safely!”

And Jonathan’s watching this unfold, too overwhelmed to notice Nancy and Steve wrapping the banner around him.

He finally notices when he tries taking a step forward only to bump right into Nancy.

“Nancy!”

“Finally,” she says. Her hair’s shorter, back to its shoulder-length, and she’s wearing a green sweater with red polka dots on it. Her smile lights up her face. “This can be your ugly Christmas sweater.”

“Doesn’t beat the red glitter on your face, though. I love the commitment.” Jonathan’s able to worm his arm out of the tight hold of the banner and dust a speck of red glitter off of her face.

Nancy wrinkles her nose. It’s the cutest thing he’s ever seen. “Holly was making a craft earlier. It’s funny. You notice a lot of things, but you haven’t noticed Steve.”

“Wait, he’s here, where —” Jonathan fumbles backwards. He anticipates to fall since he’s already stumbling on the banner, but a strong set of hands steady his shoulders.

“Whoa, Byers,” a scratchy voice tickles his neck. “I know you’re excited to see us, but don’t hurt yourself. Relax.”

Jonathan grins. “Seems like you two should relax. Wrapping me up to keep me here in Hawkins? I see right through you.”

“Nah,” Nancy says. She yanks on the end of the banner in her hands to pull him closer. Their faces are inches apart. “You’re our gift, so it only makes sense.”

Jonathan laughs into their kiss. Smiling against Nancy’s mouth with Steve’s hands still on his shoulders, the kids and parents catching up and beaming at each other, feels right.
The next week flies by quickly.

His family agreed to exchange gifts when they return to Illinois on the third of January. He, Nancy, and Steve agreed for New Years Eve.

Christmas day with the Wheelers is warm and familiar. Karen got everyone Christmas sweaters. She asks Jonathan to take a million pictures before insisting Ted swap with him so they’ll have some with Jonathan, too. Jonathan lets Holly throw glitter on him and keeps the pictures that Nancy takes of Jonathan pretending to chase after her in revenge.

At six in the afternoon, Ted’s fast asleep, Karen breaks out the wine, and she, Joyce, and Murray occupy the living room, laughing so much it’s like they’re cackling.

El, Will, and Mike are in the basement. Now that El and Will are friends, the three have been inseparable since they got here.

Nancy wordlessly tugs on his hand and drags him up the stairs. They collapse on her bed. She lays her head on his chest and traces the snowman on his sweater. He cards his fingers through her hair and shifts so she can tuck her leg in between both of his.

“Your mom’s best friends with Murray,” she says drowsily into his neck.

“And you didn’t believe me.”

“I still kind of don’t. They seem happy.”

“They do,” he agrees. He feels fuzzy all over at the sound of more cackling from downstairs. “So do you.”

She nuzzles his cheek and sighs contently. “I can’t give you all the credit, but I can give you a lot of it.”

“I’m honoured.” He pauses. Hesitates to say this next thing, but figures that if they both confessed their love for the same guy together, that they can talk about it. “Lot of it goes to Steve too, right?”

Nancy smiles back. “Yeah. Speaking of ... I’m thinking New Years. We tell him.”

“A week from now New Years?”

“No, the one two years from now.”

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated right now,” he says, mostly joking. She kisses his jaw and mouths sorry on his skin. “Let’s do it.”

“We should have a plan.”

Jonathan smiles again. He bends down to rest his forehead against hers. “A plan?”

“Yes,” she deadpans. “So we don’t go in there like amateurs who don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Nancy, we are amateurs who don’t know what we’re doing.”

“Steve doesn’t have to know that!”
He laughs, but they end up spending the next ten minutes going over what they could say or do, before Jonathan brushes his lips against hers without really thinking about it, and they get too distracted by each other’s mouths to do anything else.

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In light of Jonathan and his family visiting, Karen decides to have a party for New Years. It really just consists of the Byers and Murray, the Wheelers, and the kids.

And Steve.

“It won’t be weird? Us doing this in your house, with our families downstairs?” Jonathan asks in a hushed whisper. They’re in the kitchen, pulling out paper plates and cups and setting them on the counter.

Nancy shrugs. She sets a stack of styrofoam cups by the sink and rests her hand on the small of Jonathan’s back. “I figured that in case anything goes wrong, it won’t be awkward for him to go downstairs and hangout with the kids. Not that I think that’ll happen, but in case. And it’s not like we’ll have sex. But if things go well, I mean, you leave in three days, and his parents won’t be back for four.”

Jonathan can’t help his stupid smirk. He leans forward until their noses touch. “Thought about sex with him a lot?”

“To clarify.” She grins, flashing her white teeth, and nips at her favourite spot on his neck, right underneath his pulse. “I thought about sex with me, him, and you a lot.”

The kids are in the basement. Karen, Joyce, and Murray went out to buy snacks. Ted had decided to spend the New Year with his sister, so he’s not even in the state.

So Jonathan kisses Nancy, helping her up onto the counter. Her legs wrap around his waist and she pulls him close that way, grinning at his startled moan.

She kisses him again, and it’s easy to lose himself in her, like he’s done thousands of times before. His hands trail from her face down to her back.

“Who’s fuckin’ ready for 1986 — holy shit, do you guys only ever make out in Nance’s kitchen?”

Jonathan smiles and presses another kiss to Nancy’s lips before swinging around. “And her bedroom.”

Steve cracks a smile. He must’ve hung his jacket by the door, since all he’s wearing is a baby blue sweater and jeans. Snowflakes decorate his hair. His cheeks have been bitten red from the wind. “Deja vu, anyone?”

Nancy leans back and knocks the stack of styrofoam cups over. “Now it’s deja vu.” A beat. “You two really let me make a mess for no reason other than a stupid comment?”

“We don’t let you do anything. You do your thing, and we, exasperated but also, like, fondly, join you in whatever idea’s brewing in your genius mind,” Jonathan says.
“Letting Nancy Wheeler do something,” Steve scoffs. He walks inside the kitchen and bends to pick up the cups. “You’re so funny, Nance.”

Nancy flushes and squats next to Steve to help gather the cups. “You’ve got snowflakes in your hair.” Before Steve can reply, she wipes his hair gently.

The red in Steve’s cheeks could still be from the cold, but Jonathan doubts it. “Thanks.”

Jonathan doesn’t even register that he’s got his camera until he’s snatched it from next to the microwave and the flash goes off.

Nancy and Steve look up at him.

“Really?” Nancy looks like she’s trying hard not to smile. She’s failing.

Steve flips his hair back. “At least let me comb my hair first,” he says. Jonathan thinks he’s joking.

He takes another picture. “You both look great.”

“You gotta take pictures of everything, huh?” Steve says, flustered.

“No,” Jonathan says, smiling so big his face hurts. “Just the good stuff.”

It feels like a second later that it’s five minutes to midnight and they’re sitting on Nancy’s bed. They’re not passing a Coke this time, but a juice-box. Jonathan doesn’t really get why. They brought a whole stack of juice boxes, but he likes brushing his hand with Steve’s when they pass it, so whatever.

“FIVE MINUTES!” Lucas yells from downstairs.

“I didn’t think he’d give us minute warnings, but it’s appreciated,” Nancy says. She taps her New Years hat strapped underneath her chin. “I cannot believe mom got Holly to ask me to wear this.”

“Looks cute,” Steve says casually. “Not as cute as my glasses, but still.”

Jonathan pokes the 6 in Steve’s 1986 glasses. “How practical is that?”

“Certainly more creative than your New Years sign,” Steve snorts.

Jonathan looks down at the piece of paper El taped to his shirt. He didn’t want to wear any of the New Years themed things Karen bought, so El wrote out IT’S 1986 in black marker. “You like simple things,” she’d said. “I hope you like this.” He was touched, and added extra tape so it wouldn’t fall off the front of his mustard sweater.

“It’s handmade,” Jonathan says. “And El made it!”

“Alright, never-mind, it’s adorable, and Nance and I both lose.”

“She’s so comfortable with you,” Nancy says. She foots Jonathan’s thigh and lets her leg rest there. “It’s nice. She deserves an older sibling like you.”
“She has one, already. You remember me telling you about Kali, right? El says she visits every six months at least, and that she loves her a lot. When she first told me about her, I felt kind of jealous, I guess, but then I realized she was telling me because she really wanted me to know. She trusts me. I feel really lucky.”

Nancy squeezes his hand.

Steve smiles. “You’re easy to trust. Something about your eyes.”

“My eyes?” Jonathan splutters.

Steve freezes. His mouth falls open and his eyes widen. “Um. You know. They’re like — Nance, help me out?”

Nancy grins. “Nope.”

“Okay, fine, you just have nice eyes. It’s stupid that you don’t have more pictures of yourself.”

Nancy nudges Steve. “I’m sure we helped with all the pictures we took of him. You better not delete them, Jonathan.”

“Wouldn’t plan on it,” he says honestly. “It’s stupid that I don’t have more pictures of the both of you.”

“You have a million,” Nancy says. It sounds accurate.

“Not enough.”

“I get it,” Steve says. “Nance, if you don’t want to be a lawyer anymore, you could be a model. I’m being serious! I know you’d hate it, but you could do it. Could do anything, really.”

Nancy’s cheeks heat up, but she fiercely responds with, “So could you. I’m just saying. Community college is a valid option. Pick up a class or something. I’m not saying you need an education to be great, you’re already great the way you are, and not that not going to college isn’t valid either, but this might help you figure out what you want to do. If you want.”

“There are lots of community colleges in New York,” Jonathan says without thinking. He kind of expects Nancy to give him a pointed look at his going off the script, but she softens.

Steve glows. “Whatcha implying?”

Jonathan shrugs, trying to look casual. “Nancy and I both want to go to New York for school. There’s room for you there with us.”

“Could be cramped, us three in a shitty apartment,” Steve says, squeezing the empty juice-box in his hands.

“We’ll make it work,” Nancy says. “Think about it. Robin could come too. It’d be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“Real nice,” Steve agrees. His smile is small, but it feels like everything.

“TWO MINUTES!” Lucas screams.

The moment ends as the three dissolve into nervous laughter.
Steve leans against Nancy’s pillows, waving the juice-box at them. “I’ll look away, if you want. Y’know, when you kiss.”

“You don’t have to,” Nancy says. “You’ve caught us kissing a bunch of times. ‘S not weird.”

“You, uh. Don’t want to kiss anyone?” Jonathan has completely forgotten the plan, but it looks like Nancy has too. He’s impressed by how composed and calm she is, even though he’s pretty sure her heart must be pounding the same way his is.

Steve licks his lips. “No one to kiss.”

“That’s not a no,” Nancy points out.

“Well, are you offering?”

“Sure,” she says. “If you want.”

Steve’s face whitens. “I was joking, Nance.”

“Okay,” she says, dubious. “But if you weren’t, then I’m not, either.”

Steve sits up, discarding the juice-box into the pile they’ve made in the corner of the room. He rubs his hands together. “And you’re okay with this, Byers?”

Jonathan can barely hear him over the pounding of his heart. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Steve still looks wary, nodding slowly.

“You don’t have to,” Nancy says. “If it’s weird or something. I was just — if you want. It’s New Years. It’s nice to celebrate the new year with some love, right?”

Steve’s eyes shine. Jonathan doubts that Steve realizes he’s shifting forward, his knees bumping against theirs, leaving little room between them. “Right.”

“ONE MINUTE!” Lucas bellows.

"WE CAN HEAR YOU JUST FINE!” Mike shouts at him.

“I’m not shouting for you, I’m shouting for those three! BUT NOW I’M SHOUTING FOR YOU!” Jonathan looks at Nancy, then at Steve. They laugh. “I guess, uh, we’ll kiss first, then you guys?”

Steve gulps. “Sure. Whatever works.”

“1986, huh.” Nancy’s fidgeting, her eyes darting back and forth between both boys.

“I have a good feeling. Lots of, um. New beginnings next year. I’m cautiously optimistic,” Jonathan says. “But even if shit hits the fan, can’t be too bad if we have each other.”

Nancy beams at him like it was the perfect thing to say. She gives his knee a comforting squeeze.

“We do have each other, don’t we?”

Steve smiles, finally relaxing and lowering his shoulders. “We do.”

He’s not sure how long they spend looking at each other, dazed and transfixed, but before he knows it, everyone downstairs starts counting down from ten.
His stomach flips. This is improv, but he knows where this is going, what Nancy’s doing, and what he’ll do soon.

“NINE!”

Nancy looks at him. “Hey, it’ll be fine.”

“EIGHT!”

“You okay, man?” Steve frowns, touching Jonathan’s arm like it’s an instinct, a natural thing to do.

“SEVEN!”

“I’m okay,” he assures them. “Really okay.”

“SIX!”

“There’s no place I’d rather be right now,” he adds.

“FIVE!”

Nancy smiles. The bed creeks as she leans in to Jonathan, her other hand on Steve’s thigh. “Me too.”

“FOUR!”

Steve lowers his flimsy, paper glasses and drops them by his feet. “Me three, I guess.”

“THREE!”

Nancy effortlessly and smoothly rips her hat off. She flings it across the room. “Ready?”

“TWO!”

Jonathan nods. He holds Nancy’s face with his scarred palm, calmed by the way she strokes the side of his cheek. “Ready.”

“ONE!”

“Happy New Year,” Steve says softly, in contrast to the cheers and screams from downstairs.

Jonathan and Nancy catch each other’s mouths in a kiss. It’s slow and earnest, the simplicity of a mouth against a mouth, of two people feeling things together.

She taps her finger against his neck. Understanding what she means, he pulls away, but doesn’t let go of her hand.

She doesn’t speak. Just looks at Steve, a single eyebrow raised.

Steve nods. They lean in at the same time. “Happy New Years, Steve,” she says right before pressing her mouth against his.

It’s a chaste kiss. Two people going through the motions of what was once muscle-memory for them, easing back into familiarity and into each other.

She cups the back of his head, smiling against his lips. Steve’s eyes are screwed shut, like he wants to capture this feeling and store it away so he can have it forever.
There’s no pull of jealousy. Just fondness, light in his chest.

Steve pulls away. He’s breathing heavily, looking dazed at Nancy. “Happy New Years, Nance.”

Nancy draws back. She’s probably looking at Jonathan, he can’t say for sure, not since his eyes are trained on Steve’s. Jonathan’s slowly leaning in as he braces one hand on the bed, behind Steve.

“Byers, what’re you ... what?” Steve’s breathless. His mouth is redder than it was before. He’s not moving away, but he isn’t moving in either.

Jonathan stops until their faces are an inch apart. He looks at Steve, from his lips, to his eyelashes, and finally, to his eyes. “I won’t move any closer,” he murmurs. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to. And you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, either. I can lean back and we can go back to celebrating New Years. Or I can lean in. Whatever you want, Steve.”

Steve’s eyebrows furrow. His gaze flicks to Nancy and lingers for a moment before understanding smooths his features.

The moment’s suspended in time. Nancy’s touching Jonathan’s back and reaches out to touch Steve’s knee. Steve’s breathing evens out. He looks into Jonathan’s eyes; if he looks any longer, he’ll be able to see everything Jonathan’s willing to give him.

There’s celebrating and laughter from downstairs, but none of it reaches up here. Right now, it’s just them. But it’s always kind of been like that.

“Steve,” Nancy says gently.

“Fuck,” Steve whispers, framing Jonathan’s face with both hands. “I want you. I want — I want the both of you, that’s all I’ve ever —” And Steve cuts himself off, kissing Jonathan with the same urgency burning in Jonathan too. The kiss is clumsy, earnest, and passionate. It’s better than he could have anticipated. The eagerness fades into a tenderness, with Steve holding Jonathan and Jonathan stroking the back of Steve’s head.

Nancy makes a low noise behind him. That’s when Jonathan decides to pull back. He steals a glance of Nancy, of her bright, red cheeks and enchanted half-smile, then presses his forehead against Steve’s.

Fireworks go off in the distance. A stream of gold and white must be soaring in the sky. It’s surely beautiful, but the brightest lights are already here, in Nancy’s bedroom, one behind Jonathan, and one in front of him.

He grips Nancy’s hand. Brushes his lips against Steve’s. And says, “Happy New Years.”

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: Frankfort is 100% inspired by my eighth grade teacher who changed my life and gave me a similar conversation the one Jonathan gets in this chapter. and Olive’s not inspired by anyone I know, but like. i love her.

expect chapter three in a week, hopefully!

i ... have too many feelings about this chapter, but exhaustion (the good kind!) from my
trip is blanking my mind. i'd love to know what you think! comments are greatly appreciated.

thank you for reading. hope that you're doing well and if you're not, then that you will be soon. :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone downstairs is still screaming variations of *Happy New Years* and *Whoo, 1986* downstairs. None of that registers in Jonathan’s mind as Steve stares back at him, their faces an inch apart. Jonathan’s eyes slip down to Steve’s lips, now a little red, softer than what he expected, but also *nothing* like he expected, too.

Jonathan wants to kiss him again, wants to see Nancy kiss him again, wants a lot of things with them, honestly, but Steve looks — he looks as confused as he did back in the old Byers’ house when he came to apologize to Jonathan.

“So,” Steve says slowly. His throat bobs as he licks his lips. “You.”

“Me,” Jonathan says.

“You.” Steve cants his head at Nancy. His eyes slip to her smudged lip gloss.

Nancy nods, fiddling with the ballet slipper charm on her necklace. “Me.”

Steve sweeps his thumb over his bottom lip. “And me?”

”Um.” Jonathan scoots back so that he faces both of them. He winces as Nancy’s bed creaks underneath him. “Yes?”

Steve nods rapidly. He rubs his hands together and makes intense eye contact with Nancy’s duvet. “Good to know.”

“Is that all you want to know?” Nancy asks carefully. She picks at a loose thread of her sweater. Swallows. Tips her chin up. Meets Steve’s eyes. Her gaze is unwavering.

Steve’s shoulder lower from where they’d been hunched up to his ears. “Nance …” His body visibly eases, tension pouring out of him from his cherished nickname, just like that.

And suddenly, Jonathan’s sent back to his sophomore year, watching Nancy and Steve from a distance. They were easy. They fit. They matched. They worked. He’d thought so after their break-up, that while things fell apart, their connection didn’t. Over a year later, and that hasn’t changed.

But the gnawing jealousy in his chest has. It’s different now. They’re all different. And on bad days, he hates it. Hates that they could never just be stupid teens sometimes, hates that he’ll never get to know the people they all could’ve been if it weren’t for monsters and evil, corrupted men. But on good days, he loves it, because he wouldn’t trade the people they’ve grown into for anything.

He’s watching them, and it’s absolutely nothing like it used to be, because he’s not doing it from afar. He’s right here with his knee dug into Steve’s thigh, his fingers skating over Nancy’s scar. He’s right here, in Hawkins, because they’re the only people that could ever get him back to this town. He’s right here.

Thank God he’s not fifteen anymore.

“I can tell you what I want to know,” Nancy says after a prolonged silence.
“At this point, I find it hard to believe that there’s anything you don’t know.” Steve cracks a smile.

She beams and leans towards Steve. Steve freezes, mouth falling open, but she only taps his forehead with her index finger. “What’s going on up there?”

“Um,” Steve says. “A lot of ums.”

“How about emotions?” Jonathan tries. It’s not fair to sit in silence as Nancy steers the conversation. “What do you feel right now?”

“I know I shouldn’t say horny, but —”

Jonathan and Nancy sputter out shocked, muffled laughs.

“You can say whatever you want with us.” Jonathan can’t meet Steve’s eyes like Nancy, but he can nudge Steve’s foot with his own. “Always.”

Steve scratches the back of his neck. “I don’t know what you want from me,” he admits, his pretty eyes sad.

Nancy cups Steve’s face. She presses their foreheads together, her voice tender as she says, “God, you’re a moron.”

Steve’s breath catches. “You kissed this moron.”

“I did.”

“Would you want to, uh, do it again?”

“Yup.”

“And Jonathan’s cool with it?”

“Would be awkward if he wasn’t since he also wants to do it again.” Jonathan’s fought with and for these people. Now, he’s officially kissed both of them. So it’s stupid that their combined set of eyes on him make him lose his train of thought, that his mouth hangs open uselessly as he struggles to remain coherent. “Is the third person thing working?”

Nancy: “Not in the slightest.”

Steve: “Try it again, I’m not sure.”

Jonathan relaxes. “He’s starting to think Nancy’s right.”

Nancy smiles lazily. She hooks her foot around Jonathan’s back. “She always is. But just to make sure, I mean, Steve, you said —”

“I’ve never stopped loving you.” Steve’s earnestness bleeds in his words. He laces his fingers with Nancy’s other hand, chest heaving out a heavy breath. “Look, you don’t have to say it back, and we don’t — we don’t have to talk about Halloween, yet, okay, we will, but now I just — you need to know that. ‘Cuz I know you know everything, but I need to make sure you know that.”

Jonathan searches. He digs down deep, sorts through the mess of feelings tangled in his chest, but he can’t find jealousy or bitterness or hurt. It just — it feels good, it feels right as Nancy nods urgently, wetly smiling at Steve. Feels like love; theirs and his.
“You don’t have to say it back.” Steve closes his eyes. “You don’t, okay, I’m not going to be a dick about it.”

“You know a lot of things too,” she murmurs. She curls her hand across the nape of his neck. “You should know that deep my feelings for you go. And that Jonathan has a raging crush on you.”

“Nancy!” Jonathan half-heartedly hisses. His face burns up as Steve whips his head around to send him a grin, expression a mix of amusement and shock, which is stupid, because —

“As if you didn’t have your tongue down his throat five minutes ago.” Nancy strokes her thumb over Jonathan’s knuckle. “Hey, he likes you too.”

Steve scoots back until his back presses against Jonathan’s chest. “I do.”

Jonathan firmly ignores the pounding in his chest. He hooks his chin over Steve’s shoulder, slides his other hand around Steve’s waist. “So that’s a thing. The three of us could be another thing.”

“So like —” Steve cranes his head. His breath stutters, but he doesn’t look away from Jonathan. “Exactly like the set-up we have, except I could just. Lean over. Put my mouth on yours.”

“If you want,” Jonathan says hastily. Steve’s lewdly licking his lips, and Nancy’s grinning at Jonathan from over Steve’s shoulder, and it’s all — a lot.

“Oh, I want.”

Nancy noses along Steve’s jaw. “Patience.”

“And there are like, a million people downstairs. We’re not doing anything here,” Jonathan says.

“But I mean. You guys would want to. With me.”

Nancy tucks her face into Steve’s shoulder. “Yes. We want to do a lot of things with you, to you, but number one on that list is to be with you.”

“There really is a list,” Jonathan whispers. “It’s ten pages long, and half of the items are TOUCH STEVE’S HAIR.”

Nancy fondly rolls her eyes. “There isn’t.” She sinks her fingers into Steve’s hair anyway. “Steve, you don’t have to tell us anything right now, or ever, if that’s what you want. But,” she looks at Jonathan, managing a smile, “you know where we are.”

Jonathan smiles back at Nancy encouragingly. “We’ll be here either way.”

Steve doesn’t speak for awhile. He hangs his head low, back curved into Jonathan’s chest, fingers tracing shapes on Nancy’s ankle. Silence is fine. Unfamiliar between them, but comfortable, easy. Steve hasn’t run out. Nancy hasn’t let go of Jonathan’s hand. Those are good things to hold onto.

“I, uh.” Steve’s voice cracks. Jonathan sits up, blinks back into focus. “I’m terrified in a really good way. Like, when something really great happens, and it feels like a dream, and you don’t want to ruin it, you know? ’Cuz you two are like that. You’re two of my best friends, and you get me. You see me, and you don’t see some dip-shit airhead, which would be fair, since I’ve been that asshole with the both of you. But you forgave me, and you gave me something even better than forgiveness. Your friendships. This thing. And I don’t know where we’re going, and I don’t know what this will look like, but I wanna find out. There’s no one else I’d rather fight monsters with, but there’s also no one else I’d rather take a three hour road-trip with or spend all night talking to on the phone with or
... spend the first ten minutes of the New Year talking about fuckin’ feelings with. So I’m game. I’m here. And sure as fuck not going anywhere either. Let’s do this. Figure it out together, right?”

“Right.” Nancy glows, both from sweat and this. It’s infectious. Steve smiles into the kiss she spurs on him, his hands raising to cup the back of her neck. They’re all so close. Steve’s hair tickles his face. Nancy’s nose smushes against his as she surges forward to kiss Jonathan. They back up, into him, someone’s hand on his knee, another squeezing his thigh.

It’s all so overwhelming that he scoots backwards. He touches Nancy’s lipgloss on his mouth, dazed. “Sorry. That was. Good. Just. A lot right now. Give me a second?”

“Don’t be sorry,” Nancy insists. “We’ll take it slow. Or fast. Whatever we want it to be, right?”

Steve’s grin is slow and soft around the edges. “Whatever we want, huh? Yeah. Yeah, that’s good.”

Jonathan cautiously tilts his head forward to tuck his chin back onto Steve’s shoulder. A sigh escapes him when Steve relaxes and leans into him. “It’s great.”

Nancy swings a leg past Steve’s hip. She hooks it behind Jonathan’s back and rests her cheek against Steve’s chest. “I like us like this.”

Jonathan’s fingers brush against her ankle. “Like what?”

“You’re going to call me cheesy.”

“I will,” he promises, biting back a grin.

“Cheesy Nancy is one of my favourites.” Steve frames Nancy’s face with his hands, thumb smoothing down her cheek. “Along with Gun Nancy and Drunk Nancy.”

Nancy makes a face. “Even after, y’know, the last time I got drunk?”

“Outlier,” he dismisses. “Wasn’t Drunk Nancy’s fault. Wait, are we having this conversation now? Are we going to —”

“No. We should do this, just us two. It can wait.”

Jonathan freezes. “Should I leave?”

“No,” they say.

“Are you sure? ‘Cuz I can just —”

“Oh my God.” It happens so quickly that it takes Jonathan a second to realize that Steve has whirled around and crawled on top of him. He sprawls himself across Jonathan’s chest, hiding his face in his neck.

“Comfy,” Steve murmurs. “And I kind of of can’t believe I did that. But I mean. You should totally stay. Not that I — not that I care.”

Nancy snorts. She pokes the side of Steve’s stomach, making him squirm and shriek out a laugh, and burrows herself in Jonathan’s other side. “You do care. You care so much you drove out to Illinois to see him when he didn’t call.”

Steve flushes. He slings his arm across Nancy’s waist. “I’m trying to be cool,” he jokes. The softness in his voice makes it fall flat.
As for Jonathan, well. it’s kind of a miracle his heart doesn’t burst out of his chest right there, so overcome with fondness that he simultaneously feels like he’s floating and grounded by the two of them. “Don’t be. I like Not Cool Steve Harrington.”

“Dorky Steve Harrington,” Nancy adds. Her voice is muffled by Jonathan’s shirt. “He’s our favourite.”

“Along with Cheesy Nancy,” Jonathan says, half to save Steve, whose blush has deepened significantly, and half because he really wants to hear what Nancy was going to say. “C’mon, it’s 1986, new year, new ... new thing right here. I promise I won’t call you cheesy. Er, I won’t do it again.”

Her mouth isn’t smiling, but her eyes are. “I was going to say that I like us like this. Together. We’ve wasted so much time, y’know, thinking it had to be one or the other, that you two had to hate each other, that I couldn’t love you both, but that’s bullshit.” She and Steve exchange a knowing, significant look. “The three of us. Just feels right to say, doesn’t it?”

There are things they should talk about, probably. Discuss what being together would mean, what their lives after Jonathan and Nancy would graduate could look like, how they’re going to make it work with Jonathan in Illinois, them here.

But they’ll get there. They’ve been getting there for awhile now, ever since that night in his old house. What’s between them won’t change if this conversation is pushed a day forward.

“It does,” Steve agrees. He smiles warmly at Nancy, brushes his mouth against the underside of Jonathan’s jaw.

Jonathan kisses the top of Nancy’s head. He pulls them closer, holding them tighter. His stomach flips excitingly at what they already are and what they could be.

The final puzzle piece in place.

In seven minutes, Mike will barge in with the rest of the kids trailing behind him, all armed with streamers of confetti, cheering about the new year. The teens will roll of their bed and stumble to their feet. Steve’ll groan, tell Dustin, who’s piggybacking Lucas, that he’d never do this to Robin. Nancy will half-heartedly tell Mike to fuck off then laugh and fling pieces of confetti back at him. Max will team up with Nancy.

El will fling her arms around Jonathan’s back. “I don’t know what’s so important about a new year other than getting a new calendar, but. Happy New Year!”

Jonathan will laugh and turn around to find Will, sweating and smiling, by El’s side. “I guess it’s the meaning we give it. A new year can mean a new start and all of that.”

Will will make a face. “We did all of that already.”

“Then for us it can just mean a new calendar. I’m thinking the one with puppies.”

“What about the Star Wars one? I saw it in the grocery store last week,” El will suggest. This’ll lead to her and Will pretending that their streamers are light sabers.

They’ll shriek and laugh, along with the kids and Nancy and Steve in the room, and the parents from downstairs. Jonathan will be struck with the same thought he had seven minutes ago: there isn’t a better way to rein in the new year.
Leaving Hawkins is easier this time.

“Call me when you can,” Nancy tells Jonathan as she hugs him goodbye. The kids and parents say their goodbyes around them by the Wheeler’s front door. The weight of the distance is much easier now than it was in early September. Less tears and more smiles, concrete plans set up for the next visit.

In a hushed whisper, she adds, “We’ll come see you for Valentine’s.”

“I’ll come here.”

“Nope. Let us come to you.”

He doesn’t bother arguing now. He’ll save it for their next phone call. Instead, he kisses her forehead and relishes in her soft sigh. “Can’t believe there’s only six months left.”

“Six months. We can do this.”

“Six months,” he repeats, giddy with it. They rock back and forth in each other’s arms. He focuses on how her hands grip his back like she doesn’t want to let go, ignoring how badly he doesn’t want to, either. When they pull apart, he kisses her knuckle.

And then grabs Steve on his left and yanks him into a hug. He tries not to blush too much, to keep his face neutral. It doesn’t work. His adoration must be all over his face as he inhales the scent of Steve’s stupid hairspray and runs his fingers through Steve’s hair. No one’s watching them, so he can. No one except Nancy, whose small smile only encourages him.

“We’ll miss you.” Steve squeezes him so tightly that Jonathan’s momentarily lifted from the floor. “Heads up. I’m going to get extra annoying on our phone calls.”

“You can get worse?” Jonathan smiles into Steve’s neck.

Steve laughs and holds him tighter. “You love it.”

Jonathan takes another whiff of Steve’s hairspray. At this point, it’s etched into the back of his mind; he’ll never forget it. He never wants to. “I do.”

They pull back. Steve smooths the back of Jonathan’s hair. “I’ll be thinking about you, Jonathan.”

Jonathan’s eyes crinkle with an automatic smile. “I’ll be thinking about you too, Steve.” It’s hard not to close the space and kiss him. But he’ll have the chance to soon enough, he reminds himself excitedly.

Maybe it’s easier because of the warmth in his chest that he’s starting to get used to. He’s always been hopeful, but this is more than that. It’s solid. Defined. Real.

They’ve survived multiple near-death experiences. It’d take a lot to end this, especially before it even begins.
So they say goodbye. On the car ride, Murray driving, Jonathan looks through his camera roll and finds a picture from a few days ago, when they arrived in Hawkins. Jonathan’s wrapped up in the banner. Nancy grips one end of the banner as Steve dusts Jonathan’s shoulder. They’re all grinning, Jonathan at Nancy, Nancy at Steve, Steve at Jonathan. The joy in the single shot is palpable.

Will must’ve taken it.

A few days later, after Jonathan developed the picture at school, he tapes the photo in his room. The photo quickly develops worn out creases from how often he takes it down to hold it.

Weirdly, for Jonathan’s senior year, his exams are the calmest he’s ever been. He credits it to not working, not living in Hawkins, and knowing that a bad grade won’t be the end of him.

Will’s a ball of stress. El’s almost as calm as Jonathan, though she freaks out when they go into exam specifics.

“I can’t leave? Even if I finish early?” She asks over breakfast. She thanks Jonathan for the stack of pancakes he slides in front of her.

Jonathan shakes his head. He drops into the seat across from Will. “Not until the hour and a half are up.”

Will makes a face as he pours syrup onto Jonathan’s stack of pancakes. “Why?”

“Less distractions without people getting up, I guess.” Jonathan begins to cut his pancakes into pieces. “And they hate us.”

Joyce squawks indignantly from the sink. She turns around and marches to Jonathan’s right, her cup of coffee sloshing in her hand. “They don’t _hate_ you. They just like seeing you suffer.”

“Like you?” Will says.

El snorts out a laugh. At Joyce’s gasp, El ducks her head and bites her lip to keep her smile from spreading.

Jonathan flicks his gaze slowly between Will and Joyce. “Am I missing something?”

“Mom totally embarrassed me in front of Oliver when he came over to study yesterday!” Will bursts out. “She was all, _Will always talks about you, Will loooooves you!”_”

“You do always talk about him,” Jonathan points out.

El elbows Will. “You do love him.”

“Not you guys too!” Will points his fork at Jonathan. “At least I don’t kiss Nancy _all the time!”_”

“I don’t kiss her all the time,” Jonathan argues through a mouthful of maple-syrup and pancake.

“I saw you guys in the kitchen on Christmas Eve,” El says.
“I heard you guys in the kitchen on New Years Eve,” Will continues. “And I could hear you giggling with Steve that night too.”

Jonathan lightly kicks Will from underneath the table. “I can’t giggle now?”

“No, you can’t,” Will deadpans. “And with Steve, you —”

“I don’t talk to Mike and Max on the phone for hours,” Jonathan blurts out.

El’s fork clatters to her plate. “Not for hours! Jonathan!”

Jonathan doesn’t bother stifling his grin. He reaches over to ruffle her hair, careful to avoid her headband. “What? This is how families act with each other.”

El glows as soon as he says families. She swats his hand away.

“It’s how they show their love.” Joyce smiles as she bends down to steal a sip of Will’s orange juice. “You three are ridiculous. But I do not enjoy seeing you suffer! I like seeing you happy. And you all seem to be very happy right now. Right?”

Will licks the maple syrup from the corner of his mouth. “Right.”

El nods. Her face lights up Joyce leans over to tuck a strand of hair behind El’s ear. “Right.”

“Jonathan?” Joyce claps his back, then mindlessly rests her hand on his shoulder.

Jonathan takes in the sight of his family, smiling at him, stacks of pancakes, a bottle of maple syrup, and half-full cups of orange juice between them. He melts into his mother’s touch and under his siblings’ eyes. “Right.”

First semester exams take up the last week of January. Friday is for fifth period exams. Jonathan’s fifth period is Photography; since that doesn’t have an exam, he’s at home while Will and El take their English exam.

He crashed late last night, talking to Steve. He talked about his exams and listened to Steve talk about how Nancy’s doing with hers, and how she and Robin will only talk to him if he brings them coffee.

“They’re stressed out, which I don’t get. They’re geniuses. You’re a genius and you’re not stressed out!”

“It’s like, well, I’m not being attacked, so it’s whatever. As a general rule I refuse to get stressed if my life isn’t in danger.”

Steve laughed on the phone. “See? You really are a genius.”

“Stop,” Jonathan said without any sincerity. He tried to keep quiet since everyone in the house was asleep. “You’re only saying that because you’re my —”

“Your what?” Jonathan could hear the stupid smile in Steve’s voice.
“My, uh. You know.”

“I don’t.”

“My shit-head,” Jonathan finally said. “You’re my shit-head.”

Steve laughed again, the sound crackling over the line. “Okay. You’re my shit-head too, then. I’ll try calling Nance a shit-head and let you know what she says.”

“I like that you said try. You could never call Nancy a shit-head. You call her angel, love, honey-bun, and I’m still not sure if it’s ironic or not.”

“I can call you those names if you want. Angel, how was your day?”

Jonathan faked a groan. “Stop.”

“But muffin, I really wanna know —”

“I’m a food now, love?”

“You’re whatever you wanna be, puddin’ —”

Jonathan wheezed out a laugh. “But, sweetcake, what if I wanted to be a —”

“JONATHAN!” Will shouted from across the house. “I have an exam tomorrow! Please!”

Their call eventually ended at one. Steve let it slip that he had an 8am shift tomorrow, and while Jonathan was touched that Steve wanted to talk to him all night anyway, he’d rather Steve sleep. Jonathan stayed up for another hour, fully intending on sleeping until noon.

The doorbell’s constant ringing disrupts his plan.

His first instinct is that something is wrong.

The clock by his nightstand reads 10:00. The kids are still at school. Joyce is at work. Murray has a key to the house.

He could grab a knife in the kitchen. But if the person has a gun, would a knife help? It’s broad daylight, though, so an audible gunshot would raise attention. The knife would work. Or he could escape from the backyard, hop the neighbour’s fence, and run. He’s a fast-runner. But, God, if it was somehow a monster —

The doorbell rings again.

And Jonathan remembers. This isn’t Hawkins. If anything, their neighbour probably got their newspaper instead. Murray could’ve forgotten his keys. He doesn’t have to worry. Not anymore.

“COMING!” he shouts. He forces himself out of bed and to the front door. “Sorry for the wait.” He opens the door. Waits for his brain to stop lagging, for him to recognize the person in front of him.

Why else would a stranger be at their door, after all?

He doesn’t know this girl. She’s shorter than Will, tiny but intimidating regardless. Her hair’s black with fading streaks of blue. Her shoulders are squared. Her hands are balled into fists. But he isn’t afraid. Honestly, she just looks tired. Red eyes with bags underneath. Chapped lips. Shaky legs. He kind of just wants to give her breakfast.
“Hi,” Jonathan says, voice scratchy with sleep. “Can I help you with anything?”

Her dark brown eyes stare into his. “I’m here for Jane.” She raises her arm to smooth back her hair. He catches the 008 on her wrist.

It takes him a second. “Oh.” He straightens and nods, fully awakened. “She told us about you. Kali, right?”

Kali’s hardened expression cracks. Her voice raises an octave, emotion bleeding into her words. “She did? She’s okay? I didn’t — I’d been gone for awhile, something happened, and I didn’t hear a thing about that bullshit fire that I know isn’t a fucking fire, but — went to Hawkins, and — Jim’s dead? I had to talk to — the police station shouldn’t be giving away your address like that, but — she’s okay?”

“She’s fine,” he promises. “What do you mean they gave you our address?”

“Gave is kind of open to interpretation. I broke in. Was super easy to find it. I’d apologize, but.”

“Doesn’t matter. Jane’s at school right now, writing her last exam. She should be back in an hour. Do you want to come inside?”

Kali doesn’t move a muscle. “No.”

Jonathan balks, but then reminds himself that to her, he’s a random guy who she has no reason to trust. It’s fair to be wary. Even though he’s ninety-nine percent sure she could kick his ass if she wanted to. “Can I wait with you outside then? I’ll brush my teeth, call my mom. We don’t have to talk or anything. I can just, uh. Sit with you and wait.”

Her mouth hangs open. She squints at him and waits a few seconds before replying. “Okay.”

"Great.” He turns around and ducks back inside.

On the phone, Joyce says she can’t leave work yet, but can come home a few hours earlier.

“How’d she seem?” Joyce asks.

“Don’t really know since I don’t know her, but she seemed worried. She calmed down when I told her that El’s okay. Don’t worry. She’s okay. El will be happy.”

“What do you think? Of her?”

Jonathan grips the phone tighter, inexplicably defensive. “She just wants her sister to be okay. But she’s — I mean, she’s so young. I thought she’d be older, I don’t know, I didn’t think ... and Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“She’s El’s sister, right, and it seemed like she doesn’t have anywhere to go? If — if it comes down to it, what would —”

“No question about it. We take her in. She’s a kid who didn’t get the love, support, or home that we
got, that El’s had for sometime now. It’s not too late for her. I’m not changing my mind about this, but I still want to know your thoughts.”

He puffs out a breath of relief. “I’d be okay with it. I’ll see you later, okay? Love you.”

“Love you too.”

He grabs a mug full of coffee and a small carton of chocolate milk. Stepping back outside, he clears his throat. “In case you’re thirsty.”

Kali’s sitting on the front porch with her legs hugged to her chest. “Alright.”

“It’s freezing. You sure you don’t want to come in?”

She wrinkles her red nose. “Fine.” She follows him into the kitchen.

They sit across from each other. Jonathan slides the chocolate milk towards her. He sips his coffee. They don’t have to talk. He’s already made her uncomfortable with inviting her inside, so he doesn’t want to push it.


He raises the mug to his lips, quietly relieved at the break from silence. “How are you sure I know about that?”

She rolls her eyes. “You know who I am, don’t you? And Jane told me about your brother. Mentioned you, I’m pretty sure. Said you’re one of the people who helped save him, the town.”

Jonathan hides his flush with another sip of his coffee. “She’s saved him more times than I have.”

“She has powers. Do you?” she asks dryly.

“No. But, um. Well, she’ll tell you.”

Kali’s face hardens. “Tell me what?”

“Her powers aren’t working right now. We all think she tired herself out with what happened last summer, but it’s still not back.”

Kali schools her face into an unreadable, blank expression. She sinks into her chair. After a long moment of her chewing on her fingernail, she says, “That’s happened to me before. It’s not permanent. I’ll help her. She’ll be fine. Well — as fine as she can be with all things considered. Now will you tell me what happened?”

It takes him a second to answer. His mind blanks at Kali’s deadpan expression turning irritated as she tries stabbing the straw into her carton of chocolate milk. She misses the hole. It takes her two more tries. He hides another smile. “Um. Of course. It’s a long story. You want me to tell you everything?”

“Everything.”

. .

. .
Five minutes after he finishes explaining everything, El and Will come home.

It’s a beautiful reunion. Well, probably, if he’d seen it. As soon as El shrieks at the sight of Kali and runs to throw herself into Kali’s arms, he looks away. He can’t imagine what this must be like for them; it’s a moment they ought to have for themselves.

Jonathan faces Will who walks towards him. Will fiddles with the straps of his backpack, glancing at Kali with his eyebrows furrowed. “She’s the sister?”

“She’s the sister,” Jonathan confirms. Raising his voice, he says to Kali and El, “We’ll leave you guys to catch up. I’ll make lunch in an hour. You okay?”

El and Kali rise to their feet. El wipes her face with the sleeves of her shirt and nods. She doesn’t let go of Kali’s arm.

Kali doesn’t touch her damp cheeks. Just says to Jonathan, “Thank you.”

He’s not sure what she’s thanking him for. Honestly, he should thank her. El’s been okay for sometime now, but this is what she needed most after Hopper died. And now, she finally has it.

Not sure how to convey that, Jonathan just nods. “We’ll see you guys in a bit.”

“How is Mom still talking to her!?”

Will throws his hands up and groans. He paces back and forth in Jonathan’s room.

“They have things to go over, bud. And no one said you had to hide in my room if you don’t want to,” Jonathan sits at one end of his bed. Four binders line up by his feet. He already emptied his Math binder. He’s halfway through his Chemistry binder, admittedly tempted to burn his notes, because it’s not like he’s taking Chemistry again. It would make for a cool shot. Even if he did that with his Trig notes from ninth grade already.

“I wanna be here!” Will sounds offended at Jonathan’s insinuation. Jonathan surpasses a smile as he crumples another worksheet. ”It’s not that I’m bored here, it’s that I’m hungry, and they’re talking in the kitchen.”

“Sure,” Jonathan scoffs. “Like you don’t want to check up on El.”

Will stops. “It’s a lot for one day. I just wanna talk to her. And Kali! El’s told me so much about her. I can’t even introduce myself.”

“You can talk to her. After Mom’s done.”

“What’re they even talking about?”

“Y’know,” Jonathan says carefully. “Kali’s ... not a bad person, but she lives a life that isn’t the safest. Kali probably wants to see more of El. There’s a lot to go over.”

Will pushes Jonathan’s Chemistry binder to the side and sits next to Jonathan. “If she stays with us, will we be okay, money-wise?”
Jonathan’s chest tightens. He plaster on a tight smile. “Of course, bud. Mom’s job is good. And if anything, I can get a job. The hard work of senior year is over, and I’ve been meaning to get a job, anyway.”

Will shakes his head. “No.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll get a job instead,” Will declares. “Hear me out! I’m fourteen now, so I can start working. You’re busy with school and you should enjoy your last year before NYU.”

Jonathan’s stomach flips with both excitement and dread. Applications went out a few weeks ago. He applied for a few schools in Illinois, in case, but his heart, like it’s been since he could remember, is set on NYU. Frankfort gave him a glowing recommendation, his grades were better than he thought, his portfolio is solid by his own, unreasonable standards, and he’ll have Yearbook under his belt by the end of the year. Yearbook at this school is a course taken in the second semester. Another course with Frankfort and Olive. It’ll look good for his program, and honestly, another course run by his favourite teacher that he’ll have with his friend is a God send.

But still. Money’s going to get tight sooner than later. Sure, he applied for scholarships, but he’d still need money for rent. Even if he does start working before New York, that money would have to go to his own expenses, not theirs, and then he’s off. Away from Illinois. Away from them.

Everyone’s doing better. He hasn’t heard Joyce cry in months. El’s smiling and laughing with them more. Will hasn’t had a nightmare since leaving Hawkins.

But Jonathan knows very well that better isn’t permanent. What happens when money gets tight again? When the grief inevitably weighs down on Joyce and El again? When the three year anniversary since Will’s disappearance comes back and he’s not there to be there for them and with them?

And if somehow, someway, something dangerous happens in Illinois ... New Year is fourteen hours away by car.

Can he really risk that?

“And honestly, I would be great at the grocery store, and — Jonathan? Are you okay?”

Jonathan chokes out a breath. He forcefully bumps his shoulder against Will’s. “I’m great. And you’re not getting a part-time job.”

Will continues to list the reasons why he should get a job and why he’d be great at it. Jonathan argues playfully back, but he can’t get rid of the unease brewing in his chest.

Everything he’s done and every reason he’s had to get up and through another day has been his family. After everything, can he really just leave them?

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It’s well past nine when Joyce finishes talking to Kali. There’s not enough time to make dinner, so Jonathan offers to buy a pizza.
Joyce, Kali, and Jonathan hover by the front door. El’s gone to the shower, while Will determinedly makes the family banana smoothies from the kitchen.

“Jonathan, why don’t you take Kali? Show her around town a bit? It’d be nice for you to see what this area’s like.” Joyce sends Kali a warm smile. She’s still in her secretary clothes, a pink skirt and white blouse, though she’s rubbed all her makeup off.

Kali shrugs. “Sure.” She thumbs a hole in her jacket sleeve and follows Jonathan out the door.

The first few minutes of the drive are quiet. Jonathan presses play on the mix-tape already in. It’s a mix he made for El. Radiohead instantly settles him from the silence, makes it easier to embrace the night sky.

After two songs, Kali clears her throat. “I’ll be staying with you guys for an indefinite amount of time. I’ll take the couch.”

“You can take my room.”

Kali chuckles. It’s a nice sound, low and scratchy. It makes Jonathan crack a smile as he takes a left. “Your mom said you’d say that.”

“Offer’s still on the table, if you want.”

“You don’t have to act like you don’t know.”

Jonathan freezes at the abrupt change in Kali’s tone. He spares a glance at her, but she’s staring out the window, her arms crossed, face hidden. “Don’t know what?”

“About the things I’ve done. I’m not saying I’ve done everything right, but —”

“I think you’ve done a lot of right things,” Jonathan interrupts. She doesn’t need to defend herself, least of all to him. “Assholes in charge have done shit for me and my family when we needed help. And you’ve been treated a million times worse, so — so I’m not judging you.”

“Jane thinks — she thinks the world of me. And I don’t want her doing what I’ve done, but your mom offered me a place here, and I can’t — don’t you think there’s a limit? That at some point, people are too far gone?” Panic cracks in her voice. She’s shaking, looking at him now with big, wide eyes, her chin wobbling. This is not a conversation she would want to have with him, he thinks, unless there wasn’t anyone else to have it with.

His hands are steady on the driving wheel. It’s not without trying; he goes through five things you can see and four things you can touch. It’s enough to calm him down, so he doesn’t do the rest. “I think what you do about your mistakes say more about you than your actual mistakes. I think that if you’re the type of person asking if you’re too far gone, then you’re not. And I think ... we all have blood on our hands. I’ve got some on mine, and I don’t think it’s out yet, but I’m gonna keep scrubbing until they’re clean. I don’t know how it works. I don’t know how to do it, but I’m trying, and I can tell you are, too. Getting away from what happened in Hawkins helped us. This could help you.”

Kali draws in a shaky breath. “You don’t even know me,” she says, with a shaky, wet laugh. It’s a sad sound.

He’s driving slower now, so he looks at her again. She’s a year or two older than him, but she looks so small, so young. Did she ever have someone looking out for her? Someone to take care of her, someone she could take care of? It makes him sad, but it mostly makes him angry.
He thinks of Nancy’s words from Thanksgiving. How this stupid world takes and takes. It took Will. It took Barb. It took Bob. It took Hopper. It took Jonathan’s youth. The father he was supposed to have. The comforting lie that there were no monsters and replaced it with the truth that monsters are everywhere, and most of them are people.

This world takes. All you can do is give.

He’s been given a lot. His family, his relationship with Nancy and Steve, his friendship with Olive. A place to sleep, eat, and shower that he can call home. Being able to have a dream, and have a chance at it. Getting to have some semblance of a normal life away from every person and thing that’s wronged them.

What’s Kali been given?

“I don’t know you,” he amends. “But I could.”

He doesn’t know her. Maybe she does have a home and people who love her back in Chicago. It’s unfair to take everything he’s heard about Brenner, her past, and what he’s seen of her, and assume she has nothing. He knows she has friends, knows she has El.

But if she wanted, she could have more. Jonathan and his family could give her more.

Kali smiles. It feels like a gift. “You could.”

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The next two weeks are calm.

Kali turns down everyone’s offer at taking their bed and insists on sleeping on the sofa. (Joyce promises to buy a proper mattress soon.) Kali’s home when they leave for school, and there when they get back. She hasn’t really talked to Jonathan, focussed on catching up with El and her new life, but he’s still holding onto hope ever since their conversation in his car.

Nancy and Steve are intrigued. They ask him a lot of questions, like what happened for her to be gone for so long and what happened to her friends, but he admits that he knows nothing and doesn’t want to ask.

“You’re introducing us when we come for Valentine’s Day, right?” Nancy asks over the phone. Steve’s saying something in the distance. Nancy shushes him. “Wait your turn, Steve!”

Jonathan smiles to himself, leaning against the wall that the phone’s attached to. “Yeah. I’ll let you know if anything happens. She sits with us for family dinners, but keeps to herself.”

“Give her some time. You and your family have done everything right. Sooner than later, you’ll be good friends,” Nancy says sagely.

“And then Nance will steal your best friend from you!” Steve yells in the distance.

“It’s not my fault Robin likes me more.” Jonathan can practically hear Nancy sticking her tongue out at Steve.

“It is absolutely your fault. It’s okay, I guess. Mike likes me more.”
“You can have him.”

“Holly likes me more.”

“Oh, please —”

“Hey, children, are you finished?” Jonathan interrupts, a crack of fondness in his voice.

“Did he call us children?” Steve says. “Nance, can I just. Can I hold the phone this one time?”

“You’re gonna yell in his ear,” Nancy says.

“False. The phone will be yelling in his ear.”

Nancy laughs. “You’re such a dork.” Jonathan thinks he hears the sound of her lightly shoving his arm, then definitely hears her passing Steve the phone.

“Like Nance was saying, give it a minute. You’re easy to like, so she’ll come around sooner than you think.”

Nancy snorts in the background. She and Jonathan are both thinking the same thing. “Because you liked me right away,” he jokes.

Steve groans. “You know what, you’re assuming I like you now.” He shrieks out a laugh. “Nance, don’t tickle me!”

“Aw, but you do like Jonathan. You like him so much.”

“Gah, okay — okay, fine! Don’t tickle me or I’ll tickle you back. You know I’ll win.”

“Nancy’s beat me in all of our tickling matches,” Jonathan says. “Her height misleads how strong she is.”

“It’s one of my favourite things about her.” Steve sounds dreamy.

“She has very nice arms.”

The line crackles. Nancy’s voice shortly sounds. “Jonathan, you like my arms?”

“I love your arms. They’re very strong. You have. You know. Muscles.”

Steve’s instantaneous laughter is both irritating and infectious. “God, you’re so awkward.”

“One of my favourite things about you,” Nancy says solemnly to Jonathan.

“Wait, man, I wasn’t,” Steve stutters. “Y’know, I was just joking, you know that, right, I wasn’t — it’s cool, I’m into it, oh, fuck, Nance — stop laughing at me!”

Jonathan’s face hurts from smiling so hard. “Your awkwardness is one of my favourite things about you, too, Steve.”

They talk for another hour. After he hangs up, Kali walks down the hallway, towards him. She dons a faded grey shirt (Joyce’s) and a pink pair of shorts (El’s). “Who were you talking to him??”

It was the first time she’d spoken to him alone and without asking if he could please pass the mashed potatoes. Jonathan nods, a little overenthusiastic. “My girlfriend. They — she’s back in Hawkins.”
"Heard you address someone named Steve?"

“He’s a friend,” Jonathan lies. He hopes Kali won’t push it.

She doesn’t. Just grimaces in what Jonathan realizes is an attempt at a smile. “I’ll be frank. I don’t know how to talk to people who don’t have powers like me or who I’m not threatening.” She plays with the drawstrings of her shorts. “I tried asking your brother about his drawing. He asked if I wanted to colour something for him, and I got so nervous I broke his yellow pencil crayon in half.”

Jonathan’s surprised by his own laugh. He cocks his head towards the living room and walks with side-by-side with her. “What about my brother makes you nervous?”

“It’s not your brother. It’s me. I seem to have my foot lodged in my mouth.”

“You’re doing great now.”

“After I blurted out how I think I’m irredeemable in your car.” She plops onto one end of the sofa. Her smile is sharp and sardonic, aimed at him as he sits next to her. “I’m not great with people. Shockingly.”

“I told you I killed someone.” He winces at how easily the words come out of his mouth, but pushes past the acrid taste it leaves behind. “I think I’m just as awkward.”

Kali’s eyes momentarily widen. But that’s it. No shock, no disgust, no pity. He’s not sure what he expected, but mild surprise wasn’t it. “You said you had blood on your hands. Not that you specifically killed someone.”

“Well, I did.” He digs his feet into the carpeted floor. It’s hard to meet Kali’s eyes. He settles for staring at the fading blue in her hair. “Self-defence. He was possessed by this monster that possessed my brother last year. It would’ve killed me.”

Without missing a beat, Kali says, “So you did what you had to do. Better you than him. Your family really loves you. Jane too. Losing you would’ve destroyed them.” He hadn’t thought about it like that.

“It’s kind of destroying me,” he admits. “I freaked out in school at a picture of a hospital.”

“I freak out when I see bathtubs. Don’t ask why. I don’t know, some things just stick. Doesn’t make us damaged beyond repair, just reasonably damaged. I mean, look at Jane. She’s gone to hell and back, and she’s still able to go to school and do normal, boring things. You’ll get to do all the normal, boring things you want. You’ll be okay. You won’t be normal, but that’s fine. Normal’s boring as shit, anyway.”

There aren’t enough words to tell Kali that that was the perfect thing she could’ve said. So all he can do is sincerely say, “Thank you.”

“Repaying the favour from the car.” She nudges her foot against his. “You wanna watch TV or somethin’?”

They watch a shitty comedy with canned laughter. Neither laugh or even crack a smile. But then Joyce comes home from her weekly spin class with Murray, and Kali’s smile is small but real as she says, “Hey, Joyce,” and Murray’s racing over to squeeze in between them on the sofa, and it’s — it’s good. Watching the remaining ten minutes of the episode with Joyce, Murray, and Kali, he reminds himself that what happened in the hospital was worth it for moments like these.
A week later, everyone comes home at five in the afternoon. Jonathan and Olive had a Yearbook meeting, which felt unnecessary considering they had Yearbook last period with Frankfort, anyway, so Oliver, El, and Will stayed at the local library that was across the street. Jonathan had the car that day, so he dropped Olive and Oliver off, and brought everyone home.

The first thing he notices upon arriving home is the smell of something sweet. His stomach grumbles.

“Kali can cook?” Will says incredulously. He grins and dashes into the kitchen, El trailing behind him.

Jonathan dumps his backpack into his room and jogs into the kitchen. “Smells great.”

Kali turns around from the stove. The kitchen’s a mess of ingredients and pans. He peers at the stove, recognizing one dish of pasta, and something else with chicken. “Hey,” she says, wiping a drop of sweat from her brow. “I thought I’d make dinner. Least I could do.”

“You didn’t have to,” he says.

“Dude, I do jack shit all day. I wanted to. Honestly.”

“I know how to cook waffles,” El says, clamouring for Kali’s attention. “Thought that was impressive, but now ...”

“Janie, that is impressive. Make it for me tomorrow.”

“Jonathan taught me. He’s a good cook.”

“Really good,” Will adds.

Kali beams. “I can see that, yeah. He’s a good brother, too.” The best part about it for Jonathan is how casually she says it, like she’s not trying to compliment him, but sharing an observation.

Half an hour later, when Joyce arrives, they all sit at the dining table.

“Kali, this is amazing!” Joyce exclaims. She dabs the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “Such an interesting combination.”

Kali flushes, shyly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “My friend Dottie taught me the recipe. She’s taught me everything I know. I’ll let her know you liked it.” So Kali’s still in touch with her friends. Jonathan files that away to ask her about it later, relieved that she’s still got people to reply on outside of them. “I’d love to cook more. Help out more.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Joyce says.

“No, it’s fine. I, uh, also wanted to say thank you. For letting me stay here. I feel really lucky and grateful, and I’m going to figure out how else I can help. You’re all very kind, lovely, and good people. So thanks again.”

Will proposes they raise a toast to Kali. It’s a toast consisting of his and El’s apple juice, Joyce’s water, and Jonathan and Kali’s hot chocolate, but a toast nonetheless.
After dinner, the four teens squeeze in on the sofa and watch the same, stupid comedy. They speak over it. Will tells Kali about their school, with El interjecting to correct him or add on. Kali asks questions, clearly engaged and enjoying talking to him. El’s over the moon about the interaction. She watches Will and Kali talk with a bright, earnest expression.

Jonathan catches Joyce lingering in the hallway. Her gaze is set on them. She sips from a cup of tea, a fond look in her eyes.

“You can c’mere. There’s space on the couch,” Jonathan says, loud enough for her to hear, but not loud enough that Kali, El, and Will are pulled from their conversation.

Joyce waves her hand. “In a minute. I like watching my kids.”

Jonathan has to admit. *My kids* has a nice ring to it.

Jonathan has a paper due for his Law class and his coloured design proposal for the athlete’s section due the day following Valentine’s Day. Nancy has two tests and a Physics assignment. They agree to meet in the end of March instead and find a weekend when their schoolwork isn’t as heavy.

They also agree to mail out their gifts a few days in advance. Nothing extravagant, nothing store-bought, and nothing too much.

Jonathan had considered the idea of a huge collage arranged as a timeline of sorts. But before the idea could even fully form, Yearbook and his classes stole so much of his time, that he wouldn’t have enough of it to execute his idea.

A mix-tape and a framed photo, each, would suffice. He made two different and personalized mixtapes. Wrote *I’ve got you, always* on Nancy’s. Wrote *You’re my something familiar, too* on Steve’s. He knew that they would get it. He sent them his favourite picture of them. Nancy’s was from the Snowball. She was laughing and flipping him off as she told him to put the camera away and dance with her. Steve’s was the one of him drooling. He’d given Steve the one of Jonathan’s wall, and replaced it with another picture of the three from Christmas, wearing their Christmas sweaters.

Their gifts didn’t arrive on Valentine’s Day, which was alright. It gave him another thing to look forward to this week. It’s not like he didn’t get anything from school, either. Oliver made a batch of cookies for him, Will, El, and Olive. Olive drew and coloured in a drawing of her and Jonathan holding a heart in between them. Frankfort gave everyone heart-shaped candies. El woke up extra early to make heart-shaped waffles. Will made everyone in the family as well as Olive, Oliver, and Murray cards.

Jonathan felt really loved.

After dinner, he stayed up longer than usual to finish his work. He completed his essay during the work period they’d been given in Yearbook class, so he worked on Yearbook at home. He finished at one in the morning.

Afterwards, he wanders into the kitchen. The light’s turned on. He assumes it’s Kali, but when he skips past the living room, he hears her snoring on the pull-out.
“Hello?” He calls out. He balls his shaking hands into fists.

“It’s just me.”

Will.

Relief washes over him. Jonathan stifles a yawn and enters the kitchen. “What’re you doing up, buddy?” He joins Will on the counter, abandoning his quest for a cup of water. “You okay? Was it a —”

“No nightmare. Something else.”

Despite this, worry just as intense knots in Jonathan’s stomach. He rakes his eyes over Will’s pale face, his chewed lips, and the fingernails he’s digging into his palms and tries not to wince or jump to conclusions. “Wanna talk about it?” Jonathan asks.

“I made Oliver a card for Valentine’s Day. Left it in his locker at the end of the day, because I was too nervous to give it to him at lunch. I feel like I made a mistake.”

“It’s a nice gesture. I’m sure he’ll love it. Why would it be a mistake?”

Will leans his head against the top cabinet. “He’ll know.”

Jonathan wraps his arm around Will’s shoulder, pulling him close. He frowns. “Will, I’m not following.”

“He’ll know that I like him,” Will hisses through clenched teeth.

“Oh,” Jonathan says. Understanding smooths out the frown on his face. He smiles gently. “He likes you too.”

Will sniffs. “You don’t get it! I like boys.”

Maybe casually saying, “I like boys, too,” wasn’t the best course of action, but it was the first thing Jonathan thought of.

“What?!”

“SHH,” Jonathan whispers, looking around frantically. “It’s okay, Will. There’s nothing wrong with you. Oliver won’t make fun of you or tell anyone. He’s better than that. And I’m really glad you told me. Glad I told you, too.”

The tears in Will’s eyes don’t leak out. He’s not tense anymore, loose in Jonathan’s arms. “So I’m not imagining your crush on Steve, then?”

“Nope,” Jonathan says. He’s not surprised that Will guessed it so easily. Will’s always known him best, known every crevice and crack, in a way only siblings can. And honestly, he’s wanted to tell Will for awhile. Just didn’t know how. “All three of us are, um, together.”

He expects confusion and questions, not Will’s calm, “Huh. That makes sense. Good for you guys.”

Jonathan laughs into the back of his hand. He pokes Will’s knee with his own. “You’re the coolest.”

“You’re cooler,” Will insists. “I haven’t told anyone else.”

“Your friends back home would be okay with it. Mom and El and Kali, too. But you don’t have to
tell anyone. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. It’s your choice.”

“I just — I know there’s nothing wrong with me, but it’s scary.”

Jonathan sighs. He rests his arms by his sides. “It is.”

Will stares at his feet, swinging them back and forth. “What’s it like? Being in love? I mean, I know you love them both the same, but you know what I mean, don’t you? Since Steve’s ... well, a boy.”

Jonathan considers this for a few moments. “It’s like when your cheeks hurt ‘cuz you’re always smiling. I feel safe, and cherished, and like I won’t be alone, ever. I have someone, two people, really, to talk to, to hold and to hold me, to take pictures of, to spend hours on the phone with, to be my best friend that I can kiss and have se — second kisses. More kisses.”

Will snorts out a laugh at Jonathan’s unsubtle save.

“It’s not a bigger love than what I have for you and Mom and El or Olive. Fundamentally different, yeah, but just as big and powerful, if that makes sense. It’s ... it’s a lot of things, but it’s something that I don’t think I’ll ever really accept as real. But it is. And it’ll happen for you. If not with Oliver, then with someone else, eventually. There are so many things I thought weren’t real, but these days, I’ve learned that nothing’s too unlikely, and that things that feel like a never are usually a not yet. So, like. I thought, I’ll never have friends. Now I’ve got Olive and Kali. I thought, I’ll never find love. Have it with Nancy and Steve.”

“I thought, I’ll never be friends with El. And now ...” Will trails off. “Like that?”

“Like that. So if you’re thinking I’ll never find love, like I thought, change it to a not yet. I haven’t found love ... yet. But you will, if you want it.”

“I want it,” Will says. “I want it a lot.”

“And it’ll come to you. I promise. I don’t know when, but it will.”

Some colour returns to Will’s cheek. He soothes the crescent-shaped indents he left in his palm with his thumb. “It’s not a never, just not now.”

Jonathan smiles. “Exactly.”

“I feel better now that I told you. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Dad’s such a fucking dick.”

Jonathan blinks. He stares at his brother, Will’s face twisted in a scowl, for another second. “What? I mean, you’re not wrong, but what?”

“All of those things he said ... they’ve stuck in my mind for so long. But you were right when you said he was wrong about us. He was so wrong. We’re fine the way we are. You’re fine the way you are. Great. You’re kind, and loving, and smart, and twice the man he’ll ever be. I know that I’m not as nearly screwed up as I would be, because I had you and mom, but you had mom dealing with him all the time and me as a baby. And babies are useless! I don’t know how you turned out to be this ... this good, but I’m glad you did. I’m really lucky.”

“You’re making me cry,” Jonathan says, as though Will can’t see the tears shamelessly rolling down
Will passes Jonathan a box of tissues from the counter with a smile.

“Thanks.” Jonathan accepts the box and tears a tissue out.

“Thanks, too,” Will says softly; Jonathan understands what for and tries not to cry any more than he already has.

Jonathan doesn’t believe in coincidences. Not anymore. The rest of February and the beginning of March feel like signs.

It starts in Yearbook Class.

Frankfort greets his class by asking, “How are my seniors doing today?”

The class collectively groans. It’s five minutes into the period. Three people are already asleep.

Frankfort isn’t deterred. His smile widens as he walks around, still holding the attention of those who are awake. “C’mon! You’re almost done high school. You’re in the final stretch. Applications are sent out, and soon, acceptances will be rolling in. Your hard work has paid off.”

“We aren’t accepted yet,” a kid in the back says.

“I’m failing Physics,” another grumbles.

“Acceptances are more anxiety-inducing than applying,” Olive says.

“And we still have this damn Yearbook to do,” Jonathan says under his breath. He blushes when the class laughs, smiling reluctantly when Olive knocks her foot against his in acknowledgement.

Frankfort props himself onto the counter at the front. He clasps his hands together. “That’s all valid. I misspoke. There’s still a lot to do, and we still need to get quotes for the rest of the seniors and half of the school’s clubs photos. But let’s just take a second, yeah? To be proud of ourselves and one another. No matter what happens with acceptances and where you choose to go, you’ve all done an extraordinary job at being students, sure, but more importantly, at being people. So let’s give you guys round of applause!”

Jonathan’s pretty sure if it was any other teacher, he wouldn’t clap. But Frankfort lights a spark in every student he has, cares just enough and can get the attention of his students on Friday, last period class, when all of them are seniors nearly finished the year.

After the thundering applause Frankfort and the class give themselves, Frankfort sends them off to do their respective, split-up work. He makes his rounds around the class, starting with Jonathan and Olive.

“How’re the superlatives coming?”

“Still counting the votes,” Olive says. “I needed time to recover after talking to so many students to collect their ballots.”
Frankfort snorts. “Fair. Any acceptances yet?”

“One,” Olive says.

“Where? You didn’t tell me!” Jonathan says, brimming with pride.

Olive shrugs, playing and staring at the ends of her hair. It’s what she does whenever someone compliments her art. “It’s just Illinois State. Not NIU. Calm down.”

“That’s still great!” Frankfort turns to Jonathan. “What about you? NYU respond yet?”

His pride for Olive dissipates, replaced with dread crawling up his throat like bile. “Not yet.”

“Your acceptances are coming, both of you. Keep me updated.” Frankfort smiles politely before shuffling to the back of the room, where someone has their hand raised.

Olive and Jonathan work for the remainder of the period. They count ballots for the superlatives and make jokes over the names submitted. Still, NYU sits in the back of his mind, clouded with panic and anxiety and worry. It only gets worse when he gets home.

Will, El, and Oliver are at the library again. They wanted to stay until six and promised to walk home together; Oliver would have dinner with them and Jonathan would take him home.

So Jonathan’s by himself when he arrives home. He closes the door behind him quietly, even though no one’s home. Kali got a part-time job at the library (thanks to Murray) not by Jonathan’s high school, but twenty minutes away. She takes the bus and won’t admit how much she likes the job.

His hand goes limp on the doorknob when he hears the sound of laughter.

“Your friendship with Principal Smith will always baffle me,” Joyce says.

“Not as much as our friendship, I suppose,” Murray says. They’re speaking from the living room. Right. Joyce’s school has a day off and the office staff were allowed to stay home.

Not wanting to interrupt their banter, he tiptoes to his room and drops his backpack by the foot of his bed. He’ll slip quietly into the kitchen to grab a drink, maybe say hi, and go back to his room. As odd and unlikely as the friendship between Joyce and Murray is, he’s been a good presence for her. He’s been good, period. Jonathan won’t admit yet how comfortable he is with Murray, but he’s getting there.

And Murray’s also cut down on half of the weird shit he says, so Jonathan isn’t as tense around him as he used to be.

He catches sight of the living room sofa as he’s passing the hallway. Joyce and Murray are curled up on opposite ends. Their backs are to him.

The conversation has clearly shifted. There’s no laughter anymore.

“I don’t want your money, Murray. Honest. We’re doing fine, it’s just ... September’s looking rough. Property tax is coming up, and I still need to buy Kali a bed, replace the microwave, so much small shit that adds up to a crazy amount. We’ve got twice as many people in the house as we did last year. I don’t know what I’ll do. I haven’t taken Kali’s money, and I still don’t want to, so that’s a last-resort. And you know what’s crap? Jonathan’s scholarship doesn’t even cover everything. Even if he stays at the provided-dorm, he still has to pay for it.”
He leans against the wall, out of view. Even if he wants to move, he can’t; his legs feel like weights. He feels like throwing up again.

But he continues to listen.

“Why doesn’t he go to a school in Illinois then? Stay at home and commute?” Murray suggests.

“NYU’s been his dream for ages. He deserves this. He’s worked so hard, and I can’t take that away from him. But I don’t want him to get loans.”

“So he works in NYU then. Uses the money you saved for him from the ‘fire’. Should that help?”

“It will. He’ll be fine. And we’ll make it work here. I don’t know how yet, but we’ll be okay. We always are. And there’s something else, but you have to give me an honest answer on what you think.”

“So I’ll tell you if it’s stupid or not. Got it.”

“I want to put everyone in therapy. Kali included. No clue the fortune I’d have to give over, but if I need to hoard over my liver, then that’s fine. All of the kids have been okay now, but summer’s coming up, the anniversary of Hop’s death, and October’s the anniversary of Will’s disappearance, and — look, you and I both know that you can go months being okay, but the trauma doesn’t just go away. It comes back. We’ve worked hard to be better this year. I want that to stick.”

“Let me help you pay for it,” Murray says earnestly.

“It’s just something I’m thinking about. But don’t worry. I’ll figure it out.”

Jonathan’s throat dries up. But he can’t possibly go into the kitchen now or else Joyce and Murray will hear him and know he heard their conversation.

He waits for them to say anything else. Murray reminds Joyce again that he’ll help her with whatever she needs. The conversation shifts to a movie they want to see on the weekend.

He stands there in the hallway for awhile. They don’t talk about money issues again.

Logically, he knows that his going to NYU can still happen. He can work in Illinois, save up, then work in New York. He doesn’t have to give the money to his family, nor does he have to stay in Illinois to take care of them and make sure everything is okay. If that wasn’t the case, Joyce would have talked to him about it already. She’s as insistent about NYU as he is, maybe even more, but she wouldn’t withhold the truth from him. They’re a team. It’s how it is. It’s how it’s always been.

But there’s no room for logic when all he hears is how much harder things would be if he went to New York.

And how much easier they’d be if he stayed in Illinois.

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The rest of the week only furthers Jonathan’s paranoia that NYU would hurt his family.

It’s the little things. El gets sick, and Jonathan’s the only one who can drive her room since Joyce
can’t leave work, Kali can’t drive, and Murray’s out of town. Will sobs with the stress of his Math class. Jonathan’s the only one who knows how to do the set of questions and he’s the only one who can calm him down. Joyce leaves for work at seven on the dot. The high school starts at nine, and Jonathan’s the only one who can get them there on time and get them home, too.

But it’s worrying over nothing. He hasn’t received an acceptance yet. Even then, he has to decide in June, so he still has three months.

But he can’t see himself changing his mind.

The second week of March provides a long weekend, so Jonathan decides to visit Hawkins. It makes up for Valentine’s and provides a chance for El and Will to see their friends and join him on the ride.

He asks Kali if she wants to come. She appreciated the offer, but ultimately declined. “I have a shift on Saturday and your mom wants to take me shopping. I’m, uh, really looking forward to it.”

He’d smiled at that.

They each pack a duffel that Friday after school. Joyce hugs them and kisses their cheeks in a goodbye. Kali squeezes El in a hug, high-fives Will, and bumps her shoulder against Jonathan’s. Murray waves and wishes them a safe ride.

The ride isn’t quiet. Will pops a mix-tape in and cheers when *Bohemian Rhapsody* plays. The three Byers’ know all the words, because of course they do. So Jonathan rolls the windows down, lets the wind blow through his hair, and sings along to Queen with his siblings as the sky sets above them.

It’s nine pm when they reach the Wheeler residence. No banner this time, but Mike, with Holly asleep on his lap, Max, Dustin, and Lucas sit together on the stairway, and Nancy and Steve wait by the door.

Jonathan’s exhausted from the ride, so his greeting isn’t as enthusiastic as it should be. They squeeze him into a hug and he lets himself be held and shifts his weight onto them for a moment. “Hey,” he says into Nancy’s hair. He kisses her forehead and ropes an arm around Steve’s neck. “You guys smell really good.”

Nancy laughs. “Really? I’ve been sweating all day.”

“You always smell good,” he says drowsily. “Like. Like clouds and pictures when I develop ’em.”

Steve carefully grabs the strap of Jonathan’s duffel bag and pulls it over his own shoulder. “C’mon. Someone’s sleepy.”

They go upstairs and lay in a pile on Nancy’s bed. Jonathan’s wedged between them. Nancy traces lines on his chest, her head tucked into his shoulder. Steve slings his leg over Jonathan’s. Over his waist, Nancy and Steve hold hands.

“Sorry for bein’ quiet.” Jonathan had been listening to them tell him about their days, half-asleep and zoning in and out.
“Don’t be.” Nancy’s breath is warm against his cheek. “You had a long drive. We’re just happy that you’re here.”

“And that we can thank you for the mixtape and picture in person,” Steve adds. “I have mine on repeat.”

“Really?” Jonathan blinks the sleep out of his eyes.

“I’ve got the lyrics to that David Bowie song, Changes, memorized,” Nancy murmurs. “He plays it when we’re together, too. So you’re there in spirit.”


“Go to sleep.” Steve rucks the blanket strewn over the trio higher. “We’ll be here.”

“But Nancy, your mom,” Jonathan manages to get out through a yawn.

“Is out of town with my Dad. I got Mike to take the kids and Holly out tomorrow afternoon, so we’ll have the house to ourselves for a few hours.”


“I have condoms,” Steve reassures. “Don’t worry. Even if it’s kind of cute that you immediately got upset at the idea of not having sex with us.”

“We could still do hand-stuff.” Jonathan’s eyelids are heavy. They keep drooping.

“Oh, we will,” Nancy says. “Tomorrow. Sleep. We have time.”

“And we’re not going anywhere,” Steve adds. “We’re yours — well, we’re always yours, but we’re especially yours all weekend.”

Jonathan closes his eyes. Nancy presses a kiss to his eyelid. Steve touches their foreheads together. Their entwined hands shift onto Jonathan’s hip. All at once, the tension in his body drains. The weight of the past few weeks, of the past year, really, is lifted.

It’ll come back. It always does, suddenly and violently. But the reprieve is welcomed. He doesn’t need to forget about what happened; he just needs to make his peace with it somehow. So far he hasn’t. Some days, he doesn’t know if he ever will.

But right now, it feels possible. He drifts off to the soothing and steady sounds of his partners’ breathings and their hushed murmurs and giggles, a seed of hope planted in his chest.

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The next day, by all accounts, was good.

Jonathan woke up curled between two of his favourite people. They spent most of the morning in bed, trading kisses and murmuring against each other’s skin and trying to laugh quietly so the kids wouldn’t know they were up yet.

It worked out well. Lucas and El, who’d been getting tips from Jonathan and Kali, made breakfast,
and announced they had lots of leftovers right before all of the kids left the house at eleven in the morning.

Despite this, the three spent another hour in bed. They tried telling each other stories, to catch each other up, but it turned out they’d heard all of it, anyway. They talked so often that it didn’t feel like it’d been two months since they last saw one another.

They decided to make a pillow fort instead.

“Holly had a nightmare last week. I told her that pillow forts ban all nightmares. We gave it a shot, and she told me the next day it worked,” Nancy said, glaring at a pillow as it fell down from the fort. She caught it and held it in her lap.

“She caught it and held it in her lap.

“Sneaking into your room is how I ban nightmares, but I’ll give it a go next time,” Steve said, looking up at Nancy from Jonathan’s lap.

“Give it a go here. You can do both.” Nancy shot Steve a smile and poked his nose.

Jonathan threaded his fingers through Steve’s hair. “I haven’t had a nightmare in awhile. Can’t remember the last time for me. I thought … I mean, I was pretty sure I’d be dreaming about Tom for most of my senior year, wallowing in guilt, but I feel not \textit{good} about it, but like, okay, it happened. That’s all it. What about you?” He tapped Nancy’s thigh with his foot.

She stroked his ankle and hummed. “To be honest, I didn’t feel that bad about it. I’ve been good at telling myself that it doesn’t make me a bad person and that I had no other choice. I’m not that surprised that I’m okay, just massively relieved. After everything, we deserve peace. I think we’re getting there.”

Jonathan squeezed her knee.

Steve nodded in agreement. He rolled over in Jonathan’s lap to press a kiss to his palm, then rolled back to press a kiss to Nancy’s. Both landed on their scars.

“You’ve been doing better,” Nancy murmured to Steve. “It’s been a month since you came into my room at night. Well. A month since you came in for nightmare reasons.”

Steve snorted. “Yeah, I’ve been okay. I think I’m just handling myself better. I’m sleeping eight hours everyday, cut back on the drinking, and I’m drinking more \textit{water}. Like, \textit{Water}! But, y’know. Robin and the dip-shits help. And you two, obviously, but you knew that.”

“We do,” Jonathan promised.

They got out of bed when they got hungry. Ate the breakfast, brunch really, left for them. Showered together. Piled together in the living room, speaking over whatever random television show Nancy played.

At five, the kids weren’t home yet, so left the house, bought three boxes of pizza, and split one amongst themselves.

And this is where the good part of the day ended. It started with Nancy saying, “This is what New York’ll be like.”

Right now, they sit at the Wheeler’s dining table at the corner of the table. Nancy’s at the end, with Jonathan on her right, Steve on her left. Their feet are tangled underneath the table, chairs scooted close. Steve has one leg propped onto Jonathan’s seat. Nancy has one propped up on Steve’s.
Someone’s touching Jonathan’s knee, but he can’t tell who.

“It’s gonna be fuckin’ amazing,” Steve speaks through a mouthful of crust.

Jonathan mindlessly hands him a tissue. He manages a smile, even if the mention of New York makes a lump form in his throat. He sips from their shared water bottle before saying, “So greasy pizza, not wearing any clothes —” He darts his gaze at Steve’s bare chest, gestures to Nancy’s lack of pants. “And spending the day in bed? Sounds like a dream to me.”

Nancy laces her fingers behind her neck. The bun at the top of her head bobs as she nods in agreement. “I wanted to tell you guys this in person and at the same time.”

“Holy shit,” Jonathan says softly. “Did you — you got into Columbia, didn’t you?”

Nancy’s grin is brighter than the sun, brighter than all of the stars in the sky. “I did! *I fucking got into Columbia!*”

They jump to their feet and rush to Nancy’s side. The chairs scrape against the floor, Steve’s knocked to the floor. Jonathan’s half-eaten pizza lays forgotten on his paper plate. But it doesn’t matter, not when Steve and Jonathan crush Nancy into a group hug, kissing all over her face, and congratulating her. Not when she landed her dream school.

“Columbia’s going to be so lucky to have you.” Steve smacks another loud kiss onto Nancy’s cheek, rewarded with her high shriek of laughter.

Jonathan raises their joined hands to kiss Nancy’s scar. She yanks him forward before he can do it and presses her head against his chest. He welcomes the act by resting his chin on the top of her head. “I’m so proud, so happy for you. You did it. You got into your dream school!”

Nancy leans back to look into Jonathan’s eyes. “You’ll get your acceptance letter to NYU soon,” she says softly. “Robin’ll get her acceptance for Linguistics at NYU as soon as you do, and we’re off.”

They’re both smiling at him so brightly, shining with excitement, that his chest hurts. He stumbles back. Face tilted down, he scratches his neck and ignores how wrong not touching them feels. “I need to tell you guys something, actually.”

“You got in?” Steve resembles an eager puppy, stepping back into Jonathan’s space like Jonathan’s just acting shy.

But Nancy stands still. A crease forms between her eyebrows. “What’s wrong?”

Steve frowns. He touches Jonathan’s shoulder, light and careful.

Jonathan nearly flinches. He’s shaking, even at Steve’s touch. What’s *wrong* with him? He touches his chest, his thumping heartbeat. Waits for it to calm down.

He can tell Nancy and Steve anything. He can be scared about it, and still be brave and just tell them. He’s had enough practice with bravery every goddamn day since Will disappeared. Maybe even longer, thanks to Lonnie.

Jonathan thumbs the hole in his sleeve. Breathes in, breathes out. Wills himself to speak because they don’t deserve to be in the dark.

“I think I might stay in Illinois.”
“Then we’ll go to Illinois too.” Nancy laughs, clutching her stomach. “I thought it would be something bad. Thank God. That’s not a problem!”

“Nancy, no,” Jonathan says firmly. “You can’t not go to Columbia.”

Her jaw sets. “What?”

Steve nods rapidly. He rubs his hands together. “Then I’ll go back and forth between New York and Illinois.”

“You have to go with her!” Jonathan winces at the volume and urgency of his voice. He sounds pathetic and desperate to his own ears. What does it sound like to them? “Just, please, okay? Trust me on this.”

“Dude, we’re going wherever you are.” Steve’s voice breaks. His face crumples, his eyes already glassy; all because of Jonathan. It hurts to look at him, so Jonathan doesn’t. “What happened? What changed? You have to talk to us. It doesn’t work if you don’t tell us what’s going on. We want to listen, okay? I lost Nance once like that, and I’m not letting it happen with you.”

“Jonathan,” Nancy whispers. He would prefer if she yelled. “If you can’t talk, can you just look at us?”

Jonathan opens his mouth to speak right as someone kicks the front door open. Footsteps reverberate through the first floor of the house.

“IS THAT PIZZA? NANCY, DID YOU BUY US PIZZA!”

“Sweet!”

“I love your sister, man.”

“Jonathan taught me how to make pizza!”

“El, you know how to make pizza!?”

The only reason Jonathan can look at Nancy and Steve is because of how startled the kids’ arrival renders him. He opens his mouth, but Nancy’s raised finger silences him.

“We’re talking about this tonight,” she whisper-shouts. Her bottom lip quivers, but she continues. “We’re dealing with this. No running. We’re a fucking team, and I’d keep going, but I’m not wearing pants right now, and none of those kids can see me. I’m obviously upset, but not at you. This is just something we need to talk about. And we will.”

Jonathan’s shoulders sag. Nancy’s firmness has always been a mix of horrifying and touching. He loves that about her. “I’m sorry,” he starts babbling, “I don’t —”

“TONIGHT!” She says over her shoulder. She shuffles past them, heading towards the backyard door in the kitchen.

Jonathan stares after her. He tilts his head to the side. “Is she going into the backyard to climb to her room?”

Steve snorts. He crosses his arms and shifts his gaze from Nancy to Jonathan. “Don’t apologize,” he says before Jonathan can get it out. “This is us against the problem. Not us against you. You gotta let us in, though.”
“I’m —” Jonathan pushes down another apology at Steve’s eyebrow raise. The kids’ voices grow louder, their footsteps thudding from the hallway. “I appreciate it. I appreciate you.”

Steve smiles. He bumps his hip against Jonathan’s. “Yeah, well. You’re my something familiar. I can’t lose you, can I?”

“You’d still have Nancy.” It’s a joke, nothing serious, but Steve flinches like he’s been struck.

“But —”

The kids come running into the dining room. Mike leads them in and scowls. “Steve. You’re not even dating my sister anymore and I still have to see you shirtless in my house. Dude.”

Steve rolls his eyes and crosses his arms again, higher up his chest. “You don’t have to look. And Jonathan doesn’t mind.”

“Jonathan’s too nice to say anything,” Lucas says from behind Mike. El and Max nod in agreement.

“I’m sure he hates it.” Dustin wrinkles his nose. “Probably more than we do.”

The kids stare expectantly at Jonathan. Even Steve waits for an answer, his mouth curved into an amused grin.

“I … don’t not not hate it,” Jonathan eventually gets out.

“Do we have to keep sharing opinions on Steve’s body or can we eat pizza?” Will elbows Dustin and glares at the rest of his friends. “I’m starving!”

The kids follow Will into the kitchen. Will shoots Jonathan a thumbs-up in passing.

Jonathan shakes his head, smiling. “You were right about me not minding.” The kids are out of sight, so Jonathan trails his hand down Steve’s chest. “Didn’t include how this is one of my favourite sights in the world, though.”

Steve’s grin widens. He drags Jonathan’s hand down to his hip. “Doesn’t mean much when I know you’ve been to just Hawkins and Indiana.”

“You and Nancy are my favourite things to take pictures of,” Jonathan tries again. He knows Steve’s comment was just him teasing, that he appreciated the sentiment, but he needs to say these things. He needs them to know it.

“Tsk, I’m not a thing,” Steve teases.

“Sorry, a person. One of my favourites. And you know that I don’t like most people, but you guys aren’t most people, and no matter what happens, that doesn’t change. Especially not when you’ve put up with me the way you have.”

“We don’t put up with you.” Steve’s hands frame Jonathan’s face, forcing their eyes to meet. His palms are warm and soft. “Don’t say shit like that. You’re joking to me, but I don’t know if you’re joking to yourself, so … don’t. We chose this, right? I chose you. Chose all of you. I wanted you and Nance for a whole year. You’re annoying, yeah, and that’s part of why I like you so much. You’re not a fuckin’ burden.”

Jonathan’s breath catches. He presses his forehead against Steve’s. He wants to say something, but no string of words can describe how much he loves Steve, especially in this moment. So he sinks
into Steve’s embrace, hoping it’s enough.

Nancy flies down the stairs. Jonathan thinks she’s wearing his sweatpants, but he can’t see her properly with his head bent towards Steve. She dashes into the dining room and into them. She drops a kiss to Jonathan’s shoulder blade and presses her face into his back. She doesn’t say anything.

None of them do. They hold onto Jonathan. And Jonathan lets himself be held.


The kids entrance into the dining table breaks apart their hug. They crowd around the dining table, the teens watching them finish the rest of their pizza, asking about their day as the kids make fun of and speak over one another.

It’s a few hours later that the kids decide to watch a movie in the living room. Nancy announces that she, Jonathan, and Steve will go upstairs.

That’s how they find themselves back in Nancy’s room at eleven at night. Back in a triangle with their knees pressed together.

Jonathan leans against Nancy’s headboard. “I feel like we have all of our serious conversations here.”

Nancy chuckles. She rolls Jonathan’s sweatpants up to her ankles and swings her leg across Steve’s lap. “Makes for the perfect place to talk about this, right? So let’s talk.”

“You don’t want to go to New York.” Steve gently tugs Jonathan’s leg out of the cross-legged position so it’s on his lap, next to Nancy’s leg.

“I do want to go,” Jonathan says carefully. “But I don’t want to leave my family. Lots of things could go wrong, Will and El and Mom are grieving, Kali and I —”

“We understand,” Nancy interrupts. “Your family’s a priority. I love that about you. So then let’s move to Illinois. You can go to school and stay home, you still have a scholarship, and Steve and I, Robin, too, can get our own place. You stay with us or your family, whatever you want, but we’ll see each other always.”

Jonathan blinks, shocked. “You thought about this?”

“All through dinner with the kids. So I already have a response to your point of but, Nancy, you didn’t apply to schools in Illinois! I did. Just in case.”

“You did that?” Jonathan’s voice drips with sincerity. He reaches for her hand, heart swelling.

She beams, pressing her palm against his. “Of course. You know, in case one of us didn’t get to our dream school, or in case of this. And Robin’s considering taking a year off, anyway, so if she goes through with it, this works. Steve, what do you think?”

“Don’t care where we are as long as I’m with you two and Robin. I’m good.”

As easily as Jonathan’s heart had swelled, it constricts with a terrible thought. “But Columbia is your dream school. And New York is the place for you, Steve, a big city like that will help you figure out
what you want with your life. I can’t hold you back.”

“You’re not holding us back if we’re choosing this,” Nancy insists.

“But aren’t I? You deserve to live your life, not move from one shitty town to another, and not because of me.”

“It’s not a shitty town with you in it,” Steve cuts in.

“So you’re okay with Nancy throwing her dream away?”

Nancy bristles. “I’m not throwing my —”

“If this is what she wants,” Steve says, looking at Nancy, “then it’s what I want. Don’t you think she can make her own decisions?”

Jonathan grips the blanket underneath him tightly. They’re not getting it. “Nancy, of course I trust you and know that you’ll make the right choice for yourself. But I just … you want Columbia.”

Nancy squeezes his hand. “I want you.”

He holds their joined hands to his face, blinking back the wetness in his eyes. “Don’t.”

“Jonathan,” Steve says desperately. He tips Jonathan’s chin up. “What’s the matter?”

“Don’t do this for me. Please, don’t move near me, and not go to the school and place of your dreams.”

“We’re not doing long-distance.” Nancy’s voice burns with tears. “We can do ten months, but four years? No.”

“I can move back and forth,” Steve suggests again.

“But Jonathan and I won’t be together. One of us will always be missing you. All three of us, together,” Nancy huffs with the same amount of determination as when she’d told Jonathan once upon a time that she wanted to kill a monster, burn the lab to the ground. That was justice. This is love. But the lines overlap, and he thinks either way, they’re talking about right and wrong. “That’s the way it should be. We agreed this works best. We’re not those stupid teens who think they’re in love and make all of their life choices around each other. We’ve fought with each other. We’ve fought for each other. This is real. Is that — is that what you’re afraid of?”

“Of course not!” So many things in Jonathan’s future remain uncertain, but his feelings for them and what he wants with them aren’t. “I know this is real, and I know we’re different. We have a good love here, but choose yourself. Please. Nancy, you deserve to go to school, get the career you want, and Steve, you deserve to figure shit out away from all the expectations and people of your past tying you down. History can’t repeat itself.”

Steve clenches his jaw. “So we get the chance to not fuck up like our parents, but you don’t? In what world is that fair?”

“I never said it was fair,” Jonathan bites out. “This world isn’t fair.” It’s the truth. Surely it’s not just something he told himself when Lonnie left, at Will’s funeral, at Barb and Bob and Hopper’s funeral (so many fucking funerals), at the dozens of times where bills and wages and schoolwork caught up to him.
“So let’s make it!” Steve cries out. “I don’t care if I sound like a naive idiot, but why the fuck not? Why can’t we be together?”

“I’m not breaking up with you!”

Steve laughs bitterly. “It feels like it.”

“Nancy, will you tell him?”

Nancy sighs at them both. “Jonathan, have you even talked to your family about this? Is Joyce okay with it?”

“She would never let me turn NYU down,” Jonathan says with certainty. “I can’t tell them, not until after I graduate. They love me, they want what’s best, but me staying with them, that’s what they need.”

Nancy and Steve share a knowing look. Steve touches Jonathan’s back and Nancy strokes his hair. Jonathan leans into their touch, crumbling bit by bit.

Nancy nestles her head on his shoulder. “But what about what you need?”

“I need them to be okay.”

“I know I won’t get it the same way you do, so help me out,” Steve says. He guides Jonathan’s head onto his shoulder, afterwards resting his chin on top. “Why wouldn’t they be okay?”

“Let’s see. Money. If they have a nightmare, a bad day because of all the shit from Hawkins, or even … El only eats breakfast when I make it. I’m the only one that can properly wake Will up. Things like that. What happens when I’m gone?”

“They deal,” Nancy says. “Change is a part of life. They’ll be okay. So will you.”

“I’d be fine without them.” Jonathan can be a good liar if he needs to, but even he can’t fake this. “Or not. Maybe not. God, definitely not.”

Steve hums. He rubs up and down Jonathan’s shoulder. “Change is scary, but look how well you dealt with the move.”

“But I had my family,” Jonathan splutters. Nancy and Steve have shifted so that they sit on either side of him, his and Nancy’s leg still on Steve’s lap. All of their attention is on him, but he can’t bear to look at them. He stares ahead, but then his eyes catch sight of a picture Nancy has, of her and Barb. Something inside him breaks. She’s had it so much worse. Her best friend died. She killed someone too last summer, but she can handle it. She doesn’t need to tell herself stupid fucking affirmations every morning and night. And Steve was tortured last summer, beaten up and hurt again, missing for days. And of course they’re struggling, but they’re living, too.

They aren’t breaking down at the prospect of moving to New York either.

The realization shatters inside of him. The pieces carve into his chest. His family may need him, but he needs them just as badly. For nights he can’t sleep, when he can crawl into Joyce’s bed or check on Will sleeping. For mornings when the quiet is unbearable, he can sing with El, watch stupid comedy shows with Kali, or ask Murray about his latest conspiracy. The little things. The in-between moments. They’re woven into every second of his life, every aspect of his being. He can’t let go of that. He’s not ready.
“You’ll have us,” Nancy reminds him. She drops a kiss to his collarbone.

“It’s not that I don’t need that as much as my family, it’s just …” Jonathan trails off. He buries his face in his hands. “I’m sorry. I need a second.”

Nancy presses her face into his neck. Steve continues stroking Jonathan’s back. “Don’t be sorry,” Steve says into Jonathan’s hair. He kisses the spot.

“Take as much time as you need,” Nancy adds.

Everything — his feelings for Nancy and Steve, his responsibility to his family, his friendship with Kali and Olive, his love for them all, his dream for NYU, his ache to start over, but not lose what he’s built and fought for — fills him up and overflows. It’s too much. It’s leaking out of him. He starts coughing frantically, his sobs caught in his throat.

Nancy and Steve pull away. “Jonathan, what’s wrong?” He can’t tell who’s speaking. All he can tell is that he needs them back. He gestures for them to return. Arms wrap around him and pull him close. A soft pair of lips kisses up and down his neck, another pressing a long one to this forehead.

His throat clogs up with all of the things he can’t say.

Thank you for being patient with me. Sorry I’m like this. I wish I could be better. I’m glad that I’m here. You’re both amazing. I love you, I love you, I love you.

He’ll say it later. For now, in their touch, he falls apart into a million pieces. They can’t help put him back together. No one can, except for him. But they help him clean up the mess.

Chapter End Notes

a few breakdowns later and heavy rewriting and editing, and here we are!

these past few weeks have been Weird and i am STILL out of the country, but i return home next week, and anticipate chapter four around then. a funny thing happened where so much of this chapter and the next foreshadowed (not technically but) events of my life, hence the delayed update. but things are better - middle fingers up for depression, please - and i’m really happy with how this chapter is now.

thank you for your kind comments! i really appreciate them and will continue replying. comments/kudos are always, always appreciated.

have a lovely day!
A day and a half later, they head back to Illinois.

They leave in the afternoon to make it in time for dinner. Jonathan openly weeps in Nancy and Steve’s embrace. They don’t bother with separate hugs. The three hug and cling to each other tightly by the doorframe. If the kids catch on, they don’t say a word. At least not with Jonathan there.

It’s harder than it was last time. The assurance that they’ll see each other soon only reminds him more of how long they’ll have to go. Nancy and Steve don’t acknowledge his red, puffy eyes, though they dry his cheeks. They get it. (They always do.)

Will and El handle their goodbyes better. No tears for them, rather repeated “I’ll call you!”’s, dry-eyed smiles, and lingering hugs.

On the drive back, El splays out in the backseat. Will sits in the passenger seat. He’s in charge of the music.

Jonathan’s not in the mood for talking. He still feels like he’s leaking, like the smallest of things could set him off again. He doesn’t want to worry Will and El. There’s nothing to say, anyway. Everything with Nancy and Steve is decidedly okay. They talked about it. They understand. They just want what’s best from him. He promised to talk to Joyce, to not make any hasty decisions without telling them first, and to take their words seriously. He knows he has to think it over, but he’s too tired to do that now.

All he wants to do is drive and listen to Radiohead.

Two songs later, Will clears his throat. He and El have been exchanging pointed glances and shrugs for the past five minutes. Jonathan has pretended not to notice.

“What’s up, bud?” Jonathan asks.

Will’s mouth twists into a frown. He lowers the volume, quieting a song by The Clash. “Are you okay? You look upset.”

“More than usual when we leave them behind.” El sits up and clasps her hands in her lap. Her single, arched eyebrow perfectly resembles Kali, who does the same thing whenever she’s asking a question and wants the truth.

Jonathan squeezes the steering wheel. His knuckles turn white. “Don’t worry about me.” He attempts a smile that’s probably more frightening than reassuring.

“Don’t lie,” El says firmly. “Friends don’t lie and neither do family.”

*Family.* It’s like the word is magic, because his grip on the wheel loosens, his mind finally quiets,
and for once, he's able to answer the question honestly. Later, what El said will settle in his heart, how they went from small talk over waffles to this. “I’m just a little sad, I guess. Worried about the future. Everything will be okay, but it’s hard to see that from where I am.”

“You’ll get into NYU,” Will reassures.

Jonathan nearly laughs. It’s not what he was worried about, but the thought that he might not even get in after his freak-out about moving to New York is stupidly hysterical. “Hope so.” For all his worrying, getting into NYU is something he can’t even imagine. Living in New York, attending the school of his dreams, getting to do what he loves every day — he can’t wrap his mind around it. It doesn’t sound real. It doesn’t sound like a life that could be his.

But it could be.

After all, a few years ago, this life would’ve been unrecognizable and unreal to a Younger Jonathan.

“You will.” El lightly kicks the back of his seat as if to dare him to keep talking. “Your photos are good. Your grades are good. You’re good.”

“Yeah! You’re great.” As Jonathan slows at a stop sign, Will nudges him with a bright smile. “And you’ll be great in NYU.”

If his hands weren’t glued to the steering wheel and his eyes weren’t stuck to the road, he’d crush them both into suffocating hugs. “You wouldn’t miss me or anythin’? You’d be okay on your own?”

“We wouldn’t be alone,” Will says solemnly. “And we’d miss you, but we’ll be happy for you too. It outweighs that sadness.”

“It does?” The lump in Jonathan’s throat makes it difficult to remain casual. He steals a glance of Will from the corner of his eye and catches Will nodding enthusiastically.

“It does,” El chimes in. “The hurt is good. It’s how we feel everything else. It’s scary, yeah, but it’s better to be out there, feeling everything, the good and the bad, than inside, all closed-off. We’ll be out there with you, even if you’re in New York, and we’re here.”

Tears prick Jonathan’s eyes. He blinks rapidly, nearly missing a red light. The car slows down.

“You’re getting good at those. Your very own El Ives-Hopper pep-talk.”

“El Ives-Hopper-Byers,” she corrects proudly. It’s the conviction in her voice that gets him. That they’re just as part of who she is as her mother and father.

Will grins. “Will that fit on your driver’s licence?” He sticks his tongue out when El does the same and turns his back to her to raise the volume to Take on Me.

“I know this song!” El rolls the window down and pokes her head out. The wind blows through her hair. She sings, the words caught on a laugh as Will joins her.

Will hits Jonathan’s arm. He sings louder and fixes Jonathan with a pointed look, raising the volume even higher.

“Will that fit on your driver’s licence?” He sticks his tongue out when El does the same and turns his back to her to raise the volume to Take on Me.

“I know this song!” El rolls the window down and pokes her head out. The wind blows through her hair. She sings, the words caught on a laugh as Will joins her.

Will hits Jonathan’s arm. He sings louder and fixes Jonathan with a pointed look, raising the volume even higher.

Jonathan sucks in a breath. He rolls his own window down. Clears his mind. Sings with his siblings and to the wind, “But I'll be stumbling away, slowly learning that life is okay!”

The words stay with him long after the song ends.
He has a nice week.

There wasn’t any school on Monday, so school went by faster. His other classes are calmer, save for Yearbook. Frankfort has about 15% less hair now than he did at the beginning of the semester.

Yearbook has them running all over the place. Graduation photos need to be planned, by them for some stupid reason, there are still ten clubs that need their photo taken, seven more that need to submit their list of members’ names, and Jonathan and Olive are in charge of hounding teachers for their graduation blurbs. It’s as fun as it sounds.

“What’re you doing tonight?” Olive asks after the third teacher on their list yelled at them for interrupting their class. All they’d done was stare into the window on the door.

Jonathan slaps his hand over his chest. He exaggerates a gasp. “Olive, are you initiating plans?”

She rolls her eyes and knocks her arm into his. “I’m initiating dinner with the rugrats at the pizza place on Ninth. You in?”

“I have plans with —” Jonathan stops himself. He checks the hallway and verifies that it’s empty.

“Your girlfriend?” Olive guesses. They skip down the stairway that leads back to the first floor.

“With my … with Jane’s sister.”

Olive comes to a halt so sudden that Jonathan walks right into her back. She turns around, jabs a finger into his chest, and says, “Explain.”

He awkwardly obliges. This is what he comes up with on the spot: El is adopted, she was stuck with a shitty foster-dad where she met Kali, her foster-sister, and then adopted by a friend of Joyce, Hopper. Following his recent death, Joyce took them all here and adopted El.

“So Will and Jane aren’t actually twins?” Olive asks, chewing on a fingernail. They’ve been standing in the hallway for five minutes. Teachers and students have passed them, but they’re yearbook students. Yearbook students are known for lingering in the hallway and being anywhere but their classroom.

“They aren’t biologically related,” he says carefully. “We’re still siblings.”

“I know that. Oh God. Her dad died last year. That’s a lot.”

“He died in the Hawkins fire. He was, uh, Chief Hopper.”

Olive’s mouth hangs open. “That’s why you moved here. Because of the fire. Because he — oh, Jonathan.” She throws her arms around his neck and holds him tightly.

Jonathan makes a strangled noise. The clipboard in his hands falls to the floor. He stands there, arms by his side, stunned, before he remembers to hug back.

“Thank you,” he chokes out, his voice muffled by her hair. "And if you want to come tonight, you can. Just don’t want you to feel left-out with Kali. The sister. But she’s great. You two would get
along. Maybe don’t mention her or what I told you here, though.”

Olive pulls back. Her cheeks are flushed all over, but she just bumps her shoulder against Jonathan’s. They drift back to each other’s sides and walk back to Photography at a slower pace. “What’s she like?”

He describes Kali as best as he can. How she lights up around El and takes walks with her. How she *hates* shopping, but goes with Joyce in the mornings when everyone else is asleep. How she paints with Will while he draws. How she drinks coffee with Murray as they go over conspiracy theories together. How she cooks dinner with Jonathan two days of the week. How her chicken curry is the best —

Olive raises a hand. “Is she brown?”

Jonathan opens the door to Photography for her. He steps inside after her, shutting the door behind him. “Uh, yeah?”

“You’ve been hiding a brown girl from me all this *time*? Jonathan!”

“Olive! Sorry! I didn’t figure —”

“It’s fine,” she interrupts. They walk past the students laying on the floor, the mess of crumpled designs, and the exasperated artist in front of their desk who breaks a pencil in half. Olive sinks into her seat. “I just … wow. Wow. What she look like?”

“Adorable. But don’t tell her I said that.” Jonathan slips into the chair next to her. “Why?”

“I, uh, like drawing cute people. Which is why I draw you so often, I guess.” She flashes her crooked grin. Jonathan decides to ignore her blush.

He snorts. “You sound so much like Steve.”

“When can I meet him? He’s your best friend.”

“You’re my best friend.”

“You can have multiple best friends,” she says, matter-of-fact.

“I know that,” he says, thinking of Lucas, Max, Mike, and Dustin, all best friends with El and Will. “But I’m not — I mean, I’ve never —” He closes his mouth. He’s never been a person with people outside of his family. It’s always been Will and Joyce. That’s it. He thinks of everyone in his life: of El, Nancy, Steve, Kali, Olive, even Frankfort and Murray. He’s always known he’s been loved, it’s impossible not to with Joyce as his mother and Will as his brother, but it’s different when your circle isn’t just your family. When the love isn’t all the same. Familial, platonic, romantic. Different types, different people, who all love him for him.

For his tendency to take pictures of everything, to go on about movies and music that most people don’t know or care about, to cry at the smallest things, to talk to stray dogs and butterflies and rats as though they were people. For all of the things Lonnie hates about him. For all of the things he hates about himself. Maybe used to hate, though.

Olive pokes his forearm with the back of her pencil. “You there?”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m here. Steve and Nancy want to visit next month. I’ll invite you over.”
Olive bites at the smile spreading across her mouth. She readjusts her hold on her pencil and continues a doodle of a flower on the table. “Sweet. I’ve been wanting to meet her, too. So is it — I mean, are you sure it’s cool if O and I come over tonight for dinner then? That we’re not barging in on family time?”

Jonathan automatically smiles at Olive’s nickname for her brother. It’s the same nickname that Oliver has for her. “Of course. My mom loves you, and your brother likes listening to Murray talk which means Murray likes him.”

Her eyebrow raises. “And Murray doesn’t like me?”

“You argue with him. So he loves you. You remind him of Nancy.”


Jonathan starts to reply, but Frankfort storms into the room, visibly distressed. He tugs on his few strands of hair, gripping his clipboard with both hands. “Why do none of these teachers know how to write a minimum of four sentences to say goodbye? Just say goodbye in four different languages if you have to! I gave them a months heads up that today was the deadline, and —”

“Hey, Jonathan, it’s your turn to calm him down,” a kid in the back calls out.

Jonathan glances at the schedule on the whiteboard. The class formed it to decide which of them would have to calm Frankfort done ensuing one of his many, constant breakdowns as the end of the year loomed. It confirms that it is his turn.

He jumps out of his seat, Big Brother mode activated, starting with the low, soothing voice. “Hey, Frankfort, it’s okay.” He guides Frankfort back into the hall, away from the chaos of exhausted seniors rushing to meet a deadline in the room. “You’ll be alright.”

“I’m just tired, Jon,” Frankfort sighs into his hands. “Teachers suck.”

“Not all of them,” Jonathan says immediately. It makes Frankfort laugh.

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Dinner goes well.

The house overflows with noise. The laughter and conversation continues non-stop. Olive and Kali take to each other immediately. It’s an immediate connection from the second their eyes meet. For the entire night, they sit next to each other with their heads bent close, talking easily and seemingly never running out of things to say. It makes Jonathan immensely glad that two of his favourite people like each other so much. Olive and Kali could both use more friends, and it didn’t occur to Jonathan how well they complemented each other.

“Your sister is hogging mine,” Oliver says to El. He sits between Will and El. “But I don’t mind. They like each other.”

El smiles knowingly. “They do.”

Oliver smiles back and swallows another forkful of chicken. He looks at Will andFlushes.
Underneath the table, they’re holding hands. Jonathan only knows this because he’d dropped his fork and spotted it. It’s unbelievably cute. He plans on teasing Will about it later, when no one’s around.

“You have something on your nose,” Will tells Oliver.

“Really!?” Oliver wrinkles his nose like he can’t see it.

“No.” Will ducks as Oliver chucks a napkin at him. They break into laughter.

“So cute,” Joyce sighs. She sits across from Jonathan, dabbing the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

“It’s never as sweet as when you’re fourteen,” Murray adds thoughtfully.

Jonathan wonders when Will could’ve Murray about his relationship with Oliver. Will (and Jonathan) hasn’t even told Joyce. But Murray picks up on these things, and unlike most people, will tell you straight to your face. Jonathan’s had experience with it, the memory of Murray’s incessant prodding in his relationship with Nancy almost fond.

“I dunno,” Jonathan says. He scrapes his spoon against his plate to collect the last bit of Alfredo sauce. “I think it’s as sweet at any age if you let yourself be fourteen year-old idiots with the person you love.” Nancy and Steve would definitely tease him for saying it right before they kissed him. His lips tingle at the thought.

Joyce leans across the table to squeeze Jonathan’s hand. “Now that is sweet.”

Meanwhile, Murray says, “Your mother and I aren’t dating, bud.”

Jonathan choke on the spoonful of sauce in his mouth. “I didn’t imply that you were! I was talking about myself!”

Murray’s eyebrow shoot up. “Oh, my bad, my bad. I get it wrong, every now and then.”

Jonathan resists the urge to glare at Murray. He sips his water as his heartbeat calms back down. “So modest.” The smile Murray sends him is as dry as Jonathan’s retort. Strangely enough, Jonathan finds himself smiling back.

“Every now and then,” Joyce repeats in a nasally voice. Murray scoffs at her impression of him. “Please.”

“Yes, Joyce, even someone as intelligent and amazing as me makes mistakes. It’s hard to believe, but it’s true.”

Joyce rolls her eyes, but can’t conceal her laughter. She slides Murray’s glasses up his nose. “You’re ridiculous, Murray.”

Jonathan scans the table. Kali’s explaining how she dyed her hair to Olive. Olive nods, playing with the now purple streaks in Kali’s hair. Oliver rants about their science teacher to an equally-annoyed El and a moon-eyed Will. Joyce teases Murray for not knowing how to change a tire.

It’s a nice moment. The looming fact that it could all go away in a handful of months doesn’t change that.

Even if Jonathan loses his appetite.
After the life Jonathan’s lived with the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer, it’s probably melodramatic to deem this the worst week of his life. Even more so to say that it starts with his envelope from NYU.

Really, it isn’t. But it comes close.

The letter arrives on the first Saturday of April. That morning, Jonathan's the first one awake in the house. Kali, El, and Joyce caught a late movie, so they’re presumably sleeping in. Will’s still at his sleepover with Oliver.

He rolls out of bed, brushes his teeth, and washes his face. His feet move in the direction of the front door before he’s even aware of it. He’s been habitually checking the mail as soon as he’s freshened up in the morning. Part of him hopes that he gets NYU’s letter as strongly as the other part hopes that he doesn’t.

This morning, the former wins.

As he files through the stack of mail on the front porch, the world stops as he sees it. NYU’s crest on the top right of a large, heavy envelope.

His throat turns dry. The rest of the mail falls out of his grasp and scatters onto the ground. His future sits in his hands.

Slowly, he sits on the front porch without falling. The porch creaks from the incessant tapping of his toes against the wood. He stares at the envelope. It stares back at him.

He rips through the paper and bunches the pieces of the envelope into his right hand. With his left, he clutches his letter from NYU. All he has to do is look down to know.

Despite this, he looks up to the sky. It’s blinding, but the morning sunlight greets him well, casting a warm glow on his face. If photography doesn’t pan out, he could be a gardener. Spending all day in the sun. Digging his fingers into the soil. Bringing things to life and helping them grow. He could be happy like this. It’d be a good life.

But he’d be happier with a camera. Capturing the moments, the good stuff. Finding the beauty in life to remind people that no matter what shitty things happen, that you’ll always have this. Making people smile, think, or even “ooh” at a breathtaking shot. Filling up galleries, memorializing weddings and birthdays, or even following Frankfort’s footsteps as a teacher. Inspiring the next generation. Telling them that they can be anything they want, but to first make sure that they’re kind to others and to themselves.

Doing what Lonnie said he couldn’t do. Doing what Joyce always knew he could.

Fuck it. If he doesn’t get in, he can start a garden.

Dear Mr. Byers.

We are delighted to inform you —
This is supposed to be the happiest moment of his life.

For the life of him, he can’t understand why it’s the opposite.

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For the rest of the weekend, Jonathan’s restless. Jumpy. Not himself.

“Jonathan? Jonathan.”

His spoon falls out of his hand and into his bowl of cereal. Drops of milk splatter across his shirt.

“Um. Yes?”

Kali kicks him from underneath the table. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He picks his spoon back up, watching the milk as he mixes his cereal around. “Are El and my mom still sleeping?”

Kali grinds her jaw at the blatant conversation change. “Jane saw this old shirt that belonged to Jim and started bawling. I stayed with her, of course, but Joyce took over, told me to eat and take care of myself first. So what’s wrong with you?”

“Is she okay?” His stomach lurches at the image of El crying uncontrollably. He glances at his cereal and pushes it away, out of sight on the table. No way he’s eating now.

“Joyce is handling it.” Emotion flits across Kali’s face so quickly that Jonathan can’t begin to register what they are. She schools her features into a neutral expression. Her thumb scratches at the 008 on her wrist. “Some things you can’t fix. Grief is one of them.”

Jonathan rises out of his chair. He gestures wildly to the hallway. Narrowly, he avoids hitting the table as he points in the direction of El’s room. “We can always help. We should help!”

“You want to help or you want to distract yourself from whatever’s wrong with your life right now?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that there’s something wrong with you and you won’t tell me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” He sits back down, struck with a wave of panic. It claws at his chest, rips right through him, begging him to move, to be a good brother to El, to prove to Kali that he’s okay, he’s fine. But he can’t. His bones, heavy with exhaustion, weigh him down to his seat. He can’t do any of the things he wants to, except meet Kali’s eyes and try not to prove her right.

“Hey, that’s not what I meant!” Kali opens and closes her mouth several times. Her chin trembles. “I’m sorry, I don’t — emotions are hard for me, you know that —”

“I know,” Jonathan says flatly, unable to keep the hurt out of his voice.

Kali braces her hands at the back of her neck. “Are you upset?” Her voice breaks. He’s never seen her like this, and it’s as unnerving as it is upsetting.

“No.” Maybe one day, his automatic response to that question won’t be to lie. “You misspoke. I
understand, okay? I’m not upset. I could never be upset with you. I’m sorry. Please don’t cry. Especially not because of me.” He closes the gap between them by leaning over to replace her thumb by her tattoo with his own.

Kali laughs wetly. She hooks her thumb around his. “You think I’m crying?”


“Yeah, yeah, I’m good.” Kali smiles back. They share a relieved chuckle as Kali leans back into her seat, and Jonathan pokes at his cereal again. “So. Did you check the mail? Your letter come in yet?”

“No,” he says for whatever reason. Right after reading his acceptance, he’d stowed the letter underneath his bed where no one will see it. It’s stupid. He should tell them. They’d be happier than he is, although that’s not a high bar to set.

He should tell him. He doesn’t.

“Maybe tomorrow.” He picks his bowl up and tosses the rest of his cereal into the trash.

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Sunday night, he wakes up to Will’s screaming.

Back in Hawkins, he’d been used to the sound. Nightmares were frequent. Paranoia and shadows led to the breaking of several bowls, plates, and mugs. He and Joyce would drop whatever they were doing to tend to him.

It’s been so long since Will had a nightmare this bad that Jonathan thinks something is wrong. Something is wrong, yes, but as Will’s screaming bleeds into sobbing, he understands that it’s not a physical threat. It’s the emotional kind. At this point, that seems worse.

You can kill a monster in real life. But what do you do about the ones in your head?

Jonathan sprints out of bed. He bursts into Will’s room. Kali’s already there, precariously positioned at the edge of Will’s bed.

“I’m fine,” Will says, as if he’s not breathing heavily. He’s also sweating. His hair sticks to his forehead, dark bags are outlined underneath his eyes, and tears well up in his eyes. “Just a bad dream.”

“We’ll sit with you. Bad dreams are scary.” Kali rubs his shoulders. She makes a quiet, stunned sound as Will leans into her touch. “Or do you want us to go?”

The door’s kicked open. Joyce runs in next. Her hand flies to her stomach at the sight of Will. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Nightmare,” Will says numbly.

Joyce marches to Will’s bed. She jumps on and envelops Will into a hug. “Oh, Will.” She drops a kiss to the top of his head, stroking the back of his head.
Will doesn’t bother putting up a front. “I’m so tired, Mom,” he hiccups. He hides his face in her shoulder and wraps his arms around her neck. “I’m just. Exhausted.”

“I know, baby, I know.”

Kali disentangles from Will. She rolls off of the bed and walks towards Jonathan’s side. “Do you want us to go, Joyce?”

“Just give us a minute, hon. Jonathan, how about you make hot cocoa?”

Jonathan stops slouching and straightens at the sound of his name. He’s just been standing here uselessly, providing no comfort to Will, just watching him suffer. He can do this one, small thing. “Okay,” he rasps, his voice unfamiliarly hoarse. He wants to cry, to crawl into a hole, to be better than he is. More than anything, he wants to feel something other than the overwhelming nothingness in his chest.

But he doesn’t know how. He does know how to make hot cocoa, though.

He and Kali walk side-by the side to the kitchen. Once they’re out of ear-shot, Kali turns to Jonathan. “You okay?”

He considers a lie, but he can’t do that to her. They’ve been straightforward with each other from the start. He can count on her to understand. “I don’t know how to help him.” It’s not the entire truth, but it is true. Other things plague his mind, but he can’t exactly tell her what’s going on if he doesn’t understand it himself.

Kali’s lips purse. She leans against the kitchen counter. “You’re a good brother. That’s how you help. And you’re making him hot cocoa. The little things add up.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he tells her genuinely. He takes the milk carton out of the fridge and waves it at her. “You want a cup?”

“Sure.” She grabs three mugs and sets them by the sink. A small grunt escapes her as she attempts to sit on the counter.

“You want help?” Jonathan can’t help his smirk as he shuts the fridge door.

Kali flips him off. Two tries later, and she’s up. There’s something deeply amusing about a bad-ass like her having trouble sitting on the kitchen counter.

They don’t talk as he prepares the hot cocoa. Silence between them is familiar. She’s the only person that he appreciates them with. But this time is different. His heart races in stark contrast to his sluggish movements. His hands shake. Everything he holds, from the carton of milk to the mugs to the bag of marshmallows, he almost drops.

It’s an easy task. Yet he can’t fucking do it.

When El bursts into the kitchen, he jumps so badly that he spills a mug of hot cocoa all over his leg. “Jonathan!”

The pain delays. He makes a few observations: his sweatpants are stained, the mug is empty, and his eyes sting with tears.

Then it comes. The liquid burns, scalding hot and soaking through his sweatpants and to his skin.
He can’t even do this right.

“God fucking dammit,” he scowls. Anger, pain, and exhaustion pulse through him, overwhelming and overcrowding. The urge to throw the mug across the room twitches his fingers. The reverberating thud as the mug shattered and broke apart wouldn’t fix anything, but it would do something.

But he looks at how rigid El’s spine has gone. Then at Kali, who’s leapt off of the counter. She’s stood in front of El and raised a hand out in the direction of the mug.

It wasn’t too long away when he was in their position. Lonnie preferred smashing Joyce’s cherished plates, but he worked fine with bottles, vases, mirrors. In a drunken fit, he’d smashed one of Jonathan’s favourite mugs. It was yellow and cheap, with black flowers painted on by Will. Jonathan can’t remember what caused the fight. He’ll never forget the sound of it shattering it into a million pieces or how desperately he tried putting it back together.

Certain moments are defining, because you decide who you are, right then and there.

Jonathan decides.

It doesn’t matter what’s going on in his head and heart right now. He can’t do that, not to them or himself.

He forces an inhale, then an exhale. “I’m going to get cleaned up,” he announces. He sets the mug by the sink.

El hugs her chest. “Jonathan,” she says, her voice quivering, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was an accident. It happens and it’s no one’s fault.” He smiles at her to show that he’s okay. “I’m gonna get changed.” He doesn’t wave to them like he would otherwise, still horrified at finding Lonnie in himself. It was a split-second. He didn’t even throw the mug in the end. But it was all too much.

He exits the kitchen then drifts down the hallway.

“Jonathan!”

He turns his head at Joyce’s voice. Stepping back into Will’s room, he winces. “Sorry, I forgot to bring the hot —”

“I’ll get that for him in a minute,” Joyce says dismissively. Jonathan tips his head up to find Joyce Will curled up on one side of his bed. Will’s head rests on her shoulder. “You wanna come in? I figured we could all sleep here tonight. Kali and El, too.”

Will nods encouragingly. He pats the space next to him.

Jonathan absentmindedly reaches down to touch where he had spilled the drink all over his leg. The black in his sweatpants hides the stain. “I’m okay.” He touches the stain and recoils.

Joyce frowns. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I’ll just go back to bed. Feel better, bud.” He swings around and puts one foot in front of the other until he can face-plant into his bed.

Sleep doesn’t come.
“Just let him be.”

“But he’s drooling all over the table.”

“Who gives a fuck about these tables? Like you haven’t drawn a penis on it every day this semester!”

“Olive, quit PMSing.”

“I will murder you, but even then, you’d only bitch about the blood on the ta —”

“Whoa, whoa, everyone relax!”

Jonathan groans at Frankfort’s loud, stern voice. He touches the back of his pounding head. It doesn’t take long for him to understand; he fell asleep in Photography. There is drool all over the place, down his chin, across his cheeks, on the table indeed.

“Olive is the one letting Byers sleep throughout class as if we have all the time in the world to finish Yearbook!”

And there’s someone shouting right by his ear.

Jonathan stirs, but no one acknowledges him. His eyes flutter open. After a few blinks, his vision clears up to reveal Olive to his right. She crosses her arms across her chest and is yelling at someone.

“It’s not a big deal if he misses one class,” she snaps. “He’s tired.”

“So are we,” a boy, Dylan, hisses back. “That’s not an excuse for him to be a lazy asshole.”

“Have some compassion. Or at the very least, fuck off.”

Jonathan sits up at that. “’M awake,” he grumbles. It takes a moment to adjust to the light. He stretches his arms above his head. “And sorry.”

Dylan, standing at Jonathan’s left, waves his hands dramatically. “See! He’s sorry.”

“He shouldn’t be,” Olive seethes. “Dylan, get the fuck out of my face.”

“Olive,” Frankfort warns from in front of their table. He shakes his head disapprovingly.

Olive rolls her eyes so hard that it’s a wonder they don’t get stuck. “I’m sorry,” she drawls, her voice thick with sarcasm. “Please get the fuck out of my face.”

Jonathan tries to mask his surprise. He’s never heard Olive swear, raise her voice, or lash out at someone like this. It simultaneously warms and worries him that she would do all of this for him, but in doing so, would risk getting in trouble, especially in the most important year of their academic lives.

Frankfort rubs his temples. “Both of you walk away.”

Despite this, Dylan steps towards Olive. He laughs, the sound mean and dry. “Guess I gotta be
considerate and all during your time of the month.”

“You? Considerate?” Olive smiles sharply, squaring her shoulders. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”


“Yeah, Olive, listen to your boyfriend,” Dylan sneers.

“What part of walk away do neither of you get?” Frankfort glares at Olive and Dylan, but neither acknowledge him.

“Girls and guys can just be friends, dickwad,” Olive snarls. “We aren’t dating.”

“That makes more sense. I knew you were a dyke.”


“C’mon, Olive. I’m joking.” Dylan laughs again, the sound higher, and grabs Olive’s wrist.

She recoils, but he doesn’t let go. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

Olive snorts. He tightens his grip with another laugh. “I’m just playing —”

Jonathan won’t remember jumping out of his seat and punching the side of Dylan’s voice. The memory of how sharp the stinging in his fist is and Dylan dropping to the floor, however, will never leave him.

The class gasps. Jonathan spares them a glance, but doesn’t do the same for Dylan. He looks over his shoulder to Olive. “Are you okay?” He asks softly.

Olive claps a hand over her mouth. She eyes Dylan, sprawled across the floor and smirks. “You’re going to get into so much trouble.”

“So are you. You swore at him.”

“You hit him!”

“He touched you.”

“Oh my God.” Olive opens her arms as if to fling them around Jonathan, but she quickly slaps them back to her sides instead. “We’re so fucking screwed.”

She’s right. Jonathan shouldn’t be relieved, but the fact that Olive’s alright and that he didn’t wait until she attacked him instead, getting him the worse end of the punishment, make it easy for him not to care.

Frankfort heaves a sigh. He helps Dylan up to his feet. “Come on, guys,” he chastises, tilting his head at Dylan’s throbbing and reddening cheeks. “Office. Now.”
Jonathan gets sent home for the rest of the day. He misses a total of half an hour of school. Olive and Dylan have to help Frankfort with whatever tasks he’ll choose to assign them after school; Olive has to stay for one hour while Dylan has to stay for two.

On his way out of the office, Jonathan makes the gesture for a phone with his hands to Olive. She nods. It means a call later. He wants to thank her and scold her, the same things she’ll do to him. He doesn’t ask her to walk Will and El home, because he knows she will.

He drives the car back home. He pulls up to the driveway. The kids won’t be home for at least another forty-five minutes, his mom and Kali for another hour and a half. He doesn’t need to go inside. Why would he?

He’ll be there for the rest of his life.

Drawing in a long breath until it reaches his chest, he pulls back out of the driveway. And drives.

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Jonathan doesn’t drive too far. Just circles by, passes familiar streets, shops, parlours, and the single mall that he hasn’t been to. He probably never will. The mall wouldn’t shake him up as badly as the hospital, but he won’t risk it.

A mixtape full of slow and sad songs was already in when he went inside his car, so he repeats it over and over again. It’s probably not helping. But he raises the volume and stops caring.

The sun sets above him. A brighter, more blinding mix of orange and pink. Spring is the best time of year. He likes what it embodies. A rebirth, a new beginning, an end to the cold harshness of winter to welcome in some light.

But none of that resonates with him now.

It feels like minutes later that he glances at the time. The car nearly swerves when he does. It’s already eight. He missed dinner. He missed his daily calls with Nancy and Steve. He wasted all of this gas. He must’ve worried his family since no one knows where he is right now.

“Fuck,” Jonathan exhales.

He speeds back home, speeding limit be damned. It takes fifteen minutes to get back. He almost trips over himself to get inside and races into the living room.

Will, El, Kali, Joyce, and Murray are all squeezed onto the sofa. The television plays a game-show he doesn’t recognize.

Their heads whirl around. Joyce’s shock, quickly bleeding into rage, sets of several alarms off in his head.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts out, unprepared for the lecture he’s owed. “I’m okay. I just needed air. Don’t be mad.”

Joyce stands up from the couch. Murray yelps as he’s knocked into the side of the sofa. But Joyce doesn’t look at him. She narrows her eyes and storms past the sofa, her eyes and march set towards
“Let’s go,” Kali hisses, blindly grabbing Will’s wrist and yanking him up to his feet. “Now!” She, Will, El, and Murray all but run out of the room and retreat into the hallway. They’ll probably hide in Will’s room.

He doesn’t entertain that thought. He can’t, paralyzed under Joyce’s glare.

“Should I bother telling you how you messed up or do you wanna do it yourself?” Joyce clenches her jaw.

Jonathan hangs his head low, resisting the urge to snap back. She has a right to be mad, but he was just defending Olive. He needed time to himself, to think, to breathe. “I punched a kid.”

“You. Punched. Someone. That’s not you!”

He’s about to say that it is, that Steve has the proof, but he snaps his mouth shut.

At his silence, she cries out, “You were suspended!”

“I missed half a period. I’m going tomorrow!”

“They sent you home. Is that not a suspension?”

“I’m sorry, mom, but I can —”

She crosses her arms and shakes her head. “Nope. Keep listing what you did.”

Jonathan bites back a scowl. He slouches, too exhausted to fight. If he just answers what she asks and leaves it at that, this’ll be over faster. “I didn’t tell you where I was. I wasted gas. I worried all of you.”

“You did.” A slip in her Parenting Mode facade. Her chin wobbles. Her arms uncross across her chest and slip to her sides. “You could’ve left a note.”

“I’m sorry, mom,” he repeats, softer now. “It won’t happen again.”

“You’re damn right it won’t.” She crushes him into a hug before he can respond, guiding his head into the crook of her neck. “You’re better than this.”

He hiccups into her hair, holding her back with the same strength. She’s the only thing holding upright. “I know.” Clinging to her is like he’s ten again, and Lonnie just drunkenly yelled at him about how he wasn’t man enough, and he needed his mom to hold and comfort him, to make it all better.

“You can always talk to me.”

“I know.”

“You’re not like him,” she says. Jonathan’s heart stutters. “I don’t know where your mind’s at, but I know — I mean, he left randomly in the day so many times without a word. But this is different. You’re different. You’re not him.”

He hadn’t made the connection with Lonnie and himself. But hearing her words make him sob with a mix of shame and relief. He doesn’t want to be Lonnie, he can’t, so he does the one thing Lonnie never did to any of them: apologize. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”
“It’s okay.”

“I wasted gas.”

“It’s okay.”

“But like you said, I should know better. I should —”

“You’re seventeen.” She emphasizes her words with a firm squeeze to his shoulders. “Mistakes are part of the deal. You get to make them, because it’s how you learn, okay? You do better next time. That’s all it is. You’re just a kid, honey.”

“No, Mom, I’m not, it’s not ... I can’t —” She doesn’t understand. He’s crying, getting snot on her shirt and in her hair, after doing he’d done nothing all day except fuck-up and needlessly worry everyone. She doesn’t understand, and neither does he.

“You do,” Joyce repeats until he stops crying, and for some afterwards.

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That’s the thing thing about moms. They can make everything okay, but just in that moment.

The world is still dull and mean and unfair when he goes to bed that night. Nothing has changed. But what more does he want? He has a great family, great friends, great partners. He’s alive.

He should be happy.

The next two weeks drag. He trudges forward, through the pages of notes for his History class, collecting the seniors quotes for the Yearbook, family dinners that are more exhausting than they’ve ever been, and pretending like he hasn’t received his acceptance to NYU. He ignores the letter underneath his bed. He ignores Nancy and Steve’s calls. He ignores everything in the hopes of not unraveling the mess inside of him anymore than he already has.

The frustrating thing is that he can’t capture what specifically is bothering him. He could pin it on his trauma, on graduation, on the stress of school. There’s truth in all of those answers. But it’s more.

He spends hours at night tossing and turning. He can’t get through more than three bites of a meal. He hasn’t genuinely smiled or laughed or felt anything other than vague panic and dread with no source.

It’s bad, but it’s not My Brother Is Missing or The World Is Ending Bad, so he can figure it out on his own.

If it includes listening to mixtapes on repeat while staring at the ceiling, then so be it. It’s better than worrying and burdening everyone.

On a weekday towards the end of April, as Jonathan tunes everything out to a mix-tape he made with El a few months back, songs she told him that Hopper introduced her to, the door to his bedroom opens. Will pokes his head inside. “Nancy and Steve called.”

Jonathan sits up on his bed. The vague sense of dread reappears, despite how much he misses them, how happy that sentence would’ve made him only a few weeks ago. “Oh?” He can’t remember the
last time they called and he answered. The second they hear his voice, they’ll know something’s wrong and do something stupid like drive up here, and he can’t worry them. They already have so much going on. Nancy’s got senior year, Steve’s been pulling extra shifts at the arcade, and they’re already plagued with their own demons. Jonathan can’t add his own to their list. Besides, it might be better like this. Them moving to New York is easier if Jonathan severs ties first and lets them free.

It’s not easy. It’s not fair for them, but so little in this world is. They’d understand, eventually.

Will pushes Jonathan’s door. He steps inside and shuts the door behind him. “Yeah. You’re not going to call them back?”

“I will.” Jonathan picks at his fingernails. “I’m just … busy.”

Will snorts. “Busy listening to sad music?”

“It’s not sad.”

“Yeah, it’s chipper.” Will sits at the edge of Jonathan’s bed. “You’re not okay.”

“Will —”

Will raises his hand in a manner so strikingly similar to their mother that Jonathan shuts his mouth. “You’re not okay,” he repeats, gentler, “and it’s okay if you don’t want to talk, it’s okay if you do, and I’m here either way.”

Jonathan can’t tell if it’s guilt or gratitude making it difficult to speak. Will shouldn’t have to worry about him. That’s Jonathan’s job. But Will’s here, and he understands that sometimes all a person needs is company. Jonathan pushes past the swell of emotion in his chest to say, “Thank you, bud.”

“And when I say I’m here, I mean literally.” Will spreads his legs out on the bed and lays next to Jonathan. He wiggles his feet by Jonathan’s head. “I’m not leaving you alone. Mom, El, and Kali are out, so we might as well have some bonding time!”

“I’m not really in the mood to talk. I’m sor —”

“It’s fine. No talking. I just want to be here, with you. Is that okay?”

Jonathan manages a nod. “Of course. Thank you,” he says again, unable to articulate how much this means to him, how it was the perfect thing to say. He lowers his head onto his pillow and hopes Will understands anyway.

The two brothers lay together. They listen to Jonathan’s mixtape, humming along to the lyrics under their breath, until Jonathan falls asleep.

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He should’ve seen this coming.

After restless weeks without any sleep or appetite, a collective total of seven showers, and a heavy, bone-deep exhaustion, it comes down to a breaking point. It always does.

He’s survived another day of school. It’s last period Yearbook. The class is usually a breeze, a free-
period to relax and chill out. But that’s not how it is today.

A handmade template for the yearbook is due two days from now. The class is a mess. Pieces of paper and extra photos litter the floor. Four students weep in the corner. Frankfort passes them each a tissue box, his hair now 30% less than where it was in February. Cameras, lists, pens, and sheets of paper crowd the desks.

Jonathan and Olive sit in their usual spots. Olive’s finishing the last touches of the back design of the Yearbook. Jonathan colours the sides of the sheet that she isn’t working on. His fingers tremble, grip on the pencil crayon shaky. It’s only a template. It doesn’t have to be perfect; it just has to be done. Despite this, he berates himself for not being able to colour within the lines. What is he, five?

“What’s wrong?” Olive doesn’t look up from the design. She distractedly sticks her tongue out as she shades the corner of their mascot, an owl.

“I’m fine. Tired.” His trembling worsens. The pencil crayon flies out of his hands and onto the floor. “Goddammit.”

Olive tears her gaze away from the design and to Jonathan. She sighs. “Take a break. And before you say no, that wasn’t a question.”

“I need to help!”

“Don’t let Dylan get to you.”

“This isn’t about Dylan.” Jonathan blinks hard several times. After many sleepless nights, it’s difficult to keep his eyes open. “Let me help you with something.”

Olive yawns into the back of her hand. Jonathan’s not the only one tired. “Fine. Get me an indigo pencil crayon? I need it for the border.”

"Got it.” He stands from his seat. Students fill up every inch of space, so he carefully wiggles past everyone to get to the other side of the classroom where the pencil crayons are kept.

There’s a line. Jonathan waits behind four people. He taps his toe against the floor.

One person steps past them, away from the bin of crayons. The line moves up.

Another person.

Another.

An—

“Shit,” a voice from the nearby desk sounds. “Hey, Jonathan, can you grab that for me, man? It’s by your feet.”

“Sure thing.” Jonathan bends to grab the object by his feet without even glancing at it. He turns to the source of the voice, a frizzy redhead named Eliot. As he extends his hand out towards him, he glimpses at the object in his hands.

It’s a pair of scissors.

The blades dig into his fingers. The cold metal burns into his skin. It jolts him, sends him out of Illinois, out of his Yearbook class, and into Hawkins’ hospital. His ribs and limbs ache. His vision spots. Blood spools underneath his shirt. He’s panting, but he can’t stop running. A man who’s Tom,
but not really, runs after him, knocks him down, knocks him over, again and again until Jonathan’s sure he’s going to die, until he has no other choice, until he knows that he can live with himself for doing it.

For plunging the scissors into Tom’s neck.

Jonathan freezes. The scissors fall out of his hands.

The classroom surrounds him once more. He’s not in Hawkins. No one’s trying to kill him. He tells himself this, but his brain’s not listening.

“Sorry,” Jonathan rasps. Or did he? He can’t hear himself over the pounding of his heart. Bending back down, he tries to pick the scissors back up, but his palms are too slick. It slips out of his hands as though it’s soaked in blood.

Suddenly, it’s all Jonathan can see. Red on the blades, red on the floor, red in his vision. So much blood, all over his hands.


Jonathan jerks back. He stumbles into someone. “I’m sorry, so —” Why can’t he do anything right? Why can’t he let go? Tom’s dead. Jonathan couldn’t have done anything for him. What’s done is done. He’d been fine all year. He was doing so well.

He looks around. Everyone’s staring.

“Jonathan,” Olive says. She rises out of her seat slowly. “It’s okay.”

No, it’s not. He’ll never escape Hawkins. He’ll never be okay. He’ll never live with himself.

Red continues to cloud his vision. It stains the tiles as he scurries across the room, towards the door. “I’m fine,” he repeats, over and over. The words don’t sound real anymore. It can’t be convincing, not with how terribly his voice cracks or how quickly he’s turned pale. Sweat clings to his skin, dampens his cheeks. It wasn’t this hot a few minutes ago.

Jonathan reaches the door. He loses his balance and leans against the doorframe to catch it again. People are whispering, people are talking to him, but none of it registers. He can’t focus on anything but the red everywhere. Frantically, he wipes his eyes. The red disappears. But it doesn’t matter, does it? The blood on his hands will always be there. He can try being better, but he’ll just end up back here. Freaking out over a pair of scissors, freaking out over a picture of a hospital, freaking out at getting into his dream school.

Illinois was supposed to be a fresh start, but he can’t start over. He can’t change what he’s done or what’s been done to him.

“Jon,” Frankfort says. His voice snaps Jonathan into focus. He smiles kindly, patiently, pityingly. “Can we talk in the hallway?” Frankfort should help kids that aren’t lost causes. Kids that aren’t murderers.

Kids that aren’t like him.

“I’m just … I’ll be back.” Jonathan turns around and bolts out of the classroom. He doesn’t stop to think about it. One foot moves in front of the other, then again, until he’s outside of the school.

The second he makes it to the school’s parking lot, he nearly topples over. He clutches his knees.
Shuts his eyes. Catches his breath. Fragments of moments flash in his mind. Flickering lights. White tiles. Tom’s demented smile. His hand wrapped around the pair of scissors. The gurgling of Tom’s blood. The thud of Tom’s body hitting the floor.

And Jonathan’s insurmountable relief.

“You’re faster than I thought you’d be.”

Jonathan jumps at Olive’s voice. He crosses his arms across his face to hide the stream of tears rolling down his cheeks. She can’t see him like this. She shouldn’t have to. “Olive. Please go back,” he says miserably.

“I’m not leaving you alone. Dylan can finish my template anyway. Want to go to the park? We can just sit. That’s all.” A pause. Jonathan considers her words, the genuineness in her tone, the promise of no questions, no expected answers. “It’s been forever since I went on a swing.”

That’s how they end up rocking back and forth on two swing. Behind the high school is a hill, and down the hill is a park where students hangout after school. Candy wrappers, cigarettes, and crushed soda cans litter the sand. It kind of makes him want to scream the garbage can is two feet away, so he averts his gaze before he’ll really get upset about it.

He digs his feet into the sand. The chains attached to the swing are cool against his fingertips as he tightens his grip around them. “I have a thing with hospitals,” he starts.

Olive didn’t ask, but she listens. She pushes herself forward with a small nod. “I figured after Harley’s assignment with the hospital photos. This happened last summer?”

Jonathan kicks himself off. The chains rattle as he moves back and forth. A gentle gust of wind blows past him. “Yeah. I thought moving here would change that. I thought I could be okay, but I feel … I feel like no matter what, this thing will always follow me. I can’t even hold a pair of scissors without breaking down. I can’t fucking do anything. I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t —” A sharp pain spikes up his chest. He clutches his chest, tightly presses his finger to the spot where it hurts most, right beneath his heart. A sob gets caught in his throat. This must be what a heart attack feels like. Maybe he’s dying, he doesn’t know, but he knows that he’s not living either. “I can’t even breathe, Olive, I can’t —”

Olive suddenly plants her feet into the sand. Her swing stops. She reaches towards the chains of his and grabs them to still him. She doesn’t touch him. “Look at me,” she commands softly. “You can do it. And that’s all you have to do right now. The next we’ll figure out later. Do it with me. Inhale. Exhale. That’s it. C’mon, let’s try.”

“Olive,” he rasps. He scratches frantically at his chest, his eyes burning with tears.


He can do it for her, he decides. Anything to get the sad look out of her eyes. Jonathan takes a deep breath. Inhales when she says to. Exhales when she says to. And repeats this with her until the pain eases, melting into a calmness that reaches his bones.

“I’m okay,” he says after awhile.

Olive must believe him, because she sits back into her swing. “Okay. Good.”

“Thank you. Just — thank you.”
“Of course.” She smiles at him, just barely. “What do you want to do now?”

Jonathan can think of a lot of answers, but he answers instinctively. “Sleep, honestly.”

“Are you okay to drive home? I can bring the kids back to your place afterwards. Do you want me to tell them what happened?”

Olive knows him so well. There are times when he wants to scream at the world for all it’s done to him and other times when he wants to thank it instead. This is the first time he’s wanted to do both.

“Yes,” he blurts out before changing his mind. He’ll chicken out if he has to tell them himself.

Olive nods. She stands from the swing and moves in front of him. “Call me tonight?”

Jonathan mirrors her and stands. “Definitely. Thank you.” He hesitates before touching her shoulder softly. “You’re my best friend. I’m really happy that I know you.”

Quiet shock passes through her features, followed by a brief and small smile. She lifts her hand and brushes her thumb against his. “I’m really happy I know you too. And I know this is a stupid thing to say, but you’ll be okay. One bad day doesn’t erase a hundred good ones. But let yourself be a person. Sometimes things gotta fall apart before you can put them back together, y’know?”

His heart clenches. “Yeah, that — makes sense. You have a lot of experience with that?”

“With being a person? Unfortunately, yes. But if you mean falling apart, then ...” She shrugs. “But that kind of also means I have a lot of experience with putting myself back together, too.”

“You know you can always talk to me, right?”

“I know. Look, we can talk about how I’m just as screwed up as you another day. Go home. Go sleep.”

So he gives her another thanks and a squeeze to her shoulder. During the drive home, her words replays in his mind. He can be a person. Maybe he can’t be strong, or brave, or even okay, but he can do that.

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He’s trying to take a nap when the kids come home. He rolls over blearily to check his alarm clock. Half past four. Much later than it would take to reach the house.

But they’re here, safe judging by the sounds of hushed giggling from the other end of the house. Jonathan rucks his blanket higher up his body. He’ll have to explain what happened, let them worry and fuss over him, instead of brushing it off, which shouldn’t feel as daunting as it does. But he can’t let this happen again. He can’t keep them — or himself — in the dark any longer.

A fist raps against his door from the other side. “Can we come in?”

“Of course,” Jonathan calls out. He sits up sluggishly, leaning his weight against his headboard.

El pushes the door open. She smiles at Jonathan. He searches and searches, but he can’t find a trace of sympathy or pity. Just fondness. “You’re probably tired, so rest up. But we just wanted to give
you something."

Jonathan’s mouth twitches into a smile. “You didn’t have to.”

El grins. He loves how happiness looks on her, loves that he was able to cause such a thing. “Too late! Will, come in!”

Will bursts into Jonathan’s room. “Ta-da!” He flips the light-switch on, and that’s when Jonathan sees it.

“A waffle,” he observes, his eyes crinkling as his smile widens. It’s store-bought from a breakfast diner seven minutes away that they’ve gone to a couple of times. The waffle is large, coated with maple syrup and sliced strawberries and bananas. It’s his favourite order. “You guys walked all the way?”

Will pshaws. “We could’ve used a walk. I’ll put it in the fridge unless you want it now?”

“Later, maybe?” He’s hungry, sure, but eating the gigantic waffle seems like a huge task that he’s not ready for.

Will and El nod. “Are you okay?” El asks.

I’m okay, Jonathan almost says. But he can’t lie to them. He musters up enough energy to firmly insist, “I will be,” to both them and to himself.

They both smile at him. “Good,” Will says. “We’ll leave you alone to sleep. Waffle’ll be in the kitchen whenever you’re ready.”

“Us too,” El adds. “Whenever you’re ready.”

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Jonathan wakes up at 12:31 AM.

It takes him exactly eight seconds for his brain to catch up. In those eight seconds, he rubs his eyes, yawns, lowers his blanket down to his lap, and sits up. He glances at his clock and groans. He’s got so much homework to do.

Probably a lot of explaining first.

He considers going back to sleep, but his stomach rumbles for the first time in weeks. It’s been some time since he had a proper meal, even longer since he wanted to. The waffle Will and El bought doesn’t quite count as a proper meal, but it’s still something. Baby steps are still steps forward.

He stumbles to his feet and pads across, then out of his room. Light from the kitchen spreads down the hallway. It must be Kali. She doesn’t work Thursdays, and usually stays up, either watching TV at a lower volume, talking to her friends from Chicago on the phone, or reading one of Murray’s many conspiracist novels. She’ll have questions for Jonathan. The thought of answering them doesn’t make him as sick as he expects. He and Kali have been straightforward and honest from the start. She’d get it. That’s kind of what he needs right now. Just someone to get what he’s going
through, even when he doesn’t get it himself.

He’d also kind of really want Kali’s company, too.

Loud snoring pulls him to a halt at the end of the hallway. It’s not like he’s memorized his family’s sleeping habits — though he does know that Will kicks his sheets when he’s sleeping particularly well, that El’s snores are deep and infrequent, and Kali regularly cuddles her nearest pillow. He also knows that Joyce doesn’t make a single sound in her sleep, and the snoring is coming from her room.

The door’s cracked open. He squints, makes out two figures molded into each other on Joyce’s bed. They’re cuddling.

It must be a hallucination. There’s no goddamn way that Nancy’s really spooning Steve in Joyce’s room. There’s no way that they’re both here in Illinois.

But seconds pass. The hallucination doesn’t disappear. Moonlight through the opened window lights Steve’s forehead and Nancy’s chin. They really came out here. On a weekday. A three-hour car ride.

For him.

He blindly clutches the doorframe, overcome with emotion. They could very well have come here to yell at him for not calling for weeks, and the thought makes his lips spread into a small smile. He’s so in love with them that it hurts; it heals.

His stomach rumbles again. Maybe after he’s finished the waffle and finished a cup of water, he’ll crawl into their bed later, wordlessly curl into their sides and drift back to sleep. He shuts their door, then walks into the kitchen.

“You’re up!”

Jonathan shields his eyes from the sudden light of the kitchen. He lowers his hand once he’s adjusted and finds Joyce perched on the kitchen counter, a tattered copy of *Misery* in her hands, and a half-empty mug of tea to her right.

In a softer voice, she says, “Hi, honey.”

“Mom,” he starts hoarsely, but nothing else comes out. The sight of his mother, waiting up for him, breaks him, and it feels like that’s all he’s doing lately, falling apart, over and over again. At what point does that just make him broken? His knees nearly give out. His face falls, chin wobbling, and there’s no use in pretending to be okay. He tried that already. It didn’t work.

Joyce sets the book down. She jumps off the counter, dashes towards him, and throws her arms around him. Her hand cups the back of his head. “There we go. Let it out. I’ve got you now, you’re not alone, you’re not ...”

He’s old enough to know that she can’t fix everything. Old enough to hear the tremor in her voice and recognize it as fear. It terrifies him, but he doesn’t stop sobbing, doesn’t cling onto her any less tighter. Bravery takes on different forms. It’s enduring your father’s mean words and meaner fists everyday. It’s preparing a funeral for your younger brother. It’s drawing a monster in to find him. It’s kissing the girl you’re in love with in a weird guy’s house (though he’ll later become your mom’s best friend, and that’ll be weirder, but good), then kissing the boy you’re in love with in her room.

Right now, it’s openly weeping in your mother’s arms, because nothing is okay, but this is how you get there.
“Your tea’s getting cold,” he mumbles into her shoulder after he’s run out of tears.

She laughs wetly. “I can always make some more. C’mon.” Gently, she pries his head out of her neck and smiles at him. “Is chamomile good?”

He manages a nod and reluctantly disentangles from her. He watches her boil milk, pull out their box of chamomile tea bags, and grab another two mugs.

“Where do you want to start?” Joyce empties her mug from the counter and rinses it. She looks over her shoulder, an eyebrow raised. “We can begin with what happened in school today, but I don’t believe it begins there.”

He gathers enough strength from her and admits, “I, uh, got accepted. Into NYU.” It takes a millisecond for him to figure out that she already knows. She doesn’t scream, run into him for a hug, or cry out of joy. She simply continues rinsing her mug.

Joyce turns the faucet off. “I found the letter underneath your bed. I was helping El look for a mixtape, thought it might’ve been your room, and instead I find this gigantic envelope from NYU. You obviously didn’t want to tell me, and I knew you’d come to me when you were ready. And that you had a reason not to tell me. Ready to talk about it?”

_Hi._ But he can’t wait until he is. He takes his spot back on the counter, swings his legs a few times, and forces it out. “I don’t know if I want to go to NYU anymore.”

Joyce falters. She sets the mug into the sink and hops onto the counter next to him. “What’s changed?”

“Everything. I mean, the person I was when I wanted to go is someone else now. It’s all so different now. _I’m_ different.”

“_No._”

“What?”

“I don’t believe you. There’s something else, and I wouldn’t normally push, but you ran out of Photography today over what the kids told me was a pair of scissors. So I’m pushing.” Her tone remains casual as she fills one mug with steaming milk. He’s grateful for it. If her voice shook as much as his, then he wouldn’t be able do this.

He stares at his shaky hands to the sound of sloshing water. He needs to do this, needs to be pushed, because right now, it’s his only way forward. “I can’t leave any of you behind. We’re a family and after everything, I just. I need to be here. But my mind keeps — it keeps circling, you know, like I can’t leave Illinois because what if something happens, and then it’s like, God, something is always going to happen. But even not, even if Starcourt really was the last incident, it doesn’t change what’s happened. They’re all — they’re all still dead. El still lost her dad. You still lost Bob and Hop. Will’s always going to have nightmares. And I’m — I’m a _murderer_. And I know I should focus on the good, but I can’t help but think — it’s just going to go away. That’s how it goes. The good goes, but the bad stuff — the trauma, the pain, all of the fucking pain — it stays. What’s the point of getting away, of anything, if it’ll always come back to this?”

Joyce tips his chin up to force him into meeting her eyes, and it’s the sudden movement that makes him notice his eyes watering. “We’re more than it. You hear me? We’re not our grief. We’re not our worst moments. We’re not the worst things that happened to us. You’re more. You’re so much more, and you will be so much more. NYU was a different version of you’s dream, sure, but that tiny kid is
right here.” She points to his heart.

“No, he’s not,” he snaps, but even then, his voice cracks. That kid deserved none of it, none of this. He wipes his red and swollen eyes. “He’s not there, and he hasn’t been for awhile. Mom, I don’t. I don’t get it.”

She gently pushes his hair back. The motion makes the tightness in his chest ease. “Get what?”

“How do you do it? Dad, Bob, Hopper, all of these bills, all of —” He makes a vague, wild gesture with his hands, nearly knocking the mug out of Joyce’s hands. He draws in a shaky exhale and lowers his voice. “The monsters and the Upside Down shit. I can’t live with it. I can’t. I don’t know how.”

Joyce smiles sadly and offers him the mug. He hadn’t noticed that his tea was ready. “I take every bad thing that’s happened, and I counter it with a good thing. So your piece of shit father —”

Jonathan accepts the mug with a dry and unexpected snort. It instantly stills his hands, the warmth spreading to his skin. “Your piece of shit ex-husband.”

She snorts back. “He got me two beautiful and brave boys. My family. My life.”

“We got you stuck with him. Would’ve been easier to leave him if you didn’t have kids to take care of.”

“I wouldn’t have survived it without you two,” she shoots back fiercely.

“You’re tough. Stronger than anyone I know. You would’ve been okay,” he argues, but it sounds weak to his own ears.

“Honey, people get through these things because they have things to get them through it. You and Will were my strength. Now, I have you two, plus El and Kali and Murray. I wouldn’t have gotten any of them if it weren’t for this. You can’t change what’s happened, and it doesn’t make any of what happened okay, but it’s all a part of life. You can’t have good things without bad things. Balance and all, right?”

“It doesn’t feel balanced right now,” Jonathan confesses in a small voice. He raises the mug to his mouth and takes a slow sip, the chamomile burning down his throat. “You’re right. About everything. I know that, but I can’t ... I can’t feel it.”

She worries her lower lip between her teeth. “I’m worried about you.”

“I know.”

“There are so many good things waiting for you.”

“I know.”

“I can’t fix this,” she says, more to herself than him. “You could talk to someone. A professional.”

“With what money? Property tax is coming up, and if I go to school this fall, then —”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where is this coming from? Money’s fine. We’re fine.”

“I might’ve overheard you and Murray talking. You wanted us all in therapy, but said money was a problem.”
“Please tell me you did not eavesdrop.”

He winces. “I did. Sorry.”

“Money is my problem, not yours.”

“Mom ...” He twitches, his discomfort not only stemming from having to strain to keep his head from bumping into the top cabinet. “I’ve worked a part-time job from the ages of thirteen to seventeen. I had to help you. I had to think about these things. I don’t blame you for it, but I’ve been in worry mode for awhile. Taking care of Will, and the smaller bills, managing what Dad should’ve.”

“You shouldn’t have had to. If I could — If I could’ve made things different for you, easier for you, I would’ve.” Joyce’s eyes become glassy. “I’m sorry. To have put you in that position.”

“You didn’t,” he says firmly. “Dad did. I chose all of it, okay, and I’d choose it again.”

Joyce smiles through her tears. She doesn’t wipe them, doesn’t even acknowledge them. “But now you don’t have to. I’ve wanted so many things for us, for you, and I can’t give you a good father or no nightmares, but this I can. Money is something I have always been transparent about with you. You’d know if we were struggling. I promise you, we aren’t. What’s your next worry?”

“If something happens, and I’m there, but you’re here —”

“Then you’ll come here. Whatever happens, we can hold it off. We’ve got two superheroes, basically, and with Murray’s collection of weapons, my self-defence classes —”

“Your what!?”

Joyce throws her head back with a laugh. “Kali’s been teaching me. She’s going to teach Will soon. She’s excellent, but we already knew that. She kept asking me what she could do to pay me back as if she had to, so I told her to teach me how to protect myself. It’s good to be prepared. Which is what we are.”

It’s deeply reassuring and also sends a ripple of love inside of him for his odd, seemingly mismatched family. “Okay. Okay, I’m okay with that.”

“Is there anything else?”

“I’m scared,” he admits, and it feels like bravery. “Terrified. I’ve never been away from all of you like this, and — it’s scary.”

Joyce doesn’t miss a beat. She holds his face with both hands, her thumb stroking his cheek, and nods understandingly. “It is scary. But it’s also your dream. If it comes down to it, you can move back to Illinois after school or even transfer after a semester, but you try first. If you can’t do it for yourself, then do it for me.”

The tightness coiled around his ribcage lets up. No expectations, no promises for greatness or happiness. Just the promise that he try. He nods and covers her hands with his. “I can do that.”

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispers. “So, very proud.”

“I know, Mom.” His eyes flutter shut. He’s too drained to cry, to do anything but nod back at his mother.

“But you need to hear it. I need to tell you. It won’t always feel like this. I promise. I’m not saying
nothing bad will happen again, but I’m saying that life flows, and you get the worst moments of your life, but you get the best moments, too. And you get everything in between. I want you to see it. You need to see it. All of it.”

Her words take awhile to settle in his chest. He finishes the remainder of his chamomile tea and plays with the mug while he gathers his thoughts. Finally, he says, “Thank you. For this, for everything, for being what a mom is supposed to be, but also making sure that I — that I didn’t become him.”

Joyce leans her head on his shoulder. “Baby, you did all of that on your own.”

His breath hitches. He wraps an arm around her shoulder, knowing for a fact that she’s the one holding him, and not the other way around.

“Nancy and Steve drove in for you.”

“I saw that you gave them your room,” he replies, a tired smile already in his voice.

“I did. They wanted to stay up until you woke, but Nancy had school, and Steve told me he had a shift, so they knocked out.”

“I haven’t been returning their calls. I just thought it’d be easier that way, which is stupid, and I’ll apologize when they —”

“That’s not why they came. They told me El called.”

Jonathan nearly bumps his head on the top cabinet as he splutters out, “El!? She called them?”

“Will had mentioned that you probably missed them a lot, but El had the idea that those two ought to know how you were. Think she called Mike, then got him to get Nancy.” Joyce smiles. “What a kid, right?”

“What a kid,” he repeats, amazed. A laugh bubbles out of his throat. “El and Kali and Murray. We collect strays, but the saving goes both ways. We struck gold three times.”

Joyce’s eyes shine. “Is this you finally admitting that you like Murray?”

He shrugs, fighting back another laugh. “If it is?”

“He told me to call him immediately after I got it out of you. Do I have a call to make?”

He lets the next laugh out. “Guess you do.”

“He’ll be happy to see Nancy tomorrow. He’s quite fond of her.”

“Me too,” Jonathan says, buzzing with excitement at the prospect of them meeting tomorrow. “And he’ll properly meet Steve. They didn’t really talk at Christmas.”

Joyce’s eyebrows lift, but she doesn’t say anything.

And then Jonathan’s mouth starts moving before he fully agrees to commit the decision. “Hey, Mom?”

“Yes, hon?”

“Nancy and I are dating Steve.”
"Are you two still dating?"

Jonathan balks. "Yes. But, uh, is that all you want to know? No questions?"

Joyce hums considerably. "Are you being safe?"

"Mom!" He lets out a strangled noise, burying his face into his hands. "We talked about this when I started dating Nancy. Not again. Please."

"But it’s different with boys, Jonathan, and if you don’t know that, then you shouldn’t —"

"We’re safe. I swear." He cringes at his own words, but peeks through the gap between his fingers and sees Joyce’s amused smile. "Safe, sane, and consensual. Just like you said."

She laughs, lightly slapping his arm. "Good. When did it start?"

"New Years Eve, officially."

Joyce’s smile softens and becomes knowing. "Unofficially?"

“I’ve liked them for awhile now, I think. I fell for Nancy somewhere along the way of looking for Will and Barb, really fell for her back at the old house when we drew the monsters in, and I think — I think Steve’s the same. But then life happened, and they got back together, and a year later, Nancy and I got together, and then we moved. Weirdly enough, that’s when the three of us ... that’s when the three of us really became an us."

"I’m happy for you." She squeezes his shoulder. "Nancy and Steve are good. Really good."

"I love them," he tells her, smile taking up his entire face.

"So, and you don’t have to answer this nor do you have to know the answer to it, but do you like girls and boys then?"

Jonathan hadn’t really thought about it. It’s not something he thinks needs an answer, honestly, but Nancy is a girl and Steve is a boy. "I guess so."

"Oh." Joyce swings her legs back and forth. She looks at him, biting her lip like she’s holding back from smiling. "Something we have in common, then."

Guess it runs in the family, he says without thinking. He groans. It’s such a stupid thing to say. He’s about to apologize when Joyce claps a hand over her mouth to stifle a shriek of laughter.

And then they’re both laughing the clutch-your-stomach, face-hurt kind of laughter, because even though the world is still dull and mean and unfair, the people aren’t. He’s loved, and he loves back. While he may never stop falling apart, in this moment, he promises to himself that he’ll never stop trying to put the pieces back together.

Chapter End Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-use of a homophobic slur
-panic attacks
-mild and non-graphic violence
-descriptions of blood
-depressive episode

hey friends!

i hope jonathan's POV and breakdown this chapter landed, and that it made sense but also didn't, since stuff like this doesn't really follow logic. though one thing is always true - things will inevitably and undoubtedly be good again.

this is also 30% of why i wrote this fic bc?????? jonathan and nancy KILLED people and i'm just not over it. the show most won't go into it, and i really needed this, bc i cannot stop thinking about how he, the same person who cried for a week when forced to kill his rabbit, would handle being forced to kill a person. i wanted to explore his response to that. i also wanted to write a story like this that with the sentiment that trauma won't be fixed, but it can be managed and he (and all of us) can still have and is deserving of a happy life.

anyways. i am drowning in my jonathan feelings, but when am i not. thank you for your kind comments on chapter 3. i appreciate them and will respond very soon. i'd love to know your thoughts on this chapter. take care, y'all.
Jonathan and Joyce remain, side-by-side on the kitchen counter, for sometime afterwards. They make another round of tea. Ginger this time. Kali’s favourite. She’d mentioned that to El, who passed that onto Joyce. That explained the half a dozen packets of ginger tea readily available in their cupboards at all time. Kali told Joyce she didn’t have to buy it for her. Joyce had merely shrugged and told her that she also loved ginger tea. Jonathan and Will backed her up immediately, nodding solemnly and eliciting Kali’s eye-roll and a grin she failed at suppressing. El nudged Kali, said, “See, I didn’t tell them anything!” Kali didn’t push, just told Joyce that she had excellent taste, and didn’t stop smiling until after they made everyone a round of ginger tea.

After that, ginger tea tasted differently to Jonathan. He’d never noticed or cared for it before. Now, it’s his favourite.

Joyce reminds him about the waffle that Will and El bought for him. “You need to eat. And while a good mother wouldn’t encourage her child to eat something so unhealthy —”

“A great mother knows that sometimes your child needs a gigantic waffle. This is definitely an exception,” Jonathan interrupts, already rolling off of the counter and walking the short distance to the fridge. Joyce’s voice was teasing, but still. He pulls the fridge door open and peers inside. The white box looks even larger than he remembers. When he reaches in and brings it back out, the lid automatically flipping open, he gawks. Like the box, the waffle is bigger than he remembered. He’s hungry, but the task of eating the entire thing is still as daunting as when Will and El showed it to him. ”You’ll help me finish this, right?”

So that’s how they end up sitting across from each other on their dining table at nearly two in the morning. They flattened the cardboard box to form a large plate. Soon enough, only a few sliced-up pieces of waffle and fruit remain.

As he bites into a strawberry, a thought occurs to him. “Oh my God!”

Joyce’s eyebrows raise. She dabs the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “What’s wrong?”

“You!”

“Me!”

“You have work tomorrow!”

“No, I don’t.”

Jonathan frowns. “You don’t?” He cranes his head to look at the calendar hung on their fridge. “Yes you do! Tomorrow is a Friday. I’ll clean up, don’t worry, just go to —”
Joyce leans back. She clasps her hands behind her neck. “You don’t worry. I took the day off.”

Jonathan unintentionally mirrors her. He sinks back into his seat. Laces his hands behind his neck. Even smiles, touched. Wrestles with his guilt, wrangles it into gratitude instead. “For me?”

A smile lifts her face. “I had to.” Reaching past the few bits of waffle leftover, she picks up a piece of banana and pops it into her mouth. “Gotta take care of my son. I told the school that my kid needs me, but honestly, it’s the other way around.”

“So this is why Nancy and Steve and everyone, actually, call me cheesy. It’s because of you! I get it from you.”

“No idea what you mean by that. Me? Cheesy? It’s called being a mom. You’ve just got a big heart.”

“You have a big heart too,” he says softly.

“I get it from my kids. All of you, you, Will, El, and Kali, you’re all so kind, such good people, helped so many people, care about so much. It’s inspiring, it’s amazing, it’s — oh.”

Jonathan’s smile doesn’t falter. He picks at the cardboard, absentmindedly tearing one edge off. “What?”

“I see what you mean about me being cheesy now.”

Jonathan claps a hand over his mouth to stifle his laughter. It doesn’t work. They laugh until they’re wheezing and they have to shush each other to keep from waking everyone up.

They shortly finish the waffle, but don’t get up to clean up or sleep. Joyce says, “You wanna know about the first girl I ever liked?” Jonathan nods eagerly, because of course he does.

And so they go back and forth with stories.

Some are lighthearted. Like Joyce’s first kiss with a girl, at sixteen, with her chemistry lab partner in the back of their school’s empty library. Or Jonathan’s story about breaking into the Photography room with Olive after school because he’d forgotten his car keys.

Others aren’t. Joyce’s voice doesn’t tremble, but her eyes grow misty, cloudy with every shitty memory and shitty feeling associated with her first husband, with Jonathan and Will’s father, not their dad, as she tells him about what the night of their divorce, the last time he left, looked like for her.

“I couldn’t move. He’d left so many times, but he always came back, and it’s not like — not like I wanted him back, not after what he’d done to all of us, not after all that he didn’t do, but it still felt like I’d lost something. I just sat in the kitchen, sitting on my hands to stop them from shaking. The house was so quiet with you boys out in the rain, and all I could do was just — replay the sounds of his yelling, of every plate he smashed, over and over again, to keep from thinking about where I’d go from now, about how impossible it all felt.

“I mean, really, I’d been a single mother for a long time, before we divorced, before the constant fighting, since the very start, but now it was real. How could I raise two boys on my own? How could I be what you needed? How could I make up for the loss of a father?

“Before any of those questions sunk in, you boys came running in. Dripping, wet from head-to-toe. Will was so small on your shoulders, and you just — you held him with so much ease, and he held your hand so tightly, and you both — you both had the biggest smiles. It got me to stop worrying,
got me out of my seat, and barrelling right into you both. I’d lost a lot, but I still had you two. We were still a family. That would never change and it would always get us through, no matter how difficult things got. I knew that then, before everything happened, and I was right, wasn’t I?”

“You’re always right,” Jonathan murmurs. He nestles his head on her shoulder and loops his arm around her, holds her as tightly as that hug between the three Byers had been on that rainy night oh so many years ago.

He thinks about how their small family has grown, doubled in size with El and Murray and Kali. You lose a father that you never really had. Get a telekinetic, a power illusionist, and a conspiracist that slowly, without you really noticing, become part of your family. It more than makes up for it. It fits. It works. It’s what you’re given, what you wouldn’t give up for anything. It definitely wouldn’t have happened without Lonnie leaving.

“You did a good job,” he tells her. “You were what we needed and more. Always.”

She kisses his forehead. He feels her wet smile against his skin.

In turn, he tells her about Tom. Not about what happened, because she’d already heard that last summer, but about all that’s happened since. The nightmares. The guilt. The incident last October when he had a panic attack from looking at a photo of a hospital. The incident from today, with the pair of scissors.

Even now, as his eyes close to calm himself down, rather than complete black, dots of red speck his vision. They aren’t the gigantic drops of red he kept seeing in his vision in Photography earlier today, but it’s still there.

"And that’s the problem, isn’t it? It won’t matter how far I go, how much time passes, or if my guilt ever subsides. This is still going to hang over my head for the rest of my life. I just want to be able to look at scissors again. Or go to a hospital and not want to throw up. I’m a — I’m a killer, and I can say it out loud when I could barely think it last summer, which means something, but it’s not enough, you know?” Tears he hadn’t realized were silently rolling down his cheeks dry. He shudders and directs his gaze to the ceiling. Joyce strokes his back, nods attentively. Her silence is a gift. It lets him collect both his thoughts and himself.

His next breath is taken with more ease. His heartbeat settles. Red disappears from his vision. “I didn’t choose this. None of us did. And I know life isn’t fair, but it should be. It’s supposed to be.” He could cry from it. Not only from the pool of sadness his words drown him into until he’s all the way at the bottom, but from the relief of letting it out, from the weight lifted off his back — from rising back to the surface. It’s liberating, even if it changes nothing. But maybe that isn’t the point. Maybe the point is just being entitled to your pain. It’s the one thing that can’t be taken from you.

His mind’s reeling with thoughts, trying to comprehend how he feels both better and worse with his admission, when Joyce sighs. “Trust me,” she says and pushes his hair back. “I get it, honey. But you wanna know something?”

“Course.” He sits a little straighter, angles his body towards her, and clasps his hands. He feels like a kid again, or maybe just actually feels like his age of seventeen for once. So eager and desperate for the wisdom she’ll impart on him. He clings onto that feeling.

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“I still can’t look at Christmas lights. Probably won’t get married again. Who knows if I’ll ever even want to date again. I still have nightmares about your brother, missing. About you —” Her breath hitches. She clutches his shoulder, like she needs to make sure he’s still there in front of her. At the confirmation that he is, she smiles, her chin slightly wobbling. She doesn’t let go of him. And after
he places his hand on top of hers, he doesn’t let go either.

“About you,” she continues, steadier, “and what what would’ve happened if you hadn’t protected yourself, if Tom – if he got to you. You’re right. It’s not fair. It sucks. We live through and survive all of that, but we’re still stuck recovering and picking up the pieces, probably for the rest of our lives. But I still have you. Still have my family, all six of us. All of Will and El’s friends, your Nancy and Steve. I have the kids at the school who make conversation with me, telling jokes and asking for my opinions on what colour bristol board they should use. The other women in the office who always ask about how my four kids are doing. I have so many holidays, movies, family nights, meals, late nights, sunrises, and other beautiful, extraordinary, completely normal and mundane things to look forward to. Things that I can’t even imagine from where I am right now. Even if I have things I’ll never get over. Do you understand?”

He nods slowly. His mind is still spinning, but it — everything, really — feels clearer than before. Not lighter, not any easier, not better. Just clearer. Like the fog from the past several weeks has lifted and he can finally see all of it.

And there’s so much to see. So much he hasn’t seen yet.

It’s terrifying. It’s exciting. Mostly, it’s a relief.

“That’s deeply comforting,” he admits.

She pats his shoulder with a small smile. “One day, you might be able to look at a pair of scissors and just see a pair of scissors. Or not. But you’ll still have the people you love and who love you back. You’ll still have Photography and your music and waffles and movies and long car rides. And you’ll still be you. Still have the life that you want, a life worth living — whatever that looks like for you. A pair of scissors won’t change that.”

His world expands abruptly. His heart opens, flutters with possibility, with the reality and truth of Joyce’s sentiment. A pair of scissors won’t change that.

His eyes scan the kitchen, past the pictures they’ve hung up. Baby pictures, school photos from ages ago, alongside newer pictures. One from Halloween with El as Leia, Will as Luke, Oliver as Han, Olive as Allison from The Breakfast Club, and Jonathan as a forensic scientist. One that Kali let him take of her with her arms wrapped around El and Will. One that El took of Will, Joyce, and Murray colouring in the living room, none of them noticing her with the camera. Another that El took from a breakfast last month — Murray struggling to open a new bottle of maple syrup, Kali laughing at him, Will mid-sneeze, Joyce with a fondly exasperated eye-roll, and Jonathan’s hand extended for Murray to just pass him the bottle. All of these pictures taken in Illinois. All moments that made this house their home. A pair of scissors won’t change that.

And it is their home. Hawkins never was. All it took was leaving Hawkins and all the pain from Will’s disappearance, the Mind Flayer, Bob and Hopper’s death, and all of last summer behind. A pair of scissors won’t change that.

Or maybe they didn’t leave any of it behind. Maybe they’re still carrying it with them as they move forward, but all that’s different is that it’s not holding them down like it used to. Maybe that’s all healing is. You learn to adjust to the load. You learn to let people carry the burden with you as you help carry theirs. You keep going, but you don’t let it go. Until one day, it’s not as heavy as it was, it’s not crushing you, and it’s not all you are. What was once the end of you is just a footnote. What was once a wound now a scar. A pair of scissors won’t change that.

He chants the words to himself. It’s half past two. The only source of light is the fluorescent bulb
above their heads, but it feels blinding, like it’s shining down on him, warm and bright in a way that nothing’s been for awhile now.

Nothing’s changed, except for him. Nothing’s changed, except everything has.

He buries his head in Joyce’s neck. Thanks her, over and over again, in a rush of murmurs. Basks in her embrace and the arms she wraps around him. Holds her back just as fiercely.

He can’t be fixed, but he can heal. Sometimes it’s all you can do, he thinks, but sometimes, it’s all you need.

The conversation and tears and revelation exhaust him, so he tells her they both ought to sleep. They clean the kitchen up in no time. He walks her to his bedroom, hugs her, and says he loves her too when she says it.

She says they’ll talk more tomorrow. Kisses his forehead. Smiles sleepily at him before telling him to have sweet dreams and sleep already.

He heads back down the hallway towards Joyce’s room. Carefully, he twists the doorknob and pushes the door open.

Nancy and Steve are still fast-sleep. They’re mostly in the same position. Steve’s head is cushioned on Nancy’s chest. His arm’s slung over her waist, Nancy’s over his shoulder. A few strands of Steve’s hair are in Nancy’s mouth.

Jonathan takes a moment to admire the sight before padding across the room. He slips in next to them. The bed dips with his weight. They stir, but don’t wake. Nancy turns her head and buries it in Jonathan’s shoulder. Steve’s arm adjusts and settles around Jonathan’s hip. Jonathan carefully raises his chin and rests it atop Nancy’s head, while winding his arms around them both.

They’ll have a long talk tomorrow. He’ll apologize, rightfully so, because he shouldn’t have left them in the dark. Should’ve trusted them more and let them decide for themselves. He’ll be honest. He’ll thank them for coming all this way, tell them about NYU, about his shitty few weeks, about everything from today. He’ll ask about how they’ve been, for every story and every day of school and every shift at the arcade, and how’s Mike, how’s Robin, how are the kids.

He’ll tell them how great they are, how lucky he is, how he’s going to make it up to them, how he’ll make them a waffle or a dozen or a million or just anything they want.

And he’ll say this tomorrow, but he’ll say it now, too: “I love you.” It’s a whisper. Of course they don’t respond. But he’d like to think that it matters all the same, that it’s not just about them hearing it, but about him saying it.

Steve’s snoring momentarily quiets. Nancy’s breath is hot against his shoulder. A drop of her drool sticks to his skin.

For now, he just holds them close. Says it again. And, finally, closes his eyes.
When Jonathan opens his eyes again, it’s hours later. Morning sunlight streams through his half-opened window and casts a strip of light across his face. He groans. Shuts his eyes again. Tries tugging the blanket from his waist back up to his chest, but can’t because it’s underneath the person snoring in his chest.

Alarm bells ring in his forehead. His eyes jerk open, heard thudding violently, because what the fuc —

Nancy’s mouth is hung open, her snores muffled by his skin. Her legs are tangled with his and her hand rests on his hip. Her hair’s tied into a ponytail that probably doesn’t count as a ponytail anymore, considering half of her hair has escaped it with a few locks in her mouth, some splayed out on Jonathan’s chest.

And it all comes rushing back to him, but all he can focus on is the fact that Nancy and Steve drove all the way up to Illinois, on a school night, for him.

He drops a kiss against her forehead, his mouth automatically curving into a small, sleepy smile. Her eyebrows slightly wrinkle, but the crease quickly smooths out as she rolls over in his direction and shifts her weight onto him.

He looks past Nancy and then behind himself, but doesn’t find Steve. He pushes down the initial stab of worry. Steve’s okay. He’s awake, somewhere in the house, maybe talking to Joyce, or Kali, or —

Definitely not the kids. His alarm clock reads 9:45 AM. The kids have long since left for school.

Jonathan carefully disentangles himself from Nancy. She sleeps like a log, so she only stirs. He gently rolls her over so her head lays on one of his three pillows. Pushes her hair out of her mouth, away from her face. Rucks his blanket up to her waist.

His heart warms. A part of him — the seventeen, lovestruck fool — wants to wake her up. Pepper kisses all over her face. Hold her close. Thank her. Tell her he loves her. Lace their fingers, line their scars up, and watch them fit perfectly.

But the rest of him — sensible and older from an absentee father and all that Trauma — wants her to rest, to sleep for as long as he can, and knows that they have time.

He presses another kiss, this time to the top of her head, then tiptoes out of the room and closes the door behind him.

The house is eerily silent. He dislikes it. The lack of shriek-laughter, yelling, television, ninth grade gossip, the latest conspiracy theory, cursing followed by a sorry, Joyce/mom, and the other sounds he associates with his mornings here feel unnatural.

He quickly brushes his teeth, then washes his face. He should shower and change clothes, but Steve is awake and somewhere in his house and every second he spends without him in this rare time that they’re in the same area is a second wasted.

So the second he’s finished in the bathroom, he practically races into the kitchen and nearly trips over his feet in the process.
And there he is.

Steve’s bare back is the first thing Jonathan sees. The sight puts Jonathan to a halt. He stops at the doorway, shifts his weight against it to regain his balance, because the sight of Steve simultaneously disorients and grounds him at once.

Steve shuffles in front of the kitchen counter. He lines three mugs next to the coffeemaker Murray gifted them for Christmas. He’s humming something that Jonathan can’t hear at first, swaying back and forth — are those Jonathan’s sweatpants? — as he carefully pours coffee into each mug. The humming grows louder as his movements get grander, shoulders shimmying, legs bouncing — those are definitely Jonathan’s sweatpants.

“Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes! Turn and face the strange!”

Jonathan smiles so big it almost hurts. He watches his dork of a boyfriend sing along to David Bowie while wearing his sweatpants and pouring them and their girlfriend coffee. He savours the warmth the sight envelops him in, like the first day of spring after a long, harsh winter.

“Ch-ch-changes!” Steve whisper-sings, running a hand through his hair. “There's gonna have to be a different man!”

And because Jonathan can’t stand the space between them anymore, he sings out, “Time may change me, but I can’t trace time!” His voice cracks, but he doesn’t care.

This — Steve whirling around, recognition flitting across his features as his eyes widen — is what he cares about.

Steve’s hand stops in his hair. His lips stretch into a grin, so bright it’s blinding, and they’re both surging forward to cross the feet between them. “Hey! You’re awake! The kids went to school, obviously, and, uh, your mom and Kali — who, yeah, is as great as you mentioned, you should’ve introduced her sooner, I introduced you to Robin much faster than you did, mkay — wait, what was I — oh yeah! Your mom and Kali went to do some errands or some shit. Told me I could help myself, but didn’t want to eat without you two, so I thought, okay, coffee, that’s a good place to start, ‘cuz I’m sure we’re all tired, I don’t know if you are, but Nance and I sure are, one helluva car-ride. Not that we didn’t want to come, obviously we did, and not that it was a hassle, ‘cuz we — ”

“You’re here,” Jonathan says breathlessly. A foot still separates them. He’s almost afraid to take those last few steps forward, as if it’ll shatter this dream of Steve and Nancy in his house, and bring him back to reality. It’s silly. But his feet remain planted on the floor, lips parted, a glint in his eyes, because he still can’t believe it.

Steve laughs breathlessly. He scratches the back of his neck. “Oh yeah? Thanks for letting me know.” His words are teasing, but his voice is soft.

“You’re here.”

“Yes, we’ve established this.”

“You’re. Here.”

“El didn’t mention a concussion. She probably didn’t want to worry us, if this is how bad the brain damage —”

Jonathan surges forward. He wraps his arms around Steve’s torso, pulling him close, squeezing tight. Never has he loved the smell of Steve’s hairspray so deeply like he does in this moment. “You and
Nancy are here,” he says into Steve’s neck, one last time, voice small and gentle.

For one horrifying second, Steve remains perfectly still.

Jonathan’s heart pounds. He draws back, trembling now, apologies on the tip of his tongue. “I shouldn’t have, I’m sor —”

But then Steve’s shushing him. He hugs Jonathan close, cups the back of his head and guides it back into Steve’s neck. “Of course we’re here. Where else would we be?”

And they’re both holding each other, slightly swaying, chests pressed together, breathing synchronized. Steve repeatedly plants kisses on the top of Jonathan’s head, before tilting Jonathan’s face back to kiss his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, his jaw.

Jonathan just about melts.

He nudges Steve’s nose with his own. “I’m, uh. Really happy you’re here.”

“I could tell. The way you leapt into my arms, God, what a relief.”

“It had nothing to do with either of you, okay? You’re good, you’re perfect. Trust me. I just — I don’t know how to say it.”

“’S okay. We have all day. But you’re sure we didn’t — that I didn’t”

“Yes,” Jonathan interrupts, firm. He threads his fingers through Steve’s hair and relishes in the soft sigh it earns him. “I’m sure.”

Their eyes meet. Steve’s smile reaches his eyes.

“I missed you,” Jonathan rasps. He strokes Steve’s jaw with his thumb. “So much.”

“Me too. Both of us. Thought about you all the fuckin’ time.”

Jonathan leans forward, presses his mouth against Steve’s. Slow, chaste, hesitant. Fumbling back into familiarity. It doesn’t take long to find their rhythm. Steve’s mouth is warm, soft, and searching, and all Jonathan wants to do is turn those pink lips of his red. He cradles Steve’s face, those three words from last night looping in his mind with every quiet noise Steve makes in the back of his throat.

But there’s another three words he has to say first.

He draws back, just a breath away. ”I’m so sorry.”

Steve’s breathing slows. His thumb circles the small of Jonathan’s back. “Don’t be. You’ve had a shitty week, it’s not like you did it on purpose.”

“I mean ... not calling back was sort of on purpose.” He cringes, because, what a stupid thing to say. He opens his mouth to expand, to continue his apology, but Steve speaks first.

“You didn’t mean to hurt us on purpose is what I meant.” Steve swallows, Adam’s apple going up and down. “That’s what I meant. So don’t apologize.”

“It’s not an excuse —”

“Yeah, but it’s a reason,” Steve grits out through clenched teeth. “Don’t you think I know that better
than anyone? There are never excuses, but there are always reasons. Why do you want me to be mad at you so bad?”

Jonathan’s throat dries. He pushes Steve’s hair back, does it until Steve’s muscles loosen, and until his own jaw unclenches. “I don’t want you or Nance to feel like you have to be completely okay because I’m ... whatever I am right now. I still hurt you, and you’re entitled to that, and we’re supposed to be able to feel anything with each other, and not have to hide, so — don’t hide it. If you need to get it out, get it out. Please.” He doesn’t say how he kind of needs them to be mad at him, needs to see what he’s done, needs this when he falls back into this place and thinks closing in on himself is the best choice there is for everyone else.

Steve doesn’t say it either. But from the way he pulls Jonathan closer, until their chests touch again, and kisses his eyelid. “Okay. We spent the last few weeks in hell, not knowing what we did, not knowing how you were, and it really fucking sucks. You can’t do that. You just can’t. You say we’re supposed to be able to feel anything with each other, but you don’t feel comfortable with us —”

“I don’t feel comfortable worrying you, I don’t want —”

“Okay here’s the thing. You don’t get to choose whether or not we’re worried. You don’t get a say, and honestly, neither do we. You think that you’re a burden, right? Well, you’re not the only one. We’re all burdens, okay, but we’re burdens worth carrying, and yes, I read that in one of Nance’s books, but it’s still relevant, and true. So fine. It hurt me. You should’ve called. We help each other, right, that’s what we do. We’re a team. Always have been. Always will be.”

“Okay,” Jonathan says, voice thick with emotion. Steve smiles at him, and it takes Jonathan a moment to realize that he’s smiling back. “It won’t happen again. I promise. I’ll do better.”

“I know,” Steve says, and kisses him.

Half a cup of coffee later, Nancy clears her throat by the kitchen doorway.

Jonathan and Steve both crane their heads and turn in their seats at the dining table. It’s a miracle that Jonathan doesn’t drop his mug and spill his coffee all over his lap.

Like Steve, she changed into Jonathan’s clothing. Grabbed a fading grey shirt from his bedroom floor and a pair of boxers from his desk. “You should’ve woke me up.” She steps forward. Her mouth twitches, and she’s not smiling, but her eyes are as they settle on Jonathan. “Should’ve done a lot of things, actually, but we’re here, okay, and you’re not al —”

She squeals. He doesn’t mean to lift her up, but he gets too excited. He winds his arms around her waist and envelopes her into a bone-crushing hug. He dives his nose into her hair, breathing her in, holding her close. Warmth, from her hands, from her embrace, from her, pulses in his chest. He grins and kisses her hair, his giddiness leaking out.

She responds instantly and squeezes him back just as tightly. Her arms fling around his neck. She tucks her head into the crook of his shoulder, kisses just underneath his jaw. “Good morning to you too,” she laughs.
He pulls back. Leans his forehead against hers. Bites his smile. “Hey. I can’t believe — I mean, you’re both — Illinois — and you have school —”

“So do you,” she teases.

“Still. You came. Thank you.”

“If I’m being honest, we did it for ourselves as much as we did it for you. We were so worried, and just needed —” Nancy’s eyes trail down his face to his chapped lips. She brushes her mouth against his. “That. And you. Make sure you were okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No one’s upset at you.”

“I want you to feel whatever it is you feel.”

“I feel like we drove from Hawkins to here and that should tell you if we’re really mad at you or not. Look, I appreciate it, okay, and trust me, I am irritated with what you did, and kind of mad, but I know you. I know your intentions. You did it junior year when we fell apart. Did it with Steve last fall by not calling. You think we’re better off, that you’re doing us a favour, that you’re doing the right thing, which you’re not. But you’re not trying to hurt us,” she says, a distant echo of what Steve said earlier, and he wonders if this is what they told each other back in Hawkins. “Even though you’re hurting. So I accept your apology. You’re in a bad place. I’ve been there. I get it. I love you. And you love us.”

“Of course,” he says, nodding urgently.

Nancy grabs his hand and presses their scars together. “So you don’t have to apologize. At least not again.”

“I really am sorry. It hurt both of you, and after everything we’ve been through together, I should’ve known not to walk away.”

Nancy’s smile slips. Her blue eyes cloud. “You should’ve,” she agrees quietly.

He cups her face with both hands, nuzzles her cheek. “But I’m walking towards you two now.”

She darts forward and kisses him on the mouth, hard and dizzying. Her fingers slide into and grip his hair. He returns the kiss with earnest and smiles against her, because he hears it. Hears everything she’s saying with her mouth against his. The forgiveness, the relief, the love.

They draw back. “I love you,” he says.

Nancy kisses his nose. Her arms loop around his torso, head against his chest. “Y’know what I don’t get, though?”
He stops nuzzling her hair to ask, “What?”

“Why Steve’s still standing there and not here.”

Jonathan chuckles, and together and entwined, he and Nancy side-step to face Steve.

Red colours Steve’s face. He gawks, gestures to the mugs of coffee in his hands for them, before he turns around and sets it back on the table. He crosses his arms. “You guys were having a moment! And don’t you want your coffee?”

“Want you first,” Nancy says, her voice coated in the remnants of her sleep. She flashes him a smile, and it’s not directed at Jonathan, but it tugs at his heartstrings all the same.

Steve’s eyes gleam. His hands fall to his sides. “I gotta say. That’s sappy as shit, Nance.”

“More sappy than you driving all this way for me?” Jonathan pipes up.

Nancy laughs into his chest. It’s through his shirt, but it warms his skin nonetheless.

“She did it too,” Steve points out, already striding forward to join them.

“So you’re both sappy as shit.” Jonathan opens his arms to welcome Steve in. “This isn’t new.”

Nancy scoffs. She yanks on Steve’s — so Jonathan’s — sweatpants once he’s within arms’ reach to bring him into their embrace. “You’re sappy too.”

“We knew this,” Jonathan says. He nestles his head on Steve’s shoulder.

Steve murmurs in agreement. He wraps his arms around them both and leans over to kiss Nancy.

She makes a pleased sound and kisses him back. “Mm. Tastes better than coffee.”

Steve’s eyebrows rise into his hairline. “Is this Morning Nancy or Drunk Nancy or is Drunk Nancy now just Nancy Nancy.”

“What,” Nancy says.

“I think Drunk Nancy is now Nancy Nancy,” Jonathan answers. “Or, and I like this better, we, especially you, have rubbed off on her.”

“Hell yeah I’ve rubbed off on her.”

Jonathan laughs. He presses his cheek against Steve’s shoulder and looks at Nancy, who stares at Steve with a single eyebrow raised.

“That was terrible,” she says.

“You love it,” Steve says.

Nancy’s deadpan expression slips. Her lips twitch. “Yeah, I do.”

“I missed this,” Jonathan says from in between them, warm and flushed and happy. “I missed you both so much.”

Nancy noses along his cheek. “Me too.”

“We could have this everyday,” Steve says. His face lifts into a smile. “A shitty apartment. No
monsters. No distance. No bullshit.”

It’s how Steve says it, dazed, dreamily, and unabashedly earnest, that sends it soaring out of Jonathan’s mouth: “Hey, Steve?”

“Mhm?”

“I love you.”

Steve’s smile widens. He grabs Jonathan’s face with both hands. “Say that again.”

“I love you, you hearing-impaired idiot.”

“I heard you right the first time, I’m just a vain idiot who likes hearing the people I’m in love with say they love me too.”

“It’s true,” Nancy says in a mock-whisper. She’s grinning and has stepped back to give them some space. “When I first started saying it again in March since we got back together, he’d ask me to repeat it at least three times for the first two weeks. He’s not a vain idiot. Just a lovestruck idiot.”

Steve looks over Jonathan’s shoulder to smile at Nancy. “Thanks, Nance. You too!”

She good-naturedly rolls her eyes and chuckles.

“I’ll say it back,” Jonathan says, stupidly giddy, “when you say it first.”

“So demanding.”

“Said the person who just told me to repeat it and who asked Nancy to repeat it too!”

Steve’s shoulders shake with a laugh. “Alright. I guess that’s fair.” He caresses the side of Jonathan’s face and gazes into his eyes.

And suddenly, briefly, Jonathan’s taken out of the moment. All he can think about is how goddamn strange this would’ve been to him a little over two years ago. His hands on Steve Harrington’s back as he waits for him to say I love you back, Nancy Wheeler watching them with her hand clapped over her mouth and a grin hiding behind it, in the kitchen of the Illinois house he shares with his mother, brother, and two girls who were strangers to him but are now just as part of his family as Joyce and Will, where a conspiracist he’d gone for help who’s now his mom’s best friend frequently has dinner and movie nights in.

Younger Jonathan wouldn’t have believed it. He’d insist Steve was an asshole, that he didn’t like Nancy like that, that his family was just him, his brother, and his mom. He wouldn’t have believed it, not just for the absurdity of it all, but because no way would he have two people who felt the same way about him as he did them and no way would their small, enduring, and close-knit family grow into this.

It all started with Will’s disappearance. None of them would be here without it, he realizes.

He’ll never be thankful for it. He’d never wish that upon his brother or for any of that trauma onto everyone. He’d take all of it back, if he could. But life doesn’t give you an option. It just gives you the worst possible thing and, unintentionally, the chance to build something from it.

And they did. They built these loves, these friendships, relationships, and this one big, odd family. They took the worst things that have happened to them and made gold.
So he can do it. Push through the nightmares, the guilt, the impending doom, the feelings that he’s a fraud who doesn’t deserve any of this, and every bad day that’ll inevitably follow. He doesn’t have to make something from it. The thought that good will still follow is enough for him.

Steve’s forehead against his and Nancy’s tender, “Tell him,” bring Jonathan back into the moment.

“I love you, Byers.” Jonathan’s last name from Steve’s lips breaks with another laugh, shaky, almost nervous.

Jonathan’s quick to soothe those nerves. He says it again, murmurs it against Steve’s mouth before kissing him, long and deep. And then they’re both laughing, and Nancy’s voice is small when she asks if she can join them, but she laughs soon enough too as Steve scoops her up into his arms, and she hangs her arms around their necks and kisses their cheeks in succession, while Steve swings Nancy’s leg at Jonathan’s hip, and Jonathan’s —

Well. He’s just overflowing with love.

The front door lock turns. The sound of bags hitting the floor drift into the kitchen. “Hey! You kids up?”

Kali’s voice follows after, in a hushed whisper: “Can I finally meet them now?”

“Oh my God,” Steve says. He readjusts his grip on Nancy, holding her more securely. “She wants to meet us!”

Nancy bops her nose against Jonathan’s. “You talk to her about us, huh?”

“It’s almost as if I’m in love with you both,” Jonathan teases. “Of course. You two just, uh, stay here, okay? I’ll be right back. Help ‘em with the groceries, don’t wanna overwhelm Kali.”

“Overwhelm — we’re so delightful!” Steve insists.

“Of course,” Jonathan says sincerely, “but it’s a lot at once, so we’ll just give her a second.”

“Shit,” Nancy hisses. “We’re — we’re just wearing your clothing! We have to change!”

“Nancy —”

“Your mom likes me, she can’t just see me in your shirt and boxer —”

“Jonathan!?” Joyce’s voice calls out.

Jonathan pokes his head out of the kitchen doorway. The front door is open. He can make out them walking back to the car to bring back more bags of groceries. “If you’d feel more comfortable changing, go ahead, but my mom loves you. You’re awesome and you’re smart and you’re you and she already knows we’re having sex, so if she assumes that that’s what we did, she won’t be upset!”

“Wait,” Steve says slowly. “Does she know that we’re — okay, go to your mom and Kali, we’ll talk after.”

Jonathan nods. He flashes them both a smile, his heart fluttering when they return the gesture, and bolts out of the kitchen just in time to find Kali at the front door with another bag of groceries in her hand.

It drops out of her grasp. Before he can get his “hello” out, she throws her arms around him and pulls him into a bone-crushing hug. "You scared me to death."
He hugs her back without hesitation. “Sorry?”

“No!”

“Okay!”

Kali pulls back. Deep lines of worry etched on her face, it’s the most vulnerable he’s ever seen her, that she’s ever let him see. Back in that very first car ride when they first met in January — was it only just a few months ago? — when she’d basically asked if she could be redeemed, she’d hidden her face and stared out the car window. He couldn’t see all of her emotions on her face.

So this raw openness and honesty across her face momentarily knocks the air out of her lungs. The wobbling in her chin stops as she speaks: “Let us protect you. Don’t try to do it on your own. I’ve got your back, y’know?”

“Of course I know,” he practically blubbers out. “I have your back too, and I won’t do that again, okay? I swear.”

Kali wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “I can’t believe I’m crying.”

“I can’t believe you’re crying either.”

She pokes his ribs and smirks when he shrieks out an uncontrollable laugh. After he catches his breath, she drifts her hands down to his shoulders. “For real, though. You’ll be okay. I know it doesn’t seem like it from where you’re standing, but that’s why you keep going. The view changes. Trust me.”

“Always.” He sniffs, covering her hands with his. “Thank you. You know you’re family, right?”

Kali’s face falls. “You don’t have to —”

“It’s true.”

They both separate and swirl around to face the front door. Joyce leans against the doorframe, her arms crossed, a knowing smile splitting her face. “Sorry. I didn’t want to ruin the moment. I like it when my kids are like this.”

“Joyce,” Kali tries again, her voice hard. “You don’t have to say it.”

Joyce steps forward. She cups Kali’s face with both hands. Jonathan can pinpoint the moment that Kali’s face softens. “What’s wrong with saying the truth, hm?”

Kali smiles wetly. “I didn’t cry this much until I moved in here. All of my friends agree that you’ve all turned me into a cheesy disaster. I had a reputation, I swear, and then they hear me call Will buddy and Jane love on the phone and it just goes down the drain.”

“Sorry.” Jonathan’s shit-eating grin says otherwise.

“I’m not,” Kali says firmly. She clears her throat. “Let’s get the groceries into the kitchen, yeah? And introduce me to Nancy and Steve already.”

Joyce strokes Kali’s face once more before bending down to grab a bag.

Jonathan steps past the bags on the floor to close the front door. He lifts two the two heaviest and stifles a grunt. “I like the sound of that.”
“Nancy and Steve are okay?” Joyce asks as the three walk further into the house.

“They’re good. Just changing right now. We talked. Everything’s fine.”

Kali raises an eyebrow. “Everything?”

“I mean, there’s still stuff to figure out, I guess.” NYU and the possibility of therapy pop into his mind. “But I feel good. And I feel like I can figure it all out.”

“You can,” Joyce says.

He stops suddenly and nearly walks into the kitchen wall. The handles of the bags dig into his wrist. Kali drops her two bags onto the kitchen counter and begins putting those groceries away. Light from the fridge spills out as Joyce opens the fridge door.

“Hey.” Kali’s mouth curves into a frown.

Jonathan blinks. His vision snaps back into focus. “Mhm?”

She closes the top cabinet door. “You good?”

It takes him a moment to register what’s happening inside of him. His limbs hang loose. His heartbeat beats steadily. There isn’t any tension in his body. His mind is clear, free from worry, guilt, numbness, and everything else he’s been plagued with recently.

The realization washes over him: this is what it feels like to be at peace.

“I’m good,” he says and goes to help unpack the rest of the groceries.

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The rest of the day goes by in a blur.

Nancy and Steve change back into the clothes they arrived in last night. Jonathan introduces them to Kali. They bond instantly, Nancy and Kali especially, first about the lab and Kali’s powers, then delving into all of the details Jonathan has told them both. Nancy says she’d love to try Kali’s cooking, that she can’t cook herself. Kali flushes and agrees if Nancy would lend her a book from her “impressive collection”.

“We don’t even have that book at the library I work at,” Kali exclaims. “What the fuck!”

“Of course I’ll lend it to you! I write notes in the margin, so sorry if —”

“I do too!”

“She’s gone and stolen your best friend,” Steve says without any heat. They’d eaten a late breakfast and currently sit around the dining table.

“Oh, c’mon. Thought you knew how to share. Been doing so since New Years.”

“Boo. That was terrible.” Steve laughs anyway and elbows Jonathan.

Jonathan prepares to elbow him back, but Joyce appears behind them. “You boys want anything else? I’m making some more toast.”
“I’ll get it for us, don’t worry,” Jonathan assures.

Steve jumps to his feet. “I’m happy to do it, Ms. Byers.”

“Oh, Steve, it’s alright.”

“No, really! I want to learn how to cook, anyway, and my mom’s banned me from the kitchen. I swear, I won’t burn your house down.”

“I feel like that’s what’s usually said before a house is burned down,” Jonathan says.

Steve flicks Jonathan’s forehead. “You’re such an asshole. Oh, shit, sorry, Ms. Byers.”

“After everything, you can call me Joyce and swear in front of me,” she says. “Now, c’mon. I’ll teach you how to use a toaster.”

The hours fly by. Before he notices it’s already four in the afternoon, El and Will come running into the living room and cheer at the sight of Nancy and Steve.

“Thanks for calling us,” Nancy says as she ruffles El’s hair.

Jonathan had nearly forgotten about that. “I can’t believe you did that,” he tells El. “Thank you. I mean that.”

El beams. She thumbs the straps of her backpack. “We’re a family and I’m here for you.”

His breath catches. He wants to weep with gratitude, thrown back to that moment last summer, just him and her in their kitchen, as he tried consoling her. Hearing her use the same words he used to comfort her makes him wonder how someone could get this lucky.

Steve and Will pull back from their one-armed hug. “It was a genius idea, right?” Will grins at El before looking at Jonathan. “And look at you! You look so happy!”

“It’s not just because of Steve and Nancy,” Jonathan protests. “You guys too.”

The landline rings. Joyce can’t take the call since she’s in the shower. Kali, Jonathan, Will, and El all look at each other.

Their fingers scramble to touch their nose, three “Not it!”’s chorussing.

The only Byers not touching their nose is El.

Will furrows his eyebrows. “You want to get the phone?”

El shrugs all-too casually. “I mean. I don’t mind.”

Varying degrees of confusion flits across everyone’s faces, except for Kali. Kali’s mouth hangs open. A laugh tumbles past her lips as she dashes in front of El. “You don’t mean ...”

El extends her hand. In the blink of an eye, the phone lands in her palm. “Yup.”

A few minutes later, Joyce walks into the kitchen, a towel wrapped around her head, and finds them all screaming and cheering and jumping around.

“What on Earth is going on here!?” She’s half-laughing as she gestures wildly to all six teens.
“Mom, look!” El shoots her hand out. Joyce’s towel soars through the air and right into El’s palm. “Here, I’ll put it back.”

Joyce tears up. Jonathan isn’t sure if it’s because of Mom or El’s powers back or just both.

They calm down and settle into the living room, squeezing into the sofa. An hour ticks by. Jonathan’s face starts to hurt from laughing as Will and El animatedly tell the older teens about a fistfight from school.

“Does no one in this house know how to answer the phone!?”

Nancy’s forehead wrinkles. “Is that ...?”

“I didn’t even hear the front door open,” Steve whispers.

“MOM.” Will shouts. “CAN YOU TELL MURRAY TO, LIKE, RELAX.”

“I will not!” Murray steps into the living room, his hand on his hip. “There are literally a million of you, and none of you can answer the ph — Nancy?”

Nancy smiles, an equal mix of dry and friendly. “So you’re like this on weekdays too.”

“Like what? Pleasant, a great conversationalist?”

“Since when?” Will says.

“Lying isn’t right,” El adds.

“Dude, we all know you already,” Kali says. “You can’t fool us.”

Steve laughs into the back of his hand. “Bro, they all hate you.”

“Nah, it’s how they show their affection,” Jonathan corrects. No one disagrees.

Murray’s eyes land on Jonathan. His gaze softens. “I called about you, actually. Can we talk for a minute?”

“Yeah, of course.” Jonathan swallows and disentangles from the mess of limbs they’ve made on the sofa. He joins Murray. The two descend into the hallway out of earshot from the room. “Is everything okay?”

Murray removes his glasses and hang them from his shirt. “Depends. Is everything okay with you?”

Jonathan didn’t know how to answer that. He and Murray weren’t close. Murray was a part of his life, of course. He frequented their family dinners, movie nights, and spent many weekends hanging out, and not just with Joyce. He helped Will and El with their English homework. Visited Kali at the library. And of course, routinely hung out with Joyce. They saw movies, ate out, and did errands together.

He and Murray didn’t really have a thing. They’d talk. Jonathan would occasionally laugh at his jokes. Murray often teased him. Once, Murray asked Jonathan if he wanted to throw ball, but Jonathan couldn’t tell if he was serious or not, and just said he had homework.

He didn’t expect Murray to care this much. Not enough to be irritated that no one answered his call because of how much he wanted to check up on Jonathan.
“I’m okay now,” Jonathan answers. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. “Dunno how long it’ll last.”

“I know a guy.”

“You have to understand that I have no idea what you mean by that.”

“Someone you can talk to. Professionally.”

"Is this, like, a friend of yours? Is he, hm, how do I —"

“He used to be my therapist. He’s a good one. Don’t worry, he doesn’t treat me anymore, got a different one right now, so there isn’t a conflict of interest or anything and I won’t know anything about your sessions. If you want it.”

“You go to therapy?” Jonathan’s face crumbles. “Are you okay?”

Murray barks out a bitter laugh. “Are any of us? But, hey, that’s the point of it, right? We’re not okay, but this is how we get there. So let’s get you there.”

The sincerity and fondness in Murray’s voice surprises Jonathan. He didn’t think Murray hated him or anything, so he wasn’t sure why he was so shocked. Maybe it was just because Lonnie never looked at him with kind eyes. The last man who did was back in Hawkins, six feet under the ground. He wasn’t used to this. But he let himself, he could. “I appreciate it, I do, but isn’t it expensive?”

“I can cover it.”

Jonathan shifts. “You can’t.”

“Your mom agreed.”

“What!?”

“I know, right? I was shocked too. But ‘m pretty sure she knows you need this and she won’t let her pride get in the way. And if you’re thinking, well, I’m going to New York in a few months anyway, this guy’s got recs for therapists all over. Got a good one in New York, too, fifty minutes from NYU. She’s legit.”

It had to be the fifth hug he’d been in today, but he doesn’t care. Murray needs to know. He needs to understand. “Thank you,” he chokes out. “I don’t — I’ve never —”

“Me too, kid.” Murray wraps his arms around Jonathan and squeezes him tight. “You’re gonna be alright, you hear me? You’re gonna be just fine.”

Laughter from the living room fills the house. Someone must fall of the sofa, because there’s a thud followed by louder snorts of laughter. The window at the end of the hallway reveals the start of the sunset, a hazy glow of pink. Somehow he knows that Joyce is watching them from a few feet away, biting back a smile, letting them have their moment as her heart grows three sizes at all the love in this house and all of the love she’s brought to her kids and to herself.

Jonathan knows the same thing is happening to him.

He squeezes Murray back. “Here’s a sentence I never thought I’d say: I think you’re right.”
i had to rewrite this chapter three times, but here's the final, finished thing. i've just been settling back from my vacation and into senior year and getting back into the swing of things. this chapter was extremely cathartic to write and i hope you liked it as much as i did.

i have so many things to respond to here and on tumblr that i will get to soon, i promise!! just bear with me.

comments/kudos feed the soul. take care of yourselves, y'all, and i'll see you soon for the last chapter.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

apologies for all grammatical errors -- all mistakes are mine! was in a rush to post.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nancy and Steve leave that night.

Everyone, save for Jonathan, says their goodbyes in the kitchen after dinner is finished. It takes a few minutes. Promises to call, to read this book, watch that television show, to visit soon are made by everyone.

El draws back from her hug with Steve to ask, “Are you coming for Jonathan’s graduation?”

Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan freeze. He knows that the same thing’s on all of their minds: NYU. He hasn’t told them about his acceptance. Hasn’t even decided what he wants to do.

But then they glance at him, Steve’s smile panicked, Nancy’s eyes wide. He might’ve just made his choice.

“Of course, man,” Steve says.

“I’m not a man,” El says.

“Right. Sorry, dude.”

“I’m not — okay, fine, I’ll let you have that.”

Jonathan walks Nancy and Steve to Steve’s car. He tilts his head towards the sky. The sunset fades, the pink in the sky bleeding. Evening light rapidly dwindles. Kicking at the gravel on the driveway, Jonathan clears his throat. “We should talk about it before you leave.”

“It’s all your choice.” Nancy grabs his hand and kisses his knuckle, sending a rush of warmth throughout his body. “We’ll make it work. We’ve done long-distance long successfully. We can keep at it.”

“Yeah.” Steve sounds hollow. He hooks his chin over Jonathan’s head and buries his nose in his hair.

Jonathan waits until they’re all pressed up against each other, fingers laced, heads bent together, to say: “NYU accepted me.”

For a beat, no one moves. The only sounds are their slow breaths.

“Congratulations.” Steve kisses the top of Jonathan’s head. “Real proud of you. That’s amazing.”

“Regardless of what you decide, it’s still a huge accomplishment,” Nancy continues.

“Oh. I should probably say. I’m going.”
“Hold on.” Nancy laughs shakily. She holds Jonathan by the shoulders, her face bright enough to light the night sky. “When did you decide?”

Jonathan grins. “Just now.”

“Oh my God!” Nancy squeals and leaps into his arms. Steve cups his hands around his mouth and yells, “HE’S GOING TO FUCKING NYU!” before twirling them both in the air. Jonathan laughs and throws his arms around them.

They kiss, and hug, and incoherently yell about NYU and Columbia and New York.

When he watches them drive off, his heart aches. But this will be one of the last few times they’ll have to say goodbye. That reminder eases the pain.

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The following day, he and Olive spot each other from opposite sides of the first floor hallway of school. They instantly sprint towards each other. He nearly knocks into a group of freshmen, but narrowly avoids them. He throws a breathless “Sorry!” over his shoulder anyway.

Olive and Jonathan stop with a foot of space between them.

She pushes her hair out of her face. “Hey.”

Jonathan shifts his backpack over his back. “Hey.”

“You didn’t call.”

“Sorry. Nancy and Steve came in for a surprise visit, Jane called them actually. And, uh. Had a lot of conversations yesterday about what happened, what’s been happening with me.”

“And?”

“And. I’m okay? I’m getting ... help. Letting myself be a person.” He gives her a weak smile.

Olive smiles back. “Good. Great.”

“Thank you. For everything the other day. I didn’t ask for help when I needed it, but you gave it to me anyway. That means the world, especially since it was from you.”

“Hey. We’re friends. Part of the deal. You’d do the same for me.”

A comfortable silence falls over them. Students walk past them, in between them. The first bell rings. Five minutes to get to homeroom. Everyone heads off towards their classes, but they remain still.

A teacher from the stairway gives them a dirty look.

Jonathan scratches the back of his neck. “Can we hug now?”

Olive sighs in relief. They meet in the middle. The teacher from the stairway pointedly coughs, but they hold on for another few seconds before reluctantly parting to get to Physics on time.
Jonathan speaks to Frankfort at lunch. He explains that he opened up to his family, that he’s working on it, that it won’t happen again.

“Good,” Frankfort says sincerely. He sits in his chair with one leg propped up on his desk and his container of salad in his lap. “Anything else?”

Jonathan repeatedly crosses and uncrosses his legs in his seat. “Actually. Um. Yeah. I’m a little nervous about last period. I had that huge freakout, didn’t come to school yesterday, and I don’t care what people think, I shouldn’t, but I’m scared.”

Frankfort sets his container next to a stack of papers. He rubs his palms together. “Want me to speak to the class about it?”

“God no. I mean. No thank you.”

“Some advice then?”

Jonathan manages to nod.

“Honestly? I have nothing.”

Jonathan groans. “You’re the Wise Teacher. You’ve gotta have something.”

“Nope. But, and in no way am I dismissing your feelings and tell me if I am, but these are, what, people you barely know, right? People who don’t know you either. People you won’t see again two months from now. It doesn’t matter what they think, because they don’t know the full story. And I promise, if anyone says anything, I’ll handle it. You just know that you’re doing your best. It’s never an easy thing to do. I don’t know what you’re going through, but I commend you for getting through it. And you will get through it.”

Jonathan relaxes. He soaks in Frankfort’s comfort. “That was perfect. How do you do that? Do all teachers have the natural gift of pep talks or do you practice?”

“Both. But I’ve heard you and Olive in class, know all about your Jonathan Byers pep talks.”

“Oh, they’re nothing like what you just said.”

“I doubt that. C’mon. Give yourself some credit.”

Jonathan picks at a hole in his jeans. “Okay. Yeah, I’ll try.”

“Good.” Frankfort clasps his hands behind his head. “NYU respond yet?”

“Yup.”

“And?”

“I’m in.”

They spend the next fifteen minutes discussing the program. Jonathan asks Frankfort questions about
his university experience. They eventually land on the topic of how he decided to be a teacher.

“I graduated at twenty-five. School took a little longer for me. Life was rapidly moving forward, and I couldn’t really keep up, already felt so behind. I knew I didn’t want to do forensics or journalism. Too intense for me. I was doing paid gigs, small weddings, birthdays, baby showers, things like that. I just needed the work. I’d take anything to earn cash at that point. My local community centre put posters up asking for English tutoring, and you know I teach English too, always liked it in high school, so I thought. What the hell. I applied. Got the job. And it just felt like the final puzzle piece slotting in.

“It made so much sense to me. So I did some more school. Kept up with the photography gigs and tutoring. And here I am. I ended up somewhere good, I think. Education isn’t easy, but when you love something, it doesn’t matter if it’s easy. Not everyone can do what they want like this, y’know? So I’m lucky. And so are you. Whatever you decide, you have time. Just focus on school. You’ll figure the rest out when you’re meant to.

“But I mean right now, do you have any ideas?”

Jonathan fiddles with his fingers. He looks around the room. The gigantic birthday card the class made for Frankfort using a green bristol board hangs in next to the whiteboard. Doodles from the tenth grade photography class cover the whiteboard. Paint dots the walls, the tables. Four freshman shuffle into the classroom, wave at Frankfort, and take the table in the back as if this is an everyday occurrence. Frankfort waves back, so it must be.

“Sup, Franky!” The taller boy yells. The girl to his right elbows him. He elbows her back without looking away from Frankfort. “Should we leave? Are you two having a private conversation?”

“Don’t worry, you’re good,” Jonathan says quickly. “We’re just talking.”

“Thanks, man!”

The girl rolls her eyes. “Don’t call a senior man.”

“I’m not calling him sir.”

Jonathan can’t help but smile. “Jonathan’s fine.”

“Oh, shit!” The smallest girl says. “You’re Jane and Will’s brother. They’re cool. We like them. We’re friends. Or, like, we will be.”

“...Okay. Good luck?”

“Thank you!”

Frankfort pretends to glare. “Are you guys finished hogging my student?”

The kids tease Frankfort, but take their seats. Jonathan waves at them before turning back to Frankfort.

“So? What were you saying?” Frankfort asks.

“I see the life that you have. Teaching kids, getting to work with cameras and art all day, making a real change in people’s lives. I’ve never really had a teacher give a shit about me, sorry for swearing but it’s true, and then I had you, and it was like. Oh. Oh, so this is what a good teacher can do.”
Jonathan has never seen Frankfort’s face transform like this. It touches him that he caused the glint in Frankfort’s eye.

“Wow, Jon, that means ... wow. For the record, I think you’d be amazing at it. You’ve got a big heart, you’re a great photographer, obviously, and you’re great with kids. Don’t look at me like that. Your siblings love you, and my nines over there keep whispering about how you’re the nicest senior they’ve met.”

Jonathan resists the urge to spare the kids another look. His face grows hot. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Course not. You basically said it yourself. There aren’t enough people who would be good at teaching and who would love it in this field if you hadn’t known the power of a good educator until now. I’m delighted at the prospect of you in that position. You could make a difference.”

“It’s just an idea.” But it’s like a light-switch has been turned on in his head, his heart. It’s just an idea, but that’s how it starts. “But I appreciate it. Coming from you.”

Frankfort smiles. “Don’t tell anyone. But you’re one of my favourite students.”

“You’re my favourite teacher, but I think that’s kind of obvious.”

A knock on the door grabs their attention.

Olive steps inside, sketchbook clutched to her chest with a banana balanced on top. “Hey. You were taking awhile, so thought I’d come by. Already ate. Did you?”

“Hi to you too, Olive,” Frankfort says.

“Teachers shouldn’t be this sensitive.” But she waves anyway.

“Sorry, yeah,” Jonathan says, laughing a little. “I’m good to go. Unless you wanna stay here?”

“Ask Frankfort. You’ll hurt his feelings otherwise.”

Frankfort groans. “I said one thing.”

“You really are sensitive, huh,” Jonathan says. Frankfort groans again, but lets them stay.

Before he knows it, it’s last period. Time for Yearbook. He considers bolting, walking right out of the school, but he can’t avoid this forever. What’s he have to be ashamed of, anyway?

Of course people stare. Jonathan stares back, and they look away, but it still unsettles him.

As he takes his seat, someone prods his shoulder. He jumps.

“Shit, sorry, man.” It’s Eliot. It was his scissors that Jonathan had mindlessly bent down and picked up off of the floor. “Look. I dunno what the hell happened the other day, but it’s not my business, so whatever. Just wanted to ask if you were okay. Which I’m now realizing is dumb, because you’re not gonna open up to me of all people, and, like, you’re obviously not okay after whatever the fuck that was, but. It’s cool, y’know? Don’t feel bad. We’ve all got our shit. I hope you ... handle it. You know what I mean, right?”

Eliot ruffles his red, messy hair. “Of course. But definitely not as much as it startled you.”

Jonathan forgets how genuine people can be. He’s known of kindness, but has never expected it from anyone he doesn’t know well. He’s thrown off guard, but in the best way possible. The world may be mean and unfair, but that doesn’t mean everyone in it is. He struggles with remembering that. “I appreciate it. A lot.”

"Hey, Eliot.” Olive shuffles past Eliot to sit next to Jonathan. “You sittin’ with us today?”

“Uhh ...” Eliot stares at his feet. “I mean? If you’re offering?”

Jonathan kicks the seat to his right out. “Definitely. I’d love to see the typographer in action.”

Eliot flushes. He takes the seat and drops his backpack by his feet. “Typography isn’t that big of a deal.”

Olive snorts. “Water isn’t wet. That’s what you sound like.”

“Actually, water isn’t really wet because —”

“Oh my God.” Olive makes a face. “You’re wrong.”

Jonathan laughs. He witnesses the ongoing debate, not paying attention to what they say, but to how intense it gets, as he sorts through club photos. He laughs until his cheeks hurt. It’s a good feeling.

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The rest of May passes by quickly.

The first week after everything is weird. He doesn’t know how else to put it. And not just because everyone’s treating him like he’s made of glass, but because ... well, a week ago, he’d toss and turn and lie there in his bed for hours. He’d lie and say he’d have homework to avoid dinner, then not eat the food left out for him and lump it with the leftovers. The phone would ring with a call from Nancy or Steve, and he wouldn’t answer. He’d be awake until sunrise, and the light would slip in through his opened window, but he couldn’t feel it.

That’s all gone now. He sleeps, eats, showers, calls Nancy and Steve. Can feel the sunlight, can feel his smiles, can feel like a person again.

He’s cautiously optimistic. He knows that those bad days won’t just go away. What does he do next time? What if he’s got exams, if God forbid monsters resurface in Hawkins or someone comes for El, if it happens when he needs to be one-hundred percent himself?

He hasn’t taken Murray up on his therapy offer. Not yet. Murray hasn’t pushed. Joyce has mentioned it twice, but leaves it at that.

One night, he asks Nancy for her opinion. Steve’s got a late-night shift, so it’s only them on the call.

“You know what I’ll say already,” she says. “You know that I want the best for you.”

“What would you do if it was you then? No bullshit.”
“No bullshit? Alright. I’d wanna try. The thing is, everyone says shit like, it’ll get better. And I spent a lot of time thinking that that was a bunch of crap. How could anything get better? Barb was —” Nancy’s voice shakes.

“Hey. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“I just need a second. Hold on.”

“Take however long you need.” Jonathan’s chest pangs. He wants to press their scars together, to kiss her knuckles, to hold her close. But all he can do is listen and add, “I’m here for you.”

Several seconds tick by. “Okay. I’m good. So Barb was dead, your brother would never get his childhood back, and none of us could ever forget. It felt like lies. And I still believe it now, but not for the same reasons. It doesn’t get better. We do. We can’t wait around to heal. It’s a ridiculously long process, and you start over so many times, but you have to choose it. And not to say that if you decide to be happy, you will be, but you’ve gotta try. That’s what your mom did with moving to Illinois. She wanted to heal from all that pain, so she did something about it. Therapy could be your Illinois.”

“Would you ever consider going to therapy?”

“I didn’t experience what you —”

“You don’t have to downplay your feelings. You’ve got your own shit.”


“I mean, and this is the most self-aware I’ve ever been, I think it’d take me awhile to admit I’d probably need it. But eventually? Yeah. There are so many studies, statistics, and blatant evidence that therapy helps. I don’t want to ever believe the voice in my head that tells me that I should’ve died, not her, not again, but if it happens again one day, then I owe it to myself, right?”

“Nancy ... I didn’t know you —”

“It hasn’t happened in awhile. That first year after she died, then a few months after her funeral, but recently, it’s been quiet up here. Dunno how long it’ll last, though.”

“If you ever feel that way again, promise you’ll do something about it? Doesn’t mean you talk to us — your mom or Robin or Mike, whoever — but please. Promise?”

“You don’t have to worry about — oh, shit, I really almost said that to you.”

“I’m not calling you a hypocrite, because you technically didn’t say it.” Nancy’s laugh crackles over the line. “I promise. But you too.”

“Promise to reach out or go to therapy?”

“Look, therapy is your choice. I’m not making you do it. But reaching out is something I need you to do.”

His chest loosens. “Okay. Promise. Love you.”

“Love you too.”
They go back to talking about Not Trauma related-things and end up at the topic of graduation.

“It doesn’t feel that high school is over in a few weeks,” Jonathan admits. “And I feel everything. Relieved. Excited. But also, sad? Nostalgic? I was so different coming into it. I had Will and my mom, and that was good, of course, but I didn’t have —” His breath hitches. “You, Steve, Kali, El, Olive, hell, even Murray. I was this kid, too exhausted at fourteen. I had no idea about the shit-storm waiting for me, but I also didn’t know that I could be me and have all of this. But I could. I do.”

“I love you,” she tells him again. “And I get it. I do. I’m happy we’re here, even if I hate how we got here.”

“Me too. What about you? How’re you feeling?”

“It’s like you said, but mostly relief mixed with sadness. Not for graduating, fuck that, I won’t miss this place, but I was supposed to — to do it with Barb. We were going to have matching caps, graduate together, go to college together. I’ve handled her absence, I think, I’m used to always missing her, but not this. Not all the missed birthdays, graduations, and all. She was supposed to be here.”

A pause.

“She was,” he says softly. “Comfort, advice, or just need me to listen?”

“I — fuck. Just listen. This is good. Need it off my chest.”

“You talked to Steve about it?”

“ Mentioned it once last week. We cuddled afterwards. Think that’s all I need. Maybe I’ll break into his room for a change tonight.”

The conversation moves easily after that. He ends the call when Will shouts that dinner’s ready.

“I gotta go eat now. Talk tomorrow. You okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

“I’m great, but I always feel like that with you.”

“I feel like that too,” she admits quietly. “I feel better.”

He traces his scar absentmindedly. “Me too.”

“Whatever you decide, I’m backing you up. You’ll make the right choice for yourself, Jonathan.”

So, the deadline to accept college offers is coming up. Made a decision yet, honey?”

Jonathan looks up to find five pairs of eyes on him. He blinks and nearly drops the plate out of his hands. He hadn’t expected to announce it during dinner, but here goes nothing. “Oh. Yeah. I’ve decided.”
“Hold on,” Will says. “Did you even get your letter from NYU yet?”

“Yeah. I got in.”

“Congrats, man.” Kali nods approvingly.

Murray, on Jonathan’s right, claps his back. “Nice.”

“You didn’t tell us!” Will says, his mouth caught between a grin and a frown.

Joyce smiles smugly. “I knew.”

“What!? You told mom before me?”

“Why did you say it like that?” A crease forms between Joyce’s eyebrows. “I birthed him.”

“I’m his brother!”

“Will,” El says. “Who cares. We’re proud of you, Jonathan, not upset you didn’t tell us sooner.”

“Of course I’m proud of you! You’re going to kill it and be so, so happy. I’m not slightly offended that Mom knew before me. Of course not!”

Jonathan smiles, his cheeks warm and flushed. “Sorry, bud.”

“He’ll get over it,” Kali insists. “Right?”

Will nods. “Yeah, of course. Congratulations! You did it!”

“We need to celebrate,” El says. “Ice-cream!”

“I feel like you just want ice-cream,” Murray says.

“Don’t you want to celebrate Jonathan?” El counters.


Joyce scoffs. “Like hell you will!”

“Jonathan hasn’t agreed to anything,” Will reminds them all. “You wanna celebrate?”

With them all beaming at him from across the dining table, it’s the easiest thing in the world to say, “Hell yeah.”

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The last Friday of May finds them where every Friday finds them: Jonathan and Will in one side of the booth, Kali and El in the other, in the ice-cream parlour twelve minutes away from their house. A plate of fries and their individual orders of ice-cream sit on the table.

“Mint is disgusting,” El declares. “Never trying it again.”
“Oh, c’mon, you barely tried it.” Kali gently nudges El. “And you’re also extremely wrong.”

“No, El’s right,” Jonathan says. “Mint’s fine for toothpaste, but as a flavour? Disgusting.”

El high-fives him.

Kali gapes. She points her spoon at Jonathan, then El. “You’re disgusting. What the fuck. Will? Do you have taste?”

Will curls his lower lip at Jonathan and El. “I do have taste, Kali. Jonathan and El are nasty.”

“Okay, Mr. Coffee-Is-An-Acceptable-Ice-Cream-Flavour.” El snorts. Judging from Will’s yelp, she must’ve kicked him underneath the table. “I don’t trust your taste anyway.”

He kicks her back with a laugh. “You’re full of shit!”

“Hey,” Jonathan says, mock-stern. “You’re full of shit.”

Everyone bursts out laughing.

“I think that’s the first time you’ve sworn at him,” Kali says.

“It definitely is,” Will wheezes out. “You should do it more often. Fuck. See? That was fun!”

“Did Oliver do this to you? You did not swear this much until he started swearing,” Kali says.

Will raises an eyebrow. “How would you know that? You don’t see him that often.”

For a fleeting moment, Kali blushing. But then she schools her face into a neutral expression and shrugs. “Olive mentioned it. We’re friends, y’know.”

“You guys are good friends,” Will says slowly.

“So are you and Oliver.”

“That’s not what they mean by good friends, I think,” Jonathan whispers to her. He keeps his eyes trained on Kali. If what he’s thinking is right, he can’t tell if Kali wants to say anything or not. He could give her an in. She wouldn’t have to take it if she didn’t want to.

Jonathan quickly looks around. It’s nearly eleven pm. A middle-aged man and woman sit at the opposite side of the store, their legs tangled underneath the table. Two tables behind them, a woman lets her five year-old son feed her ice-cream. No one’s paying attention to them.

“I have something to say, actually,” Jonathan announces. “I’m dating Nancy and Steve. Both of them. At the same time. They’re, uh. Dating too.” After they’d left Illinois, he’d asked them, separately, over the phone, if he could tell some people. He had to tell them that Joyce knew. They already knew that Will knew. Kali, El, Olive, and Murray didn’t. It surprised himself that he wanted Murray to know, but Murray is more than his mom’s best friend to him now. He didn’t spend too much time thinking about why it mattered so much that he knew. Just that it was important.

Will, of course, has no reaction, other than a smile and an encouraging nod.

Kali’s eyebrows rise. For a split second, Jonathan’s horrified that he’s made a mistake, that Kali’s going to hate him now, that he read it incorrectly. But then she smiles. Leans over. Claps his
shoulder. “Nice dude. Didn’t know that you had all that game.”

“I really don’t” Jonathan’s shoulders sag with relief.

Meanwhile, El bites the cherry from her ice-cream. “Like me and Mike and Max.”


Even Kali looks bewildered. Her hand freezes on Jonathan’s shoulder. She looks back and forth between them. “What, since when — holy shit! Will, you knew!”

Jonathan gapes at Will. “Will!”

Will bites back a grin. “El likes me more.”

“Or Mike and Max are all friends with us,” El corrects, shooting Will a smile anyway. “Mike and Max are friends, though. Well. Friends in their own way. And Mike and —”

“Shh!” Will hisses.

“Are you serious,” Jonathan says. “You were the first person I told about Steve and Nancy, and you won’t tell us whatever this is!? You don’t have to, but —”

“Mike and I are kind of dating, and Oliver’s cool with it, because they have an aunt who lives with her girlfriend. So we know everyone’s dating situation except for Kali.”

Everyone looks at Kali.

Kali crumples her empty cup. “We’re not dating. But I like her. And I think she likes me back.”

El bumps her knee against Kali’s. “Ask her out!”

“I can’t just ask her out, Jane!”

“Why?”

“Because — because! I just can’t. Oh my God. You’re all dating. You’re all dating two people, in fact, and I’m pining away.” Kali sinks into her seat. She presses her forehead against the table. “I’m too cool to have emotions.”

“You’re too cool to be this big of a disaster over a crush,” El says so candidly that Jonathan claps his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. She threads her fingers through Kali’s hair soothingly.

“Hey,” Jonathan says softly. “It’s okay. You don’t have to do anything you don’t wanna. But I know Olive, and sure, I didn’t notice before, but I know for sure that she’s into you. How could she not? You’re smart, thoughtful, funny, and the best.”

“And,” Will adds. “It won’t be the end of the world if she doesn’t feel the same way. You still have love in your life regardless. There’s more to life than boyfriends and girlfriends, right?”

That gets Kali to sit back up and pry her face out of her hands. She smiles almost ruefully, and rubs at the flush in her face. “Did I just get my very own, personalized Byers pep talk?”

“Afraid so.” Jonathan touches her wrist. “Will’s right. You’re loved regardless. And I guess our pep talk has some merit, since, like you said, we’re all dating two people. Huh. That’s — it’s not weird to say nice to that, right?”
“Not weird,” El confirms. She pokes Kali’s stomach and giggles at the startled laugh Kali shrieks out. “You’re brave. But not telling her doesn’t mean you’re not brave. Does that make sense?”

Kali smiles fondly at El. “Yeah, kiddo. It does.”

“Oh no,” Will blurts out.

They stare at Will.

“I’m good! But I realized that we won’t have this in a few months. Jonathan’ll be at NYU. It’ll be good, us three.” He gestures to himself, Kali, and El. “But it won’t be the same.”


“But then we’ll be in school again, won’t we?” El frowns. “And if we leave, then we’re still — still spending a lot of years away from each other.”

“How,” Jonathan says.

“I didn’t realize,” Kali says.

Their table descends into silence. They look at each other, unsure, hesitant, sad.

Jonathan breaks the silence. “We can look at it in a good way too, right? Like that Winnie the Pooh quote. I’m so lucky or whatever to have something that makes it difficult to say goodbye.”

Will makes a face. “Winnie did not say it like that.”

“You get what I mean. We’re lucky to have this.” He points between them. “And this? It’s not going anywhere, not just ‘cause I’m going off to school, or because you two will eventually, or if Kali ever goes back to Chicago —”

“I don’t think I will,” Kali says. “I know that’s a hypothetical, but this place’s been good to me. My friends are all safe back in Chicago. They’re getting there, getting better, but until they’re there, this is the place for me. Home. Sorry. I interrupted.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Jonathan smiles, overwhelmed with relief for something he hadn’t begun to worry about.

El squeezes Kai’s knee. “You mean that?”

“Of course! But Jonathan’s right. Doesn’t matter where we are. And really, we’ll always be in this small, weird-smelling booth.”

Jonathan soaks it in. The flickering light above their table. The after-taste of his favourite order in his mouth: two scoops of peanut butter ice-cream. El’s foot bumping into his underneath the table. Will’s elbows knocking into his from his right side. The light in Kali’s dark brown eyes.

Winnie the Pooh was right. How lucky he is.

“It doesn’t smell that weird,” Will protests.

Kali rolls her eyes and reaches across the table to playfully flick Will’s elbow. “Okay, mint-hater.”
A week later, and Yearbook is hell in the form of a high school class.

Everything is a mess. Everyone is stressed, rushing to finish the yearbook. Paper, pencils, pens, rulers, and scissors litter not only the table, but the floor. Jonathan straight-up tells Frankfort that he’d prefer to do anything that gets him out of the classroom and avoiding scissors entirely, please. He’s a Photographer, and all of his work finished last month. It’s the visual artists and editors struggling to complete the designs, proofread everything, last-minute approve of the seniors’ graduation quotes that are swamped.

Frankfort sends him and Olive, who finished her assigned design two days ago, to return everything they’ve borrowed. From supplies to the visual arts department to, for some reason, calculators.

They finish early and hide in the girls’ washroom. Olive promises that no one uses it. She ensures it’s empty before Jonathan steps inside.

“You’re okay with hiding out with me in here?” Jonathan presses his back against the wall and slides down to the floor.

Olive drops her backpack by her feet. She joins him on the floor. “Sure. It’s clean in here, everyone is stressed out and screaming in the class, and you’re my friend.”


He yawns into the back of his hand, noticing Olive immediately turn her shoulder towards him. He accepts the offer with a small smile and nestles his head against her shoulder. “Mm. Comfy.”

“Don’t fall asleep or I’ll wake you up,” she warns, but her soft voice invalidates her threat.

“Liar.”

“I’ll ... be annoyed. But won’t wake you up.”

“Still lying.”

“Fine. I wouldn’t be annoyed. I shockingly care for your wellbeing.”

“You’re my friend. I know you. Know you care. Know that you have a heart under all those layers of black.”

She rests her cheek against the top of his head. “No one will ever believe you.”

He chuckles. “I’ll know it. That’ll be enough for me.”

“You’re also caring. To your siblings, O, me. I’m lucky to know you.”

“I feel the same way.”

Olive scoots back suddenly.

Jonathan sits up, rubbing the side of his face, and frowns. “Is everything o—” The word dies against
Olive’s lips. Jonathan doesn’t move. His eyes don’t even close. The second he registers that she’s kissed him, he reels backwards, his eyes wide, hands raised, and body tense. “Olive!”

“I’m sorry! I needed to make sure!”

“Make sure what?!” He touches his lips, bewildered.

Olive covers her face with her hands. “That I like Kali and not you. I’m so sorry.”

Jonathan sits with it for a second. His horror fades into relief and joy for Kali, for Olive, and for himself. He’d considered telling her about how he’s not just dating Nancy, but it seemed like too big of a risk.

Risk’s gone now, though.

“I couldn’t — couldn’t quite tell, and I think it’s ‘cuz like, well, it made more sense to my brain that I’d fall for my guy best friend and not the girl one instead, and it’s so confusing, I hate feelings — and you were right there, and I’m so — oh my God, you’re dating Nancy —’

“And Steve.”

Olive’s mouth remains open, but no sound comes out.

“Both. I like. Both of them. Well. I love them, but I don’t think that distinction is currently relevant. So I kind of get it. I hate feelings, too, but sometimes they aren’t so bad.”

Her face hasn’t changed. She’s still gaping at him.

“Thank you for telling me,” he adds. “Or. I mean, you didn’t really tell me, but you can trust me.”

Still nothing.

“And, like. It’s okay that you kissed me! Not okay okay, but you obviously won’t do that again, and we’re cool.”

Nada.

“...Are we?”

Olive starts to laugh. It’s a soft, quiet sound that quickly delves into snorting. She throws her head back. “We’re like, queer magnets or something —”

He can’t help but smile. “What?”

“I don’t know! I can’t believe I kissed you!”

“Me neither.” He chuckles a little.

“And you’re dating two people. That’s awesome!”

“It is!”

“And I like Jane’s sister,” she says, dropping her voice.

He smiles softly. “You do. You should go for it.”

She narrows her eyes and points her finger into his chest. “You know somethin’ I don’t?”
“You do something about your feelings and maybe I’ll tell you then.”

She cracks a smile. “A year ago, I had no friends and O had friends, sure, but ones that were total assholes to him. And now I have you, and your adorable siblings, and Kali, and he’s got Will and Jane, and it’s so crazy, isn’t it?”

He thinks of himself and where he was at a year ago, all that he had and still has, all that he’s been given, all that he’s fought for since. He drops his head back against her shoulder. Olive’s arm loops around his. “So crazy,” he agrees.

A comfortable silence floats in the girls’ washroom. Footsteps pass by the washroom, but no one comes inside. Olive presses a kiss against his forehead. He snuggles closer in. His heartbeat slows down.

A few minutes later, Olive says, “You know I have a million questions, right? ‘Bout you, Nancy, and Steve?”

Jonathan laughs hard. Olive joins him. They end up sprawled across the bathroom floor, their faces red, hands clutching their stomachs. Their laughter echoes throughout the the bathroom.

All of his teachers had told him that June will go by in a blink of an eye.

Jonathan knew that they were right, to some degree, but when June goes as fast as it came, he doesn’t know how to feel.

Endings are everywhere. They complete the Yearbook in the second week of June. Everyone’s got their plans for next year: Nancy accepted Columbia, Robin and Jonathan both accepted NYU, Olive accepted NIU, and Steve and Robin gave Keith an early warning that they’re leaving the arcade mid-August. They agreed to live together in their first year. (When he’d checked that he’d be living off campus for first year, he did it with a huge smile.) Frankfort gives them time to clean out their lockers. Jonathan didn’t have much. Three binders, a crumpled periodic table, one half-empty, plastic water bottle, and a taped-picture Frankfort snapped of Jonathan, El, Will, Olive, and Oliver in the Photography room during a lunch in March when Jonathan and Olive had to come into lunch to finish something up. Still, the sight of his empty locker causes an odd ache in his chest. It’s so final.

He’d been looking forward to the end of high school for as long as he could remember. Thing is, he’d never thought he’d actually get in and get to go to NYU. In recent years, he wondered if he’d live long enough to even finish high school.

So the bittersweet feeling is overall more sweet than bitter.

He’ll miss Frankfort. He’ll miss going to school with Will, El, Olive, and Oliver everyday. He’ll miss seeing Olive every day.

But Frankfort had told Olive and him that if they wanted any part-time gigs during their breaks home or even to say hi to write him a letter and send it to the school. He’ll call Will and El all the time. Same with Olive and Oliver. He knows, in his bones, that his friendship with Olive won’t disappear. She’ll be in Illinois, and he’ll be in New York, but that won’t change anything. Besides, she’s officially dating Kali now. It won’t be long until she’s an honorary Byers’ member.
He has a lot to look forward to. His classes at NYU. Living with Nancy, Steve, and Robin. Getting to know Robin better beyond their short and polite conversations on the phone when she’s hanging out with Steve and Nancy. Early mornings tangled with Nancy and Steve in their bed, Nancy’s cold feet on his legs, Steve’s hair in his mouth. Making their small and dingy apartment in New York a home.

It won’t be easy. Nothing ever has, for him, and he won’t fool himself into thinking life will change now. But like Nancy said, it isn’t life that changes, is it? It’s just him. Life didn’t put him and Nancy and Steve together; they fumbled, tripped, and ultimately walked into love all on their own. Circumstances brought El and Kali into their lives, but they chose to be a family all on their own. Chance put him and Olive next to each other on that first day of Photography, but they became friends, all on their own.

It won’t be easy, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be good.

While this is an ending, it’s also a beginning.

It feels like more than just the beginning of his four-year program at NYU. What else is starting, he doesn’t know. But for the first time in awhile, the unknown doesn’t look daunting. It looks inviting.

“You want to drive out to Hawkins at six in the morning.”

“Yes.”

“To make it to Nancy’s ten am graduation.”

“Yes.”

“And then you, Nancy, and Steve will drive back here to make it on time for your graduation?”

“Yes.”

“Jonathan.”

“Mom.”

Joyce looks torn between a smile and a frown. She runs a hand through her bed-head and curls into their living room sofa.

It’s a Saturday morning. It’s seven am, earlier than El and Will wake up for school, than Kali would get ready for a shift at the library. Jonathan doesn’t know why he’s awake so early. Over a month ago, it’d be because he hadn’t slept at all, but today, it could be because he’d crashed early last night from the week’s exhaustion or because of his excitement at the plan that he, Nancy, and Steve concocted.

Those days will come back. Somewhere deep down, he knows that what happened with the sleepless nights, loss of appetite, and the feeling of watching himself, but not feeling like himself will come back eventually. He’ll have to do something about it.

He hasn’t come to a decision yet, but it’s starting to feel like there’s only one option left if he really
wants to heal.

Before he can even think of Murray’s name, a key jingles from the other side of the front door. It abruptly stops.

“Ah, fuck!”

Joyce meets Jonathan’s eyes. They snicker.

“Him and his butter hands,” Joyce says under her breath. “Should we give him a hand? Let him in?”

“Nah. Let him struggle for a second.”

More curses sound from outside. The key jingles once more, and then the front door’s kicked open. Murray stands on the other side, his hands on his hip, a drop of sweat between his eyebrows. “I hate your lock.”

“It hates you too,” Joyce says. “The door-bell misses you, though.”

Murray steps inside. He closes the door behind him and locks it. “You could’ve been sleeping.”

Jonathan scoots over and pats the space to his right. “So considerate.”

“Thank you, kid.” Murray slides into the seat and throws Jonathan a smile that isn’t as sharp as the ones Jonathan is used to receiving from him. He looks at Joyce then mirrors her, hugging his knees to his chest. “So, what’re we *gossiping* about today?”

“Jonathan, why don’t you tell Murray what your plan is?”

“It’s not as ridiculous as you’re making it sound, Mom.”

“Isn’t it, though? *Isn’t it?* ”

Murray raises an eyebrow.

Jonathan sighs. “Me and Nancy’s graduations are on the same day, hers in the late morning, mine in the evening. We were thinking that I go out to Hawkins, leave early in the morning in my car, go to her graduation, then she and Steve drive back with me to make it in time for mine. Perfect plan. Her graduation’ll wrap at one, say she needs an hour to get changed and stuff, then we leave at two, get here at five, and have an hour left until my graduation.”

“Sounds good to me,” Murray says.

“I just don’t want you to tire yourself out,” Joyce says. “It’s a big day, and if you’re late to your *own* graduation —”

"I won’t be!"

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I trust you. Did you get Nancy and Steve’s tickets?”

“Yup. My homeroom teacher stared at me for twelve seconds — I counted — when I said I wanted seven tickets, but we have a pretty small graduating class, so it’s not like we need the space.”
Murray sits upright. “You’re bringing seven people?”

Jonathan blinks. And then he remembers the third ticket he hasn’t given out yet and hastily excuses himself. He jogs into his room, grabs the crumpled graduation ticket with with Guest #5 of Jonathan Byers in pen at the bottom, and returns to the living room.

Joyce and Murray are talking about something, but Murray stops when he notices the ticket thrust out towards him. He pushes his glasses further up his nose. “What’s this?”

Joyce foots Murray’s knee. “Read it.”

Murray gently takes the ticket from Jonathan. His mouth forms an ‘o’. “Why?”

Jonathan’s heart drops. “Um. You don’t want to?”

“No, but I don’t ...” Murray turns to Joyce. “You asked him to?”

“Nope. Told him to invite whoever he wants, that’s all.”

Jonathan nods in agreement. He wrings his hands together. “Teachers told us to invite family, so I did.”

It’s kind of alarming, seeing this much emotion on Murray’s face. For once, he’s at a loss of words.

“Just take the ticket and say thank you,” Joyce says gently.

Murray jerkily leans forward and accepts the ticket with a shaky hand. He strokes the word GRADUATION. “Thank you.”

“Be on time,” Jonathan tries to joke.

“You try to be on time,” Joyce says.

“So you’re letting me go?”

Joyce smiles wryly. She absentmindedly hangs her arm behind Murray’s shoulder as Murray stares at the ticket. “At this point, I don’t think I can not let you do what you want. You’re responsible and thoughtful. You’ll make the right choices for yourself. And I want you to be there for Nancy, and I want Nancy and Steve to be there for you. You paid for a lot of your car, you’ve thought through this, and it’ll make you happy. I’m not standing in the way of that, and I’ve never had to worry about you making the wrong and irresponsible choices. So if you need me to say it, then here it is: I’m letting you.”

Jonathan grins. He bounces on the balls of his feet, his fingers itching to call Nancy and Steve. “Thank you so much.”

Murray claps slowly. “If every parent was like you, there’d be world peace.”

“It’s only easy ‘cause I’ve got great kids,” Joyce says.

“Why do you think they’re great?” Murray extends his hand out to Jonathan, then to her. “You. Duh.”

“T’ll make coffee,” Jonathan says, still smiling and buzzing with a newfound energy.

“After or before you call Nancy and Steve?” Joyce teases.
“After,” he says.

“Two sugars, please, and —”

“I know your order, Murray!” Jonathan calls out as he makes a bee-line for the phone.

Jonathan can’t be bothered to care about his upcoming exams. He should. He still needs to pass and still needs to maintain his GPA or else NYU will take away their offer, but he’s doing well in his classes. He’s so close to the finish line. It’s like he’s already crossed it.

Still, he forces himself to study. His calls with Nancy and Steve dwindle. She’s busy with exams and he’s working more shifts at the arcade, what with the onslaught of middle-school kids coming in since it’s nicer out and they can stay out longer. He’s busy enough that while he misses them, he doesn’t feel it. Graduation’s closer and closer, and once they cross that, they’re finished. He’d known they were capable of long-distance, but the truth in front of him still makes it feel like an accomplishment.

He’s almost nostalgic. It’s his last high school exams. Olive laughs at that, tells him of course he’s going to miss exams, but admits soon enough that she feels the same way.

But then his Physics exam comes and destroys him, so that’s over.

After his last exam, he, Olive, Kali, Will, El, and Oliver all go out for lunch. Pizza, fries, and a terrible amount of soda. They exchange horror stories about their exams and Kali makes fun of them for it. They toss fries into their mouths, followed by laughter at both the successes and failures, and earn a few glares from older customers.

Maybe another day, a younger Jonathan would tell everyone to shh out of politeness. But the employees aren’t complaining. Jonathan and Olive are finished high school. They’re all finished exams. They’ve all endured a hard year full of hard things, and honestly, if someone can laugh this hard on a Tuesday afternoon, then isn’t that amazing, their pasts aside? Who honestly cares if someone’s laughing at a public establishment like a pizza parlour?

So Jonathan laughs harder at the joke Oliver cracks. When the customers look his way, he holds eye contact, and finds a ridiculous amount of joy in how quickly they look away.

Three days later, he drives out to Hawkins.

He leaves a note on the fridge, just so Joyce knows he left on time and can get a final reminder that yes, he’ll be on time.

He also brings a couple of juice-boxes, granola bars, his camera, and a few mix-tapes. Pops his favourite one in. Listens to Freddie Mercury. Sings find me somebody to love, but doesn’t feel the
words down to his core the way he would’ve even a year and a half ago.

It sends a wave of calm over him. He cranks the volume, thanks all the Gods he can think of for Freddie Mercury, and sings louder.

The drive is slow, but he doesn’t mind. He’s on time. He’s also in that mindless state where the music clouds over his thoughts and there’s nothing but him, the lyrics, morning sunlight, and the open road.

Before he notices it, he’s in Hawkins. The Welcome! sign stares at him, obnoxious, bright, and undeservedly friendly. He drives by and tenses. His grip on the wheel tightens. The air in the car becomes hot, stuffy, and tight.

It’ll just be a few hours in here. He spent Christmas and a weekend in March here. Honestly, after today, he doesn’t have to ever come back again if he doesn’t want to.

His hands loosen around the steering wheel. He rolls the window all the way down. Wind cools his skin. He drags in a breath until he feels it in his chest then releases it.

He’s good.

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He’s even better when he sees Nancy and Steve.

Parking had been annoying, but he managed to find a spot not too far away from the school. The five minutes it took to find a parking spot coupled with three minutes it took to walk from that spot to inside the school were jarring. Being back at school, surrounded by the classmates he was supposed to be graduating with, and being at this graduation as a guest rather than a graduate is ... a lot.

He shuffles through the crowd in search of Nancy and Steve. The front foyer is filled with graduates in their caps, chatting with family and/or chatting with one another, exasperated teachers trying to guide the students away to prepare for the ceremony, and conversations, everywhere, the school so loud that his ears ring. His palms sweat. His heartbeat quickens. He’s surrounded by ld classmates, old teachers, and old hallways that he hasn’t thought about in nearly a year. It’s not like anyone will say anything. Who cares that that one weird kid is back when you’re graduating! and your family is here!

Regardless, the anxiety coils around his ribcage and squeezes, hard.

But then a child yells out his name. It’s Holly, so much bigger than he remembers. She leaps out of Karen’s arms and races towards Jonathan.

She latches onto his leg. “Hey! You came!” She raises her hands and makes grabby gestures.

“Of course I did.” He bends down and scoops her up into his arms, carefully readjusting his camera to his other side so she doesn’t bump into it and get hurt.

Holly loops her arms around his neck. She bends her head towards his like she’s about to tell him a secret. “Nance is excited to see you!”
His heart swells. “Me too. Where is Nance?”

Four fingers tap his shoulders. Two on each one. “Right here.”

The muscles in him instantly loosen. He turns around, grin already on his face, and brings Holly close to his chest. She kicks her feet around and claps when she sees Nancy and Steve. Jonathan would do it too if he weren’t holding her.

He flicks his gaze between them both rapidly. Nancy’s dressed in her blue cap and gown. Her shoulder-length hair is curlier than usual, and lips coated with lip-gloss and the skin around her eyes tinted pink with what he guesses is eye-shadow. She’s glowing. It’s not just the makeup and sweat. Pure, unadulterated joy radiates from her. Her smile lifts her face. He hasn’t seen her this excited before, bouncing on her feet, waving her hands, laughing with her words. It’s infectious.

Steve stands to her right. He wears a light-pink dress-shirt that Jonathan remembers hearing about. Steve said his dad made a big deal about it, but his mom backed up. It made him wonder, for a second, if she knew, but she hadn’t said anything so he didn’t, and he took the victory. And what a victory. Pink looks great on him. He looks happy and confident in it, some of his King Steve swagger back. It’s not obnoxious, though. His grin is kind of, extremely hot.

And just like that, it’s easier to breathe.

“You both look — wow. Nancy, you — I mean —”

Steve uses the arm he has around her waist to tap the side of her leg. “We broke him.”

Nancy laughs. “You look good too.”

Steve strokes Jonathan’s tie. “This isn’t your graduation, if you forgot,” he teases.

“I have mine soon, if you forgot.”

“Ugh, can’t believe I’m with two high school students,” Steve says, mock-disgust in his voice.

Nancy elbows him, her smile widening. “Literally everyone you hang out with is younger than you. Your best friend is in high school. Your other best friends are in the ninth grade.”

“Yeah, Steve has no friends his age.”

“Robin!” Jonathan perks up as Robin appears behind Nancy and Steve. She claps one hand on Nancy’s shoulder and the other on Steve’s.

Robin waves. “You made it!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. You look great.”

“It’s the joy of leaving high school. You’ll get it in a few hours.”

Steve ahems. “I haven’t forgotten you two making fun of me. Jonathan, they do this all the time, it’s such bullsh —”

Nancy widens her eyes. “Steve!”

Holly, oblivious, pats Jonathan’s head.

“She should know her sister’s favourite word,” Steve says.
Nancy laughs again. She laces her fingers with his and swings their hands back and forth. “You could be a comedian in New York.”

“Or a clown,” Robin says.

Jonathan laughs. “Good one.”

Steve flicks the back of Robin’s cap. “Stop! It’s a special occasion!”

“Not your special occasion, dingus,” Robin points out.

“Nancy! The seniors are leaving!” Karen’s voice sounds throughout the crowd, standing out among all of the other voices.

“Gotta go.” Nancy kisses Steve’s forehead, and lunges forward to kiss Jonathan’s cheek then Holly’s nose. She leaves a trail of lipgloss on Jonathan’s cheek. He gets flustered thinking about it.

Nancy steps back and loops her arm with Robin. “We’ll see you after!”

"After we graduate!" Robin laughs as Nancy drags her forward, off with the rest of seniors heading into the gymnasium.

Steve turns to Jonathan. His smile softens as he spreads the lipgloss Nancy left on Jonathan’s cheek. “You good to go in?”

Holly buries her face in Jonathan’s neck. The front foyer empties, slowly, as families line into the school’s back entrance to go to the football field. It gets quieter. Jonathan can hear his heartbeat again.

“I want to kiss you,” Jonathan confesses.

Steve actually flushes. He fiddles with Jonathan’s tie again, before running his hand down the sleeve of Jonathan’s only dress-shirt. “Me too.”

He outstretches his hand, retracts it, and outstretches it again. Someone’s aunt or younger sibling will most definitely see Jonathan holding Steve’s face, but they’re literally never going to see them again, so he just. Gently cups Steve’s jaw.

“I’m gonna do it the second I can, okay?”

Steve chuckles. “You’re so fucking lame.”

“Steve!” He gestures to Holly.

Steve shrugs and pokes Holly’s shoulder to get her attention. “Mini Wheeler isn’t listening, are ya, kiddo?”

Holly shakes her head. “Nope.”

They rush outside after that. Jonathan greets the rest of Nancy’s family. Ted ignores him and takes
Holly into his arms. Karen expresses relief and gratitude that Holly was with him, and suffocates him in a warm hug. Mike beams and tells him and Steve to sit next to him. He asks about El and Will, of course. Jonathan doesn’t say that he knows, just smiles and says they’re good. He also asks about Jonathan’s graduation, how school’s been, and what he’s looking forward to in New York.

Jonathan answers. In turn, he asks Mike about school, remarks at how tall he keeps getting, at how he’ll miss Nancy once she moves. Mike pretends to be excited that she’s leaving, but he says they better invite him, Will, and El to visit. The way he says it — “You better give us a good room” — makes him smile.

Throughout the entire conversation, Steve has his chin hooked over Jonathan’s shoulder. Jonathan doesn’t notice himself combing through Steve’s hair until Steve makes an irritated noise when he draws his hand away.

The ceremony eventually starts. It’s — well. It’s not terribly exciting. The speeches and awards go before the graduates get their diplomas, which is actually a blank piece of paper, so they wait. He and Steve hold hands underneath two pamphlets with the schedule and names of all the graduates.

The valedictorian speech is nice. He’s had a few classes with her, knows she’s super into school but is also freakishly good at everything else. Sports, academics, student council president, and popular. She talks about change and growth and “who we were then” and “who we are now”.

“I won’t tell you that everything will be fine, because that’s not true. Everything will be messy, chaotic, scary, and new. But to say that is all it will be is also a lie. The road ahead of us is dark. Terrifying things await us, but so do good things. It’s okay if you are scared. But do not let it stop you. Walk forward. Keep going. Eventually, you will step into the light.”

It speaks to him. He grips Steve’s hand and sighs contently when Steve squeezes back.

Jonathan claps his hand with Steve’s once the speech finishes.

More speeches. More awards. Then: “And the calculus award goes to ... Nancy Wheeler!”

Mike’s the first to break into cheering. Karen shrieks and applauds with Holly screaming in her lap. Steve cheers, just as loudly as Mike, jumping to his feet. Meanwhile, Jonathan fumbles with his camera. He pans to Nancy in the sea of graduates, her face screwing up in genuine shock. Not like, I can’t believe it!. More like, but why?

It makes him laugh. He snaps a few pictures then waits for her to awkwardly make the trip onto the stage and shake the math department head’s hand. Jonathan takes another picture before joining the applause and cheering.

Jonathan expects to tune everything the diplomas go out, but right before they start, the arts teacher gives a small tribute to Barb. It’s genuine. The teacher had known Barb, taught her art both freshman and sophomore year, and spoke nothing about the tragedy of Barb’s death, but about the gift of her life. Two staff members bring out a small tribute, full of pictures of Barb, one of her and Nancy from freshman year catching his eye, and Barb’s artwork.

“She should be here with us today,” the art teacher says. “She is, with this display, and in every way but physical, too.” They give her a moment of silence.

It’s an honest tribute. Nothing about how everyone loved her or insincere shit like that. Jonathan steals several glances of Nancy, but her face is blank.

The graduates then come on stage. Robin’s a B, so she’s up there soon, her smile dazzling and her
face flushed as she shakes their principal’s hand. Jonathan cheers, takes a picture, then cheers some more. Then they wait.

After an eternity and a half, Nancy’s name is called.

Jonathan jumps to his feet. He claps and cheers and takes a picture of her with her bright grin and thinks about how happy he is for her, how happy she looks, and how damn proud he is of her.

After, there are a million more pictures. Jonathan takes several for Nancy’s family. Karen insists. Nancy apologizes, but Jonathan promises that he doesn’t mind, happy to take one of just the siblings, then just Holly, Mike, Karen, both parents, then Robin, then Steve, then Robin and Steve, until Karen orders Mike to take a picture of Jonathan with Nancy as well.

“She needs one with just her boyfriend!” Karen says behind Mike’s shoulder.

Nancy and Jonathan both glance over at Steve and share a private smirk.

Jonathan jogs up to her side. The field’s emptier now, the fake diplomas and several caps scattered across the grass. He narrowly avoids stepping on a crumpled pamphlet as he steps next to Nancy, slipping his arm around her waist.

She kisses his jaw and murmurs, “Hey, boyfriend.”

“Hey, high school graduate. And calculus awardee! Is that a word?”

“Dunno, won the calculus award, not the English one. I think it is? Ask me how to multiply negative exponents or something and I can help you with that. I don’t even understand how I won, but I’m thankful, I guess, if not —”

“Nancy!” Karen glares. She places her hands on her hip. “Stop talking and pose!”

“Pose,” Holly repeats.

Mike snickers. “Yeah, pose. And hurry up! It’s hot in here.”

“Oh, boo hoo, it’s hot,” Nancy says in a nasally voice.

“Nancy!” Karen scowls.

Nancy groans and snakes an arm around Jonathan’s neck. They smile, and he kisses her cheek per Karen’s request, even if he stiffens during it. But then Nancy rubs his back and it’s easy to remember that it’s almost finished.

“One with Jonathan and Steve, too! Then we’ll get all of the teens after!”

“Why not just do all four of them now?” Mike sighs, exasperated. He lets Jonathan’s camera hang around his neck and fans himself with both hands. “Mom, I’m going to die of heat exhaustion.”

“You’ll die of complaining first,” Karen replies easily. “And because they’re always visiting each other and on those phone calls. Plus, Robin has a family to take pictures with! She’s graduating too, y’know. We’ll get her in a second. She’s busy. Now let’s go!”

Steve runs over towards them. He stands on Nancy’s other side, wraps his arm around his waist, and rests his fingers on Jonathan’s hip. No one would notice. No one does, except for them.

Nancy sighs contently. “Glad I have one with just my boys.”
Jonathan leans into Steve’s grasp. He presses a quick kiss to Nancy’s hairline. “Me too.”

Karen doesn’t bother telling them to smile. They already are.

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The ride back to Illinois is loud, quick, and smooth.

It’s been awhile since they talked and nearly two months since they last saw each other in person, so silence never fills the car. There’s always some story, an observation from Nancy’s graduation, speculation about Jonathan’s, or some comment about the road, Jonathan’s driving, or the music.

Barb comes up about halfway through the ride.

“She would’ve hated her tribute,” Nancy says quietly.

Jonathan immediately stops the music. Steve, who has her legs spread out on his lap, rubs her calf and nods. Neither say a word.

“Like. The content was fine, but it was so fucking cheesy.”

When Nancy doesn’t continue, Jonathan says, “So, uh. Did you like it?”

Nancy stares out the window. The wind blows past her hair. She closes her eyes. “I loved it.”

The conversation flows after that, more questions about what Nancy thought, how surprised she was that they even did something for Barb. Her name doesn’t hang heavy in the air. They each say it with ease. It makes him glad that Barb isn’t a ghost they have to be afraid of. There’s power in stories and power in remembering. It’s usually all you have left of someone, but it can keep them alive. Not in the way you want, but in a way that matters nonetheless.

They reach Hawkins at nearly five. One hour left until Jonathan’s graduation. He drives them to his house, gloats to Joyce that he did make it on time, and leave Nancy and Steve with the the rest of his family, all in the living room, to shower and change. It’s not long before they drive to his school. They split the car-ride. Jonathan, Nancy, Steve, and Kali take his car. Murray drives Joyce, Will, and El in his car.

He was told that seniors needed to report to the gym immediately. He waves everyone goodbye, but hesitates to turn around. He loves the sight of his favourite people all together, even more when he thinks about how they’re all here for him.

He tattoos the sight into the back of his mind and jogs off to the gym. From there on, it’s chaos. The school decided to have seniors change right before the graduation, which goes as well as you’d imagine.

But then they’re off, organized alphabetically, and start their march to the football field. It goes by quicker than he expected. He wills himself to pay attention, even though he hasn’t had most of these teachers and doesn’t know the valedictorian. Awards begin. Again, he doesn’t recognize most of the names, but then Olive wins the visual arts award. He flies out of his seat, clapping, cheering, and brimming with pride.
Frankfort steps up next to present the photography award. He gives a small speech about the award’s recipient. He cracks a few jokes, which prompts laughs from the audience and graduates. And then, unthinkably, says: “This award goes to Jonathan Byers!”

Which.

What.

Frankfort said things about promising future, potential, kindness, and capability. He was describing Jonathan.

The person to Jonathan’s right gently nudges his knee with their own. Right. To the sound of thunderous applause, Jonathan stumbles to his feet. He tries not to trip as he makes his way up to the podium.

Frankfort’s grin is blinding. “You aren’t surprised, are you? Who else would it be?” He holds the award out, a gold, shiny plaque, something that he never thought would carry his name.

Jonathan laughs breathlessly. He shakes Frankfort’s hand and accepts the award in his other hand. They face the audience for the obligatory photo. Jonathan’s smile is genuine. “As surprised as you’ll probably be when I tell you that — that you honestly changed my life.”

Frankfort’s smile slips. They face each other again, the applause dying down, the next teacher stepping up. “Really?”

Jonathan grips the award. “Really. The stuff you taught me, I know I’ll carry it with me for the rest of my life.”

Frankfort smiles again and claps Jonathan’s back. They step off the stage together, but before Jonathan departs to head back into his seat, Frankfort says, “You ever wanna reach out, I’ll be here. This life-changing stuff, it goes both ways, too. You’ll do great. And you’ll be alright.”

The rest of the ceremony flies by. Soon enough, he walks across the stage to accept his fake-diploma. He spots his seven guests, all screaming and clapping, and finds Olive’s parents and Oliver in the row behind them. They’re cheering just as loudly.

Jonathan hadn’t spent a lot of time worrying about senior year. He didn’t think it’d be all that scary, but it was terrifying. And right as he’s thinking about how he can’t believe he made it through, it hits him that he really did make it through. It’s over. High school, senior year, living away from Nancy and Steve. All of it.

His principal shakes his hand and congratulates him.

The paper she hands him is blank with a decorative ribbon, but he takes it like he’s just won something (again). He’s sweating and grinning and people are still clapping and he’s a fucking high school graduate.

“You did it,” she says. Her grip is firm and her smile is small, but sincere.

Jonathan shakes back, thinking, holy shit. I did.
When he sees his family and Nancy and Steve after the ceremony finishes, the first person to leap into his arms is El.

“You did it!”

He’s already emotional, so it’s not surprising that it throws him back to the first week she spent in their house following Hopper’s death. How detached she was, reluctant and shy, all understandable, of course. They were practically strangers. She and Will weren’t really friends. She and Jonathan hadn’t ever been in a room alone together. She’d known Joyce, but Joyce was Jonathan and Will’s mother, not hers. At least not yet.

And now, she laughs into his arm, and squeezes him. “Congratulations!”

He laughs back, startled but immensely pleased. “Thank you!”

And then it’s a blur of hugs, congratulations, and requests to see his award. They take a million pictures. Murray brought Jonathan’s camera, unbeknownst to Jonathan. Secretly, he’s delighted; he wants to remember every moment of this day.

Olive comes over with her family. They both kind of yell incoherently at each other over their awards and graduation.

“Ahem,” Steve says, amused. “Are you going to introduce us?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Jonathan whirs around and gestures to Nancy and Steve. “Olive, this is Nancy and Steve. Guys, this is Olive.”

Then they’re talking and smiling. Joyce calls Jonathan over for more pictures. He feels slightly nervous about leaving Olive alone with Nancy and Steve. But then she says something, and Nancy laughs so hard she snorts and Steve agrees with whatever Olive said. Kali appears behind Olive, her hand on Olive’s back. All of his nervousness dissipates.

She smooths her yellow, summery dress before opening her arms to hug him. “My Photography genius!”

“Mom,” he starts, laughing. He hugs her back just as tightly.

“Stop! Let me have this. And a picture of us two, yeah?”

“Yes.” Fondness softens his features as Joyce rises on her tiptoes to kiss the top of his head. She hangs her arm around his neck and presses their cheeks together.

Murray beams at the sight. He wipes the sweat off of his head and raises his thumb. “In three!”

They take more pictures. Frankfort comes by. More pictures. He wishes Jonathan and Olive well, tells them how memorable they made his year, and repeats that they’ll always have the choice to reach out if they need anything or just to say hi, and that he’d look forward to that. It doesn’t feel like a goodbye at all.
“You’re actually not terrible at this.”

“Thanks?”

Kali laughs and swings Jonathan around in their living room. *The Clash* blares somewhere among the bags of chips, empty pizza boxes, his discarded graduation gown, Nancy and Steve’s overnight bags, and the crowd in the house.

It’s not *that* big of a crowd. It’s everyone who lives in the house, plus Murray, Nancy, Steve, as well as Olive, Oliver, and her parents. Olive says her parents plan on sponsoring their siblings, all younger and closer to Olive’s age than them, over here, but it’ll take awhile. They won’t admit that they’re lonely, but they are, with most of their family across the world.

Here, though, Olive’s mom excitedly agreeing with Murray about his theory about taxes that’s only source is his hatred of taxes, and Olive’s dad explaining a family recipe to Joyce as she takes notes, they don’t look lonely. Not at all.


Jonathan’s breath catches in his throat. But Kali’s strong, and he doesn’t even wobble. “Olive know you can do it?”

Kali snorts. She brings him back to his feet. Their hands don’t stop touching. “How else do you get a girl to like you?”

“Fight a bunch of inter-dimensional monsters with you,” Jonathan answers easily. His free hand settles above Kali’s hip. “Are there other ways?”

“How else do you get a girl to like you?” Kali raises an eyebrow. “Probably. Can’t be sure. It’s not like I’d know.”

He laughs and spins her around. It’s still hot in here, but it’s not as bad as it was out in the football field with his graduation gown. Now, he’s in a torn pair of sweatpants and a red sweatshirt Murray gifted him for his graduation. He should probably change into something else, but it’s too comfortable, like a permanent hug.

“He says, tone serious. “I don’t know how to ask it, so I’ll just. Throw it out there.”

Kali stills. Her hand goes limp in his. “What’s up?”

“Do you want to move to New York with the four of us?”

“No.” A beat. “Oh, Jesus, that sounds terrible. I mean that, well. I’ve got something here, you know? The library is shit that I actually like doing, the girls I work with, Olive and me are making something good together, got Joyce ’n the kids ’n Murray, plus ... my friends back in Chicago, they’re thinking about moving here in a few months. Probably not right by here, but a city or two over. Mick apparently has a sister here, so. Feels like I finally have a place that’s my home. I’ll miss you, but you’re not going to be gone forever. Think you’ll stay in New York after you graduate, though?”

“No.” Jonathan hadn’t thought out if since accepting NYU. The answer slips out of him, but it’s the truth. “This is my home, too.”

Kali eventually gets thirsty and excuses herself to grab a drink from the kitchen. Jonathan turns around and bumps right into Steve.
Though, knowing Steve, it might just mean he stood there on purpose.

"Hey!" Jonathan leans forward automatically then stops. Only to remember that he’s in his own house. Everyone basically knows about them. Olive’s parents have an aunt with a long-term partner. Who’s going to give a shit?

So Jonathan leans in, slowly so Steve understands what he’s doing, and brushes his mouth against Steve’s. Steve hesitates. Jonathan starts to pull back, but then Steve’s grabbing the nape of his neck and reeling him back in. Kissing Steve always feels good, but doing it here, on the night of his graduation, in his house, in front of people, not having to hide, not having to pretend that Steve’s only his friend feels ... it feels fucking amazing.

Jonathan draws back. He presses their foreheads together. “Told ya I’d kiss you.”

Steve laughs. “Didn’t do it on the car-ride here.”

“Maybe I wanted to surprise you.”

“Surprise me again,” he says. Jonathan wants to point out that it isn’t a surprise anymore, but he wants to kiss Steve more, so. Not a difficult choice.

They kiss and kiss some more until Steve declares that they should dance and where’s Nance and ha, that rhymed.

Jonathan frowns, though, looking around and unable to find Nancy. “Where is she?”

“I found it!” Nancy appears suddenly from behind the sofa. Her loud voice alarms Murray, who clutches his chest. Murray glares, but she glares back. It makes him snort out a begrudging laugh. She holds something behind her back and leaps over the sofa to meet them.

Jonathan mouth twists into a smile. “You have something.”

Nancy shrugs. “Doesn’t mean it’s for you.”

“Is it for me?”

“Are you a brilliant photographer?”

“If I say no?”

“...Can you say yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then it is for you!”

“Nance and I wanted to give you something special,” Steve says. He elbows Nancy and prompts her to reveal the white bag with pink and blue polka dots on it. Blue tissue paper peeks out through the top.

Jonathan’s throat gets all tight. “You didn’t have to,” he says, but forces himself to continue, “so thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Open it.” Nancy extends the gift towards him. “I thought we could continue the home-made thing. It’s ... I mean, you deserve more, but it’s sweet, and Steve’s like. Really good at this kind of stuff.”
“Aw, Nance, thanks. You’re terrible at it, but you’re great at calculus and wielding guns and being smart.”

“You keep starting compliment battles. I will win, but let’s continue after he’s opened the gift.”

Jonathan accepts it with shaky hands. He rifles through the wrapping paper and finds a small box at the bottom. He opens it and his heart skips a beat.

Two handmade keychains sit inside the box. One is a small, clay camera. A laugh escapes him. It’s the second camera they’ve given him. The second one takes him a second to register. But it’s clear once he gets it.


“It’s kind of our symbol, isn’t it?” Nancy says.

“The bat belonged to Nance,” Steve explains.

Nancy nods. “You put the nails on, Jonathan.”

“And Steve uses it.” Jonathan feels a little dizzy with it. He strokes the grey, dull lines of the bat and presses it against his chest. “The keychains. They’re for the key to our apartment, right?”

Steve nods eagerly. “Yup!”

“I love it,” Jonathan chokes out. “And I love you two so much.”

Oliver races by them. Will trails behind. El chases after the two boys, laughing her head off, the three probably playing tag. Kali tosses a chip into Olive’s dad’s mouth. Joyce and Olive’s mom trade music recommendations near the hallway. Olive teaches Murray how to shade with her own set of pencil crayons, for some reason on her person. The pair press Olive and Jonathan’s fake-diplomas against the wall and practice. The house is noisy, full of people, life, and love.

It’s kind of a weird time to make such a declaration. But Nancy kisses Jonathan. Steve wraps his arms around them both and hugs them towards himself. None of that feels weird at all.

“We’re gonna be happy in New York,” he whispers to them. “We’ll be a lot of other things too, but definitely happy. No monsters. No distance. And no high school, thank fuck.”

They laugh.

Nancy mouths at the hollow of his neck. “We’ll be more than happy.” Her hand slides down Steve’s back. “We’ll be free.”

Steve exhales in Jonathan’s hair.

He thinks of how worse this year could’ve been for him had he been in Hawkins. He’d have to pass what was once the Starcourt Mall to get to school. To pick up his mom from work, he’d have to pass the hospital. Illinois didn’t heal every wound, but it didn’t pick at each of them before they could heal.

Jonathan holds them closer. They’re all going to be okay, he reminds himself. For every nightmare, every bad day, every time Jonathan sees a pair of scissors, Nancy passes a pool, and Steve needs to enter an elevator, they’ll have each other. They’ll help clean up the pieces. No one can be broken beyond repair. They’ve all spent the past year, repairing from the damage of last summer, the last two
years, even, and they’ve done a pretty great job.

At around eleven, the noise dies down. The music quiets. The dancing, tag, and general standing stops. The adults get the living room. The rest of the teens crowd in Will’s room, which is the biggest. They know this because a few weeks ago, Jonathan, Will, Kali, and El got bored so they measured everyone’s room. Will’s was longest by two and a half inches.

Jonathan and Will offer to get everyone drinks.

“You’re the graduate,” Steve says. He clings onto Jonathan’s wrist. “Stay.”

“I’m the host,” Jonathan protests half-heartedly.

Nancy grabs Jonathan’s other wrist and pulls him forward. “We’re the guests and we want you to stay.”

“Oliver, can you tell them that you want me to go so I can make tea?” Jonathan tries.

Oliver, wedged in between El and Will on Will’s bed, shakes his head. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ll go,” Will says.

Oliver makes a face. “I don’t want that.”

Olive playfully rolls her eyes. “O, you can handle five minutes away from Will. He’ll come back.”

“How about you go make tea? Wouldn’t mind if you left.” Oliver sticks his tongue out at her.

“Will is so nice to Jonathan.” Olive reaches across Kali’s lap to flick Oliver’s forehead. “Why can’t you be like him?”

Nancy laughs. “Tell me about it. My little brother is a dip-shit.”

“I still wanna meet Mike,” Olive says poking Will’s stomach.

“Can you convince your mom to let Mike come to Illinois? Please?” Will asks Nancy.

“Oh no,” Kali says.


“No one not give in to that,” Steve says.

“I can.” Nancy stares back. “Fuck. No. I can’t. I’ll give it a try, bud, but no promises.”

Kali sighs. “You tried your best.”

“My puppy-dog eyes are better,” Will says with a shrug as Nancy shoots Kali an amused smile. He rolls off of the bed and plucks Jonathan right out of Nancy and Steve’s grasp. “Alright. I’m going with Jonathan to get tea. Oliver, I’ll be back soon. Nancy, Steve. You guys are literally going to be living with him in two months.”
Kali laughs. El and Olive smile. Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan just beam at each other. His heart flutters, even after Will drags him out of his room.

He waits until Will sets aside eight mugs to ask, “So? What’s up?”

“What do you mean? Just wanted to help.” Will looks momentarily confused. He rifles through the cabinets for the tea packets. He’s a good liar. Just not with Jonathan.

Jonathan closes the cabinet door, forcing Will to stop and look at him. “C’mon, bud. What’s up?”

Will pushes himself onto the kitchen counter. It seems like every important conversation Jonathan’s ever had with his family happens here. “It’s going to be cheesy.”

“Have you met our family? When are we not cheesy?” Jonathan sits next to him. He swings his legs back and forth.

Will chuckles. “Good point. You remember that last night in Hawkins? We made a promise to each other.”

“Of course I remember.” He hasn’t thought about it much, but there’s no way he’d forget. The way Will lit up with Jonathan’s reassurance, and the way Jonathan lit up in turn at Will’s. Will was the one in distress, but Jonathan needed the conversation just as much. And of course, their deal. “What about it?”

“I wanted to check in. I kept my promise to try with El. El’s like. My platonic soulmate. I can’t believe there was a time where we weren’t ... family.”

“Me too,” Jonathan agrees. “It feels meant to be, right? Like. She was going to end up in our lives.”

“Totally.” Will bumps his foot against Jonathan’s. “You remember your end of the deal?”

Jonathan ducks his head. To be happy. To really, truly believe he deserved it. “I do.”

"Did you keep it?"

That night, Will had told him, “You still deserve it. I know you think you don’t, that you’re not a good person anymore, but you do. You are.” It was something Jonathan understood to be true, but couldn’t wholeheartedly believe.

It’s ten months later. Some things haven’t changed. He can’t hold a pair of scissors. Can’t go into a hospital. Can’t escape the days where the sun’s light isn’t bright enough, where everything is grey, where he’ll see red, red, red everywhere.

But so much more has. He lives in Illinois now, but in two months, will live in New York. He has two partners, a best friend, and three new members to his family. His dream is no longer his dream, but his life. He’s got the name of a therapist in New York, through Murray, and an appointment already booked for the last week of August. He’s got a few more scars, but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t healed.

He’s come so far. He’ll go so far.

He knows that for a fact, because after ten, long months, he finally, wholeheartedly believes what Will told him last September.

“I kept my end of the bargain,” Will says softly. “Did you?”
Jonathan’s eyes crinkle with a smile. He doesn’t have to answer; Will grins at him like he knows Jonathan’s answer and knows it’s the truth. But Jonathan says it anyway, both to his younger brother and himself: “I did.”

Chapter End Notes

a few fun facts about this fic:

-robin was supposed to be in this more I'M SORRY

-i know NOTHING about the US like???? apparently illinois is a state???? what??? and a comment said colleges don't let you NOT live in dorms during your first year?? WHAT???? and WHERE are your graduations held??? it better be in a football field or i SWEAR

-this was born out of frustration from a lack of jonathan/byers/stoncy/kali from s3, so i hoped it helped any of y'all if you felt similarly

-i accidentally wrote about my mental health and school situation w/ this fic and didn't notice until i was having a breakdown. this was a very cathartic fic and extremely personal, which is kind of cool.

-i find it kind of cool that i'm at the where jonathan was in the beginning of this story re: senior year. wish me luck!

and that's all, folks! i will post a photoset sometime on my tumblr (trulyalpha) so stay tuned for if you want to reblog! i will cherish comments for the rest of my life, so please let me know what you think! i hope any of this story resonated with you. i wish you so much peace.

take care y'all. see you (soon) for my next story.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!