A Few Words for the Living

by DuskRose19

Summary

The Losers come back to Derry for their second showdown with Pennywise, where they cross paths with two Federal agents investigating the disappearances. When the Losers and the forensic psychiatrist and the agent team up, will they be able to make it out unscathed—and will they be able to maybe, for once, be honest with themselves about who they are and what they want?

Notes

“The Remainders are leaving their homely places
With excited faces, drawn to the night
Preparing their minds for a break from the sensible life
As the leavers bring with them their noise and light, their wild wonder cure-all of crazy religion
In one sacred ritual
Unmasked and undressed
We all come together
We’re all one tonight.”
See the end of the work for more notes.
The Leavers

The boy with the glasses was back again, Eddie Kaspbrak thought. He was sitting on the floor of the bathroom of his office, head in his hands, struggling to breathe. It was a dream with the flavor of a memory, something brought back from the haze of childhood. A pale young man with curly, dark hair, tall and gangly, had been haunting him since...well, now, that was tricky. College, it had to be. ’88...no. ’92.

Frustrated with the fogginess descending on his mind, he took a pull of his inhaler, hacked a couple brief coughs.

’91. ’91 for sure, he decided. Someone he’d seen. Someone from the street, a classmate, a kid in a photograph. Someone he knew when he was sixteen, seventeen, however old the boy was. Whoever he was, he was Eddie’s nightly visitor, popping up almost every time he closed his eyes. The dreams were frustratingly vague—a companionable silence, an electric brush of hands, a flood of rippling, carefree laughter. Eddie couldn’t remember ever being as happy as he seemed to be in those dreams.

He couldn’t wait for them to go away.

It was nice, of course, to have those fifteen minutes of pleasure. But he couldn’t stand waking up afterwards, feeling-whomever-the-fuck-he-was recede and opening his eyes to see Myra’s slack face on the pillow next to him. Even more embarrassing was how he woke up: confused, shocked, and aroused, like a teenage mid-makeout session. Every time he thought he’d successfully numbed himself to the heartbreaking disappointment of his life, that goddamn dream-kid showed up and made him feel—what? Strong? Important? Desired? Loved?

God. What a joke.

Eddie Kaspbrak was an adult, and adults understood that the heady mix of love and joy and excitement he felt was nothing more than a golden dream in the minds of teenagers, not something to be pursued as an adult. Life wasn’t about exhilaration. It was about making it through the day. Anything above that was a risk, and Eddie had never been much of a risk-taker. And Myra, of course, wasn’t much of a risk.

Eddie pulled himself up from the floor and grabbed the quilt and pillow from the bathtub. His large office, with its full bathroom, complete with shower and bathtub, had become his sanctuary. Myra made a lot of noise about him coming in late, but just so long as he was keeping up their cushy lifestyle, she didn’t put up much of a fight. Eddie took his time along where he could get it, but eventually, he always had to come home.

Myra, of course, was primed and ready for a meltdown the moment Eddie opened the door. At the first ring of her reedy, plaintive voice, the gauzy residue of his dream dissipated. There was nothing to it, just her usual Eddie where were yous and I was worried sicks. He didn’t put up much of a fight anymore—not that he ever had, if he was being honest with himself—preferring, instead, to go limp and let her wash over him. He didn’t ask what the pills she pressed into his hand were. He simply swallowed them dry and prepared for their effects, be they pleasant or unpleasant. She didn’t kiss him in greeting, and he didn’t want her to. He never felt more ill than when she was in direct contact with him. One week later, someone would tell him, “when you lie to yourself, you lie to everyone.” That was, of course, what his life felt like. A lie he couldn’t stop telling, because if he did, everything would come crashing down, revealing—

Revealing what?

In the background, Myra’s voice descended into a wordless, animal bleat. Something awful, Eddie thought. If I can’t remember it, I’ve probably repressed some kind of trauma. I must’ve been ill. Cancer, maybe. Or a car accident. Head trauma could explain why the time before college has always been...blurry. It’s best that I don’t remember. Forget the unpleasant things.

But, of course, I’m also forgetting the boy.
The boy in Eddie’s dreams could’ve been seventeen or eighteen, maybe younger, maybe older. He was tall but awkward, like he wasn’t used to the extra length in his limbs. Eddie felt young in those dreams too, full of hope and glory.

“Edward Kaspbrak! Are you listening to me?”
Myra’s ejaculation was somewhere between a screech and a bellow. Eddie started, moving a step back. He’d never considered her a physical threat before, but just then, as she stood over him, he felt his smallness acutely. “I think you need something to put you to sleep. You’re working too hard, Edward. Your constitution can’t take it. You’re delicate, remember?”

He nodded mutely, and remained pliant while she pressed a handful of pills into his hands. He never examined them, never looked them up, never exercised any critical thinking about whether or not to take them. Some made him feel better, and some made him feel worse, but he didn’t keep track. They were the price of peace. Whether it was the yellowish circles that wrapped his brain in velvet sheets, or the poppyseed-red sleeping pills that transformed his limbs to lead every night before slipping to a realm of half-formed thoughts, unarticulated memories, and desires only able to be expressed in dreams.

“Finish with your work, Edward,” Myra admonished. “Then it’s time for bed.”

She was still angry, which was good, because it meant that she wouldn’t try to touch him. In almost ten years of marriage, they had never had vaginal intercourse, a fact for which he was so dizzyingly thankful that he could hardly express it. It was blatantly obvious that she was his nurse, not his wife, and, beyond her occasional, patronizing attempts at a handjob, their relationship would not have violated any hospital ordinances. His only relief came from the poster.

The poster was, unquestionably, both the most embarrassing and the most necessary thing in his life. He had stolen it from work and kept it in a Ziploc bag in the toilet bowl, accessible only with a pair of surgical gloves and copious amounts of hand sanitizer. Far from ideal, obviously, but it was the only place that he could be certain that Myra wouldn’t find it. Eddie wasn’t sure why he was so protective of it—it was just a flyer for a low-rent comedy act at some dive bar in the Village, proclaiming in bold letters:

**COMEDY NITE AT LUTECE LIQUORS FEATURING “TRASHMOUTH” TOZIER!**

It was nothing he ever would’ve gone to, certainly not with Myra. Ritchie “Trashmouth” Tozier was foulmouthed and crude and the only thing that could give him an erection. It was an absolute mystery, because Ritchie Tozier was fairly average-looking, neither fat nor too skinny, with a slight receding hairline and hunched posture, and nobody talked about him or thought about him too much, either in Eddie’s almost-nonexistent social life or on the internet—except, of course, for Eddie Kaspbrak.

Very carefully, on feather-light feet, Eddie crept into the bathroom and, after making sure the coast was clear, locked the door behind him. Once, during his alone-time with “Trashmouth” Tozier, Myra had come out of their bedroom and banged on the door, demanding to know what was taking him so long. It wasn’t an experience he wanted to repeat.

Tonight, Eddie was desperate. He had very little time before whatever pills Myra had given him started rampaging through his system, and he preferred to spend his time with Ritchie sober. After a religiously thorough handwashing, Eddie laid the poster down on the floor and, after, unzipping his pants and pushing down his briefs, took himself in hand and closed his eyes. He imagined that he was kneeling in front of Ritchie Tozier, who was petting his hair, caressing his chest gently, touching him tenderly and with kindness. A thumb swept across his lower lip, and Ritchie then took his chin in a hand, directing him to look up.

“You’re so beautiful, Eds,” Dream-Ritchie said softly, which was silly, because nobody called him Eds, and certainly nobody called him beautiful. Dream-Ritchie’s hand hovered at the fly of his crappy, worn jeans. “Are you sure you want this, baby?”

“Yes, Ritchie,” Eddie whispered to himself. Dream-Ritchie ran a gentle hand through his hair before unzipping his fly. Eddie imagined pulling down Ritchie’s pants and boxers, giving his beautiful cock a few gentle strokes before wrapping his lips around the head, pushing back his foreskin to lick up the pearls of precum dripping from his slit. Eddie stripped his cock faster,
imagining Ritchie’s hands sinking deeper into his hair, his aroused moans, mumbled praise. “Oh, yes, Eds, you’re so good, so sweet, so fucking beautiful, my sweet, sweet Eddie…” Eddie came into a clump of toilet paper with a soft gasp. After taking a few moments to gather himself, he wet some paper towels, cleaned himself up, carefully replaced the poster, and exited the bathroom, only to almost bump into Myra.

“Edward, are you sick? You were in there an awful long time! You’re so flushed! Do you have a fever?”

Eddie couldn’t stop himself from shuddering as Myra placed a hand on his forehead. He didn’t want her touching him.

“I’m fine.”

“Here, sweetheart, let me give you a bath, cool you down—”

“No!”

The sharpness in his voice startled them both. “Myra, I just want to go to bed. Okay?”

She opened her mouth to argue, and Eddie opened his mouth to apologize, but before either of them could speak,— the phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” he sighed. “Kaspbrak residence.”

A pause, and then, for the first time in years:

“Mike?”
It was five in the morning, and Roxanne Little, M.D., Ph.D. was in great pain. She was leaning on her cane, both hands clasped over the wooden knob, which was engraved with the sign of the scorpion, her zodiac sign, encircled by an ouroboros. She was only thirty-eight, but her body ached like an old woman’s. She would’ve liked to have been laying in her bathtub, instead of standing in the blistering cold in the very early morning, looking at the front yard of 1779 Macadam Street and wondering how an eleven year old girl could disappear in broad daylight, but nobody gets what they want all the time.

“It’s happening again,” he said. His voice was hoarse and tired. “Twenty-seven years, and it’s happening again.”

He nodded. “I was fourteen when it ended.”

“Your name?”

“Mike Hanlon. I’m the head librarian at the Derry Public Library.”

“Roxanne Little. I work for the FBI.”

“You’re an agent?”

“No, I’m a forensic psychiatrist. A desk jockey. Why?”

“I’m just surprised that the FBI is sending its people all the way out to Derry. Our police department isn’t the kind to ask for government help.”

“Yeah. Well, more than three linked murders puts the case in our jurisdiction. So they sent me.”

“Did you do something to piss them off?”
It was a joke, but it hit Roxanne funny. Her mouth snapped shut, and she closed her eyes.

“Yeah. I guess so. Look, Mr. Hanlon, no disrespect, but you might want to stop hanging out at
crime scenes. It’s a small town, and these cops are awful eager to have someone to pin this on.”

“You don’t suspect me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Roxanne sighed. “You were fourteen when the first murders occurred. While it’s not impossible
for a fourteen year old to kill multiple people, it would be almost impossible for someone that
young to leave so little evidence. Moreover, the killer is sophisticated enough to stay undetected
for almost thirty years. Someone that organized wouldn’t hang out at his crime scenes in front of
the cops.”

Mike gave her a tired smile. “So, you think a person’s doing this.”

“Who else is there?”

Mike shrugged. “A monster.”

“At first blush, realizing that monsters don’t exist seems like a relief. But realizing that regular
people, just like you and me, can do so much evil is much worse than ghoulies and ghosties and
long-legged beasties. I’d rather face down killer clowns from outer space than myself.”

Mike started, then chuckled.

“Far safer through an Abbey gallop,
The stones a'chase,
Than, moonless, one's own self encounter
In lonesome place.
Ourself, behind ourself concealed,
Should startle most;
Assassin, hid in our apartment,
Be horror's least,” he recited.

“You know your Dickinson,” Roxanne laughed. “I didn’t know they taught Masshole poets in
Maine.”

They stood for a few more moments in silence before Roxanne turned to go. “I’ve got to get back,”
she said. “I’d like to talk to you later. If the perpetrator was younger last time, maybe he made a
mistake. I’d like you to tell me what you remember.”

Mike laughed ruefully and nodded.

“Yeah, okay. You know where to find me.”

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In Room 107 of the Derry Fairfield Inn and Suites, Roxanne ran a bath and turned out the lights.
She stripped down and, with some difficulty, lowered herself into the water. It wasn’t hot and it
wasn’t cold—just the right temperature to forget where she ended and the water began. This was
how she tried to empty herself out and become a receptacle for the evidence, but her brain wasn’t
cooperating. Her admission to the librarian was bothering her. Whatever she might tell herself,
when she really got down to it, she wasn’t a cop. Just a whole lot of book learning and a handful of
lockpicks. New Mexico had proved that much, at the very least.

Floating on her back in the rapidly cooling water, Roxanne fought the urge to scream. She’d never
asked them to pin all their hopes on her. All the shit they talked—oh, Roxanne Little, never lost an
unsub, interviews serial killers without handcuffs, let the Chesapeake Ripper chew on her so that
she could bring him in, ooh la la—she’d never participated in it. They were the ones who hadn’t
taken it seriously. Send in the cranky, smart cripple to show those DEA knuckle draggers what to
do, and we’ll be all set.

Thinking such troubled and uneasy thoughts, she sank into a fitful doze for what could’ve been
minutes or hours, until the light flicked on and the door flew open. Her partner stood in the
doorway, hands full of grocery bags.

“Chelle,” Roxanne said. “Your hands are full. Lemme do both sides of the conversation. ‘Roxanne,
you said that you’d stop falling asleep in the bathtub!’ Chelle, I was just resting my eyes!”
S.S.A Michelle Johnson put down the bags and crossed her arms. After a beat, she raised her hands and began to sign.

“How’s your pain?”

“It’s been worse.”

Michelle sighed.

“I’m sorry, Rosie.”

They sat there for a moment in silence, rapidly-cooling water plinking off Roxanne’s skin and hair into the tub. “Here. Let me help you up.”

Michelle reached one arm under Roxanne’s bent legs, wrapped the other around her back, and lifted with an inaudible grunt, and carried her for a few steps before gently sitting her down. She then stepped back, looking lovingly at the bare back of her wife.

Roxanne had changed little from the first time Michelle had seen her without clothes all those years ago, in the summer of ’87. She had lost fat from her hips and breasts, and she had become harder and more angular, but the sinuous arch of her spine remained the same, as had her long, lithe, shapely legs. Age had flayed the baby fat from her cheeks, revealing sharp cheekbones, a chin like an arrowhead, and a nose as from a Greek statue. Her breasts, small, taut, and capped with puffy, bubble-gum pink nipples, still pointed directly out, and her ass was still a pair of perfect, tiny spheres. We blossom and flourish like leaves on a tree, Michelle thought fondly, and wither, and perish, but naught changes thee.

Except for the scars, of course. Despite ostensibly being a desk jockey, Roxanne collected scars like some people collect stamps or baseball cards. There was the ridge on her back from where her dissertation supervisor had stabbed her with a pair of poultry shears, the two fingers her dissertation supervisor had bitten off of her right hand, the jagged slashes on her forearms from when she had jumped out of a third-floor cupola window to get away from her dissertation supervisor, two ensuing knee replacement scars, electrical burns on her knees, elbows, and palms, white lines of scarring on her temple, and a dash on her cheek from being grazed by a bullet. Her body was marked by the cases she’d worked, the people that she’d risked her life for. Michelle watched as Roxanne shrugged on her oversized sleeping shirt (emblazoned with the legend OPUS FOR PRESIDENT) and walked towards the giant map of Derry hung on the wall, stuck with colored pins and covered in nearly-illegible notes.

“Something weird’s going on in this town, Roxanne. Violent crime is 50% higher than average. Domestic abuse, child abuse, hate crimes, missing persons...by just about every metric, Derry is just that much more evil than the average small town.”

“No, no, no. That’s not possible. There must be some kind of mass shooting or something like that throwing these numbers off—”

“I’ve controlled for that. The numbers are still crazy high.”

Roxanne stuttered for a moment, then shook her head.

“Must be something in the water,” she sighed. “Okay. This is what we know. Three disappearances. No geographical pattern. Two girls, one boy. Two Caucasians, one African American, so no gender or racial pattern. No signs of a struggle. No witnesses. No physical evidence.”

“Three disappearances and nobody saw a thing?”

“I know. You’d think people would be on guard.” Roxanne scratched the scar on her elbow absently. “You know what’s weird? It’s like nothing’s changed here. The cigarettes, kids hanging out in sewers, in the park at all hours of the night...I mean, it reminds me of when we were kids, but that was the eighties, how we used to spend the night in Cowen Park, sleeping under the overpass, walking the Ave late at night, and stealing cigarettes from my dad. Everywhere else, it’s totally changed. Kids don’t wander around on their own, nobody smokes, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But here, it’s like nothing’s changed. From homophobic hate crimes to racist attacks to alcohol and tobacco consumption, there’s been no progress. Everything’s stayed.” She sighed.

“Including Mike Hanlon.”

“Who?”
“This guy I met at the crime scene. He grew up in Derry, stayed to become the head librarian. I mean, all I could think to ask was ‘why?’ Why stay? It couldn’t have been easy being one of the only black children in Derry, not to mention the whole murder spree going on from ’82-’84. I would’ve wanted to get the hell out of dodge, but he stayed.”

“Well, we stayed.”

“Yeah, in Seattle! Staying in Seattle, Washington is different than staying in Derry, Maine.”

“Elitist.”

“Yeah, yeah. You remember how gritty the Ave was back in the day. Remember when we worked at Baskin Robbins, and we’d get addicts coming in every ten minutes asking for metal spoons? You, my little law-abiding angel, never handed out a single one.”

“You’re funny. You know, you were a big reason I stayed—”

“Sap.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh.”

“I was just wondering who Mike was staying for.”

“Must’ve been a hell of a love affair to make him chance this. The way he talked, it was like...like he was just waiting for this whole thing to start up again. Like he’d spent 27 years afraid of it.”

“He must’ve been terrified back then. I remember when the Green River Killer was all over the news in Seattle, and he wasn’t killing kids. I can’t imagine living in fear of something happening to my friends.”

Roxanne looked over the edge of the folder she was holding.

“You only had one friend.”

“Yeah. And you were the one who hit Tommy Viscanza in the throat with your Louisville Slugger for throwing a dirty needle at me, so you were really more the serial killer than the serial-killee.”

Roxanne snickered.

“My, my, my, how the turntables turn.”

“Look, I think we should put together a list of adolescents in Derry the first time this happened. I know it’s rate, but it’s possible that a teenager saw or helped his father commit the first round of crimes and has decided to repeat the cycle. Violence isn’t genetic, but it can be a learned behavior.”

“The Boston Butcher coerced his son into abducting and torturing women for him when he got too old to do it himself, and there was a case in southern Virginia where a son found the diaries of his late father, in which he described his crimes, and the young man tried to copy them in order to feel closer to his dad. I wouldn’t bet on it, though. The MO’s too similar. It’s only been 27 years. If the killer was, oh, 25 then, he’d be 52. That’s not too old, especially if the victims are children.”

“Maybe the children saw something. You remember being a kid. You don’t tell adults jack shit because they never listen, and even when they do, they don’t understand. Maybe after all these years, one of them will be willing to help us.”

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNh___GZJL1s
The Return to the City of His Birth

Chapter Summary

Ritchie comes back to Derry, and remembers. Everything.

Chapter Notes

“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word ‘Lenore?’
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, ‘Lenore!’
Merely this and nothing more.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The woman’s name was Denise, and Ritchie Tozier’s manager had all but insisted that that Ritchie go home with her. He’d been anxious all evening, knowing that he’d have to find a way to explain his lackluster and unenthusiastic performance, so at odds with his onstage persona. So, true to form, he’d gotten hammered. That way, when she reached down the front of his pants to grasp a completely flaccid penis, he’d had plausible deniability. Unfortunately, she was persistent, and eventually, after fifteen minutes of determined handjobbing while Ritchie closed his eyes and thought of gay pornography, he’d firmed up enough to allow her to climb on top of him and slide home.
“‘There we go,’” she purred.
Instead of the willowy blonde, Ritchie imagined a young man in his lap. He was small and slender, fitting perfectly in his arms, with soft, wavy, shiny brown hair framing his lovely face. The vision was so clear and so arousing that Ritchie wondered for a moment if he was going insane. Dizzy to fever with arousal, Ritchie surged forwards, blindly searching for lips to kiss, fitting hands to hips, gasping, almost crying—
“‘Eddie—oh, Eddie, oh, God, oh my God, oh, Eddie, fuck—’”
“Hey! What the hell!”
Ritchie yanked open his eyes to see Denise’s pissed-off face, smeared lipstick, and crossed arms.
“You’re not into this, are you?” she asked.
“Uh…”
“Look, it’s okay, honest. If you’re not into me, you’re not into me. I just wish you would’ve told me, instead of letting me make a fool out of myself.”
“I’m sorry,” Ritchie said, numb. “It’s just...my act. You know.”
“Yes,” she sighed. “If you don’t mind me asking...who is Eddie?”
Ritchie felt like he was going to cry.
“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I, I, I…”
Denise’s eyes turned from irritated to soft and sad. “I’m sorry I lied to you, I really, really am, but I think I need some time alone. Can I call you—”
“I’ll call a cab,” she said, getting up and pulling her dress over her head. “Whatever’s going on with you, Ritchie, I really hope you sort it out. Everyone deserves to be happy.”
He nodded numbly.
“Just so you know, I won’t tell anyone.”
“Thanks,” he bit out.

She was halfway out the door before she turned around.
“I really hope you find him, Ritchie.”

Ritchie put his head in his hands and tried to figure out what the hell was going on. The young man was so familiar, and so beloved, that it seemed insane that he couldn’t remember him. He must’ve been part of the blur that was his life between ’92 and ’98. Whoever he was, he had clearly informed Ritchie’s entire sexual development. He was similar to, but not the same as, the men in the videos he would guiltily masturbate to. All of them had brown hair, brown eyes, and small frames, but none of them were quite right. Somewhere in the depths of his brain lived the memory of a young man with big, brown, melted-chocolate eyes, a small, soft, shining, pink mouth, and finely wrought features, who had once looked up at Ritchie with desire and love. Who looked at him like the sun would only rise in the morning if he said it could.

Ritchie got up, did up his pants, and poured himself four fingers of bourbon. Maybe if he got shitfaced, the empty feeling would go away. He’d only just swallowed his first mouthful when the phone rang.

“Dammit. This is Ritchie.”

“Ritchie?”

The voice was so goddam familiar, Ritchie thought.

“Who is this?”

“This is Mike Hanlon. Ritchie, It’s back.”

“I don’t—Mike—when—”

The man on the other side of the phone waited patiently.

“Mike...did I know someone named Eddie?”

“What? Ritchie, Eddie was your best friend. You guys were inseparable. Ritchie, I don’t know what’s going on, but you need to come back. It’s back.”

“It? I don’t understand…”

“Look, Ritchie, just come back to Derry, and we can talk about it. I don’t know what’s going on with you guys, but leaving Derry must’ve made you forget. You’ll remember once you’re back.”

Ritchie hung up the phone numbly. He didn’t remember much—just that Mike was a friend, and that Derry was where he’d spent his childhood—but he was overwhelmed with a bone-deep sense of dread. He was scared. Really scared. But there was another sensation deep in his stomach, like he’d swallowed a bowl full of snakes. It was uncomfortable, but not entirely unpleasant.

Eddie’ll be there.

He couldn’t get to the car fast enough, and it’s fucking crazy, because he’s scared out of his wits of something so horrible he can only think around the edges of it, and he knows he might die, but somehow that’s better than the lie he’s been living. He jumped into the driver’s seat and plugged Derry, ME into his GPS, not giving a single thought to the comedy club expecting Trashmouth Tozier in Milwaukee tomorrow, or Urbana the day after that, or South Bend, or Ann Arbor.

Ritchie gunned it and cranked up the volume of his music. I Want You to Want Me played as he merged onto I-90 East, sliding quickly into Surrender. He switched to REO Speedwagon as he hopped onto 294—first Take it on the Run, then Time For Me To Fly. It wasn’t his usual mix—he usually preferred, old, old, old school rock n’ roll, but now he wanted to listen to something he remembered from the radio, from his childhood. And the further he sped away from Madison, his manager, and the Trashmouth Tour, the closer he felt to himself.

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Twenty-two hours later, as Ritchie drove into Derry proper, he had to pull over. He couldn’t see the road. Millions of hours worth of memories pouring into his brain, playing behind his eyes. Most of them concerned his best friend and his first love, Eddie Kaspbrak. Ritchie put his head in his hands and cried, overwhelmed with a depth of emotion he hadn’t felt before or since. Being young, happy, free, and in love—pain and heaven, all contained in his scrawny body, tormented and
ecstatic like only kids could be. He remembered Eddie’s careful fingers wiping blood away from his brow, patching up skinned knees and bloody noses with tenderness and care, soothing scrapes and cuts with bare hands despite his mother’s terror of AIDS. He remembered, after a particularly harsh smackdown from Bowers, teasingly asking Eddie if he’d kiss it all better. Eddie had blushed and pulled back for a moment. Ritchie remembered his freckles, the sweep of his eyelashes fanned across his cheeks, the sunburnt, pink smear of his lips. Then he leaned forwards, and softly pressed his warm lips to the bruise on Ritchie’s cheek.

“There,” he’d whispered, barely audible. “All better. You happy now?” And Ritchie, for the first time, had dared to imagine what those soft, plush lips would feel like pressed up against his own. He felt dirty, excited, and terrified.

“Thanks, Eds,” he whispered and, with a sudden rush of bravery, bent forwards and pecked his cheek, following it up with a pinch. “Ya make a great nurse, you know that?”

How could he have forgotten?

And, of course, the answer was that he never really had forgotten. The porn, the way he’d felt ill telling jokes about women, being touched by women, the dreams, and the idiopathic sense of excitement he felt whenever he opened the door. He’d been waiting, waiting, waiting for Eddie Kaspbrak for twenty-seven years. Twenty-seven goddam wasted years.

Someone rapped on the car window. Ritchie started, hurriedly wiping the tears from his face with a sleeve.

“Sir? Are you all right?” A scarred hand rapped on the window once more. It was a woman’s hand, with long, slender fingers. A thick, ridged, puckered scar was raised along the back of her hand. Ritchie rolled down his window.

“Uh, yeah. I’m fine, Eddie. I mean, uh…” “Not even close.” The hand’s owner bent down. She was a slender woman with a sharp chin and large, almond-shaped blue eyes. “The name’s Agent Roxanne Little. Mind stepping out of the vehicle?”

“Uh, okay. I—I’m not deranged or anything. I’m just—” The agent pulled out a notepad.

“Mind telling me your name, sir?”

“Ritchie Tozier.”

“Tozier? Trashmouth Tozier? Huh.” She put the notepad away and motioned at her partner, who was leaning against the passenger-side door of their car— “Chelle, get over here! It’s Trashmouth Tozier!”

“Are you a fan?” Ritchie asked, startled.

“Not exactly,” she said. “I use your shows in my Linguistic Profiling class! I play your set about your, uh, girlfriend catching you jerking off to her friend’s Facebook pictures, and I ask them what they think I realized the second I watched it.” She pointed at Ritchie, grinning. “No one’s gotten it so far. Lucky for you, not so lucky for the BSU.” Ritchie blushed and sweated.

“Wh-wh-wha—”

“Oh, come on. Can’t fool a fellow faggot, Trashmouth!” Her partner, an athletic woman with a dark brown ponytail and striking hazel eyes, elbowed her and made some impassioned hand signs.

“Oh...oh, shit. Uh, my wife thinks you’re closeted.” She blushed. “Didn’t mean to, uh, jump the gun. Sorry. Sometimes my mouth runs faster than my brain.”

“That makes two of us,” Ritchie said. “Sorry. I just never, you know, told anyone.”

“Well, your secret’s safe with me, though I question the wisdom of repressing the shit out of yourself for forty years. You wanna tell me why you’re having an emotional breakdown on the highway?”

“I was...sad.”

“Why?” Roxanne probed. Michelle slapped her forearm.

“Because I’ve wasted my life,” Ritchie said bluntly. “I haven’t killed anyone, if that’s what you’re
“Can’t say I know the feeling, but I can certainly appreciate the menace of the ticking clock. What brings you to Derry?”

“Old friends.”

“You were here too, weren’t you? When the first murders happened. What the hell is going on in this town? Why would you want to come back to this place? Why now?”

Ritchie looked at her. She was wearing a red blouse and a pair of beige slacks. Over top was a hot pink wool peacoat. Her hair was tied up in a half-bun, frizzy curls cascading down her shoulders. She leaned heavily on a pale wood cane. She didn’t look accusatory or angry, just confused.

“It’s a long story, and I’ve only just remembered it, so bear with me. When I was a kid, I had a group of friends here. Back then, we promised that if these killings ever started up again, we’d come back, and try to stop them. It sounds stupid, I know, but—”

“Twenty-seven years...so you were what, twelve? And—”

“Thirteen.”

“Oh, thirteen. Great. So you’re making good on the promise you made as a teenager to catch a serial killer. Who does that?”

“Someone with ulterior motives,” Ritchie said. They had started walking into town, leaving their cars on the shoulder of the road. “I didn’t come back to catch a killer. I came back to see my friends.”

“One in particular,” Roxanne guessed.

“What makes you—”

“‘Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, ‘Dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before,’” Roxanne quoted. “Coming back to your hometown when a murderer is on the loose is crazy. The only reason to subject yourself to that would be if the opportunity had shocked you enough to dare to believe in something you’d never considered a possibility.” She stopped outside the library, one hand on her cane, one clutching her partner’s forearm. Ritchie didn’t fail to notice their matching dull, silvery rings. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me who. I’ll find out soon enough. I wanna talk to you, Trashmouth. About back then. What you saw. What you knew.”

Ritchie nodded silently, wondering how on earth he’d manage to censor their clashes with Pennywise into something fit to tell the FBI.

“Don’t go nowhere,” she warned. “I’ll find you.” She then turned heel and limped into the library, leaving Ritchie wondering exactly how transparent he was.

Chapter End Notes

Reunion

Chapter Notes

“And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,
‘Guess now who holds thee?’ — ‘Death,’ I said. But there,
The silver answer rang, — ‘Not Death, but Love.’”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ritchie stood outside the door of the restaurant, sweating and twitching. He was suddenly very aware of his bad clothes, receding hairline, 5 o’ clock shadow, thick glasses, weird face—“Ritchie!”
He started and turned around to see Bev, eyes sparkling, walking towards him. “Beep beep, Ritchie! It’s been too long!”
He gave Bev a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek, blinking away tears. “I can’t believe we’re all back,” he said. “Have you seen the others?”
“Mike is finishing up at the library,” she said, grabbing his hands and beaming. “The others are on their way. Are you excited to see Eddie?”
Ritchie blushed.
“Yeah. Yeah, I am.”
“Good. You two were always so close. Oh, Eddie! Speak of the devil?”
Ritchie turned around, holding his breath. He couldn’t feel his face, and he could barely hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears. Eddie was still small after all these years, but he’d filled out a bit. A pair of broadened shoulders tapered down to an achingly slender waist. His arms were definitely more well-muscled than Ritchie remembered, and a fantastic pair of thighs filled out his tapered chinos, but he still had the same sharp chin, button nose, freckles, and soft, brown hair that Ritchie remembered so fondly. Above all else, his eyes were still the same gorgeous, warm shade of brown, and they still looked at Ritchie with great warmth and tenderness.
Ritchie jogged towards Eddie, and Eddie jogged towards him, and they sort of met in the middle. They caught each other up in a hug, laughing, and Ritchie used his height advantage to catch Eddie up and spin him around.
“Rich, put me down!” Eddie demanded, but he was laughing. Ritchie complied, too overwhelmed by the scent of Eddie’s aftershave and the warmth of his body to come up with a clever riposte. Unselfconsciously, Eddie planted his face in the crook of Ritchie’s neck and wormed closer to him, taking in a deep, snuffling breath. Ritchie held him tight, feeling good, feeling alive, while also fighting off needling pangs of guilt. If Eddie knew what he was, what he wanted, he’d never let Ritchie touch him like this.
“I missed you, Eds,” he says, and even that’s hard to summon up the courage to say, because what if Eddie didn’t miss him? What if Eddie loves his life, and it’s been nice to see Ritchie, but not worth it in the slightest?
“Don’t call me that,” Eddie says, his voice muffled by Ritchie’s jacket. “I missed you, too.”
When they finally let go of each other, Ritchie’s crying a little. Eddie doesn’t notice because he’s too busy kissing Bev on the cheek and catching up with her.
“Hey,” Ritchie said, clearing his throat. “Either of you guys run into the Feds?”
Bev shook her head.
“No, I haven’t seen anyone. Are they investigating the disappearances?”
Ritchie nodded.
“There’s just two of them. I mean, there’s not much to go on. But I met them on my way into town. A profiler and her partner.” He paused. “They want to interview me.”
“What?” Eddie asked sharply, cheeks flushing. “They don’t think—”
“No, no, I don’t think so. They know we were here the first time around. They just want to see if we remember anything.” Ritchie laughed ruefully. “So it couldn’t hurt to, you know, get our stories straight. For all the good it’ll do.”
“What do you mean, for all the good it’ll do?” Bev asked.
“I just...she picked me apart pretty fast,” Ritchie admitted. “If we make something up, I don’t know that they’ll buy it. Fair warning.”
“Picked you apart how?” Eddie demanded, voice rising in pitch and volume. “I mean, did she read you your rights? She had no right to just stop you and—and—interrogate you like some common criminal!”
“It wasn’t about the murders, Eds, honest. Just some stuff about my act.” He hesitated. “She knew I didn’t write my own jokes. It wasn’t a big deal.”
“I knew it,” Eddie giggled. “Aww, poor Ritchie! Who’s gonna let the Trashmouth do what he wants to do?”
“Hey! It’s Mike!” Bev shouted. Ritchie opened his mouth to greet him, but he froze when he saw the two women flanking him.
“Hi guys!” Mike said, grinning. “Long time, no see!”
“Is one of you Eddie Kaspbrak?” Roxanne asked.
“Uh, guys, these are Agents Little and Johnson. They’re here to investigate the disappearances. They just want to hear about what Derry was like back in the day.”
“Eddie Kaspbrak? May I speak to you?”
Eddie shuffled his feet nervously.
“Uh…”
“You’re not in trouble, sweetheart,” she coaxed. “I just need a quick word. Thanks, Mike.”
Ritchie’s heart slammed in his chest as Roxanne pulled Eddie aside. He fervently hoped they weren’t talking about him.
“Look, Mr. Kaspbrak—”
“You can call me Eddie, it’s okay.”
“Okay, Eddie. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but your wife put a tracker on your car.”
Roxanne was leaning up against the wall of the Ladies bathroom, hands in her pockets. Michelle guarded the door, face impassive. Eddie was hunched over, clearly uncomfortable and a little beaten-down. He reminded her of Jesse so much that she couldn’t breathe for a moment.
“What?!”
“Yeah. And she’s been calling the agent in charge at the Derry PD so much I’ve started pretending to be a Chinese restaurant. I’m not asking you to fix it, it’s just information. But I am concerned.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah. Look, I’ve been stonewalling her, and I’m happy to continue to do so but please just know that if you ever want to talk, I’m here. All right?”
Eddie nodded, lips pressed together, eyes downcast. Roxanne sighed through her nose. “I can’t...I shouldn’t...you know what, fuck it. I want you to listen to me, Eddie. You don’t deserve to be treated like that, do you hear me? In a healthy relationship, you are allowed to take time for yourself and be with your friends.” She put a hand on his shoulder. Eddie looked over, noticing her two missing fingers. The stumps were covered with gray rubber caps.
“Are you all right?” he asked.
“Huh? Oh, yeah. I lost those almost two years ago. But I’m serious. It’s not healthy, and it’s not normal. I don’t want to keep you from your friends, but I need you to know that I’ll be looking out for you. All right?”
Eddie took a few deep breaths, and then looked up.
“All right. Thank you.”
“Okay. I’ll be out in a moment.”
When Eddie left the bathroom, Michelle walked up to Roxanne, taking her by the upper arms and pulling her close, only to maneuver her far enough back to read her hands.
“You look like you’re having a hard time. Talk to me.”
“God, I just—I can’t—”
“I know, Rosie. The last one ended ugly. It happens.”
“But it didn’t fucking have to!” Roxanne exploded. Her face crumpled, and she started to cry. “I made a bad call, Chelle. And now—”
“Roxanne, stop it—”
“NO!” she shrieked. “He’s DEAD because of ME! I pr—” Her voice cracked. “I promised to keep him safe. He risked his life to do my fucking job and I got him killed.”
“Not. You.”
Michelle’s voice, rarely used, sounded as if it was being dragged from the very depths of her chest. Guttural, deep and resonant, the rarity with which she used it only added to its impact. It was obvious that speaking was painful for her, a lingering reminder of the scarlet fever that had laid her up for nearly a year when she was only six years old.
“It was that asshole,” she signed. “Walter. He did this, not you.”
“He was a psychopath,” Roxanne snarled, pacing along the line of sinks like a caged animal.
“Skunk’s gonna spray, ain’t no use for it. He was nothin’ but an animal. I should’ve known better.”
“I know you’re scared about getting back on that horse, but there’s nothing for it.” Chelle cast around, looking for a paper towel to blot the angry tears that had started to slip from her wife’s eyes. “Jack asked me to keep you from getting too involved, but I think you could do some real good here. I know that you can find the person taking these kids, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I think that maybe you could these people too. That guy we met, the closet case—what if out secondary project, our B story, as it were, was to get him to own up to his soulmate?”
Roxanne looked up, skeptical.
“Soulmate? Are you, Evadne Michelle Johnson, actually encouraging me to meddle in the romantic affairs of a stranger?”
“I know it’s wildly unprofessional. But I also know that nothing cheers you up faster than sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”
“That won’t fix this, you know. I’ll have to carry the guilt of what I did to that poor kid around for the rest of my life.”
Michelle sighed quietly, and shrugged.
“Well, you’re not crying anymore. At least there’s that.

When she emerged, all the Losers, including Bill and Ben, were whispering together, looking concerned. “All is well, fellow citizens. I return your friend, much in the same condition in which I found him.” She clapped her hands together. “I can’t mandate that you come in and talk to me, so all I’m gonna do is strongly urge you to consider it your civic responsibility. I can’t stress enough that I don’t consider any of you suspects. I’m asking for your help because I believe that the ’83-84 murders are incredibly significant to this investigation, and the record-keeping and police reports are absolutely useless. You were kids. You knew the Derry that the missing children inhabited. I need to know it, too.” She held up a sheet of paper. “Please sign up to come see me tomorrow. I’m asking nicely.”
Ritchie was the first to sign his name, followed, as always, by Eddie. Ben went up next, followed by Bev, then Bill, then Mike. Roxanne nodded. “Thank you. All of you. Stay safe, and stay together. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes
“O darkness! O in vain!
O I am very sick and sorrowful!
O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.”
-Walt Whitman, Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking

“Are we really doing this?” Eddie whispered nervously. They were standing in the hall of the Fairfield Inn and Suites. Richie’s hands were in his pockets and his shoulders were hunched.

“I’m freaked, too,” he admitted. “It’ll be okay.”

“Richie,” Eddie said, barely audible. He reached for him, wrapping his long, slender fingers around Richie’s wrist. Richie could feel him shaking.

“Eds,” he sighed. He hesitated, then wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close.

“Everything’s gonna be alright. You’re not gonna get hurt. I’ll getcha back to that wife of yours in one piece.”

Eddie sighed, looking away and rubbing his face with one hand.

“Rich, I…”

“Richie Tozier? We’re ready for you.”

Roxanne had poked her head into the hallway. Her hair was tied back in a low ponytail, and she was wearing a pair of tiny, wire-rimmed German-intellectual glasses. Eddie gave Richie a nervous backwards glance as he entered the room.

Richie didn’t know what he was expecting, but the room was just a regular hotel suite. Roxanne crossed the room to a green armchair. She was wearing a white blouse tucked into a blue wool skirt and knee-high gray boots.

“Sorry for taking the good chair,” she said. “My lower half’s been acting up since Friday.”

“No problem.”

Richie didn’t want to be rude, but he couldn’t help but stare at the jagged snarls of scar tissue snaking up her forearms, the teardrop-shaped canyon of missing flesh under her left eye, and the two missing fingers.

“How’d you lose your fingers?” he asked before he could stop himself. The moment the words left his mouth, he wanted to slap and hand to his mouth. But Roxanne just laughed.
“Tell you what. If you tell me who you’re in love with and why, I’ll tell you what happened to my fingers.”

Richie blushed, mouth open. “It’s a really good story,” she said lazily. “You won’t be sorry. And I legally can’t tell anyone what you say to me. I’m a psychiatrist above all else, and I’m bound by the ethical standards of my profession.”

“All right,” he sighed. “What the hell.”

“Okay, why don’t you start at the beginning? Tell me when you realized you were gay.”

“I was probably about eleven. I mean, ever since I was a kid, I never felt that I belonged. I thought it was because I was a loser, I had glasses, I couldn’t not run my mouth. I was always goofing off in class--”

“Huh!”

“What?”

Roxanne shook her head, smiling.

“You can play it off like you were too cool for school, but if you graduated high school with below a 3.5 GPA, I’ll dance at your wedding stark fucking naked. Hell, I don’t believe in I.Q. testing, but if I administered one to you right now, I wouldn’t be surprised if you clocked in at 140 or higher.”

Richie chuckled.

“I liked learning, but I had trouble sitting still sometimes. I mean, you remember being a kid. It’s one thing to be sitting in a classroom for six hours, and it’s another to read a book about snakes or dinosaurs or violent Norse myths with your friends. Teachers didn’t like me, but I tested well.” He sighed. “Eddie was always just...there. I mean, he was--is--my best friend. He was just a spitfire, just truly feral-angry like, all the time, the first one to tell me to shove it, but he would never leave me. Ever. No matter how stupid the idea, he was always right there. And he was cute. Cute, cute, cute, running his mouth about infections or carcinogens or whatever, with his little tube socks and booty shorts, squishy chubby cheeks, and frowny little mouth. It was crazy because we were just children, but I’ve never felt anything like that since. That was love. The way I loved him...was something they couldn’t understand. That was what saved us. The way I loved him--still love him, will love him--took, takes, will take more than I could, can, will be able to imagine, even now. He carried me around, back then, like loose change, jingling at the bottom of his little fanny pack. He didn’t seem to feel it, though, as he walked down the street, radiating that unique birthday-candle glow, not even knowing the way I loved him. Love him. Will love him. And the second I came home, it all rushed right back. Twenty-seven years grinding by... God, it makes me sick to imagine all the wasted time.”

“What do you think he loves you back?”

Richie shook his head, eyes full of tears.

“I don’t know. I never let myself consider it. It was too painful to ever consider what it might be like to really be with him. I couldn’t let myself hope. I couldn’t lose him, even if it meant never telling him the truth.”

“What do you think he would do if you told him?”

“I honestly don’t know. Worst case scenario, he’d be disgusted.”
“And in the best case?”

“He’d feel the same way. Even then, it would be so hard to think about all the time I wasted just because I was a coward.”

Roxanne nodded.

“When did you know?” Richie asked.

“I don’t know. Ten, maybe. Chelle and I have been friends since we were six. It was like my entire sexual evolution was mapped around her. We kissed for the first time when we were fifteen. I used to make her carry me places, you know. She’d always want to jet around the city-- we grew up in Seattle-- and I’d tell her that I’d only go if she’d carry me. So we were going from Capitol Hill back to the place we always hung out, Cowen Park. There was a tiny playground attached to this long running trail in a ravine tucked under the Ravenna Overpass. We used to spend 90% of our time in the shadow of that overpass. She put me down, and I was looking up at her, and I just couldn’t not kiss her.” She shrugged. “Bravery never entered into it. I didn’t have a choice.”

“I carved our initials on the Kissing Bridge,” Richie said. “It was like I couldn’t keep in inside. It was like... you ever see one of those movies where someone gets possessed by a demon and it starts burning through their mortal form and they can’t handle the power? That’s what it felt like. I could barely sleep. Food had no taste. I mean, for twenty-seven years, I felt nothing at all. I mean, is it better to just forget, and feel nothing, or to be in pain?”

“When I would talk to the families of murder victims, they would always complain to me that their therapists wanted them to stop grieving and get better. No one understood that the pain was the only thing connecting them to their lost loved ones.”

Richie was crying. He took off his glasses and pressed his fingers into his eyes until neon spots burst into his field of vision. “I know it’s painful,” she whispered.

“God,” Richie sobbed. “It’s never gonna stop.”

“I don’t believe that,” Roxanne said. “I see a way out of this.”

“How? I can’t forget him, and he’s fucking married!”

“Richie, listen to me. His wife is a fucking nightmare. You need to tell him how you feel. You know that you’re important to him! Did you see how he greeted you? He told you he missed you! Do you really, honestly think that he’d be disgusted if you told him who you really are?”

“No, of course not, but he wouldn’t want to touch me, he wouldn’t want me to look at him--”

“What if he loves you too? What if he’s been going through the same torture as you for your whole lives? Wouldn’t you want to relieve that for him?”

“Of course. Of course. But I’m scared, and I’m selfish, and I don’t want to risk things changing between us.”

“What if it changes for the better?”

“Worse seems more likely.”

“But that’s just not true!” Roxanne used her hands to uncross her legs and recross them, left over right. “I believe that that’s distorted thinking. You obviously have self-esteem issues, which is really common in closeted people, and I think that that might be causing you to be more pessimistic than the situation warrants. Do you believe that that’s a possibility?”
Richie mulled it over. “Sure. Anything’s possible.”

“Okay. That’s the first step. I’m not asking you to reorient yourself right away. You don’t have to see the light at the end of the tunnel. You just have to believe me when I say that I do.” Her watch beeped. “That’s our warning. Well, I promised that I’d tell you how I lost my fingers.” She reached over to pull off the gray rubber caps over her stumps. “Two years ago, I was working on a case--the Chesapeake Ripper. Ever heard of him?”

Richie shook his head.

“I’m not surprised. Unless you live in the DMV, you probably don’t remember the murders. But there was a killer two years ago on the loose around Baltimore. He killed in groups of three or four, taking surgical trophies, and he never left any forensic or trace evidence. We knew he was a doctor and we knew he was a white male in his forties, but we didn’t know anything else. He was a ghost. I was at a crime scene in September of last year, examining a body, when I realized that he’d taken the sweetbreads. They weren’t surgical trophies--he was eating them.”

Richie was speechless for a moment.

“Ugh!”

“Yeah,” Roxanne said calmly. “Cannibalism can be cultural, situational, sexual, or the result of a psychosis.”

“Sexual!”

“Yeah. Some cannibals are impotent. Eating human flesh is a way for them to commune on an evolutionarily primal level with another person. Sometimes primal urges get cross-wired psychosexually.”

“Ugh!”

“The first thing I did was hop in the car and drive to see my mentor. He helped me write my dissertation, and we stayed friends. He’s the one who recommended me to the FBI. He gave me the key to his house, even. So I went up and I knocked on the door, but he didn’t answer. So I unlocked the door, and went in.” Roxanne lit a clove cigarette, her hands shaking slightly. “I walked through the house, yelling after him; ‘Hey, Doctor! He’s eating them!’ When I found him, he was in the kitchen. He was cutting something that was fatty, and pink, and I recognized the butterfly-wings of a human thymus.” She tapped her cigarette, spreading a fine mist of ash on the carpet. “I turned to run, but he came up behind me and stabbed my with a pair of poultry shears. I kicked him in the nads and ran upstairs. He caught up to me on the landing, and we struggled. He was going to bite my face, and I put my hand up to block him like this.”

She demonstrated, holding her right hand up like she was trying to block out the sun.

“I was holding his chin in my hand, pushing him back, and he opened his mouth, and bit down.” She took a moment and sniffed. “I shoved him, and he came away with my fingers. I ran all the way up the stairs and slammed the door shut behind me. I knew it was only a matter of time, and I knew that the victims had all been cut up while alive. There was a window. It was on the third floor, but it was my way out. I hit the glass with my fist to undo the latch. I got these cuts all up and down my arm.”

She rolled up her sleeves, revealing the full extent of her scars.

“I pushed it open, and fell. I hit the ground and rolled. My right shoulder took the impact and just
ground into gravel. My pelvis basically cracked in two. Kneecaps, femurs, tibia...all ripped to shit. My friend found me and called an ambulance.”

“They couldn’t, you know, reattach them?”

“Reattach what?”

“Your fingers. They can do that, can’t they?”

“Richie, I ain’t getting my fingers back. They’re long gone. And I’m okay with that. I’m left-handed, anyways.” Her watch beeped again. “And that’s time. We can meet again soon, if you’d like. But for now, please send Eddie in.”

Richie nodded and got up, head swimming. Then something occurred to him.

“Hey, I thought you wanted to learn about Derry back in the day.”

She looked up from replacing the caps on the stumps of her fingers.

“That’s exactly what I’m doing, Richie.”

“Richie, are you all right? You look...weird!”

“Thanks Eds,” Richie sighed.

“No, hey, seriously. What’s going on?” When Richie didn’t answer, Eddie grabbed him by the arms and shook him gently. “You know you can talk to me, Richie. I’m scared, too.”

“Eds, will you get a drink with me tonight?”

“Shut up. Don’t call me that. But yes, I’ll get a drink with you.”

“Meet me at the Blue Ribbon Bar on Luray at seven, okay?”

Before he turned to go, Eddie grabbed his arm.

“Richie, please don’t do anything stupid. I know that’s like asking you not to breathe, but I’m begging.”

Against his better instincts, Richie reached out and, after a brief hesitation, he took his hand. “I just got you back,” Eddie whispered. “Don’t take yourself away from me again.”

Richie pushed everything he was too scared to say into the trembling clench of their sweaty hands.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, Eds. Go on. She’s ready for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Just realized I've been spelling Richie's name wrong 5 chapters in. Sigh. In my defense, my actual brother Ritchie spells it differently.
“O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the Lake
And no birds sing!
O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
So haggard and so woebegone?
The squirrel’s granary is full
And the harvest’s done.”
- John Keats, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci.”

TW: brief mention of sexual assault/harassment

“Come on in,” Roxanne called out. “Sit down. Relax.”

Eddie walked in cautiously, peering into every corner of the room before sitting down.

“Sorry about the delay--”

Her phone rang.

“Dammit. Dr. Little.”

Eddie squirmed. “Mrs. Kaspbrak, calm down. I--what?”

Eddie shoved his fist into his mouth, staring at her with pleading eyes. Roxanne listened silently to the high-pitched buzz emanating from her cell. “No, no. That’s an old plumber’s trick. When you have a low-flow toilet, you can raise the water level by placing something in there--paper works best, but you have to wrap it in something so it doesn’t turn to mush and clog the pipes. Uh-huh. I gotta go.”

She put the phone down.

“What did you just tell her?”

“A load of horseshit. D’you wanna tell me why your wife found a shrink-wrapped poster of Richie Tozier in your toilet tank?”

“Uh…”

“I told her that it was a plumbing fix-it, but we both know that’s a lie.”

“And what do you think it is?”

Roxanne grinned and then burst into song.

“‘My blood runs cold
My memory has just been sold!
My angel is the centerfold
Angel is the centerfold!”

Eddie flushed.

“Tell me,” she said, “why are you in a relationship with someone who is so obviously wrong for
you?”

“I don’t—I—” He sighed. “You know, we didn’t…I never…”

“And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.
I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—’La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!’” quoth Roxanne.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Eddie asked, aggrieved.

“It means that you fell asleep,” Roxanne explained. “La Belle Dame Sans Merci. John Keats. It’s a
poem about a knight who is entranced by an evil sorceress. She puts him to sleep, and when he
wakes up, he’s ill and drained.”

Eddie didn’t say anything. His lower lip was tucked under his upper one, like a bird’s beak.

“I pulled hospital reports, Eddie. The second your wife called me, I knew what she was. And I’ve
seen you. The world,” she said, gesturing around the room, “thinks it’s sweet—you know, the
stammer and the tremor in your voice. But only your friends--maybe even only Richie--know not to
mistake it for weakness—or some kind of…” she trailed off. “…Incompleteness. Because round
about now, I know you can feel it tingling at your nerve endings. It’s coiled up inside you. It’s
ready to blow.”

She lit a cigarette but didn’t bring it to her mouth, just letting it burn between her fingers.

“You don’t even know me! What the hell are your talking about? Nothing’s inside me, all right?
I’m just…hollow. Like you said, they just...hollowed me out. There’s nothing left.”

“Well, Richie thinks very highly of you.”

“Richie hasn’t seen me in twenty-seven years,” Eddie sighed. “He thought too much of me even
then. I don’t know what the fuck he saw in me.”

“Why wouldn’t you trust the one person who treated you well and with respect?”

Eddie sighed. “Richie’s great. I love him. But he’s not objective. He’s an amazing, sweet person,
and he’s the best friend I ever had. But he thinks I’m something better than what I am.”

“I believe that you have great power, Eddie Kaspbrak. It’s up to you to decide what to do with it.
You can turn it on yourself, just like you’ve been doing, and keep tearing yourself apart.” She took
a pull on her smoke, keeping her eyes open and watching Eddie. “Or, of course, you could love.”

Eddie said nothing. He was frozen, feeling as if his bowels were dripping out his bunghole.
Roxanne laughed for a solid few seconds. The sound didn’t suit her austere appearance—it was a cascade of low and raspy snickers that transformed her pinched and dour face completely.

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?” he stammered.

“It means you don’t need another prescription, Mr. Kaspbrak,” she said with a grin. “You just need some dick.”

Eddie opened his mouth to protest, but no words came out. His face flushed, and he squirmed in his seat. All he could think was Am I really that fucking obvious? Finally, he said; “Shouldn’t you be telling me to go to marriage counseling, or—”

“I’m not Dr. Phil, Eddie. I don’t give a shit about the sanctity of marriage, and moreover, I don’t recommend that anyone go to counseling with an abuser. Right now, you’re a sad sack, and sad sacks are bummers, and moreover, one of the guiding principles of my life has always been that suffering don’t make you holy anymore than jumping off a building makes you an angel. This life is a blind, howling slog through the dark, and we owe it to ourselves to at least do it with someone that makes us happy.” She pointed at him with her pen. “I’m giving you a prescription, and I want you to fill it.”

She handed him a slip of paper torn from her notebook. Printed in block letters were the words “200 ccs OF DOING RICHIE TOZIER.”

“Roxanne, I...thank you. Really. Thank you for covering for me with my wife, and for trying to help me out, but I couldn’t do that to Richie. I mean, not only is he probably straight, but even if he’s not, he deserves someone who can--you know--” He made an expansive gesture. “Give him things. I’m just a yard sale of personal problems and I’m old, you know?”

“You’re the same age, asshole!” Roxanne burst out, exasperated. “And I’m ten years older than you!”

“You’re fifty?” Eddie asked.

“Forty-nine. How old did you think I was?”

“I don’t know. My age, maybe a little younger.”

“Shut up. I’ve got white fucking hair.”

“Lots of people have white hair. I knew someone who went white in college. Your face is weird.”

“My face is weird?”

“Not in a bad way. It’s like you could be eighteen or sixty. If you held a gun to my head, I would’ve guessed thirty-eight. Nobody ever guessed my age wrong.”

“You don’t look old, but you act it. Lose the stick up your ass, and you could be twenty again.”

Her comment startled a laugh out of Eddie--a sort of surprised bark. “O what can ail thee, knight at arms, alone and palely loitering? The sedge has withered from the lake, and no birds sing! O what can ail thee, knight at arms, so haggard and so woebegone? The squirrel’s granary is full, and the harvest’s done. I see a lily on thy brow with anguish moist and fever-dew, and on thy cheeks a fading rose, fast withereth, too.”

“You do know it,” Roxanne said, grinning.
“I did,” he whispered. “I just forgot. I forgot so much.”

“Tell me.”

“Richie struggled with math—not because he couldn’t understand the concepts, but because he couldn’t sit still for long enough—but he loved to read. None of the other Losers knew, but he got this big poetry anthology for his birthday from his grandmother, and he read it to pieces.” Eddie looked up. His eyes were shimmering with tears. “He’d read them to me. Love poetry, Roxanne. How could I have been so stupid?”

“You weren’t stupid, Eddie. You were scared. I remember what it was like to be so deep in the closet that I couldn’t even conceptualize what I wanted to myself, much less to someone else. The pain of admitting that you wanted something was just too much. What else could a kid do but repress that? But you’re an adult now, and it’s time to realize that when you lie to yourself, you lie to everyone. Have a little compassion for that little boy. I know that it’s not easy, because I would shove last year’s version of me down a flight of stairs with zero compunction, but try to remember what it was like to be young and scared and in love. What was your favorite thing that he read to you?”

“Lines from Hamlet. ‘Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt that I love.’”

“So why have you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I couldn’t understand why he would…”

“Choose you? Well, maybe he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t have a choice any more than you or I did. I love my wife. If I did have a choice, I’d choose her every time for a million times. But I didn’t have a choice. That love I felt—I was a prisoner of it. Fighting it was never an option. Maybe you were stronger than I was, or more scared, but you’ve been trying to outrun yourself for your whole life. I just went limp.”

“You’re saying I should be just like you?” Eddie asked sourly, a bit defensive.

“No, I’m saying you should be you. I won’t say that my life has been easy, because it hasn’t. Some parts have been ugly. It’s been dangerous. Hell, it could be over tomorrow. But at least it’s been mine. The mistakes I’ve made have been mine, nobody else’s.”

“My entire life has been dictated by my mother,” Eddie admitted.

“Yeah,” Roxanne said. “I mean, it’s obvious that someone profoundly abused you. If they hadn’t, why would you put up with this bullshit?” She waved her phone, displaying a notification announcing seven missed calls. “Is she dead?”

“No,” Eddie sighed. “She’s still alive. I haven’t visited her in years. I couldn’t come back. But then, I didn't have to visit her. She was always right there.”

“In your head, or in your wife?”

“Both. I was out, Roxanne. I was out from under her, out of Derry, and I went right back. There must be something really, really wrong with me.”

“I don’t think it’s about the location. New York, Derry, doesn’t matter, wherever you go, there ain’t a lot of space for change in the closet.”
“How did you do it?”

“I...just...couldn’t keep pretending. I loved her so much that I didn’t have room for anything else. I knew my dad would support me, that helped, but it was scary. When I was at the University of Washington as a sophomore, I had a bunch of frat boys corner me, telling me they were gonna cure me. I knew what they meant, and they could’ve. I was in better shape then, but I was never one for fisticuffs. I talked big, but I always had Chelle to back me up. She was in an evening seminar. They were big guys. There was nothing I could’ve done to stop them.” She shook her head. “I hated it, feeling like I was powerless. But I wasn’t no bitch, and I decided to call their bluff. They left, but there were more where they came from.”

“Once I was getting changed in the locker room after gym class,” Eddie said before he could stop himself. “I was with Richie, and I guess I was watching a little too close, because Henry Bowers came up next to me and grabbed me, asking me ‘you like what you see, you little fag?’” He sniffed, and started when Roxanne reached out and took his hand. The gray rubber caps covering her stumps stuck to his skin. He felt the bumpy line of her scar on the back of his hand. Encouraged, he continued. “He-he said, ‘if you like that little thing, you’ll love this.’ He stuck his...you know...in my face. It was right against my mouth, I--all I could think about was infection, I mean, both real, and...well, they talked about it like a disease, you know?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Like it was catching. They’d tell us that the queers were trying to recruit, like they were giving sales pitches in Wendy’s parking lots.”

“Yeah. My mom was always telling me I was fragile, vulnerable, sick. Once she told me that if I got the flu, I’d die. I actually convinced myself that I couldn’t be gay because of how scared I was of Henry Bowers, like if I was really gay I’d be thrilled if any dick was in my face.”

“Yeah. Like how, as a lesbian, I’d be more’n happy to eat your psycho bitch wife’s cooch.”

That startled a laugh out of Eddie.

“You don’t know that she’s ugly.”

“Pretty comes from the inside out, Edward, and read my lips: that woman’s fucked up.”

“I mean, I felt like I was going out of my head. Of course I didn’t want Henry Bowers to rape me. But I was also thinking, even as it was happening, about what it might be like to see Richie’s dick, to…” He lowered his face, blushing. “...to kiss it, even, or put it in my mouth.”

“What did Richie do?” Roxanne asked.

“He went insane. He bit Bowers.”

“On the dick?”

Eddie laughed, appalled. “No, not on the dick. On the arm. He bit a huge chunk out of his forearm. Bowers slammed his head into the edge of the locker twice and then booked it out of there. I was so freaked. I thought Richie was dead. He had a giant cut on his forehead and his nose was broken. I lost it. He didn’t even miss a beat, he was so pissed. He just kept talking about how he was gonna kill Bowers. It took me an hour to talk him down. I’d never seen him like that before. When he got picked on, he always just seemed to bounce back. But that really bothered him, and I felt awful, because he got hurt worse than he’d ever been hurt before because of me. Because I’m a deviant.”

“When did that become a bad thing?”

“Huh?”
“Well, think about it. Isn’t that what love is supposed to do—you know, break all the rules and conquer all? I mean, nothing’s worth anything if we’re not willing to fight for it. I believe that my love is special because I was willing to die for it. My wife was important enough to me that I was willing to risk my life to be with her. Straight people don’t understand that. They take their love for granted. You and I, we don’t have that option. I’m not saying it was a turn-on, sneaking around. It wasn’t sexy fun, it was really dangerous and scary. But I’m not saying it wasn’t, either. I don’t—” She sighed, frustrated. “I’m not expressing myself very well. My point is, this kind of love is special. It’s power. It’s bravery. It’s not a place, it’s a yearning. It’s not a race, it’s a journey. It’s not an act, it’s attraction. It’s not a style, it’s an action. It’s a dream for the waking, it’s a flower touched by flame. It’s a gift for the giving, it’s a power with a hundred names.” She made an expansive gesture. “Surge of energy, spark of inspiration. The breath of our love is electricity. It’s the hand that rocks the cradle. It’s the motion that swings the skies. It’s a method on the edge of madness. It’s a balance on the edge of a knife. It’s a smile on the edge of sadness. It’s a dance on the edge of life.”

Eddie’s head swam. He remembered that, the terror, along with the sick thrill of living on the edge, hiding in plain sight. It was dangerous, too dangerous to go to the Kissing Bridge and carve Richie’s initial and enclose it in a crude heart, but he’d done it anyways, heart pounding, nerve endings tingling, feeling achingly, burningly alive.

“It was fucked up,” Eddie said, voice thick. “We shouldn’t have had to live like that you know.”

“A simple child that lightly draws its breath, and feels its life in every limb, what should it know of death?” Roxanne quoted.

“William Wordsworth,” Eddie said. “‘We are Seven.’ I’d read these things, you know, and then I’d just cry, and I wouldn’t know why. But now I know—and I guess on some level, I always knew—that it was because I remembered little Richie sitting on my bed, reading me poetry and touching my knee while my heart fair beat out of my chest.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that avoiding danger ain’t no safer in the long run,” she told him. “The fearful fall foul of fate as often as the reckless. If you’ve made mistakes, there’s always another chance for you. You can start over again at any moment, any time you choose. Just because you take a mouthful of shit doesn’t mean you can’t stop chewing and get up for some chocolate cake. Failure ain’t about falling down. Failure is staying down, and giving up on yourself. When I was in high school, I used to look up X-Files fan fiction on ff.net and print them out and keep them in a binder under my bed, and Chelle found it one night, and she still married me. If that’s not fucking inspirational, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“You really don’t think that ship has sailed,” Eddie said, sceptical.

“Just because you’ve wasted some of your life, that doesn’t mean that you have to waste more. It’s the sunk cost fallacy. A bitch’s got to know when to cut bait.”

Her watch beeped. “That’s our time. I’ll see you soon. Here’s my card. Please don’t hesitate to call if you have any questions, or if you just want to talk.

Later that evening, the Losers all got together at the hotel bar.

“So, that was weird, huh?” Richie said, tossing back a swallow of bourbon.

“Really weird,” Eddie agreed.

“I don’t know,” Bev demurred, shrugging. “She’s a little intense, but it was kind of fun talking
about all the stuff we used to get up to.”

“She didn’t ask you…I mean, what did you talk about?”

Ben looked confused.

“Derry, man. Just Derry back in the day. What did you talk about?”

“Uh...the same, really,” Richie lied. His cheeks were crimson. Eddie, undeceived, was filled with awful, burning hope.
He Knows (You Know)

Chapter Notes

“It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know,
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.
She was a child and I was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.”

— Edgar Allen Poe, “Annabel Lee.”

TW: brief homophobic language

Eddie was always early. Richie was always late. That evening, he was later. The Blue Ribbon Bar was the nicest spot in Derry. The bar was dark, lacquered oak, and imitated the atmosphere of an old, wealthy cigar club. The glasses were chipped, and Eddie suspected that the dark green wine bottles with faded, peeling labels emblazoned with French were filled with nothing more than water, but it was quiet, and far away from the others. Eddie ordered a vodka and cranberry juice and drank fast, trying to drown his anxiety. He was terrified that Richie had caught wind of his ulterior motives and booked it out of Derry, or that Roxanne had given him an urgent call letting him know about Eddie’s dark and deep desires and warned him to get gone. I don’t usually do this, but your friend’s a real deviant, Rich, you’d better get the hell out of dodge. Maybe the whole lesbian solidarity thing had been an act. Maybe she was just Pennywise messing with him. She hadn’t felt like a hallucination, though. The press of her hand against his was cold and rough, but real. The grinding pops of her hip joints and her scent—jasmine, cashmere, and something else, something warm and reassuring.

Waiting, petrified, Eddie thought of the first gift Richie had ever given him. He’d bought it for five bucks at a second hand store when they were thirteen, at the end of their eighth grade year. Richie had saved up for a month to buy it. It was August of 1992. A drought had turned the sky into a humid pressure-cooker of purple clouds. He’d been waiting for Richie on the bridge. The streets, previously filled with students celebrating the summer, were emptying. The heat was killing. The distance smelled of rain and lightning. The air was green with the coming storm. The wind tasted like pennies. Then Richie had appeared in the distance, sweaty, panting. His nose was bloodied and his knee was skinned, but he was triumphant. A rectangle wrapped in silver foil was clutched in one hand. Eddie jogged up to meet him.

“Richie! Are you—”

“I got it!” Richie crowed, waving the package. “Happy summer, Eds!”
“Richie, what happened to you?”

“Oh—just a wee run-in with Bowers, Eds, don’t worry about it. That’s not important. But this is!” He thrust the present into Eddie’s hands. “Open it!”


Richie beamed at him. “I finally found another one! Now we can read together! I marked my favorites, Spaghetti. We’re gonna just have a book club, Eds, just you and me.”

For a moment, Eddie couldn’t breathe past how much he loved Richie. His grinning face, skinned knee, bloodied nose, bruised face, legs, and arms wormed their way into his heart like a painful splinter. They were the only ones occupying the airless dusk before thunder.

“Well?” Richie asked, voice faltering a little. “Do you like it?”

Eddie approached him, eyes full of tears, lips trembling. He got close enough to smell the chewing gum on Richie’s breath, the smell of sweat, blood, and Richie’s underlying scent: something citrusy, fresh, and clean. After a tremulous moment’s hesitation, he pressed a kiss to Richie’s cheek. His skin was soft and smooth, like silk. The corner of his lips was sticky from the RC cola he was always drinking, and the curve of his jaw smelled like the cologne Eddie knew he had swiped from his father: peppermint and patchouli. Richie trembled. When Eddie pulled away, Richie’s face was crimson, his eyes were wide, and his mouth was slack and open. Eddie blushed. “Wow,” he had said softly. “Thanks, Spaghetti.”

Eddie was jolted out of his reverie by the sound of the bar door banging open. Richie was standing in the doorway, breathing hard. He was pale and sweaty. Eddie left the stool and stepped away from the bar, making three paces across the room. Richie’s distress made him brave. He grabbed his hand and pulled him across the threshold.

“Richie, are you all right?” When he didn’t reply, Eddie propelled him to the bar, setting him down on a stool. “Bourbon, neat,” he snapped at the bartender. “Richie, talk to me!”

“I saw IT,” Richie whispered dully. “In the park.” He picked up his drink with shaking hands. “Eddie, we have to leave. IT knows…” he trailed off. “IT knows. I can’t stay.”

“What does IT know?” Eddie asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Richie looked up, eyes full of some kind of indescribable pain, his mouth a tense, compressed line.

“You’ll hate me,” he whispered.

“That’s not possible,” Eddie said flatly. “I know you, Richie.”

“You know me?” Richie laughed bitterly. “You knew I was a fag?” His shoulders were tensed, like his was expecting a blow.

“Yeah,” Eddie sighed. “When I was a kid, I knew you were gay. I always knew.”

Richie sat bolt upright, spots of red appearing high on his cheeks.

“You knew? And you still, uh…”

“Still what? Laid in bed with you, reading comics? In the hammock, let you sit between my legs,
fell asleep on your chest, pressed my face into your neck when I was tired, held your hand? It really never occurred to you that I might be the same way?”

Richie gaped at him, and internally, Eddie gaped at himself. But it wasn’t really surprising. He might have been a coward, but he’d always been bravest when Richie needed him. Richie had always been there for him, and this was the least he could do. He had been so afraid of this moment, but it was easy. Richie made it easy. Everything was always easy with Richie.

“Eddie,” Richie said. “I…”

Eddie would always remember how Richie’s face was taken over by awe, hope, and a dawning realization.

“Do you remember the evening I kissed you on the bridge?”

“Of course,” Richie whispered. “Even when I forgot, it was still there.” It was true. There had hardly been a night for twenty-seven years when he hadn’t dreamed of Eddie, of his bright, brown eyes, of the sensation of his soft lips lingering on Richie’s cheek. No one his managers had set him up with had ever compared with the soft touch of Eddie’s hands, sticky with melted ice cream, entwined with his own, the warm skin of Eddie’s thigh snuggled against his thigh, the milky scent of Eddie’s breath as he fell asleep on Richie’s chest. And now, Eddie was here—not in his subconscious, not in his dreams, but right here, within arms reach, beautiful and real.

“So what do you think?” Eddie asked, voice low. Richie almost got lost in watching his lips move instead of listening to what he was saying. “Do you think I’m a deviant?”

“No, of course not,” Richie said. “You’re my best friend. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Eddie’s slender fingers wrapped around Richie’s wrist. He wasn’t wearing his wedding ring. Richie was achingly hard in his jeans, but he had to clear his head. “The reason I asked you here is because I want to leave. I can’t...this is way above our paygrade, Eds. I know me made a promise, but we were just kids. We didn’t know what we were doing. We’re lucky we didn’t get killed. I don’t want to die here. But I won’t leave without you. I don’t want to go back to my life before, when I was closeted, forgetting everything. Forgetting you. I want my best friend in my life.”

“This isn’t your responsibility, Richie. I—”

“I won’t abandon you.” Despite how afraid Richie was, he didn’t hesitate for a moment.

Eddie sighed. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

“No,” Richie said firmly. “Never. Not again. Look at the mess of trouble you got yourself in last time I left.”

For a moment, Richie thought Eddie might take offense, but he just nodded and took a swig of Richie’s drink. “Yeah,” he sighed. “Because your life’s gone completely according to plan without me watching your back. Trashmouth.”
Chapter Notes

“What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?”
— W. B. Yeats, “No Second Troy”

“Wuh-wuh-wuh—we still h-h-haven’t decided what t-t-t-to tell her,” Bill ground out.

“So nobody told her anything about IT?” Eddie asked, hands in his pockets.

Bev sighed. “Do you think she’d believe us?”

“She’s a psychiatrist. She’d p-p-p-probably send us all t-t-t-to the nuthouse.”

“What if she can help?” Eddie asked. “I mean, for all we know, the government knows crap like IT
exists. They’re just keeping it a secret, like aliens, or UFOs, or—”

“—or SCPs,” Richie added.

“Yes, thank you. Wait, what?”

“Never mind,” Mike interrupted. “She’s not equipped for this. It has to be us. We’re the only ones
who know how to beat IT.”

“But we don’t, though!” Richie cried, exasperated. “We got lucky last time, Mike! We didn’t know
what the fuck we were doing!”

“Richie—”

“Sewers!” Roxanne shouted. She slid down the bannister, landing in a crouch. Her wife grabbed
her by the back of her jacket and yanked her upright, like a mother cat placing its kitten on her feet.
She was holding a rolled-up map of Derry under her arm. She booked it into the hotel conference
room, pinning the map up on the wall. It was marked with tick marks denoting the locations of the
abductions. Connecting them all was a web of strokes of yellow highlighter. “The sewer system,”
Roxanne gasped, tapping the lines with her forefinger. “It connects all the abduction sites. The two
this month, the ones from twenty-seven years ago...it all fits. Daisy Saunders stored her cigarettes
under the manhole by her house. Tell me, did any of you ever play in the sewer system when you
were kids?”

The Losers gaped, staring at each other. Bill answered first.

“Nuh-nuh-nuh-no.”

She shrugged.
“Fair enough. ’S probably why you’re still alive.” She turned to Michelle. “Chelle, I want you to organize—oh, hell, what am I saying. I’ve only got a five person PD at my disposal, and only one of these fat fucks can fit down a manhole. You and I are gonna have to start in the morning.”

“No!” Eddie shouted. Roxanne turned, eyes narrowed. “You can’t go down there,” he said. “It’s not safe.”

“I can handle myself, Eddie. There could be kids down there who need help.”

“No. You don’t understand. There’s something down there.”

“Eddie,” Mike hissed.

“Mike,” Richie warned.

“Both of you, can it. What’s down there?” Roxanne asked, stepping forwards. She was wearing a white blouse tucked into a black pencil skirt, a red coral necklace, and black heels. Her dark hair was fluffed into a nest framing her face. “Eddie, talk to me.”

“A clown,” Eddie said. “There’s a clown that lives down there and eats people.”

Roxanne didn’t respond at first. She pulled out a chair and sat down. Michelle followed her lead, watching her wife carefully out of the corner of her eye. Eddie and Richie followed suit.

“Tell me about this clown.”

“It’s not a clown, not really,” Eddie said. “It takes different shapes based on what you’re most afraid of. To me, it was a leper. It feeds on fear.”

“It’s all true,” Richie said. “We’ve all seen It. You don’t believe us, do you?”

“I believe that you believe it,” she said slowly. “I believe that there’s something living down there. But I’m not ready to believe in a demon clown just yet.”

“So you think we, what? Suffered some sort of trauma, and we suppressed it into a clown living in the sewer and eating people? How is that less weird than getting molested?”

“Fair point,” Roxanne conceded. “I mean, I’ve heard of folie a deux before, but never folie a six. Let’s assume that the killer is this shapeshifting monster. When did you see it last?”

They told her the whole story. Eddie and Richie did most of the talking, with Bev and Ben cutting in occasionally. Bill and Mike were silent. Roxanne interrupted every now and again to clarify something, jotting down notes in her leather-bound journal, and Michelle watched skeptically, one eyebrow slightly raised. When they were finally done, Roxanne sat back, face carefully neutral.

“So?” Richie asked, voice falsely jovial. “You gettin’ ready to call the men with the butterfly nets and the white coats?”

She shook her head.

“I need a drink.”

“Does that mean you believe us?” Ben asked.

“It means I need a drink.” She got up and crossed over to the minibar, and bent down to open it, only to recoil. It was empty, save for one red balloon. “What the—”
Michelle jumped upright and grabbed Roxanne’s arm, pointing at the doorway. Standing there was a middle-aged man in a green button-down and khakis. His head was shaved, and he wore a brown goatee and bifocals. He was utterly unremarkable. None of this accounted for the extremity of fear Roxanne seemed to find herself in. She drew her weapon with shaking hands and pointed it at the figure. “On your knees, motherfucker! Get the fuck down!”

“Roxanne,” he said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I’m not kidding—”

“Just between us, Agent, I have to ask you. Did you ever really plan on keeping him safe? Or was he just bait to you?”

“You’re scum,” she hissed. “A killer.”

“You’ve got a lot of words for me, Roxanne, but did you ever consider how at the base of it, we’re just the same? He was a tool to me, a blunt tool, sure, got me into just as many messes as he got me out of, but a tool nonetheless, and he was a tool to you, too.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Then why’d you use him like one? To do your dirty work, get in on the ground floor, so you wouldn’t have to get your hands dirty…” The man’s voice started to change, getting closer to IT’s voice, the voice of the clown. The voice of Pennywise. “Oh, Roxanne, I do think it’s time for you to leave. We all float down here, and I think you’d better get out before you do the same. After all, you’ve seen what happens when you drag your friends into this crazy little game of ours, and she—” IT pointed at Michelle, who gave IT the finger promptly and with vigor “—she’ll float too, Rosie, you bet your fur, she’ll float too…”

Roxanne went to fire, but the gun jammed, and then the lights flickered, and when they came back on, IT was gone. Where IT had been standing there were only six or seven cockroaches on the carpet. Roxanne went to holster her weapon, but her hand was shaking so badly she missed. She dropped it, then flew upstairs to her room.

Michelle bent down to pick up the gun and put it on the table. She crossed to the whiteboard on the conference room wall, uncapped a marker, and began to write.

“You’re probably a little confused,” she wrote. “We came off a bad case.” She wrote the letter R, then erased it. “The DEA lost a chess match with a meth kingpin. They muffed the arrest, and he managed to slip away and kill our informant.” She stopped for a moment, shaking out her wrist. “Roxanne and him were close. She really tried to protect him. He was a good kid who made some bad choices. He didn’t deserve to die.” Michelle erased the writing on the board to make more space. “She took it hard. Doesn’t trust her instincts anymore.”

“Should you go after her?” Richie asked.

“I’ll catch her on the ricochet.”

Just as she put down the marker, Roxanne flew past her, holding a brown shoulder bag, a lacquered cherry wood box, and a lighter. She threw open the door and plunked down on the step outside. Roxanne flicked open the box, withdrawing a joint, and flicked the lighter, but her hand was shaking too badly to make contact with the end of the joint. Michelle walked up next to her and took the lighter, holding it steady. Roxanne took a deep drag and panted, taking a few deep breaths.

“How the fuck can you be so goddam calm? That, that, that was fucking crazy!” she hissed, looking
up at Michelle, who shrugged. “I mean, I, I, I’m a medical doctor,” Roxanne said. “A woman of science. But I will freely admit…” She picked up a twitching cockroach with a pair of pincers drawn from her brown bag “…that I’ve never seen shit like this before.” As she signed, Eddie, who spoke ASL, provided a whisper-translation.

“Before my grandmother died, she used to tell me stories about ghosts and monsters, La Llorona, chupacabras, demons.” She raised her shirt to reveal a tattoo of a skeleton arrayed in green and yellow robes like those worn by the Virgin Mary in the stained-glass windows of the Catholic church Richie had gone to as a child. “Santa Muerte, clandestinely worshipped in colonial Spain. Sure, it was sort of a fuck you to my adoptive parents at first, but I was always thinking about that sort of thing. Never really believed, but never disbelieved, either. So it isn’t normal. So it isn’t human. So what? It’s still killing kids, and it’s our job to take it down.”

“Some days I can barely get out of bed, Chelle. How’m I supposed to take down a demon? Not that I necessarily believe that’s what it is,” she amended hastily. “This could be a stress-induced hallucination. I could be asleep.”

“Do you feel asleep?” Michelle asked.

“No,” she admitted. “You know, I used to feel like I could do anything. At twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five, hell, even last year, I felt like I could do anything. Now, I just feel like I’m out of my depth, and people are dying because I’m drowning, because my reach exceeds my grasp. I don’t think I can do this.”

“You won’t have to,” Richie said. “We took it down once. Forced it to go into hibernation early. We can help you. Or, rather, you can help us. We could use a doctor. And I’m sure your wife is handy with a gun. None of us have that kind of expertise.”

Michelle nodded.

“I don’t want to brag, I’ve got an A-5 shotgun, a Dragunov sniper rifle, a Colt Python, and two Beretta 9mms in my trunk.”

“One for each hand?” Bev asked eagerly.

“No, that only works in the movies. One for me, one for her.”

“I hate guns,” Roxanne said. “I almost never carry. Here, though. I got a bad feeling about this place from the beginning. For all the good it’ll do. There’s a lot of groundwork to lay before we go after this thing, though. We need a profile. We have to figure out what exactly you did to throw it of its game. But before that, you’re probably confused. That man—”

“It’s okay,” Eddie said. “Really.”

Roxanne held the lacquered cherry wood box carefully, turning it over and running her fingers along its smooth surface.

“I was in New Mexico,” she said. “Before. You know, it was supposed to be a cakewalk. I was just consulting. In and out in a month.” She swallowed hard, unable to look at the Losers. “It didn’t go well.”

“So you’re here.”

She turned around, still clutching the box in her hand.
“I can’t stop. If I stop, I’ll feel it. I can’t keep—” she shook her head angrily, eyes shimmering “—I have to work. So long as I can just keep myself a hair ahead of it, I’ll be all right. Stick and move, my dad used to say. Stick and move.”

“I get it,” Richie said, and he meant it. “We’re glad to have you. You don’t owe us an explanation. You said we needed a profile. What can we do to help you get it?”

Roxanne cleared her throat, shaking away the cobwebs. “Okay. The first thing we have to look at is victimology. Eddie, you said your mother still lives in town?”

“Yeah,” Eddie stammered. “I—I haven’t—I’d rather not—”

“You don’t have to talk to her,” Roxanne said decisively. She rose, half-smoked joint in her hand, and turned to the Losers. “In fact, I’d rather you didn’t. But I think she’s our best path to the evil at the heart of this town. I’m going to sweat her. Find out what’s the matter with her. That’ll tell me what’s the matter with this town. But I won’t do it without your say-so. So. Say-so?” She looked at Eddie inquisitively. Richie reached down and, unbeknownst to the others, squeezed Eddie’s hand reassuringly. He looked up and saw Eddie smile the small, private smile that had always been reserved just for Richie.

“So,” Eddie said confidently.

Roxanne, who had missed nothing, threw the joint to the ground and stomped on it, then looked up at Michelle and grinned.

“He said so,” she said.
Richie woke up to a soft rapping on his hotel room door. Glancing over at the clock radio on his bedside, he realized it was just after midnight. He got up and opened the door to see Eddie standing outside the door. He was wearing only a soft white v-neck and a pair of purple silk pajama pants. His feet were bare and his hair was curly. He looked so utterly beautiful that Richie couldn’t breathe for a second.

“Can I come in?”

Richie nodded, speechless. “Thanks. Richie, I need something from you.”

“Shoot,” Richie managed.

“You want to leave, don’t you?” Eddie asked, arms crossed across his chest.

“Yes,” Richie admitted. “I want to get out. I want to get you out of here before you have to have anything to do with that rancid bitch who raised you.”

“You can’t leave me, Richie,” Eddie whimpered. “Please.”

“I won’t,” Richie protested. “You know I’d never do that.”

Eddie wrapped his arms around Richie, pressing his face into Richie’s neck. Before he knew it, Eddie was kissing his neck and cheek up to his mouth.

“Don’t leave me, Richie, please don’t leave me…”

Eddie’s hands slipped down to reach into his waistband.

“No, no. Stop. Eds, we have to stop.”

“Why, Richie?” Eddie asked. His long fingers were playing with Richie’s waistband, stroking the skin of his belly. He was gorgeous and sexy and everything that Richie had ever wanted.

But.
“Eddie, you’re doing this because you want to keep me here. And I will. I’ll stay. But if we’re going to do...something, it has to be because you want to. I can’t—I won’t—take advantage of you. I won’t leave you. You never have to worry about me leaving you.”

Eddie was silent. He wasn’t even breathing.

Oh God. This isn’t real, is it?

“Oh, Richie,” a familiar voice growled. “You just had to look my gift horse in the mouth, didn’t you?”

Eddie, silent now, peeled himself off Richie and sort of shivered. His form molted a bit and then he was on the ground, hands tied behind his back, blindfolded.

“Hello?” he asked, his voice quavering in the trademark Eddie way that signified that he was scared but trying to be brave. “Richie? Anyone?”


“Richie! Please, I need help! Richie, are you there?”

Richie couldn’t move as Pennywise advanced on Eddie. Every fiber of his body screamed at him to launch himself forwards and tear Pennywise apart, but he was just frozen. Pennywise put a hand on Eddie’s face, running a thumb over his lips.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Richie hissed.

“Have him, Richie,” Pennywise crooned. “You know you want to. Put him on his back and fuck him raw.” One gloved hand pulled up Eddie’s shirt, revealing his pale stomach and two deep pink, pebbled nipples. “Sure, he’ll fight you at first, but after you toss off inside him the first time, it’ll take the fight right out of him. You can pretend you love him, that you want to get married, adopt a little dog, but all that’s just a workaround. I know what’s inside you. Why have him in your marriage bed when you could just chain him naked in your basement, keep him cuffed to your bed, a sweet, tight little toy to pump your come into? You’re no LOVER, Richie. I know what you want.”

“Richie, help me!” Eddie shrieked.

Richie sobbed, helpless.

“Well, fine!” Pennywise shrieked, cackling. “If you don’t want him, then I’ll have him!”

“Richie!” Eddie screamed. “Richie, WAKE UP!”
Richie came back slow. The horrific hallucination faded to black, and then he the world swam into focus. His head was pillowed in someone’s lap, and someone was gently smacking his cheeks. A high-pitched whine filled his ears. Is that the smoke alarm? Richie thought. Then he took a breath and the noise stopped. Oops.

“Richie,” someone sobbed above him. “Richie, please wake up!” A tear slipped down and plinked against his glasses. Another quickly followed it, impacting against his lips.

That voice, Richie thought. “Eds?” he croaked.

Eddie wailed, bringing his head down to press his lips against Richie’s forehead.

“Oh, God, Rich,” he moaned. “I thought you were—” He wailed.

Roxanne rushed downstairs, turning the corner fast. She was wearing a too-big Opus for President t-shirt over some mid-calf yoga pants and black flats. Her beat-up brown leather bag was slung over her shoulder.

“Richie’s sick!” Eddie bawled. “What TOOK you so long?”

“Spaghetti, it’s okay,” Richie said wearily.

Roxanne knelt down, pulling a pen light from her bag. He remembered her poorly-healed breaks, and cringed at the crunching-gravel sound of her hip joint. She shone the light in Richie’s eyes. He winced and looked away.

“Follow my finger,” she instructed.

“He could’ve had a seizure or a stroke,” Eddie told her. “Are you checking for a seizure or a stroke?”

“It’s not a seizure,” Roxanne said. “Richie, you had a panic attack. I need you to try to slow down your breathing. In for five, hold for two, out for five.”

Eddie cupped Richie’s forehead in one cool hand. Unlike in his dream, he was just wearing a pair of blue boxers and a Pussy Riot t-shirt. He looked exhausted and terrified. Richie had never loved him more than he did in that moment. He felt his bones creak with the weight of that love.

“I’m taking him to the hospital,” Eddie said.

“Eds, I just want to stay here, go back to bed.”

“You could be having a neurological event. We need to get you evaluated—”

“Richie, you’re gonna be all right. There’s no need to go to the E.R. I know you probably feel a little weak and shaky, but if you watch your breathing and try to focus on the sound of my voice, you’ll be okay very soon. I know it felt like you’re dying, and Eddie, I know it looks scary, but there’s no physical danger.”

Eddie took a shaky breath and burst into tears. Richie struggled to sit up and wrapped his arms around Eddie.

“I’m okay, Spaghetti. Don’t worry your pretty little head about your ol’ pal Richie.”

“You should get some sleep,” Roxanne said. “Both of you.” She helped Richie up and patted him on the back. He began to shuffle off to his room, realizing that Eddie was following him.

“Eddie, what—”

“I’m coming with you,” he said shakily.

“Eds, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Richie said dully.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Eddie said stubbornly. “I’m not going anywhere. I nuh-nuh-need to know you’re okay.” His voice broke, and he screwed his eyes shut, like he was in great pain.

“Eddie—”

“You really scared me, you know!” Eddie snapped. When he looked up, Richie saw tears running down his cheeks. “What the hell happened? What did you see?”

“It was IT,” Richie sighed. “Scared the shit out of me.”

“I came to see you,” Eddie whispered. “I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to see if you were up, too. But you were talking in your sleep. Then you just started s-screaming.” He hunched over, rubbing his arms. “It was horrible.”

“I’m sorry, Eds.”

They entered the room in silence.

“I heard what you said, Richie,” Eddie said quietly. “IT made you think you were talking to me.” Richie’s heart sank.

“God. Eds, I—”

Eddie grabbed his hands and held them for a moment. Then he placed them on his hips. Richie’s
heart stuttered as he felt the warmth of Eddie’s skin through the worn fabric of his shirt.

“I thought it was incredibly sweet,” Eddie said. “Before it got scary, I mean. IT wanted you to...you know. But you said no.”

Richie felt like he was going to burst into tears.

“It’s not right, Eddie.”

“What’s not right?”

“I can’t take advantage of you like that.”

Eddie reached out, and after hesitating for a split second, took Richie’s hand, tracing the lines of his palm with fingers that trembled.

“I don’t know what you saw. But right here, right now, you’re not.”

“You don’t want this, Eddie—”

“Who says I don’t?” he asked quietly.

For the first time since arriving in Derry, Richie looked directly into his best friend’s eyes. He’d been avoiding that kind of intimate contact because he was afraid that if he accessed that connection, he’d be lost. But, of course, that was ridiculous, because he’d been lost 32 years ago when he had met Eddie for the first time. His eyes were round and sincere and swollen from crying.

Over me, Richie thought, and he felt ill.

“Eds,” he whispered. “I know you know how I feel, but you can’t—”

“Shut up,” Eddie said evenly.

Richie shut up.

“Don’t presume to tell me how I feel, Richie Tozier. I grew up at the same time and in the same town that you did. I remember what my mother used to say. ‘Stay away from the queers, Eddie.’ ‘Careful who watches you in the showers, Eddie.’ ‘Don’t let strangers talk to you, Eddie, because they might be fags who want to steal you and indoctrinate you and turn you into a fag, too.’ It’s bullshit. I know you, Richie. You’re my best friend. And you’re not a predator. And neither am I.”

He brushed a lock of hair off of Richie’s forehead with gentle hands. “I’m gay. I was gay. I’ll always be gay. For you, yes, but not because of you. I loved you then, and I love you now. And I am a grown-ass adult with a working brain, and that is why you should respect my decision to sleep with you. If, that is, you do want to, and you haven’t just been playing some kind of cruel joke on me.”

Richie’s mouth was dry and his head was empty.

“Eddie,” he whimpered. “God.”

When Eddie kissed him, he thought he was going to burst like a firecracker and die. It was the only thing to do, because Eddie’s lips were soft and warm against his, and he tasted like Scope, and he smelled like bergamot and green tea, but mostly like stale terror-sweat, because this wasn’t an unwholesome hallucination or teasing wet dream, this was real. Richie wondered for a moment (a
moment, of course, was about how long he could sustain a coherent thought in this state) how he could’ve even confused the supplicating, diffident waif of Pennywise’s conjuring with his stubborn, brave, and feral best friend. This Eddie was livelier and more solid, bullying his way into Richie’s mouth while swinging a leg over Richie’s thighs to crouch over his lap.

Richie clapsed Eddie’s back, holding him tightly, reveling in the smooth planes of the muscles of his shoulders and tracing the knobby bumps of his spine. Eddie, however, was more impatient. He grabbed Richie’s wrist, placing his hand under his shirt. Richie blushed at the feel of Eddie’s soft belly under his palm, and summoned the courage to move northwards to rub at his nipple.

“Unh,” Eddie gasped, pulling back. “Hold on.”

For a moment, Richie was terrified that he’d gone too far, but Eddie was only stopping to take off his shirt, hesitating a bit at uncovering himself.

“Don’t be scared,” Richie said, “You’re beautiful.”

Eddie flushed a beautiful dusky rose.

“Shut up,” he said.

“I mean it,” Richie insisted. He traced a hand along Eddie’s calf, up his thigh, stopping to thumb at his happy trail, tweak a nipple, resulting in a muted gasp, finally stopping at cupping his cheek.

“You’re gorgeous, Eds.”

“Come on. I’m sure you’ve picked up dozens of hot guys in clubs all over the country—”

“Gay bars don’t book me,” Richie interrupted. “Only drunk straight guys have bad enough taste to buy the bullshit they feed me. And I ain’t picked up any guys.”

Eddie looked up at him. Lust, hope, and skepticism were mingled on his face. “Really. Never.”

“Nuh-uh. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m fucking closeted as shit. And anyways, I didn’t want any hot guys in clubs.”

“And why not?”

Richie laughed.

“Because they weren’t you, Spaghetti. I thought that was obvious.”

Eddie gasped involuntarily, flushing a deep crimson.

“Rich!”

With renewed fervence, Eddie ripped off Richie’s button-down and undid his belt. He pushed down his pants and wrapped his long fingers around Richie’s cock. Richie was as hard as he had ever been. Eddie spat in his hand and started to stroke Richie again, working slowly, thumb occasionally sweeping over the head.

“Oh, honey,” Richie gasped, throwing his head back, thighs tensing. Eddie paused.

“Take off your t-shirt,” he said. “I wanna see you.”

Richie blushed.
“I don’t wanna disappoint you, Eds, I—”

“Shut up,” Eddie said, yanking Richie’s shirt over his head. He was pale and more than a little hairy, yes, a little doughy around the middle, but Eddie’s eyes lit up. He pressed kisses to Richie’s collarbone, chest, and happy trail, spending extra time at the crease of his thigh. Overcome with emotion, Richie grabbed blindly at Eddie’s forearm.

“Come back up here, please. I want to kiss you.”

Eddie climbed up gladly, giving Richie a chance to flip them so that Eddie’s head was against the pillow, framed by Richie’s forearms. Eddie giggled, his soft brown hair spread out on the pillow like a halo. He looked so absolutely beautiful and carefree that Richie wanted nothing more than for them to stay in that moment forever. Eddie opened his big brown eyes, mouth softening into a kind smile. Richie cupped one soft cheek in his hand.

“I always want to remember this,” Richie said. “If I lived a million years, I don’t think I could ever be happier than I am right now.”

Eddie extended a finger, tracing Richie’s smile lines and rubbing his lower lip.

“That sounds like a challenge,” he whispered.

Eddie kissed him, slow and sweet, hands cupping Richie’s face. The other hand slipped down to cup Richie’s ass. “Mmnh,” he whimpered. “What do you want to do to me, Richie?”

Richie couldn’t answer for a moment, because the wording reminded him of the dream and he wasn’t brave, not like Eddie was.

“What do you want to do to me?” he retorted, mouth dry.

Eddie blushed.

“I wanna suck you,” he whispered. “I want you to suck me. I want you to fuck me. I want to sit on your face. Not tonight, because I need to clean up first. I want to fuck you. Not tonight, because you’d need to clean up first. So. I want to suck you. Can I?”

“Yes,” Richie whimpered. “Fuck, yes. Where do you want—”

“Sit on the edge of the bed,” Eddie instructed.

“Bossy,” Richie teased. “Do you have—”

“No condom,” Eddie said. “I trust you.”

“Fuck,” Richie whimpered. Eddie was kneeling in front of him, miles of unmarked, unblemished, olive skin on display. His hair was mussed, his pink lips wet and swollen, sloe eyes hooded and hazy with lust. His cock was long and slender, wickedly curved, a mouthwatering watermelon-pink. Richie’s cock was thicker, webbed with blue veins, skin soft as velvet. The head was an angry purple, dripping precum and throbbing at Eddie’s gentle touches.

“You’ve got a gorgeous dick, Richie,” Eddie said. Richie blushed, opening his mouth to deny it, but he broke off when Eddie wrapped his lips around the very tip of Richie’s cock. His tongue flicked out to dig into Richie’s slit, making his hips jerk. He opened his mouth wider, taking Richie in deeper, rubbing the part that wasn’t in his mouth. Richie looked down, seeing Eddie’s red, swollen, spit-slicked mouth stretched tight around his cock, and he made an embarrassing noise,
somewhere between a moan and a shriek. He slid a hand into Eddie’s hair, tugging it. He reached down to stroke Eddie’s cheek, rubbing his throat, petting his hair. Eddie moaned, the sound muffled by his cock.

“Please,” Eddie whimpered.

“Eddie,” Richie gasped. He tugged at his hair. “Eddie, I’m gonna come.”

Eddie pulled off and sat back, vigorously stripping Richie’s cock, aiming it at his face, eyes closed, mouth open. “You want me to come on your pretty face?”

“Yes,” he whimpered. “Yes, Richie, do it.” Eddie sucked on two of his fingers and reached behind himself, whimpering as he slipped first one finger into his hole, then a second. Richie couldn’t take it anymore. With a cry of Eddie’s name, he came. The first rope landed on his cheek, the second in his mouth, the third across his chest and chin. Richie reached down and took a glob of come onto his finger and rubbed it onto Eddie’s nipple until it shone. Eddie giggled.

“You freak,” he said fondly.

“I’ll show you a freak,” Richie faux-growled, taking another swipe with his finger and smearing it on Eddie’s nose like sunscreen.

“Rich!” he shrieked, swatting at it. Eddie wiped the smear off his nose with a finger and then, without a hint of self-consciousness, licked it off. “You taste good,” he whispered.

Richie gasped, face cherry-red. “Eddie Kaspbrak, are you into come?”

Eddie blushed too, and froze in the act of sucking his finger clean one more time. “Just yours,” he whispered.

Richie went down on his knees and grabbed Eddie’s chin, pulling him up into a passionate kiss. It began rough and heated, but as it went on, Eddie’s hands came up to cup Richie’s cheeks, and Richie’s arms pulled Eddie close, and it became much more tender. They broke the kiss momentarily, to breathe, and Eddie panted:

“I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Richie slid a hand into Eddie’s hair, petting the side of his face, and laid him down gently on the floor. He kissed down Eddie’s jaw, licking down his neck to suck his nipples, kissing down his belly to nuzzle at his dick. Eddie shivered, giggling softly.

“What? I’m trying to be sexy,” Richie complained.

“It’s nothing. Your stubble tickles. Try your mouth,” Eddie advised.

“Well, you’re a little forwards, aren’t you, Miss? On our first date, no less!”

“If you don’t touch my dick right now I swear to God I will fucking thump you.”

Richie stroked Eddie’s dick leisurely, gazing studying it closely. It was so immaculate it could’ve been a sex toy, pink and flushed. Richie’s mouth watered and he ached to taste him. So he did. Eddie cried out, back arched in a beautiful curve. Richie covered every inch of the sensitive head with his tongue, lapping up Eddie’s precome with every stroke. Above him, Eddie was making small, shocked gasps, punctuated by the occasional cry of pleasure. The salty liquid kept flowing into his mouth, making his lips sticky.
“God, you’re leaking,” Richie whispered hoarsely, voice a little rough. “You’re getting wet like a
girl.”

“Richie,” Eddie said softly. He reached down, smoothing down Richie’s curls. “I love you.”

Richie, of course, chose that moment to try to take Eddie into his throat. He gagged, and the
resulting pressure pushed Eddie over the edge. Richie rolled off him, gagging a lung up.

“Are you all right?” Eddie gasped. “Jesus, Rich, I’m sorry—”

Richie waved him off, still coughing a little. “Just went down the wrong pipe, Eds. Nothing to
‘pologize for.”

“Hmm,” Eddie mused, mouth curled in a mirthful smile. “You, Richie Tozier, are truly a sex god.”

Richie stood up, knees popping, and scooped Eddie up, carrying him bridal-style to the bed. He
laid him down against the pillows and crouched down next to him. After a brief hesitation, he gave

“Much. How about you?”

“Better than I have in years;” Eddie admitted. He stretched, the buttons of his spine popping out in
sequence.

“Your wife never made you feel like that?” Richie asked, immediately regretting it. He could’ve
slapped himself, but he couldn’t help it—the words had just slipped out of him, the old jealousy
coming back just as easy as breathing, the way his blood had boiled whenever someone else had
touched Eddie, or God forbid that horrible freak Bowers—

“No,” Eddie said softly. “We’ve only had sex twice. Both times were years ago. It was miserable.”

Richie reached for his hand, and Eddie took it gratefully. “I’m sorry, Richie. I really am. It
should’ve been you. It should’ve been us.” He started to weep. “Richie, God, Rich, we’ve lost so
much time.”

Eddie wept, and Richie held him. There was nothing he could say to make the pain go away, or to
lessen the loss. He could just make sure Eddie felt his presence, knew that he wasn’t going
anywhere.

“It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Eddie;
And this maiden he lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me,” Richie recited, pressing his lips to Eddie’s temple.

“You’re throwing off the meter,” Eddie complained, his voice muffled by Richie’s chest. Richie
smiled a tiny, private smile and continued.

“I was a child and he was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my darling Eddie—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted him and me.”
And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
“A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Eddie;
So that his highborn kinsmen came
And bore him away from me,
To shut him up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.”

“She’s hardly highborn,” Eddie grumped, “but she said you were a bad influence. And she was right.”

“The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying him and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling my beautiful Eddie.”

Richie’s voice shook for a moment. He was changing the words, he knew Eddie knew, but here, in this dangerous town, in this dangerous time, he couldn’t speak the word in relation to Eddie.

“But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beamed, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Eddie;
And the stars never rose, but I felt the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Eddie…”

A soft snore came from Eddie. He’d fallen plumb asleep on Richie’s chest. Richie picked him up gently, gathering him to his chest, and slipped him under the covers. Richie went to pull back slightly, give Eddie a little space, but Eddie followed him, pressing his face into Richie’s chest, snuffling wetly against his collarbone, fingers curled against his pecs. Richie promised himself that he’d stay up all night, that he wouldn’t waste a second of this, finally being able to hold Eddie, but the soft, wet sounds of Eddie breathing and the warmth of his compact little body lulled him to sleep within minutes.
Richie fidgeted behind the two-way mirror. “Are you sure Eddie wants me here?”

Michelle whipped out her stylus, fidgeted, and started to write.

“He asked for you specifically. Are you worried about what you might hear?”

“Yeah, maybe a little. I tried to protect him, Michelle, honest. From her, from Bowers, from everybody. I know it didn’t work, but I guess I’m just scared of seeing how miserably I failed.”

Michelle jerked her head at the door.

“Go get a cup of coffee, Richie. Take a breath. Take the manic energy down a couple notches. You’re supposed to be a calming presence. Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

Richie nodded and jogged out the door, almost bumping into Eddie.

“Hold tight, Eds, I’ll be right back. You want coffee?”

“Oh, sure. Cream and sugar, Ritch, and don’t call me that!” The last bit was shouted at Richie’s receding back.

Michelle snickered. “That’s always how it is, isn’t it?”

“Wh-whaddaya mean?”

“We’re the ones that sit and listen, aren’t we?”

“Sit and listen?”

“I could listen to her talk all day, you know. Jokes, riddles, stories, silly things, serious things, non sequiturs, poems…”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Eddie muttered, but his blush proved that he was lying.

“After a hard day, all I want to do is sit at home and listen to her, the one person I who really knows me, what I am, what I need, what I want, what I’m capable of. Nobody else. Just her.”

Michelle paused. “People think I’m stupid, you know.”

“Oh, no. That’s not—”

“It’s okay. Really. I don’t care. I can’t talk, so people think I’m stupid. They’ve thought it all my
life. But it doesn’t matter. Because she knows I’m not. She knows I’m smart. And he knows you’re strong.”

“Thank you,” Eddie whispered.

“One cup of melted coffee ice cream, coming right up,” Richie interrupted, pushing a cup of taupe liquid into Eddie’s hand.

“Sweartagod, Rich, just because I don’t like for it to taste like engine degreaser—”

Michelle tapped their shoulders and nodded at the mirror.

“Mrs. Kaspbrak,” Roxanne said from inside the room. “Have a seat.”

Sonia Kaspbrak was still alive, and she was still evil. Richie was shocked at the irrational surge of hatred he felt at the sight of her, how quickly the loathing flooded back. It was a special brand of ire he felt, reserved only for those who hurt his Eds.

“I hope you’ve got a good reason for having a police officer break up my bridge club,” Sonia snapped. “I was absolutely humiliated.”

Roxanne didn’t look up from the file. “Uh-huh. I’ve got some questions about your son.”

“What do you want to know about Eddie?”

“I want to know how long he’s been ill.”

“Oh, all his life,” Sonia said smugly. “He was a very ill baby. Very needy.” She went on, but Eddie and Richie weren’t paying attention. Instead, they were listening to Michelle explain the rules of the game.

“This is going to be interesting,” she signed. “Roxanne got her start by working for Red Onion supermax prison doing interviews with violent offenders and risk assessments. An interview is a chess match, and Roxanne is Gary Kasparov. She’s always six steps ahead.”

“You told me he was a severe asthmatic, and that he had to carry a rescue inhaler at all times,” Roxanne said, “but I can’t find any medical records to back that up. Who diagnosed him?”

“Oh, things weren’t like that back in the day. Doctors trusted mothers. I knew what my baby needed.”

“Sure,” Roxanne said. “And you filled that prescription at Mr. Carr’s drugstore, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I was trying to track him down the other day. Did you know he moved to Maryland in 1988?”

“I knew he left.”

“Imagine my surprise when I found that he’d been incarcerated in 1992 in the Brockbridge Correctional Center in Jessup for raping a ten year old boy.”

Eddie’s grip on Richie’s hand became so tight he could feel his bones creak. Richie pulled him closer, pressing their bodies together from shoulder to calf. “Imagine my further surprise,” she continued, “when he told my colleague that you’d asked him to doctor up a placebo to convince
your son he was ill. Imagine my even further surprise when my colleague told him he was full of shit, that he wouldn’t commit a crime like that for no payoff, and he admitted that you’d bought him off with pornographic images of your own child that you took after putting ground-up Quaaludes in his chocolate milk.”

The blood drained from Eddie’s face, and he buried his head in Richie’s chest. Richie reached up, one hand cupping the back of his head, pressing him close, fingers tangled in his hair, and the other still entwined with Eddie’s shaking fingers.

“You don’t have to stay,” Michelle signed.

“No,” Eddie whispered. “I do.”

“He’s a liar,” Sonia said. Her face was the color of a heart attack.

“Yeah, I thought so,” Roxanne said. “But then he gave us the address of his storage unit, and we found this.” She dealt out a series of Polaroids, leaving them on the table in front of Sonia. Richie felt ill with rage. Roxanne and Sonia sat in silence for a moment, before Roxanne broke it.

“You have two seconds to improve my mood,” Roxanne said.

“I don’t believe this,” Sonia cried, chest heaving. “You’d believe some degenerate over me? I am a mother! I would never do anything to hurt my child!”

“What about Richie Tozier?” Roxanne asked. “They were best friends, right? Is it possible that he knew about Carr?”

“He was a horrible influence,” Sonia said, awfully sanctimonious.

Eddie made a small sound, something like “ouagh’! or “whoof!” Richie, despite the extremity of loathing he found himself in, managed a small smile and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

“I wouldn’t have put it past him to have known,” Sonia continued. “He wasn’t right. I always thought he might’ve been a queer.”

“But your son loved him,” Roxanne pressed.

Sonia bristled. “They were in the same friend group.”

“Well, they spent all their free time together, bought each other ice cream and milkshakes, shared comic books…”

“I don’t like what you’re implying.”

“What, that your son was in love with his best friend?”

“In love wi—how dare—my son was not a faggot!”

Roxanne leaned forwards, eyes narrowed.

“Why was Richie Tozier such a threat to you, Sonia? It’s not normal for a mother to be jealous of her child’s friends. Were you afraid that your son loved him more than he loved you? Well, he did. Eddie doesn’t see you anymore, but he still sees Richie. Hell, he more-than-sees him. This is your last chance to come clean with me before you end up in gen pop of a women’s prison, and we’ll see how you like it when your cellmate more-than-sees you. Because, you know, Carr told us something else. He told my colleague that you tried to blackmail him. That you said you’d finger
him for a perv unless you did what you wanted. Which was to run over Richie Tozier with his car.”

“Oh my God,” Eddie gasped. “Oh God. Oh jeez, oh my God, Richie, Richie, no…”

“You conspired to have a thirteen year old child murdered for being friends with your son,” Roxanne snarled. “They have words for what’s wrong with you—borderline, narcissistic, fictitious disordered, but frankly, I’ve interviewed serial rapists that cut a more sympathetic figure. You may be outside the statute of limitations, but I swear to Christ that I will find a way to lock you up if it’s the last thing I do. Now listen to me, Mrs. Kaspbrak. I know that you abused your son medically, emotionally, and mentally. What I want to know is if the abuse ever became sexual.”

Eddie trembled. Richie held him tighter. Michelle grabbed his arm, a reassuring, warning weight.

Right, Richie thought. Calming presence. Yeah right.

“What kind of question is that?” Sonia asked tremulously.

“The kind I already know the answer to,” Roxanne answered.

“I’m leaving,” Sonia hissed.

“Fine. I can’t hold you. Just know that there ain’t nowhere you can go that I can’t find you.”

She got up, and Sonia got up, and as Sonia went out the back door, Roxanne stood at the table, breathing hard. Her face was a mask, and her eyes burned with more than mortal ire. Her red blouse was partially pulled out of her khaki slacks. When she opened the door and saw Richie and Eddie, she was clearly taken aback.

“They’re not supposed to be here,” she hissed. “All that—Chelle—I just outed a sexual abuse victim!”

“He insisted, Rosie, I—”

“No,” Eddie said, sniffling. “She’s right. I had to hear this. I wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Did you—” She gestured at Richie. “I mean, I—”

“No, it’s okay. I just need a little—I need a little time.”

He walked out, hunched over, arms crossed across his stomach as if he was cold or fending off a blow. Roxanne tossed her hands in the air, face apprehensive.

“Go after him, Chelle,” she said. “This is your mess.”
Michelle followed Eddie at a distance. She wasn’t too afraid of Roxanne holding a grudge. She’d felt sandbagged, but she’d be all right. There were too many secrets in this town, she thought. Eddie had wanted to get everything out in the open. That’s what he’d said. Some of that shit they hadn’t seen coming, but better to air it out than to let it fester. When he climbed the middle school, she waited ten minutes before following him. She climbed the fire escape and then the ladder. When she finally got to the top, Eddie was sitting on his knees on the edge, looking out over the town and the woods, which were starting to turn red and brown. A cool wind was blowing the bruised-looking clouds across the sky. Night was falling. His phone was ringing, but it wasn’t his wife. Richie’s name kept flashing across the screen. Michelle sat down next to him, legs crossed.

“You gonna get that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, what am I going to tell him? He’s better off not knowing the mess my life has become. I don’t want him to worry about what’s happened to me. He doesn’t have to be a part of this, you know? I don’t think he should have to be. He doesn’t need this. He doesn’t need me.”

“I was the one who found her, you know.”

Eddie turned to look her in the eye.

“What are you talking about?”

“She didn’t turn up for our family dinner, so I went looking for her. When your wife works hunting down serial killers, you get paranoid. Her boss said she’d gone to see her old advisor, so I drove to Baltimore. I was pulling up to his house when I saw a dark shape moving on the road. I thought it was a wounded deer, so I stopped. It was her.”

Eddie was silent.

“She was dragging herself across the road. She couldn’t move her legs, but she was up on her elbows. I could see the blood trail shining in the moonlight. I had to pick her up and put her in the car. By the time I got her to Hopkins, she was so deep in shock I thought she was dead. It was three days before she woke up. Three days of bone marrow in the bloodstream, emergency surgeries, blood transfusions, sleepless nights. And that wasn’t the only time, either. Once she got caught in a mass breakout attempt at the Baltimore Asylum for the Criminally Insane, and they activated the electric floors. The skin on the palms of her hands and her knees just melted and sloughed off. She once almost got a faceful of shrapnel from an explosion.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Eddie asked quietly.
“Because every single one of those moments where I feared for her life, when I felt everything slipping away from me was still infinitely better than being in the closet. Love is pain, Eddie. You can’t open yourself up to one while blocking out the other. If you won’t take that risk for your own sake, take it for his. I’m telling you, Eddie, it’s not too late to wake up.”

Eddie looked out at the town where he had been born and where he had fallen in love.

“I feel like I have. Woken up, I mean. Coming back here was like waking up from a deep sleep. It’s going to sound horrible, because of the circumstances, but this...this is like a bright new morning. A new chance. I feel like a kid again.” He turned back to Michelle, eyes shining with tears. “I’d given up on fun. How sad is that? I’d forgotten how to have fun. But with Richie, everything’s so easy. And that’s what I’m scared of. It would be so easy to finally give myself what I want. But what if that’s selfish? I can be selfish about everything else in my life, but not about him.”

“Selfish is a word I’d never use to describe you. All this time, you’ve been living your life for someone else.”

“I know, I know. Now it’s time to live it for me.”

“Not yet,” she signed. “You don’t know what you want. And that’s fine. That’s what the closet does to you. Live it for Richie. He’s got your best interests at heart. Sometimes, when you’re going through a difficult period, you lose sight of the light at the end of the tunnel. But the people who love you—who really love you, I mean—always see it. So don’t trust yourself. Trust them.”

“I was out, Michelle,” Eddie admitted. “And then I married Myra. Roxanne said it was about the closet, but what if it’s just about me?”

“There’s a Sylvia Plath poem,” Michelle said. “Do you know it?”

“‘Not God but a swastika, so black no sky could squeak through. Every woman adores a Facist, the boot in the face, the brute heart of a brute like you.’”

She nodded. “That’s the one. But that’s not the right stanza.”

“At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.
But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look
And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.’”

He sighed.

“The black telephone’s off at the root,” Michelle finished. “The voices just can’t worm through. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” She paused. “It can be over. You don’t have to keep making the same mistakes. There’s no shame in turning back if you’ve gone down the wrong road.”

“I’m forty years old,” Eddie said. “How far d’you think I’ll get down the right one?”
Michelle didn’t answer. Instead, she just looked up at the sky. The clouds, a bruised, somber mass of indigo and violet cotton batting, arched over them like a vaulted ceiling. They were like a stormy mass of condensation pressing against the lid of this pressure-cooker of a town.

“Just breathe,” Michelle signed. “Just be here. Feel the way you feel. Are you happy?”

“Yes.” His answer was almost instantaneous. “Happier than I’ve been in twenty-seven years.”

“So be happy. You can deal with your wife in all due time. Everything stays, Eddie. You have time. You don’t have to understand what’s going on inside you. Don’t feel that you have to have everything sorted before being part of a couple. That’s what relationships are for: figuring things out together.”

“They say you have to love yourself before you can love someone else,” Eddie said. “Bullshit. I have never, ever loved myself. But him.” He shook his head. “Oh, God, him. I loved him so much that I forgot what hating myself felt like. Sometimes I wonder if he could see me, feel me, all those years. What must he think of me now, after learning that all this shit?”

“Of you? He thinks the world of you, Eddie. What must he feel? Outraged on your behalf, most likely.”

“The world of me, huh?” Eddie mused. “I can’t imagine why.” He thought of Richie, who had tolerated every injustice life had thrown his way with relative equanimity, from beatings from Bowers to his parents’ icy disapproval and refusal to even attempt to understand him, but who had thrown a fit visible from space when Bowers (or Pennywise, for that matter) had deigned to even breathe in his direction.

Michelle gave him a sad smile.

“I see the way she looks at me, and it used to scare me, because I knew she was wrong about me. I wasn’t what she thought I was. But now I see it for what it is: a challenge. I try every day to be the woman she thinks I already am.” She turned, the night winds blowing her ponytail out behind her and undulating a few rogue strands against her cheeks. “Roxanne gave me a strategy that she used back when she was an emergency room doctor doing critical care. Something goes wrong, and you open the gates, and let yourself feel the fear, panic, freeze. You count to five, letting the fear in, and you close the gates and go to work. So take some time. Here. With me. Panic. Then come back, and be brave, and take what you want.”

“You ever feel like the rest of your life is about to start?”

Michelle smiled. “A bridge, a roof, the third floor are not high places. Icarus would know; a mountain isn’t far to fall when you’ve fallen in love.”

They sat for a while in silence, watching the sky toil and trouble, until, shade by shade, night fell.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the hiatus--school has been BANANAS lately, and also I was in Shenandoah National Park. T-2 chapters until some big league smut, so be warned.
“Low hangs the moon, it rose late,  
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.  
O madly the sea pushes upon the land,  
With love, with love.  
O night! Do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?  
What is that little black thing I see there in the white?”  
— Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking.”

Roxanne sat on the interview table and stared off into space. Around her, Richie wore grooves in the floor, pacing in circles, spitting profanities under his breath. After one particularly fervent string of obscenities, Roxanne snapped upright, placing the balls of her feet on the floor and wiggling, with some difficulty, off the table.

“Sit down,” she snapped. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Sit down. Sit down? Sit down!”

Roxanne opened her mouth, but Richie ran roughshod over her, spitting out half-formed thoughts, double-quick.

“I was there, Roxanne. I was there, and I didn’t do SHIT! I, I, I should’ve known. I knew she was paranoid, but I didn’t know she was LYING, all right? I shouldn’t have just SAT there while she was making him think he was sick! Much less—God—I didn’t know about Carr, I SWEAR—”

Roxanne didn’t move or respond. She just followed Richie with her eyes, watching him bounce off the walls. After five minutes of listening to him ramble, she finally cut in, voice low and ringing, like a struck iron bell.

“Yeah, but it’s not about you, is it?”

Richie was so stunned that he stopped talking, stopped moving, even stopped thinking. “I mean, when you get down to it, it’s really got nothing to do with you. You’re not the victim here, so stop feeling guilty and get ready to be fucking supportive instead of making him do emotional labor for you. I’m just telling you: you’ve got to put yourself aside. Let go of that guilt, because it’s only going to get in the way.”

“I should’ve—”

“Yeah, but you were just a child yourself, Richie! You didn’t have options. You did what you could, and you made a goddamn difference, and that’s the end of it.”

“The end of it?!?”

“Yeah, the end of it! Look, when my wife was fifteen, her grandmother died, and she was adopted by a couple of piece-of-shit evangelicals, and I’ll always regret that I didn’t tell my dad that we needed to take her in. But I don’t bring it up every goddamn day and make her reassure me while
reminding her about a shit thing that happened, because that’s selfish!” She held up a hand to forestall his protest. “Don’t think I’m not sympathetic, because I am. But I’m coming down hard on you because I know that you don’t want to make any mistakes with him, because this is it for you, right?”

Richie nodded. “The way I love him...it took more than I could imagine, even now. And hell, I mean, it feels like I’m going out of my head. I’m...sick for him.”

“I know,” Roxanne said. “I know. Hell, being in love, ain’t nothing harder. Makes you into a junkie, strung out, chasing the high of their smile, their laughter, their attention. It makes you panic, makes you vain, makes you primitive and sick inside. Shit, man, tied up and beaten, spat out and eaten, don’t think I don’t get it. But you save that shit for the bedroom, and when it’s crunch time, you put that aside and be supportive. All right? Now, remember. Be a calming presence.”

“See, I’m not good at that! I am a...nervous person, okay? It’s hard for me to—”

“Richie, I’m going to tell you something, and I say this with the greatest affection: I don’t give a shit. Figure it out. Tighten it up. And do it on the fly. I don’t want to scare you, but this could be do or die. Oh shit—here they come. Be—”

Eddie walked into the room, followed by Michelle. Richie was shocked to see that he was walking jauntily, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He smiled and nodded at Roxanne, who, confused, inclined her head at him in return. Eddie walked right up to Richie, and, without hesitating, grabbed him by the neck and pulled him down into a deep kiss. Richie’s eyes widened, and he was stiff and confused for a moment, but quickly decided that he didn’t have the space to be befuddled and horny at the same time. One of Eddie’s hands clasped Richie’s cheek, and Richie grabbed him by the waist and pulled him closer. Eddie pulled back, cheeks rosy, mouth swollen and slick, and stood on his tiptoes to whisper in Richie’s ear.

“My room. Ten minutes. I want to fuck the shit out of you, Richie Tozier. I’m through waiting. Are you okay with that?”

Richie gasped, sputtered, and finally managed a “Shyeah! No, great!”

Eddie smiled, turned on his heel, and left. Richie waited a second, staring blankly, then chased after him. Michelle and Roxanne were left in the interview room. They stood in silence for a second, and then simultaneously burst out into shrieking peals of laughter.

“This is why I didn’t date men,” Roxanne groaned. “Shyeah! No, great!” Motherfucking what? I can’t—”

Michelle, clutching her stomach, raised a hand to wave Roxanne off, trying to silence her before she ruptured something. From her doubled-over position, she raised two hands, placing her fingers together.

“No, I saw,” Roxanne giggled. “When his hands almost reach around your waist, you know the dick’s going to be good.” She snickered. “Or so I’m told. All I know is that from now on, every time you offer me sex, I will always respond with ‘Shyeah! No, great!’”

“Not if you ever want me to offer you sex again, you won’t.”

“Oh, sure. Nice bluff. We both know you’ll get horny and give in long before I will.”

Michelle gave her the finger, but she didn’t deny it. They stood together for a moment more, still giggling softly.
“I didn’t want to bring this up—and thank God I didn’t—but there’s something else. I thought Eddie’s might have been institutionalized, because of some of his regimented behavior, and it turns out I was right. His mother checked him into a residential psych facility in Boston right after his seventeenth birthday.”

“For what?”

“Nothing, probably. He gave me a release to look into his medical records, but there’s no diagnosis anywhere that I can find. Certainly nothing to justify these kinds of treatments. I’ve never once ordered ECT, or Clozaril, much less for the same patient, much less for a patient with no diagnosis. I wanna talk to this guy, Chelle. And before you say it, yes, I know it has nothing to do with the case at hand—”

“Let’s get on the road,” Michelle signed.

“I thought Jack told you to keep me on task,” Roxanne said, reaching for her go bag.

“Jack should’ve sent more men,” Michelle replied.
This is like 96% smut with feelings written by a dyke joint MFA/MA student in the Midwest. Just so you know what you're getting yourself into.

“It frightened him to think what must have gone into the making of her eyes.”
-Edith Wharton, “The Age of Innocence.”

Richie ran into Roxanne upstairs. She was leaving her room, holding her fat brown leather shoulder-bag.

“You’re leaving?” he asked.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” she said.

“Oh, okay, great. Look, can I take your little bottles of lotion if you’re not going to use them?”

“You know what, I’m gonna not give that to you. I have—hold on—here. Take this.” She pulled a half-used tube of lube out of her bag. “Top-shelf. It’s warming.”

“Oh, that’s okay—”

“No, it’s not. I’m a medical professional. It ain’t like in porn, where you ain’t never had sex with a man and you’re using unscented lotion, and you don’t use no fingers first. That’s how you get fuckin’ stuck. Use the lube.”

Richie nodded. Roxanne looked at her watch. “You’ve got two minutes,” she said.

“Is it clingy if I show up 90 seconds early?”

“I don’t know, man. Here. Take 60 seconds and wash your dick.”

“Well, if he smells soap on my dick, is he gonna think that my dick was dirty?”

“And you think that’s worse than stank dick?”

“Oh my God, thirty seconds. What do I do?”

Roxanne looked up and made a snap decision.

“Okay, look. Five inches in, up, and do the left.” She held up two fingers and crooked them.

“You’re gonna want as wide an angle between your backs as possible. If you’re going doggy, you want to lean back as far as possible, get his forehead on the bed. If you’re doing missionary, you
want to be on your knees with him lying as flat as possible, with his legs around your waist or on your shoulders to get the best angle.”

“Wait, hold on. I—”

“Dammit. You’re 45 seconds late. Look, Richie, I can’t go in there with you and give you pointers. All I can tell you is to communicate, be confident, and do everything from a place of love and respect. Sixty seconds. Get in there, tiger!” She hustled down the hallway and out the door.

“Jesus,” Richie gasped. He looked to the left, then to the right, and ran into Eddie’s room, clutching the tube of KY in one sweaty hand.

Eddie was lying on the bed, fully clothed. He even had his shoes on. He lifted his head, cheeks pink, as Richie entered.

“I thought you might not come,” he confessed.

“Of course I came,” Richie whispered. “I’ll always come when you call me.” He meant for it to be sultry, but it came out achingly earnest. Of course, Eddie had always been able to see through his artifice. “Eddie.”

“Yeah?” Eddie got up and crossed over to where Richie was standing.

“It was you, you know. It’s always been you.”

Eddie smiled gently and rose up onto his tiptoes to kiss Richie. It was soft and gentle, and Richie grabbed him, gathering Eddie up into his arms. Eddie climbed Richie like a tree, wrapping his arms around Richie’s neck, pressing their bodies together from knee to chest. When they finally had to break apart to breathe, Eddie barely gave him an inch of space, keeping their noses pressed together, lips brushing, breathing each other’s air. Richie reached up to take hold of Eddie’s chin, tilting it up so that Eddie was looking him in the eyes.

“I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight for the ends of being and ideal grace,” Richie whispered, watching Eddie’s pupils dilate and his eyes soften, before pressing a gentle kiss to those soft pink lips. “I love thee to the level of every day’s most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.” He kissed his neck, feeling Eddie’s pulse thundering under his lips. “I love thee freely, as men strive for right.” Richie dipped Eddie, sucking a kiss on his collarbone. “I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.” The left wrist. “I love thee with the passion put to use in my old griefs, and with childhood’s faith.” The right wrist. “I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints.” The left palm. “I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.”

“God,” Eddie whimpered. Richie was surprised to see tears in his eyes. “I already said I’d fuck you, man, you don’t have to sell me on it. Just…please. I need you.”

Richie picked him up and placed him on the bed. He pulled one foot onto his lap, undoing the laces of his tennis shoe.

“Rich, forget the shoes!” Eddie was fumbling with his belt with shaking hands. “Just—”

“I wanna see you,” Richie said. “All of you.”

“I’ll send you feet pictures later,” Eddie hissed, shoving his pants down to his knees. “I want you now, Richie.”
“Hey, don’t—”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, Richie,” Eddie said. “It doesn’t have to be perfect because this isn’t the last time we’re going to do this.”

Richie hadn’t been aware that he’d been assuming this was his only chance until Eddie said it out loud. His heart sang with gratitude and exaltation, but his mind wasn’t changed. He took Eddie’s hands in his and leaned forward to give him a soft, chaste kiss before pulling away.

“No,” he said. “It won’t be our last time. But it’ll be our first. And I want to do it right.”

Richie could see that Eddie was impatient, but he didn’t protest as Eddie removed his shoes and socks before reaching up to undo his belt. Richie pulled down Eddie’s slacks, revealing inch after inch of tanned, smooth skin overlaying toned, well-defined muscles. His shirt was next. Richie lost his breath at the sight of Eddie’s waist, pretty and slender as a girl’s, and the sinuous arch of his back. Finally, Richie slid his fingers into the waistband of Eddie’s boxer briefs and pulled them off, throwing them in the vicinity of the television. His cock was just as gorgeous as Richie remembered, but Richie was distracted by the plush curve of Eddie’s ass. Perfectly taut and rounded and eminently fuckable, Richie couldn’t stop himself from running his hands over the warm skin of Eddie’s cheeks, wondering about what it would feel like to bury his fingers between them. Or his tongue.

Or my cock, Richie thought, and shivered with a mix of nerves and desire. To watch his cock disappear and reappear between the globes of Eddie’s fantastic ass was beyond anything he could’ve dared to hope for.

They kissed a little more, Richie’s hands firmly clapped onto Eddie’s ass. His fingers were clutching the front of Richie’s shirt, pulling him close. When Richie pulled back, he could see that Eddie was flushed a dusky rose from his cheeks to his clavicles. Eddie leaned in from where he was cradled sweetly in Richie’s arms to whisper breathily in his ear.

“Hurry the fuck up,” he breathed.

Richie undid his shirt and pants fast, almost tripping as he tried to kick them off. Eddie dragged him onto the bed, climbing on top of him and shoving his boxers down and taking hold of his cock.

“I’ve wanted you for so long, Richie,” Eddie said, interrupting himself with a hungry kiss. “I used to keep a bottle of lotion in my nightstand, slip two fingers inside my tight little hole, thinking of you, saying your name—”

“God, who the hell are you?” Richie whimpered. “I don’t remember you being like this!”

“I’m so done with it, Richie. I’m so fucking done with pretending and lying and—and being whoever, they want me to be. I knew what I wanted, but I thought it was wrong, and now I just don’t give a shit. I can’t go back. I can’t go back to faking it. I know what I want. Richie.”

“Yeah?” Richie asked, a little starstruck.

“I love you,” he said. He picked up the lube and smirked. “I thought you weren’t fuckin’ guys, Tozier.”

“I borrowed it,” Richie said. “Forget it. I love you more, Eddie. The curves of your lips rewrite history.”

“Oscar Wilde,” Eddie said, a bent to kiss Richie softly. “You’re full of surprises, Richie Tozier. Hold out your hand.”
Richie held out his hand, and Eddie poured some of the lube into his palm. It was slick and tingled in his palm.

“Ooh,” Richie said. “This is the good stuff.”

“Shut up and put your finger in me,” Eddie said.

Richie circled Eddie’s hole with his finger, spreading the lube around, before dipping a finger inside him. The moment he slipped his finger in up to the first joint, Eddie clenched down around him. The feeling of Eddie’s slick insides pulsating around him was indescribable. He almost came on the spot imagining his cock buried in that tight heat. He wiggled his finger around, as if introducing himself to Eddie’s interior muscles. After a few moments, he was thrusting his finger in and out, and Eddie was using his hips to fuck him back. Richie added another finger and began to stretch Eddie in earnest. He remembered Roxanne’s advice—five inches, up, and to the left. He found something—a firm little nodule, something—and rubbed it.

“Oh!” Eddie gasped, throwing his head back. “Richie, don’t stop—”

Richie added another finger, rubbing relentlessly at that little spot with all three fingertips, using his free arm to hold Eddie close. Eddie was on his knees, straddling Richie’s lap, leaning back, draped over Richie’s forearm. His collarbones were popped out, dotted with sweat. Richie leaned forwards to kiss the rivulets away. His eyes were closed, pink mouth open and groaning.

“You’re so sweet,” Richie purred. “C’mere. Let me kiss that pretty mouth.” He could tell that Eddie was coming undone by how desperately he pitched forwards to press his mouth to Richie’s, letting Richie devour him, sucking on his tongue and licking into his mouth.

“Oh, Richie,” he moaned, and Richie’s stomach clenched at how wrecked—and how heartfelt—Eddie’s voice was. “Richie, I’m ready, please, I need you, Richie—”

“You’ll take another,” Richie said darkly, slipping his pinky finger into Eddie, spearing him on four fingers.

“No, please, Richie—please, Richie, fuck me, please—”

Richie contemplated teasing him a little more, withdrawing his fingers, maybe using his mouth, but stopped cold when he saw a tear slip down Eddie’s cheek.

“Eds,” he whispered. “Eds, are you all right?”

Eddie sniffed.

“I’m fine. I’ve just…waited so long. And I love you so much, and you’re being so sweet and kind, and this feels so fucking good, I just…”

“It’s okay,” Richie shushed, sitting up to kiss the tears away. “I know. I know. It’s all right. You’re ready.”

Eddie laughed, blinking his tears away.

“You’re goddamn right. I’ve been ready.”

Richie pulled his fingers out and dove into the nightstand for a condom before Eddie stopped him.

“I told you last time, Rich, I trust you. I want to feel you. I mean, I want you to come in me.”
Eddie’s face was crimson, but his voice didn’t tremble at all.

“Are you serious? You, Eddie Kaspbrak, want me to come in you without a condom?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, biting his lower lip, his face the picture of devilish innocence. “I want you to fill me up, Rich.”

Richie didn’t respond, but Eddie could feel his entire body shudder, and he held him close, hiding a grin in Richie’s bare shoulder. “You know, when we ditch this joint, maybe you buy a plug to put in me after you fuck me raw and fill me up, so that the next morning, when I get up and run errands, go to the grocery store so that I can cook you dinner, pick up your shirts from the dry cleaners, walk around town with your come inside me, so that I never forget who I belong to—”

Eddie felt the head of Richie’s cock pressing against his hole, heard Richie’s ragged breathing, and could imagine the shock-arousal-confusion-desire flickering across his face, and grinned in satisfaction.

“You want that?” Richie asked quietly.

“Hell yes,” Eddie said. He tilted Richie’s face up and pecked his nose. “Fuck me, I sure as fuck do.”

“Oh, sweet little Eddie Kaspbrak,” Richie said, recovering enough to adopt a shit-eating grin. “If only Mrs. K could see you now.”

“Fuck her sideways with a telephone pole,” Eddie snapped. “This isn’t about her. This is about us.”

“Us,” Richie mused as he pressed in. “I like the sound of that.”

The head was barely in before Richie paused, because Eddie was obviously feeling it, and as badly as Richie wanted to feel his tight ass bouncing on his cock, he didn’t want to hurt him. He applied more lube, and Eddie slid down another few inches, hovering just two inches away from sliding home.

“Richie,” Eddie said, not impatient or frustrated, just firm and fond. “I’m ready.”

Richie released the grip he had on Eddie, allowing him to take in the last couple of inches. The apples of his ass slapped against Richie’s thighs, and he whimpered.

“Does it hurt?” Richie asked. “Are you all right?”

“It’s…intense,” Eddie confessed. “It feels really fucking good. Holy shit, Richie, your cock—oh —”

A little flattered by Eddie’s reaction, Richie withdrew maybe an inch and pushed back in. Eddie gasped, head rolled back, and his chest heaved. His hands crept up to Richie’s chest, petting him gently, cupping his face.

“How do I feel?” Eddie whispered. For a moment, Richie couldn’t answer. He wasn’t moving yet, but the clench and release of Eddie’s inner muscles on Richie’s cock was almost too much to bear.

“You’re so tight,” he finally murmured. “You’re so hot and tight, and you’re beautiful, Eds, you’re so fucking pretty, And I, I love you, Eddie, I love you—”

Richie clenched his eyes shut, desperately trying to keep the tears in his eyes from falling, because nothing could be more embarrassing than crying during sex, never mind the only sex he’d ever
wanted to have, never mind sex with Eddie, but it was too late. He could feel a tear slide down his cheek, quickly followed by another, and once he started, he couldn’t stop.

“Hey,” Eddie whispered gently. With steady hands, he removed Richie’s glasses and placed them beside Richie. The large, flesh-colored blur in front of him leaned in close. He was close enough that he couldn’t have leaned so far in without poking himself in the eyes with the frame of Richie’s glasses, but Richie still hated that he couldn’t see him. Eddie’s two hands, smaller than Richie’s and soft as cashmere, cupped his cheeks. A soft kiss on his face forced a quick breath out of him. The kiss was followed by another as Eddie leaned in close and began kissing away his tears, just like Richie had done for him.

“I’m sorry,” Richie groaned. “This must be really sexy. I’m pathetic.”

“Hey,” Eddie cooed. “It’s all right. I cried too, dipshit. I know what you’re feeling, because I’m feeling it, too. Here.” He placed Richie’s glasses back on his face, and holy shit, because Eddie was right there, in his face, on his cock, and he was so achingly gorgeous that Richie felt that he could just die. Eddie’s sweet pink mouth, soft brown eyes, upturned nose, and lovely high cheekbones were seared into his memory in that moment. “I hope that what you’re feeling heals you, Rich, because I never plan on leaving you again. You’re my Trashmouth, Richie. I love you. Now, are you going to fuck me, or do I have to do all the hard work myself?”

Richie grinned, and lunged forwards to claim Eddie’s mouth. He flipped them over so that Eddie’s back was on the bed and picked up one of his legs and placed it on his shoulder. He withdrew a few inches, and then pressed back in slowly.

“Faster,” Eddie moaned.

“You’re so fucking demanding,” Richie scolded. “I’m an old man. I got a bad back.”

“We’re the same age, jackass,” Eddie snapped. “Fuck. Me.”

Richie grinned, pulled back until just the head of his dick was inside Eddie, and then shoved back in until his balls were pressed against the plush swell of Eddie’s ass. Eddie wailed. “Keep going.” His hands reached up to clutch Richie’s hips, holding him close. “Go, go, go!”

Richie had slept with four different women, and he had never felt anything like the clutch of Eddie around him. He was wet and hot, scorching hot, and his hole was opening and closing around his cock, trying to pull him in deeper. The thrill of being inside that tight, beautiful little body was popping along his nerve endings. His excitement was only heightened by the abiding love and respect he felt for his Eddie, Eds, Spaghetti. Eddie’s head was tossed back, whipping back and forth, mouth open and moaning. Richie bent forwards, kissing Eddie’s neck, before leaning in to whisper in his ear.

“How do I feel, Eddie?”

“You f-feel—oh God, Rich—you’re so big—please—oh, I love you, I love you—you’re just fucking me open, holding me down, like you own me—I love you so fucking much—please—oh, Richie…”

“My Eds,” Richie whispered fondly, cupping Eddie’s cheek.

Eddie surprised them both when he came, pushed over the edge by a particularly well-aimed and fervent thrust and Richie’s softly whispered endearment. The clench and release of Eddie’s hole pushed Richie right to the edge, as did Eddie’s sweet nothings.
“Are you sure, sugar?” Richie gasped. He stilled his thrusts, but the tightness of Eddie’s ass kept him struggling to stay on the edge. “I can pull out, Spaghetti—”

“No,” Eddie said. “No, no, no, in me, Richie, Richie, please, in me—”

Richie never, never, never would’ve thought that sweet little Edward B. Kaspbrak would’ve been such a filthy little sex demon, but then again, Eddie had never not been surprising him. From his Eds, Richie expected the unexpected. From kissing his cheek on the bridge, to joining him in the sewers, to pressing their bleeding palms together, allowing Richie’s blood to enter his veins, Eddie had never fit in any of the little boxes everyone else had tried to fit him in. Everyone had underestimated him, everyone had been shocked by him over and over, but Richie knew. Richie knew his Eds.

“Oh, Eddie, Eddie, mine—”

Eddie laughed and tossed his head back, revealing the tempting column of his throat.

“Yes, yours, yours—”

With that breathy response, Richie couldn’t take anymore. He came deep inside Eddie, holding him tight, fingers digging into his waist, as Eddie ground back into him, keeping as close as possible.

“Oh, honey,” Richie gasped. “Sweetheart.”

Eddie just smiled blissfully, reaching up to take Richie’s hand in his and entwining their fingers. Richie pulled out with a grunt and laid down on the pillow next to Eddie, pulling him into his arms. They laid together for a few moments, eyes closed, breathing heavily. “Holy shit,” Richie said.

Eddie chuckled. “You came inside me so deep it’s still in there, Rich.”

Richie groaned. “You tryin’ to fuckin’ kill me, Eds?”

Eddie kissed his neck. “I was going to say that I wanna fuck you next time, but I don’t know if I could give that up. That was unbelievable. You were unbelievable. Don’t let it go to your head, though.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that,” Richie admitted. “I mean, I’m sure you already knew that, but still. I should say it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Eddie said. “Not that I’ve got a huge frame of reference, but. You know. Wow. I always thought having sex with a man for the first time would feel like a defeat, but I’ve never felt better.” He looked up at Richie through his lashes, and Richie’s heart skipped a beat. “Because it’s not some random jagoff fucking my ass, it’s my best friend. I trust you. I’ve always trusted you, even when I didn’t trust myself.”

Richie petted his hair and kissed his temple, and before he even had a chance to tuck them in, Eddie was asleep. Centimeter by centimeter, Richie extricated himself so he could clean himself up. As he reentered the room from the bathroom, he saw Eddie’s small form curled up on top of the covers, snoring softly, and he felt like bursting into tears. The idea that he could’ve been cradling, holding, fucking, and falling asleep and waking up next to that body for damn near a
quarter century was almost too much to bear. But then Eddie reached out, murmuring in his sleep, and he rushed to tuck him in and fold him back into his arms.

“"I couldn't have spoken like this yesterday, because when we've been apart, and I'm looking forward to seeing you, every thought is burnt up in a great flame,"" Richie said quietly. The quote was from The Age of Innocence, one of his Book Club reads with Eddie back in high school, and he still remembered how achingly he’d hoped that Eddie would understand that Wharton’s words were meant for him. “"But then you come; and you're so much more than I remembered, and what I want of you is so much more than an hour or two every now and then, with wastes of thirsty waiting between, that I can sit perfectly still beside you, like this, with that other vision in my mind, just quietly trusting it to come true.”

Eddie was still snoring softly, lips gently brushing Richie’s throat.

“"It has, Eds,"" Richie whispered. “"I am never, ever, ever going to leave you, Eddie, not until you wise up and tell me to get lost and land some young guy with a big dick and a bigger bank account, and even then I’ll still love you.”

“"Rich,"” Eddie said.

Richie stiffened, mortified. “"Huh?’’

“"Shut the fuck up and go to sleep,” Eddie mumbled, and, cranky as his tone was, Richie could feel the shape of a smile against his collarbone as he turned out the lamp on the bedside table, gathered Eddie close, and closed his eyes.
“A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all compulsions meet,
Are recognized and robed as destinies.
And that much can never be obsolete.”
—Phillip Larkin, “Church Going.”

Roxanne was doing 90 on I-95 southbound, and Michelle was covering her eyes and waiting for death. She’d been driving around with Roxanne for thirty-two years and it never got easier. For a law enforcement official, she seemed to take speed limits as less of a rule and more of a challenge. Michelle had once told her that she drove like she was in a video game, and Roxanne hadn’t fucking denied it. Terrified as she was, she couldn’t help but admit that her insanity had gotten them from rural Maine to just outside Boston in under four hours. The GPS spoke up, telling Roxanne to take exit 46 in 500 feet, as she was doing 90 in the far left-hand lane in traffic.

“Fuck me,” she swore, viciously cutting off a woman in a dark Acura and veering across four lanes to make it to the off ramp. Michelle grabbed the handle above the door, clenching her jaw.

In a thirty-four year relationship, almost everything ends up reminding you of a time you’ve had sex. It’s inevitable. Michelle couldn’t listen to Blue Öyster Cult, watch Hell’s Kitchen, or lay hands on those little handles above the car door without getting excited. A smile crossed her face as she remembered being stranded at the top of the Cascades, in a car without gas, at seventeen, with Roxanne’s fingers tucked so far into her cunt that she felt like they might pop out the top of her head. Then she imagined being locked up over it, and her smile faded.

Their good lube, the kind that smelled like vanilla, rosemary, and orange blossom was gone, and had been replaced with a generic bottle of Astroglide. Michelle was no dummy—the moment she’d seen that little bottle in the bag, she’d chuckled and shaken her head. All she could hope was that those two closet-cases were putting it to good use. She certainly hoped that she was going to get lucky over the course of their little excursion. It was the first time Roxanne had been out of her work clothes since Seattle, and the low, square neck of Roxanne’s white blouse and the way her blue pencil skirt clung to her ass and cinched around her waist made her miss the skin her wife showed when not on the job. Michelle was still wearing the gray, pin-striped chinos she’d been wearing in Derry, but she’d shed her button-down, and if she wasn’t mistaken, the tightness of the tank top she wore as an undershirt wasn’t lost on Roxanne either.

They pulled into the parking lot and Roxanne chunked the parking brake into place. It was seven in evening, and dusk was beginning to fall. As Michelle helped Roxanne out of the car, they caught sight of a young man in jeans and a tee shirt waving at them. Roxanne approached him, cane clunking on the asphalt.

“Hey,” he said. He had a thick New York accent. “You work here?”

“No,” she said. “We’re uninvited guests.”

“Me too,” he said. “You know what goes on in there?”
“I got my suspicions.” Roxanne’s working-class accent crept out whenever she got comfortable. Michelle absolutely adored it.

“Hey, me too! I’m a reporter, hopin’ to get some photos, something like that. You wanna help me out?”

“Hell, why not. I was gonna do this myself but seems like you might be a bit more up to the task anyways. Get in, take your pictures, and get out. Meet me at nine in the morning at the Fairfield. Step back, hon.”

Roxanne approached the service entrance the young man had been staking out. She opened her bag and pulled out a hairpin and a scalpel.

“Hey, what’re you—”

Roxanne slipped one end of the bobby pin into the lock, followed by the sharp end of the scalpel. She rotated the bobby pin with scientific precision, listening to it click, until she twisted it with violent jerk of her wrist. The lock gave, and the door swung open.

“There. Don’t go in now. Wait until midnight.”

He nodded.

“Thanks. I’m Nat, by the way.”

“Less I know, the better. If you don’t get caught, come see us at the Fairfield. Room 327.”

***

It wasn’t five minutes before Roxanne had turned the walls of their hotel into an evidence board. She’d plastered the walls with maps, which were covered with red lines marking the sewer system. All the lines converged at the Well House, which Roxanne had circled flamboyantly.

“This is what we know,” she mused.

Michelle giggled, covering her mouth with a hand, because that was a Classic Roxanne Saying, right up there with “yes, no, maybe so” and “forever and a day.” The mouth-covering habit was one of the many holdovers from before she’d lost her voice. She’d been injured in the car accident that had killed her grandmother. She could speak, but not much, and it was very painful, and she seldom did. It was easier to let Roxanne be her voice.

“You know how in Star Wars, you never get any subtitles for what Chewbacca is saying, but you get the idea because of how Han responds to him? That’s kind of how we work,” Roxanne had once told her colleague Will. Michelle had smacked her, but it was true.

While Michelle was sitting on the bed and taking her shoes off, Roxanne pulled out her phone and started dialing. She never went into an interview—official or not—without doing her homework. “You always need something to hold over them,” she’d said. “You have to know something that they don’t know you know. An ace up your sleeve.”

“Louise,” Roxanne said. “It’s Dr. Little, from Hopkins—yeah, I’m at the U. W. now, I like it a lot—sure, sure. How’s D.C? Look, I’m calling to ask if you know a Dr. Harvey Lyndstrom.”

Roxanne turned to face Michelle, listening intently.

If kids are getting hurt at this place, you know, I mean, I’m with the board, so—sure. Okay.”


She hung up the phone.

“Oh, So, it’s not a hospital, and it’s sure as hell not a fuckin’ school. It’s a vanity chop shop for parents who wanna scrape the gay outta their kids. There ain’t no complaints because if the cops bust in, the parents are on the hook too, so nobody opens their mouths. S’like the mafia. Nobody knows nothin’.”

“Someone knows something,” Michelle signed.

“Yeah. Well, I ain’t bringin’ this place up to Eddie till he mentions it to me first. You can’t force shit like that, Chelle.”

“There’ll be others,” Michelle said. “Make a crack, and the trickle turns to a flood.”

Roxanne flopped back on the bed, hands over her eyes.

“God. Dunno why I’m here, Chelle.”

“Probably because after a getting spun a crazy yarn about a killer clown and having Mister Goddamn White appear in front of us, some run-of-the-mill child abuse sounded pretty goddamn simple.”

“Yeah. I guess so. I mean, kill the demon clown, shut down the conversion camp, whatever shall I do first?”

“Well, don’t think too hard about it. We both know you’ll end up doing both.”

“I’ve never killed a fuckin’ monster before. I don’t know. I might not be able to sort this one out. Hell, I couldn’t even sort the last one out, and that—that wasn’t no fuckin’ demon, that was a fuckin’ chemistry teacher, Chelle, a terminally ill high school chemistry teacher—”

“Oh, shut up.” There wasn’t any venom in Chelle’s expression, just a tender and abiding sadness. “That’s what it wanted you to think.”

Roxanne opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, someone was pounding on the door. She looked up, confused. “It definitely hasn’t been four hours yet. Who—”

It was Nat. “I need to talk to you,” he said, before she could ask him what he was doing there. He held up a flash drive.

“Did you come straight here? It’s only six thirty! I told you not to—”

“You need to see this,” he interrupted, pushing in and plugging the flash drive into the hotel TV.

“You ain’t heard of e-mail? You know, I gotta girl in my room, I might be tryin’ ta get laid, ya know—”

“You work for the medical board, right?”

“No, I’m a consultant for the FBI. I’m a member of the medical board in Washington State, but I have a working relationship with the psychiatrists on the other state boards. I don’t have any real
authority here. My plan is to lie my way in, gather some evidence, and bring it to the people who can do something about it.”

“But you can shut him down?” Nat pressed.

Roxanne sighed.

“I’m well-respected in my field. When I talk, people listen.”

“Okay. Look. The first thing I noticed when I got in was that the doors run on a master lock system from the outside. The doors lock at five thirty, and after that, no one gets in, and no one gets out until about seven in the morning.” The image showed a menacing electronic lock on the heavy steel door to a dormitory. “Everything takes place on site. I found an ECT unit in the basement. Lyndstrom is the only medical doctor on site, which means he orders everything. They even have a pharmacy.”

“Which means there’s no accountability.”

“None. Everything is regimented. I found this list of rules on the cafeteria wall.”

1. FOLLOW ALL STAFF INSTRUCTIONS AT ALL TIMES
2. PHONE CALLS ARE LIMITED TO THREE MINUTES
3. ALL LETTERS MUST BE APPROVED BY DR. LYNDSTROM BEFORE BEING POSTED
4. STAFF MEMBERS ARE APPROVED TO AUTHORIZE CHEMICAL AND PHYSICAL RESTRAINTS FOR ANY REASON
5. INAPPROPRIATE CONTACT WITH SAME-SEX PATIENTS, POSESSION OF FORBIDDEN MATERIAL, OR INSUBORDINATION WILL RESULT IN A FULL PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW AND TREATMENT PLAN EVALUATION

“That’s not right,” Nat said. “Is it?”

“No,” Roxanne said. “No, it’s not. All right, look. E-mail this to me, but you should keep the flash drive in case I hit a wall. My cover story will be that I’ve received a research grant to conduct a metanalysis of treatment techniques for adolescents deemed to be at risk of receiving an antisocial personality diagnosis. I gotta be out of here in twenty-four hours, though. I can get the ball rolling, but you’re gonna have to see this through—at least, until I clear this latest case.”

“You were tipped off by someone, weren’t you? Will they go on the record?”


“Fair enough,” Nat said. “Have him give me a call—”

“No,” Roxanne yanked the flash drive out of the TV. “Thanks for your help. Keep in touch.”

“So you’re pushing me out?”

“Yes,” Roxanne said. “Move it.”

***

Dr. Harvey Lyndstrom kept Roxanne and Michelle waiting for almost an hour. Michelle was bouncing her leg, fingers nervously alternating between beating a tattoo on the plastic chair and twisting her earrings. They were an anniversary present from Roxanne: handmade from sterling
silver, beaded with diamonds like tiny stars. Roxanne’s pair, for the same anniversary, bought from
the same Connecticut Avenue jewelry shop, were moonstones and diamond set in gold. Roxanne’s
father liked to joke that their wedding rings had been bought from a Belltown pawn shop, and
they’d been trying to make up for it ever since.

“Miss Little? Doctor Lyndstrom is ready for you.”

“Miss Little,” Michelle tutted. Roxanne rolled her eyes. She’d dressed up a bit, wearing a brown
wool jacket and skirt over a green blouse.

“Doctor Little,” Lyndstrom, said, getting up from his desk to shake Roxanne’s hand. He was old,
maybe sixty-five, with white hair and a toothbrush mustache. He was wearing a white lab coat over
a wrinkled button-down and a navy-blue tie. “To what do I owe the pleasure? I read your most
recent article on de-medicalizing Munchausen by proxy. Very interesting. It seems quite
unorthodox to suggest that ficticious disorders have no compulsive component.”

“Well, I hope I made it clear that the act of inflicting a disease on a child or spouse is indicative of
maladjustment in and of itself, but I contend that the act of medical abuse is more of an impulse
unresisted than an irresistible impulse. A psychopath, for example, understands what they’re doing
is wrong. They just don’t care. According to my research, Munchausen by proxy perpetrators have
a psychopathology that more closely mirrors that of the psychopath than someone with
compulsions or fixations.”

“Hmm,” Lyndstrom said. “Well, I’m sure you know more about it than I do.”

“Perhaps. What is your specialization?”

“I treat maladjustment in adolescents.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here. I received a grant from the APA to study early intervention for
children with conduct disorders likely to receive a diagnosis of an antisocial personality disorder at
eighteen. Nothing so far has proved effective, so I’m traveling to several institutions to see if other
administrators have any new approaches.”

When Roxanne was bullshitting, she had a terrible habit of looking over at Michelle, as if they
were sharing a private joke. It was endearing, of course, and Michelle found it quite flattering, but
it hadn’t taken their kids long to figure it out. Luckily, Dr. Lyndstrom wasn’t wise to Roxanne’s
idiosyncrasies yet. A wiser man might’ve realized that a psychiatrist with over a hundred journal
publications, a dozen books authored, four board certifications, and a doctorate wouldn’t usually
find herself in a unheard-of vanity clinic, and that the Park School had no reputation for treating
the kinds of severe diagnoses she was referencing, but Lyndstrom took the bait hook, line, and
sinker. He wasn’t stupid. In fact, he was smart enough to get away with his behavior for almost
thirty years. But one thing Roxanne had learned very early on was to never underestimate the
fallibility of the egomaniac. Lyndstrom had his own personal fiefdom in the Park School, and far
be it from him to recognize a challenge to his authority.

“Do you have an empty room you could show us?” Roxanne asked.

“Certainly. Right this way.”

The place looked small from the outside, but the building extended quite far back. The lot was big,
and the school had cannibalized the grounds outside to provide more accommodations for patients
over the years. Lyndstrom took them down a long corridor and opened a heavy metal door with a
swipe of a card.
“Feel free to look around. I have a thirty minute appointment coming up, so unfortunately I have to leave for a moment, but I will be back shortly. Let a nurse know if you have any questions.”

He let the door go, and it almost slammed shut on Roxanne’s fingers. Michelle caught it, and heaved it open once more. It was heavy, almost two inches thick, with thick cylindrical bars that were designed to slide into slots in the jamb, locking the door from the outside. They entered quietly.

The room had a stack of books on a shelf above a cheap particle-board desk. It was an Encyclopedia Britannica set, all meticulously dusted and put away in alphabetical order. Michelle opened the dresser, and saw rows of screamingly white shirts, all folded with military precision and lined up in rows.

“Everything’s so neat,” she signed to Roxanne, who was rummaging through the wastepaper basket.

“One neat aspect,” Roxanne replied. “The lives of severely mentally ill people are full of chaos. It’s standard practice in institutions to teach them to exercise control over their surroundings.”

“Yeah? What do you think?”

“I think the world is a chaotic place. You’ll drive yourself crazy trying to set it to rights. The semblance of order in one’s life is a social fiction that some mentally ill people won’t respect. We treat them like this for us, not for them.” Roxanne sighed, tossing an empty Similac bottle back into the trash. “I can count on one hand the number of schizophrenic or psychotic patients I’ve had who say antipsychotics improve their quality of life. We expect them to put up with the side effects because the fact that their reality differs from ours makes us uncomfortable. If you can teach somebody ways to recognize hallucinations when they come, to differentiate them from reality, or to identify irrational thoughts and work on coping skills…I mean, hell. I know what’s wrong with you. I wouldn’t change it. I know what’s wrong with me. I wouldn’t change that. I believe that the way schizophrenic people interact with the world is special, and probably necessary, and it’s definitely something we don’t know enough about. Because of my autism, I see things other people can’t. I think psychotic disorders are the same.” Roxanne’s shoulders, which had been up by her ears, relaxed centimeter by centimeter as Michelle placed a hand on her back. “Of course, there’s no evidence that any of these kids are severely mentally ill. It’s probably a method of control.”

Michelle nodded. “This feels Foucauldian to me. You know, you have a circular room with twelve cells, and in the middle there’s a guard tower. The guard can see into all twelve cells simultaneously, but they can’t see him. In the end, he doesn’t even have to be there. The enemy is within the gates. The guard is in your own head.”

“You’re probably right—hey. I think someone’s next door. Hello—can you hear me?”

There was no answer. Michelle thought of the panopticon, of never knowing when you were being watched, and felt a little ill. Roxanne knelt on the bed, ear to the wall. “As I rode ashore from my schooner close by
A girl on the beach, sir, I chanced to espy,
Her hair it was red, and her bonnet was blue
Her place of abode was in Harbour Lecou.
Oh, boldly I asked her to walk on the sand,
She smiled like an angel and held out her hand
So I buttoned me guernsey and hoved way me chew
In the dark rolling waters of Harbour Lecou.”

Michelle heard rustling in the next room, like someone had scrambled up on the bed to listen.

“My ship she lay anchored far out on the tide
As I strolled along with that maid at my side
I told her I loved her, I said I'll be true,
And I winked at the moon over Harbour Lecou
As we walked on the sands at the close of the day
I thought of my wife who was home in Torbay.
I knew that she'd kill me if she only knew
I was courting this lassie in Harbour Lecou.”

Roxanne’s eyes were closed, her face was serene, and Michelle found herself overcome with a surge of affection so strong she could feel it clawing at her throat. She remembered a young Roxanne singing to her from the Ravenna Overpass while she stood below, or from below her bedroom window. She remembered how she had sung to their kids when they were young. She remembered one particular day, when Marian had had a particularly disastrous day at school, and had refused to talk to anyone, just stormed upstairs and locked her door, and Roxanne had sat outside, singing Indigo Girls songs and old hymns until Marian had finally opened the door and come down for a sandwich.

“As we passed a log cabin that stood on the shore
I met an old comrade I'd sailed with before,
He treated me kindly saying ‘Jack, how are you?
It’s seldom I see you in Harbour Lecou.’
And as I was parting, this maiden in tow
He broke up my party with one single blow:
He said ‘Regards to your missus, and your wee kiddies too:
I remember her well, she's from Harbour Lecou!”’

A little laughter rippled her voice as she delivered the last two lines, but it fit the melody nicely. Michelle could hear breathing on the other side of the wall.

“I looked at this damsel a-standing ’long side.
Her jaw, it just dropped, and her mouth opened wide.
And then like a she-cat upon me she flew,
And I fled from the furies of Harbour Lecou.
So come all you young sailors who walk on the shore,
Beware of old comrades you sailed with before,
Beware of the maidens with the bonnets of blue
And the pretty young damsels of Harbour Lecou.
And the pretty young damsels of Harbour Lecou.”

After she finished, there was a brief silence. Then a voice came.

“Hey. I like your song.”
“Thanks.”

“Are you new here? That’s Jason’s room, and he’s not here anymore.”

“No. I’m with the FBI. What’s your name?”

“Cameron. What’s the FBI doing here?”

“Trying to get this place shut down. Why’re you in here, Cameron?”

“My parents sent me. Are you going to talk to Dr. Lyndstrom?”

“Not if you don’t want me to. I have a friend who was here a long time ago, in the nineties. He said it was a bad place then. Is it a bad place now?”

Silence. Then:

“Yeah. I was—my parents caught me. With by best friend. So they…well. They said that it’d be good for me.”

“It’s not.”

“No. I can’t think straight anymore. I have a hard time remembering. After they send me for the shock treatments, sometimes I can’t even remember my own name. Where I am. It always comes back, but it takes longer each time. I get scared, thinking maybe one day it won’t.”

“It won’t come to that. I’ll do everything I can to stop them, but you have to help me. I saw the Director’s office. Do you know what the code is for the lock on the door? I can pick the lock to the file cabinet and steal the records I need, but I can’t get past the keypad.”

“I know the first two digits are 1-2, but I don’t know the rest. I only saw the nurse punch in the first part.”

“That’s enough. I already know his birthday’s December 16th. Never underestimate the fallibility of the egomaniac.”

“If you say so. These files—what’re they gonna do for me?”

“If they detail malpractice—and I think they will—then they’ll allow me to file a complaint with the board on behalf of my friend. If the board agrees, and I have evidence, Lyndstrom will have to be supervised, and this place’ll be shut down. He might even lose his license.”

“How long will that take?”

“I have a few things to take care of first, but I promise that I’ll move as fast as I can. Once everyone’s safe, I’ll go to the board first thing.”

“Good. You have to—wait. Someone’s coming.”

Roxanne slid off the bed and made herself preoccupied with examining the writing implements on the desk—crayons and felt tip markers.

“Ah,” Lyndstrom said. “We try to get our patients to journal every day, but we make sure they’re not allowed any implements that could be used to self-harm.”

“I see. Have you had any incidents of violence on the premises?”
“Only one, but that was back in 1997.”

Michelle furrowed her brow and tapped Roxanne’s hand.

“What happened?”

“A young man snuck onto the premises to visit a patient. He became…uncooperative when we tried to remove him. After that, we decided to substantially upgrade our security. The…encounter had a terrible influence on our patient. He became uncooperative, defiant, depressed, even suicidal. I know that institutionalization as a model has come under criticism, but that one incident convinced me of the desirability of a safe haven from all the bad influences and distractions the outside world offers.”

“I. See.”

Roxanne’s mask was starting to slip. Michelle knew it was best to get her out of there fast. She gave her hand three staccato taps: Time to go.

“I’m afraid we have an appointment, so we’ll have to leave. I’d be interested to hear what you think after I write up my initial observations. We’ll be in touch.”

It was obvious that Lyndstrom was a little taken aback by the speed of their exit, but there was no other choice. They barely made it a block before Roxanne stopped dead in her tracks and released a hair-curling deluge of expletives and viciously kicked a recycling bin, which spilled its cardboard guts all over the alleyway.

“Motherfucking cocksucking piece of shit CUNT ASS WHORE FUCKING ASSHOLE SHIT-DICK MOTHERFUCKER—”

She pulled back to aim a punch at the brick wall in front of her, but Michelle caught her wrist and pulled her into a bear hug. Roxanne struggled briefly, then went limp. Michelle heard a soft sob and felt her wife’s arms wrap around her.

“Goddamn it,” she whimpered. “God DAMN it.”

All Michelle could do was nod.

Goddamn it.

***

It was midnight when they returned to the unlocked service entrance. They slipped inside and made their way to the Director’s office, pausing only to enter the code into the door. The only sound was that of a far-off television set, probably the night nurse, or one of the orderlies.

“Keep watch,” Roxanne ordered, as she got down on her knees and started to work on the filing cabinet. “These aren’t labeled, so it could take a hot second.” She was holding the penknife in her teeth as she rotated the bobby pin. “Too far back. These are from 92-93.”

An orderly in a white uniform passed, and they knelt behind the desk until he disappeared.

“Hurry up,” Michelle signed.


They couldn’t lock the cabinet back up without the key, so all they could do was hope that nobody
would miss the file. Roxanne slid it into her bag with some difficulty, and they made it to the exit, hopped into their car, and pointed themselves towards Derry. They’d lost too much time already.
Richie woke up in the middle of the night by...something. When he opened his eyes, he couldn’t see a thing between the darkness of the room, which was lit only by the alarm clock on his bedside table, and his near-blindness without his glasses. He still felt a little unnerved, however, which was understandable, since he was in town at the same time as a psychotic demon clown. He knew the only way to convince himself that Pennywise wasn’t lurking in the closet was to take a look around, but it was nearly four in the morning, and he didn’t want to wake Eddie up. There was no way he could extricate himself from Eddie, who was essentially asleep on his chest, without waking him up, so he decided to turn on his phone and use the light from the screen to scan the room, and, when there was nothing, he could fall back asleep. So he groped for his phone, feeling his fingers skate along the wood and bump up against his glasses, until something grabbed his wrist. It wasn’t Eddie. Eddie’s hands were still curled sweetly against his chest.

“Jesuschrist—”

The light clicked on, and Richie almost had a heart attack, because gripping his wrist was a doughy blond man, about his age, in Juniper Hill sweats, holding a gun. “Oh my God—”

Richie tried to sit up, dislodging Eddie in the process. He made an extraordinarily grumpy sound.

“Rich, wuzzat—Jesus Christ!”

Richie got on his hands and knees, trying to cover Eddie with his body, for all the good it would do. Though he wouldn’t have wanted to encounter Bowers under any circumstances, doing it naked was about the worst-case scenario he could’ve dreamed up.

“Bowers, what the fuck—what d-d-do you want? I got money, you know, you can have my credit cards—”

“I don’t want your fucking credit cards, you fucking faggot. Get the fuck up.”

Richie got out of bed, painfully aware of how helpless he was and how much he wished he wasn’t naked. More than anything, he really, really, really didn’t want to die. A couple days ago, he could’ve accepted it, but now? No way. He wanted to live.

“Richie, don’t—”

Eddie clung to him as he got out of the bed, like he was hoping that they would stay safe as long as they were under the covers. Richie remembered that feeling, too. When they were children, Richie would sneak out of his bedroom and run to Eddie’s house, climb the trellis, and rap on his window. Eddie would let him in, and they would whisper in his bed until they fell asleep. While they were shining flashlights under the covers, or if Richie was keeping stock-still while Eddie slept in his
arms, they had felt safe. Safe from Bowers, from his mother, from the clown. But they were adults now, and Richie was pretty sure that Bowers wouldn’t hesitate to shoot them both if they got smart.

“You too, Kaspbrak. Both of you queers, over by the wall.”

“Leave him alone, you—”

Richie never got to finish his insult, because Bowers hit him in the face with the gun and he went down. He hadn’t been in any fights since leaving Derry, and the pain came as a surprise. Somewhere, very far away, he could hear Eddie screaming. Cool hands wrapped around his face, pulling him close, shielding his head.

“Get up, you fucking pussy. Get him up.”

They withdrew to the wall. Richie slowly came back to himself. Eddie was holding him up.

“How dare you, how fucking dare you, you white-trash motherfucking piece of shit—”

“Eds,” Richie mumbled.

“I’ll kill you, I swear to God, I’ll fucking kill you—”

“Eds.”

“What!?"

“No, no, ignore your little faggot friend. Keep talking.”

Bowers got close, shoving the barrel of his gun under Eddie’s chin. Richie felt ill. He considered going for it. He would’ve if the gun was pointed at him. But the risk…no. Maybe they could still talk their way out of this. Eddie looked like he was ready to spit in Bowers’s face. It was crazy, Richie thought. This is crazy. Since when did he become the voice of reason?

“Henry, just tell us what you want, and we’ll do it. Nobody has to get hurt.”

“Tozier. Sit down on that chair. You. Tape him down.”

Legs shaking, Richie sat down on the wooden rocking chair. Eddie duct taped his wrists, then his ankles, to the armrests and supporting slats with shaking hands.

“What are you going to do?” Eddie asked, lips trembling.

Bowers pressed the muzzle of his gun against Richie’s forehead. Richie screwed his eyes shut.

“Guess.”

“No! Stop it!” Eddie wailed. “Stop it, don’t hurt him! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Richie opened one eye, peering out at the scene in front of him.


He moved the gun from Richie to point it at Eddie.
“No, no, no—”

“Huh,” Bowers said. “I thought this little freak was just a warm hole for you to fuck. But you’re telling me that you actually care about him?”

Richie opened his mouth to reply, but they were interrupted by his phone playing “Changes.” Bowers picked it up, and, putting it in front of Richie, answered it, while keeping his gun trained on Eddie.

“Hey, Richie. It’s Roxanne. Sorry to bother you so late, but I thought you might still be up.”

“Yeah, uh, no problem. What’s up?”

“Look, we’re getting in from Boston, and I thought you might want to get a drink. I sure as hell won’t be sleeping tonight.”

“I—I don’t think so. I’m kinda busy.”

“Ha! Gotcha!” She gave her best “squeaky bed frame” sound effect, then laughed some more. “Anyhow. See you tomorrow morning.”

“Bye, Roxanne.”

***

Ten miles away, Roxanne frowned.

“Something’s wrong,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

She floored it.

***

“So listen, Tozier. Here’s what’s gonna happen. First, I’m gonna kill your faggot boyfriend. Then I’m gonna kill you. Then I’m gonna kill the rest of your friends. IT says it’s your time to float, but I won’t pretend I hadn’t already been thinking about it. Guess I just needed a little push.”

He pointed the gun at Eddie. Richie wanted to scream, do something, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t lift a hand to stop it—

Several things happened at once, or, at least, in a very quick sequence. The door buckled, almost getting torn out of the jamb. Bowers’s shoulder exploded in a shower of blood. The massive crack of Michelle’s Colt Python ripped through the room. Richie’s head snapped towards the doorway where Michelle stood, gun up, wearing a cardigan and beige slacks, like a French teacher from Hell. She raced towards Bowers, kicking him away from Eddie and rolling him over. He groaned. Roxanne followed, holstering her Beretta. She kicked Bowers’s gun away towards Richie.

Michelle helped Eddie up onto the bed, urging him away from Bowers. Roxanne ran to Richie, pulling a knife from her bag and cutting the tape. As soon as Richie was free, he ripped the tape from his mouth and went for Bowers’ gun.

“Richie, what are you doing?” Roxanne asked slowly.
“I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Rich—”

“NO!” Richie yelled. He pointed the gun at Bowers’s head, hands shaking. “You saw what he was going to do to Eddie. I cannot allow that. Okay?”

“I’m not going to let you kill him,” Roxanne said softly.

“Oh really, Roxanne? And what exactly are you going to do to stop me?”

It wasn’t exactly a threat, but it was pretty close. Roxanne didn’t react. She just unholstered her gun, and Richie wondered for a moment if she was going to shoot him.

“Not a goddamn thing,” she said. “Because I’m going to do it for you.” She pointed her weapon at Bowers and clicked the safety off.

They stood there for a moment, frozen in time. Eddie’s eyes were wide, hands clapped to his mouth. Finally, Richie slumped, dropping the gun. The rage was gone. He just looked broken.

“You can’t do it,” he whispered. “You can’t. I can’t.”

“I know. I know. Come here. I know.”

Richie stepped over Bowers and fell into her arms. He wasn’t exactly weeping, but he was overcome. He screamed into her shoulder.

“It’s a fine thing you two came along when you did,” Eddie said. “How did you—”

“I’ve been doing this a long time,” Roxanne said. “I know what someone being held hostage sounds like. You two should go to the bathroom, get some clothes on. We’ll watch him.”

They pulled on jeans and t-shirts and edged out of the room, keeping their eyes on Bowers, who was lying groaning on the ground. As they left, two cops brushed past them, rushing into the room. They brought Bowers out cuffed, screaming and cussing.

“Yeah,” Roxanne said. “That’s the problem with .44 calibers at this range. Rip the shit out of things. You won’t have a tendon left in that shoulder, I reckon. No more squash for you, you scum. I want him under lockdown, you two.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Roxanne blew out a breath, hands on hips.

“Well, you two can’t stay here. There’s still blood on the god damned floor. You’ll have to come back with us. The room’s pretty big, we can sleep on the couch. I mean, it’s nice. Not the Ritz, we are government workers, but I mean, hell, it’s better than this hell hole. I mean, at least our bathtub was built in this god damn century.” She stopped and squinted at Eddie. “Are you all right? I mean —”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Okay. Well—”

“No. I mean, I really am. I’m kind of freaking out, Roxanne. I—feel—fine.”
“Well, you survived. It’s a hell of a rush. I know. But give yourself some space.”

“I don’t need space. I feel like I could run a marathon, guys, honest.”

Richie didn’t look like he could run a marathon. He looked like he was going to vomit. He was pale and sweaty and shivering. Then he fell. Michelle had to catch him by the collar of his shirt and put him back on his feet.

“Okay. All right. Let’s go.”

Michelle and Eddie had to half-carry him, one under each arm. They were about the same height. They slid him in the backseat.

“I think he’s sick,” Eddie said. “Roxanne can you—”

“You’re not sick,” Roxanne said. She pressed one cool hand to the back of Richie’s neck, pushing him to place his head between her knees. “Richie, you’re having another panic attack. Breathe in for five seconds, hold for two, out for five.”

“I can’t—”

“Yes, you can.”

She withdrew her hand, replacing it with Eddie’s.

“Rich, I’m here. I’m all right.”

He had to soothe him for almost five minutes, but eventually Richie’s breathing slowed down and some of his color returned. Eddie slid into the backseat with him, and they took off.
Fly By Night

Chapter Notes

“We cross our bridges as we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and the presumption that once our eyes watered.”
—Tom Stoppard, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.”

Richie woke up at five in the morning, after an hour of restless sleep, because the bathroom light clicked on. The door was open, and someone was breathing heavily. For a moment, he thought Eddie might be in trouble, but Eddie was next to him, sleeping like a baby. How, Richie couldn’t tell you. He guessed he might just be that much braver. He got up to check on the person in the bathroom, wondering if it might be Michelle. She had shot someone. An evil freak, sure, but still.

It wasn’t Michelle. Roxanne was leaning against the sink, white nightgown hiked up, white panties showing, feet bare. Her left hand pressed to her lower back, compulsively stroking the ugly scar a couple millimeters to the left of her spine.

“Are you all right?”

Roxanne started, then let out a heavy breath.

“Fine. Nightmare.”

They stood for a moment in silence. Richie was a little nervous that she might be embarrassed, undressed and panicking in front of a virtual male stranger, but he remembered that she’d rescued him while he was bare-ass naked and not said a word. The score was evened a bit, perhaps.

“Sometimes I have to remind myself that he didn’t kill me,” she said. “I wake up, and I feel dead.”

“I feel like I’ve been dead for twenty-seven years. Like I just woke up. But it’s not…easy. It used to be easy, you know? I mean, it was hell, but…it was easy. I’d wake up in the morning, and then the pain would set in and it never stopped. I was a machine. I had nothing to lose. Now.”

“Now?”

“I got everything to lose,” Richie admitted. “I’m scared, Roxanne.”

“Yeah,” she said.

She removed her hand, and Richie took a good look at the scar. It was an angry purple splotch, like the red eye of Jupiter, climbing her spine like a ladder. “Poultry shears,” she said, and laughed.

“‘The Peer now spreads the glitt’ring Forfex wide, / T’inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide. / Ev’n then, before the fatal Engine clos’d, / A wretched Sylph too fondly interpos’d; / Fate urg’d the Sheers, and cut the Sylph in twain, / (But Airy Substance soon unites again) / The meeting Points that sacred Hair dissever”
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!'"

Richie wasn’t sure how to respond, so he said nothing. She laughed some more, and then sighed.

“It’s the kind of reference he would’ve made.” She tugged the nightgown down, stooping to sit on the rim of the bathtub. “Crazy how you think you know someone. I never saw it coming. But then, who does?”

“I guess we do,” Richie said. “Coming here. It’s like stepping in front of a train.”

“You wouldn’t do it if you didn’t think you could live. Hell, everyone does. I’m not saying it’s true. But you’re not stupid. You wouldn’t just send yourself to the slaughter. Only way, as I see it, is to trust yourself.”

“Will you come with me,” Richie demanded. It was phrased like a question, but it wasn’t.

Roxanne nodded.

“Let me get my boots.”

***

After Roxanne pulled on her galoshes and grabbed her bag, they set out into the misty Maine pre-dawn. The sky wasn’t even beginning to get light yet. Richie led them through the silent streets, feet occasionally splashing in a brown puddle or scattering piles of gravel. Roxanne didn’t know where they were going; she was a stranger to the town. Richie knew the way to the Barrens like the back of his hand. The houses thinned out and the lots got bigger as they approached Neibolt street, jogging past the house at the corner, and speeding down the bank to the stream marking separating where Derry proper ended and the Barrens began, slipping on slick, muddy tussocks of dead grass and gnarled, protruding roots. They skipped over the little brook, making for the line of trees on the other side of the blighted, mud-splattered field. Neither of them were wearing jackets. The cool morning air, saturated with liquid jewels of dew, nipped at Roxanne’s bare arms and calves. The hair on Richie’s arms was standing up with cold, but he didn’t seem uncomfortable at all. This was his show, sprinting across Derry like a ghost returning to his burial site. Roxanne followed, swift on his heels.

When they reached the clubhouse, Richie levered the trapdoor open and dropped down with a thump. Roxanne followed, a bit more slowly. They stood there in silence for a moment, listening to the rain patter on the slats forming the roof.

“You said you were dead,” Roxanne reminded Richie. “Did you know you were dead?”

“I felt it. I didn’t know why, but I was just…living a lie. All the time. It was like there were two versions of me: the real one, the one that remembered, and the one that forgot, the one that was the lie, and the real me, the me I am right now, was just…trapped. Like a ghost. I had nothing to do with the Richie Tozier that was walking around, getting paid. Now, I’m…awake, and it has nothing to do with this place, because I don’t want to be here, and it’s not because of the rest of my friends. I’m glad to see them, don’t get me wrong, but I got along okay without them. It’s him, Roxanne. I can’t. Without him.”

She nodded.

“But in this shithole town in this shithole state, when I’m with him, it’s like waking up from a bad dream, and we are in danger, Roxanne, we are in so much danger, and I cannot, cannot, cannot get separated from him again, I can’t lose him, and I almost did—”
“But you didn’t, did you?”

“Oh, come on—”

“I’m serious! I could give you a bunch of psychobabble, but the God’s honest truth is that the best way to be unhappy is to keep one foot in the past and the other in the future and shit all over the present. Stop thinking about what might have happened. It’s not easy, but it is simple.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“If I knew that, d’you think I’d be bustin’ my hump out here? I’d be livin’ on a fuckin’ island somewhere, drinking pina coladas and gettin’ stuck in the rain.”

They sat for a moment in silence. Finally, Roxanne got up and started rummaging around in her bag. “Fuck it. I’ll have to buy some more, but I think we need it.”

“Need what—oh my God.”

She held up two little bottles of gin, the kind sold on airplanes for $9.

“Gin? Could you have picked a more disgusting liquor to carry around with you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I think I usually keep some peach schnapps with me, just in case I ever turn into a giant pussy, but I must’ve left it in my other pants. Do you want to get drunk or not?”

Richie grabbed the proffered bottle.

“If I puke, you’re cleaning it up.”

“Hey. I’m the brilliant doctor, and you’re the uneducated dumbass joke teller. You clean up my puke, and I stop you from suffocating in yours.”

“Deal.”

They clinked their plastic bottles together, cracked them open, and made the first in a long line of questionable choices.
Paper Lies

Chapter Summary

Roxanne comes clean about her dark past. Eddie comes to a realization, and Richie makes a promise.

Chapter Notes

“And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal,
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!”
—George Gordon, Lord Byron, “The Destruction of Sennacherib.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Eddie woke up at half past eight, Richie was gone. He tried not to panic, but not panicking had never been Eddie Kaspbrak’s strong suit, especially when it came to Richie.

“Uh, Michelle?”

He hesitated for a few moments before crossing the room to wake her up. He figured she’d might kick his ass, but at least he’d know where Roxanne and Richie were. He shook her, and she grunted and tried to shoo him away before opening her eyes.

“Hey. Richie’s gone. Have you seen him?”

She groaned and waved him off.

“S’fine. Let me sleep.”

“Roxanne’s gone, too.”

“Probably went to breakfast. Relax.”

Just as she gently but firmly turned over and pulled the blanket up over her head, a loud retching noise came from the bathroom.

“Oh, jeez,” Eddie groaned.

Michelle swung her legs off the bed, resting her elbows on her knees, head dangling. It was the first time he’d seen her with her hair down. It made her look much younger, like she was a high school student, not a federal agent north of forty. When they entered the bathroom, it appeared empty at first glance. However, when Michelle yanked back the shower curtain, they saw Roxanne, in her nightgown and a pair of rain boots, lying in the tub in a nest of towels. A pile of puke was on the floor.
“Oh, gross—” Eddie gasped.

Michelle rolled her eyes and reached down to shake Roxanne’s shoulder. She mumbled something incoherent, slapping her hands away.

“Lemme sleep.”

Fed up, Michelle turned on the shower.

“Ahh! Jesus! I’m up! God!”

“How drunk did you get last night?” Michelle signed, eyes narrowed. “And where’s Richie?”

“He’s here. I remember…we went out.” Roxanne got up, almost slipping on the puke, and crossed to sit down on the toilet. “We were drinking.”

“Duh. Where did you go?”

“I don’t remember. Why—oh, wait. I’m getting a crime report from the cops.”

“What?!” Eddie shrieked.

“Oh my God, you have to lower your fucking voice, or you’re gonna kill me. Relax. It’s not a murder. It’s…oh. Okay. I think I know where he is.”

***

Roxanne shuffled out of Michelle’s Honda Pilot at nine in the morning to look at the spray-paint spattered façade of Sonia Kaspbrak’s house. She was wearing a pair of sweatpants and a baggy University of Washington sweatshirt, as well as a big pair of aviators. A big canteen of black coffee was clutched in her left hand.

“Oh, you are kidding me,” Michelle signed. “This is where you were?”

“I told you, I don’t remember anything. I was running, and we were shooting the shit, and then gin, and then I woke up when you turned the fucking shower on.”

“He could be dead in a ditch, Roxanne! Or hit by a car, or—”

“Or asleep in those bushes,” she interrupted, pointing at the shock of dark curls visible behind the hydrangeas in Sonia’s side yard.

Unfortunately, that was the exact time that the Derry cops decided to escort Sonia out of the house, all while taking her statement.

“Oh God, hide me!” Eddie whimpered.

“Behind the car,” Roxanne said, shoving him. “I’ll distract her. Get him in the car. Hey!” she hissed at Eddie, studiously not looking at him as he climbed into the backseat. “You know how badly my head fucking hurts, and you know the pitch and volume of this bitch’s voice. You’re gonna fuckin’ owe me.”

Roxanne walked over, interrupting Sonia’s conversation with the cops.

“Ma’am, did you see anyone outside yesterday?” she asked.

“You! You tramp! Officer Buckley, this woman accused me of being some sort of—of—”
“No, finish your sentence,” Roxanne dared her. “You wanna tell this young man exactly what kind of a freak you are?”

“How—dare—you! I—I know who did this. It was either her, or it was that no-good pervert Richie Tozier.”

“ME?” Roxanne asked, raising her voice. “You’re accusing a medical doctor, a goddamn P.h.D. psychologist, a profiler and federal agent, of spray-painting your house?”

Behind her, the word C U N T, rendered in bright red letters, was scrawled across the façade of the house. She surreptitiously scratched a fleck of red paint off the back of her hand. Behind her, Richie wiggled in Michelle’s grasp, and she almost dropped him.

“Okay,” the local cop interposed. “Miss Little—”

“It’s AGENT Little, young man, and if it weren’t, it would be Mrs. Little,” Roxanne corrected, all too aware that if she were to loose their focus now, they would turn and see Michelle dragging a near-comatose Richie by the shirtfront towards the car.

“Oh, really?” Sonia asked caustically. “You’re married? What does your husband think about you running around out here, doing all this mess?”

“I’m married to a woman,” Roxanne said absently, listening to the sound of the Pilot’s trunk opening.

“You’re a dyke. I might’ve known. How—”

“Oh my God, if you don’t take your voice down at least fifty decibels and three octaves, I am going to book you for assaulting a federal agent. You know what, fuck it. There are three kids missing, and if you people want to waste your time on this nonsense, fine. But I’m gone.”

She turned on her heel and stalked away. When she got in the car, Richie was lying facedown in the backseat, completely passed out.

“We should take him to the hospital!”

Roxanne winced. Even when Eddie wasn’t really raising his voice, he was still pretty loud. And he was definitely raising his voice. Far be it from a self-respecting feminist like Roxanne to chide someone for being shrill, but her head was in danger of shattering into a million tiny pieces.

“’S just a hangover. No point.”

“Um, he could have alcohol poisoning! He could be—”

Richie broke in with an earth-shattering snore.

“Turn him over on his side,” Roxanne advised. “That’s how Hendrix died.”

“I don’t think that’s funny!”

Roxanne gave a jaw-cracking yawn, slumping over the passenger side dashboard.

“Hello!” Eddie shouted. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” she groaned. “He’s not going to die. I’m pretty sure…”
Richie snored again in his sleep, then, belched. The burp was followed by a meaty squelching sound, and an odor.

“Aw, geez!” Roxanne groaned. “Not in my backseat!”

“Ugh, it’s all over me, Roxanne, it’s fucking black, what did you feed him—”

“Feed him? I didn’t feed him anything! I told you, we were drinking gin, and then we must’ve tagged the house. I don’t remember anything else. And I’d appreciate if you didn’t treat me like the bad guy from a ‘Just Say No’ skit. Your boyfriend is forty, and I didn’t force-feed him anything.”

“I mean, honestly, are the two of you fifteen years old? You get drunk and spray paint a house? Not to mention that you just ditched him in the bushes—”

“Eddie, listen to me. I like and respect you, and I consider us to be friends, but I’m begging you to pipe down.”

They got out of the car. Michelle opened the door to the backseat, and immediately gagged.

“Oh God,” she signed. “It’s like cold oatmeal, it stinks—”

“Jesus, I’m gonna barf—”

Roxanne, stomach already upset from her hangover, stumbled away and ejected a thin stream of ochre-colored liquid onto the parking lot. Eddie, whose hoodie was splashed with Richie’s vomit, also began to retch. Somehow, they managed to drag Richie back into the hotel room, pushed him into the tub, and turned on the shower. He woke up, sputtering and cursing.

“Morning,” Roxanne said. “How’s your head?”

“Mushy. My back hurts. What happened last night?”

“Apparently we wrecked up Eddie’s mom’s house and spray-painted the C-word in six foot tall letters On an unrelated note, someone replaced my white matter with angry bees.”

“I can’t believe you!” Eddie broke in. He’d stripped off his sweatshirt and was scrubbing at it aggressively in the sink. “You get drunk and paint swears on my mom’s house—”

“First of all, is it a slur if it’s a scientific truth? Second of all, what are you yelling at me for? I hardly ever drink, so it’s not much of a stretch that it’d hit me pretty hard. Yell at him, he’s a standup comedian, he probably does cocaine every Thursday evening—”

“Never done cocaine,” Richie protested. “You never know what they cut it with.”

“Oh, look who’s being sensible now—”

“Can it, both of you,” Michelle signed. “Roxanne—”

“If it’s not some nice hot tea with lemon, I don’t want it.”

“Well, if you want me to fetch you some tea, you’re gonna have to tell us all why you don’t drink much.”

“Oh, no, Chelle, I don’t like that story—”
Richie poked his head out of the shower.

“What story?”

“Is it funny?” Eddie asked.

“Oh, it’s funny,” Chelle replied. “It’s a trip.”

“Hmm,” Eddie mused. “I could use a laugh. I’ll tell you what. I have some Zofran in my suitcase. If you tell us this story, you can have some.”

Roxanne groaned.

“You’d deny a nauseous woman Zofran for not dancing for your amusement, like some sort of monkey—”

“You’re the one who decided to go out and get smashed, not me. It’s up to you.”

“Fine,” Roxanne sighed, struggling to sit up. She scooted back on the bed so that she was sitting up against the headboard, holding one of the pillows on her lap. “It happened when I was seventeen. Right after Chelle and I graduated, we went out to party in Vancouver. Took a train. The drinking age was eighteen in Canada at the time, so it was totally legal for us to get smashed. We got drunk, drunker, drunkest, and somehow I decided that I wanted to break into Sea Land of the Pacific and free the whales.”

“Sea Land of the Pacific?” Eddie asked.

“It was a kind of cut-rate Sea World. Basically a concrete swimming pool and a couple whales in it. I smashed a window, messed with some levers, and next thing I knew, I was waking up in my own bed, and my dad was downstairs watching a TV report about someone breaking into a Vancouver theme park and freeing five orcas, three seals, and four sea lions.” Roxanne sighed. “I found out later that each of those whales was worth like, three million dollars. I stole fifteen million dollars worth of whales.”

Richie and Eddie stared at her. They spoke at once:

“Are you—”

“What on Earth—”

“They never caught you?” Richie asked, incredulous.

She shrugged.

“I was in Seattle, across the border. From what I heard, they had an image of me out of a security cam, but it was dark, and the eighties, and nothing came of it.”

“And this didn’t come up in your personality exam for the FBI?” Eddie asked.

“First, I’m a consultant, not a full agent. Secondly, no, because I lied about it. Zofran, please, now.”

Eddie sighed.

“Hey, hey, hey! We had a deal! I tell you the funny drunk whale story, and you give me nausea meds.”
“Okay, okay.” Eddie kicked open his suitcase and pulled out a ziploc bag full of pill bottles. He shuffled them around, and finally pulled one out, tossing it to Roxanne.

“Thank you,” she sing-songed, cracking it open and shaking out a tablet. “I—hey! This isn’t Zofran!”

“Yeah, it is! I took one just yesterday!”

“No, it’s not.” Roxanne dumped the pills out on the coverlet, examining them. “Eddie, these are Clozaril. How many do you take?”

“I—I don’t know. One a day. Sometimes two. Is that bad?”

“Who gives these to you?”

“My wife picks them up for me,” Eddie whispered. “Am I gonna be okay?”

Roxanne sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I—yes. If I was your doctor, I’d want to run some liver tests, but not before taking you off this shit immediately.”

“What’s Clozaril?” Eddie asked, voice trembling.

“It’s an atypical antipsychotic.”

“What?” Eddie asked. “I’m not—Richie, Roxanne, I’m not crazy! I don’t—”

“No,” Roxanne said. “You’re not. You’re not even psychotic. These pills are meant for one thing and one thing alone: to make problematic people behave. To slow them down. This is true for you, and this is true for every non-adherent schizophrenic these are prescribed to. I don’t think anyone should take these, but that’s a different can of worms. You’re not even sick with the illness these are supposed to treat.”

“What if I am?” Eddie asked, voice trembling. One of his hands was clutching his cheek. The other was shoved into his hair. “What if there’s something I don’t know? What if I really—”

“Eddie, what? Are you kidding me? I’ve known you your whole life, there’s nothing wrong with you!”

“I read that schizophrenic breaks happen in your twenties. I wasn’t…you weren’t…”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Roxanne said. “Eddie, there is nothing wrong with you, except for a willingness to accept bad behavior from the people close to you. Look at me.” She grabbed his shoulder and shook him gently. “Come on. Look at me.”

He looked up at her, deflated. Her face was pale, but her eyes were clear, wide, and earnest. She wasn’t lying. “Nothing wrong with you,” she repeated. She flicked her eyes at Richie for support.

“Not a fucking thing,” Richie said, winding an arm around Eddie’s waist. “You’re perfect.” His voice wavered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, babe,” Eddie said. His voice was unsteady, too. Richie’s stomach was still roiling with rage, but he couldn’t help the way his heart skipped a beat when Eddie called him “babe.” “What for?”

“Leaving you,” Richie said. His voice broke. “If I hadn’t left, then this never would’ve happened to you. I left, and you got hurt.” He sniffed, and felt like scum for doing it, because he wasn’t the one who was being poisoned, and the last thing that he wanted for Eddie was to feel like he had to
comfort Richie instead of Richie comforting him. But then Eddie reached up and put a cool hand on the back of Richie’s neck and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Rich, I’m okay. It’s okay. We’re together now.”

“I’m sorry I got drunk,” Richie said voice muffled by Eddie’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I spray-painted your mom’s house with cuss words. I’m sorry I puked on you.”

Eddie gave a wet laugh.

“Remember when I threw up in your lap when we were in math class in fifth grade? You just evened the score. And I appreciate the sentiment. She is a cunt. But I’d feel better if you just ignored her from now one. I’d prefer it if she didn’t even know that you existed. I don’t want her thinking about you. It makes me feel dirty.”

“He’s right,” Roxanne said. They looked up, a little startled. They’d momentarily forgotten her presence. “I’m not a conflict-avoidant person, but I don’t recommend any contact. She has nothing you need.” She looked around. “I think you two could use some down time. This place is empty as hell. I’ll pick the lock of the adjoining suite.”

“Are you pushing us out?” Eddie asked.

“I don’t ask for a lot. All I ask is that if you’re going to have some romantic, emotional sex, do it in your own room.”

“I wasn’t—I mean—”

“Well, now that you mention it—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Roxanne shuffled out into the hall and started to mess with the lock of the door next door. “You know, I was young once, too.”

“Aren’t you like, eight years older than us?”

“Show some goddamn respect for your elders.” The door swung open. “All yours. I’m going to go run a bath and sit in there with the lights off, so if you need to call me, don’t.”

She shut the door with a decided click, leaving Eddie and Richie in the doorway. Eddie sighed and leaned against Richie. Richie closed the door behind them.

“You okay?” Richie asked. “You wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I mean, my mom told me I was sick, but I just told myself for so long that she wasn’t lying, just…worried. But Myra, she…she poisoned me. I mean, how blind am I? How stupid? What is it about me that—” He whirled around, eyes wide, lips parted. “Richie, I forgot!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Richie, do you know the one thing that made it possible for me to stand up to my mom?”

“You—you were brave, you—”

“Oh, fuck that, Richie, I’ve never been brave—”

Richie opened his mouth to argue, but Eddie blew past him, talking in that double-fast quick-time patter that Richie remembered so fondly. “I told her it was my friends, but that was a lie, it was a lie, Richie, because it was you, it was always you, and I forgot.”
“Forgot what?”

“The way you treated me,” Eddie whispered. “You treated me so well. You were sweet. Kind.” He shook his head, eyed full of tears. “Rich, I remember. Everything. You bought me ice cream, held me in Bill’s garage, but your own body between me and that clown in Neibolt. We were in danger, and you protected me. You didn’t hesitate for a second.”

“I loved you,” Richie said. He didn’t hesitate. “I would’ve done anything for you. I still love you. Hell, I was just a kid then, even though I loved you like an adult. Now, I think I might love you even more, now that I’m grown enough to appreciate you. Before, all I could think of was how scared I was, and how wonderful you were, but you were…unattainable.” Richie stooped to kiss Eddie’s cheek, pulse speeding up as he felt Eddie’s eyelashes flutter against his temple. “I want good things for you, Eddie. You deserve them. It would be nice if I were the one to give them to you, but if there’s better than me out there—”

“There isn’t,” Eddie said. “Not for me.”

When they kissed, it was soft and sweet. Eddie’s lips tasted like Scope and medicinal Chapstick. Richie licked into Eddie’s mouth, running his tongue over every inch of Eddie’s mouth. When they broke apart, Eddie looked up at him, a little starstruck.

“Wow, Rich,” he said.

“She’ll never touch you again,” Richie said. He took Eddie’s chin in his fingers, tilting his head up so that Eddie was looking him in the eyes. “Hear me? I swear to you, neither of them. Ever.”

“I believe you,” Eddie said, smiling. “My hero. You save me from my mean wife, and I’ll save you from your mile-wide self-destructive streak. Deal?”

“Deal,” Richie said, amazed at Eddie’s beauty. Amazed at his good luck. “Did I hypnotize you or something? Am I going to say the word ‘Allspice,’ and you’re gonna wake up screaming?”

“Oh, please,” Eddie laughed. “As if someone as dumb as you could get one over on someone as stubborn as me.”

“Fair point, Mr. Kaspbrak,” Richie conceded, leaning in for another kiss. “Fair point.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so screamin' long. School got ca-razy, and I started a new fic that got some attention: https://archiveofourown.org/works/21388003 It's a reddie post-apocalypse zombie au, so check it out! I'll try to split my time more evenly in the future.
Love Like You

Chapter Summary

Smut with very little plot written by a dyke English major. TW: brief homophobic language

Chapter Notes

“If I could begin to be
Half of what you think of me,
I could do about anything.
I could even learn how to love
Like you.
When I see the way you act,
Wondering if I’m coming back,
I could do about anything.
I could even learn how to love
Like you.
I always thought I might be bad,
Now I’m sure that it’s true,
’Cause I think you’re so good,
And I’m nothing like you.
Look at you go,
I just adore you,
And I wish that I knew
What makes you think
I’m so special.”
—Rebecca Sugar, “Love Like You.”

Eddie wrapped his arms around Richie, surging up into his arms, kissing him sloppy and passionate. Richie could feel the twist of his muscles under the soft fabric of his polo. Eddie’s hands grabbed at his waist, plucking at the cheap fabric of his shirt. He was taken by surprise by the pure, unmitigated desire he felt for Richie. He remembered jerking off to that stupid, shitty poster in the half bath in his neat two-bedroom and wanted to burst out laughing. This, the real thing, was so much better. Richie still smelled like peppermint and patchouli, and his hands were still big, soft, and gentle, skating over Eddie’s arms, chest, face, hair, and thighs. He cupped Eddie’s face in those big, gentle hands, tilting him up, cradling him, kissing him like he was something precious. His belly flopped as Richie held him close. Richie was bigger than him, but not in a scary way, because it was Richie, who didn’t have a mean bone in his body, except when he was protecting his friends. Eddie opened his eyes and immediately blushed. Richie was staring at him like he was having a religious experience.

“Richie,” he said. “What—”
“I wish the whole world could see this,” Richie whispered. “I wish your wife could see this. That you belong to me.”

Just the suggestion of exposure was scary, but undeniably arousing. The idea of Myra watching them, of seeing how Eddie was around his friends, around Richie was both frightening and exciting.

“What would you do?” Eddie asked, voice quirk ing upwards into a squeak as Richie kissed up his neck. “What—ohh—do you want her to see?”

“Hmm,” Richie said, considering. His face was flushed, but he had a confident, almost cocky expression, miles away from the fear endemic in him just a few days ago. It was catnip to Eddie. He loved it when Richie was at peace, confident in himself, free from fear and self-doubt. One of Richie’s hands was restlessly smoothing down his hair. The other was cupping his ass, rubbing at the small of his back. “Well, first things first. I’d want to kiss you just like this.” Richie dipped him and kissed him, softly at first, then passionately. All Eddie could do was open his mouth to Richie’s tongue and hold on for dear life. The first and last time he’d been kissed on the mouth had been the day of his wedding, and that had been a chaste peck that had made his skin crawl, nothing like this. The feeling of Richie’s lips on his, his tongue down his throat made his head spin and his toes curl. He felt utterly claimed and owned, and it was really turning his crank in a way that was just unfair. “You’ve got such a damn pretty mouth.”

Eddie blushed.

“Please.”

“Oh, honey, your mouth. Your mouth is so fucking gorgeous.” Richie passed a thumb over Eddie’s lower lip, dipping in briefly to his mouth. Eddie sucked his finger briefly, licking the pad of Richie’s thumb. Richie made a brief involuntary noise, somewhere between a gasp and a moan. “I’d get down on my knees in front of you then, and I’d take out your gorgeous cock and put it in my mouth. I’d worship you, down there, show her what you deserve. Show you how much I love you, how good I can make you feel.” He made a considering noise. “What do you want me to do?”

Eddie paused, a little bashful. It wasn’t easy for him to say it out loud, that he wanted his best friend to put his cock in his ass. But it wasn’t easy for Richie, either. Eddie knew that much.

And he did want it. God knows, he really wanted it.

“I want you to put me on my back,” he whispered, face cherry-red, wiggling that much closer to Richie. “I want you to put me on my back, I want you to watch while I open myself up for you, as she watches me say your name, crying, reaching out for you…” He took a deep breath and plunged on; voice barely audible. “…begging…”

Richie’s cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were wide and dark. He looked stunned and so very hungry. Eddie was pleased.

“So pretty, Eddie, god damn,” he breathed.

“I love you,” Eddie whimpered. “Richie…”

“Oh, I love you, I love you, Eddie, please…”

The edge of desperation in Richie’s voice, his desire…

“Richie.”
“What?”

“Why me?”

Richie laughed, like it was the silliest question in the world. Like Eddie had asked him why the sky was blue, or why the sun rose in the morning and set in the evening.

“It’s always been you, Eddie. It just has.”

“There has to be a reason. What is it about me that makes me worthy of this sort of attention?”

“Because you’re brave and smart and tough and you never, ever give up. You’re easy to talk to and loving, you’re compassionate and you always try to do the right thing. When you decide what’s right and what’s wrong, self-interest and convenience never enter the equation. You always try to do what’s right, even if it means that you have to go out of your way or take risks. You’re stubborn and beautiful and headstrong, and I’ve never been happier or freer—more myself—than when I’m with you.”

Eddie closed his eyes and swallowed, hard. He’d seen that, when they were children. How Richie changed around him. The way he managed, occasionally, when they were alone, to drop his defensive and snarky façade, and admit that he was sad, or frightened, or angry. How Richie had clung to him when they parted and beamed at him when they reunited.

Eddie was torn. He wanted to luxuriate in Richie’s affection, and it certainly felt nice, someone he trusted having that sort of regard for him, but he also felt a deep sinking sensation in his stomach, because he wasn’t what Richie thought he was. Sure, he’d had his moments in childhood. Confronting the clown, walking into Neibolt, those were brave deeds, especially for a thirteen-year-old kid. That was what Richie saw, not the beaten-down, pathetic man he’d become in the years since.

Richie said something, but Eddie was too distracted to hear it.

“Come again?”

“I said, get out of your head.”

“Is it that obvious?”

Richie nodded.

“I like to think I know you pretty well.” Richie spun around and sat down on the bed. Eddie stood between his thighs, both of his hands folded between Richie’s long fingers. “Is it…” He blushed. “Do you feel…I don’t know…weird? About this?” He gestured between them.

“What? No! No, I—I don’t—” Eddie shook his head, like he was trying to rattle a thought loose. “Richie, I’m just afraid that—that you might—”

“That I might what?”

“What do you want? From me, I mean. I…I’m married, Rich, and I don’t intend to stay that way, but it’ll be a process, and you—if word gets out, you could be in the papers, on the internets, it is a huge risk for you, for what? You’re moderately wealthy, you’re sort-of famous, you’re good-looking—”

“You think I’m good-looking?”
“Oh, shut up, I’m talking. I don’t—I—why would you want to be with me?”

Richie looked at him like he was speaking Klingon.

“Pardon?”

“I just—I want you to know your options, okay? Because I don’t want you to go into this thinking that you couldn’t get someone else, and that you have to settle, because you—and I’m not endorsing this, but you could definitely find someone younger, or, I don’t know, what do they call them, twumps—”

Muted laughter came from the room next door, but not even God herself could’ve stopped Eddie now that he had gained momentum.

“—and you always used to look out for me, Rich, but you don’t owe me anything.” He was winding down, now, unable to even look at Richie, unsure of what he was going to see on his face. “You don’t have to sacrifice yourself for me, Rich, I don’t want you to.”

They were Renaissance children, becalmed beneath the Bridge of Sighs, Siamese children, related by the heart, bleeding from the surgery of initial confrontation, holding the words, scalpels, on trembling lips. There was nowhere else for him to look. He had to meet Richie’s eyes, and all he could think when he did was:

Oh, no, no, no, this is not what I wanted!

Richie’s eyes were full of tears. He took a shaky breath, and:

“Eds, if you don’t want—this—all you have to do—”

“NO!” Eddie clapped both hands to his mouth, voice raw and trembling. “No, you don’t understand, I want this too much, and—and—”

Fuck it, he thought.

“—I’m scared, Rich, because I want it too much, and if I—if we—and if you—”

He didn’t have to finish his sentence, because Richie came up and embraced him. There was no kiss, not yet, but he took Eddie in his arms with unbearable tenderness and let him cry into his chest.

“Oh, Eds,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “I know, I know. I won’t leave you,” and Richie knew him, God, how he knew him, for better or for worse, Richie knew Eddie and he knew him well, “I know I did before, and I’ll never forgive myself for that, but I won’t ever do it again.”

Eddie’s brain was still on. He didn’t know that he could ever turn it off entirely, but the high-frequency wail of his insecurities and anxiety was pushed way, way, way back to his hindbrain as Richie’s hands clamped down on his hips. He backed up until his butt hit the bed, and he pulled Richie down on top of him.

“Ooof!”

“Hey,” Richie chided, wiggling forwards so that they were lying on the bed instead of hanging off of it. “I know I ain’t exactly skinny anymore, but there’s no need for that.”

“Richie?”
“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Richie shivered as Eddie kissed his lips again, then broke away to kiss up the side of his face. He stopped to nuzzle at Richie’s temple, breathing hot air on the sensitive skin and feeling Richie’s pulse thundering.

“Yes, sir,” Richie breathed.

Eddie smiled a quick, private smile, and then changed course. He nipped at Richie’s earlobe, kissed at his pulse point, then finally pulled back.

“I want you to fuck me,” he whispered.

“Again?” Richie asked.

Eddie stifled a laugh.

“No, no, that’s not—that’s not what I meant, I just—I mean—you aren’t still…sore?”

Eddie considered. There was a little tugging sensation down there whenever he moved his legs in a certain way, but it was nice. Pleasant. That tenderness was powerfully erotic, if he was telling the truth. It was a constant reminder of Richie. Inside him. It was a feeling he wanted more of.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Oh, but the lube—”

“Spit on your fingers.”

Richie looked a little dubious, but he did as he was told, and the second he slid a finger inside of Eddie, he moaned.

“Fuck, you’re still so open—”

Eddie couldn’t suppress the high, wrecked moan that left his lips at the sensation of Richie’s finger slipping inside him so easily, as well as his murmured words. He shivered at the thought of his slutty, fucked-out hole yielding to Richie like he was nothing, just waiting for him to slip inside and claim him, anytime, anywhere he wanted—

Richie had moved up to two fingers, and Eddie was rolling his hips back, trying to get him deeper, and he still couldn’t control his noises. An endless cascade of “Richie” was falling from his lips, and he fair wailed as Richie slipped in a third finger, tears falling from his eyes at the shock of pleasure that lanced up his spine, the frustration, the desire for Richie to hurry the fuck up—

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In the room next door, Roxanne briefly lifted the wet washcloth that she had folded and draped across her eyes. She looked over at Michelle, who was sitting on the toilet, legs crossed, reading Psychology Today.

“Do you ever miss that stage in our relationship? You know, when everything had to be right freakin’ now?”

Michelle looked up, raised an eyebrow, huffed a short laugh through her nostrils, and then shook
her head.

***

Eddie rolled onto his stomach, shakily lifting himself onto his hands and knees. Richie’s fingers rotated inside of him, gasping as the pads of his fingers drummed against his prostate.

“What—where are you—”

“No, no, like this,” Eddie moaned, reaching back to take hold of him, brushing his hip, trailing down to stroke his cock, groaning an oath when he felt how hard he was. “Please. I want you to take me, I want you to show me you own me, please, please, please—”

It was such a slutty thing to say, and such a slutty thing to want, to be taken from behind. As far as you knew, it was any goddamn person fucking you, and thoughts of his mother floated through his head for just one moment, mostly about how disappointed she was/is/would be, that he had turned out to be everything she hadn’t wanted him to be. A queer. A disgusting faggot who loved to take it up the ass without a condom. A philanderer. A soon-to-be divorce. A Democrat.

Richie Tozier’s whore.

Then, after a moment or so of uncomfortable introspection, all thoughts ceased, because Richie’s hands fitted themselves to his hips, tilting him upwards, and ohholymotherfuck he was pressing forwards, and he felt so much bigger like this, and the pulling-stretching-pressure feeling was much more intense, still not pain, but still not entirely benign, but he needed it, God, he needed it, because it kept him in his body, and in his body was where he needed to be.

“Shh,” Richie said. His voice was very faint, and Eddie was almost indignant, because how could he be so calm when the membranes between them were so burningly and achingly porous. He felt a cool hand between his shoulder blades, soothing him. Richie’s other hand meandered up his chest to cup his chin and card through his hair before gripping one of Eddie’s thighs. “Sweetheart.”

Eddie made a sound that was half a moan and half a sob. “I’m right here. I’m right here.”

Prove it, Eddie thought, but at the last minute, he decided not to say it.

Richie, however, heard everything, said and unsaid, from Eddie. People assumed that he didn’t pay attention, and they were mostly right. There were many things that Richie Tozier didn’t pay attention to. Stan’s lectures on birds. Trigonometry lessons. His mother’s tirades. His manager’s pleas that he get a girlfriend. Ben’s discourses on “alt” pop, which sounded just like regular pop to Richie. But he always paid attention to Eddie Kaspbrak.

He waited for a few more moments for Eddie to relax enough to allow him to push forwards, and then, using his hands on Eddie’s hips for leverage, pushed in the final few inches. He missed seeing Eddie’s face, being able to gauge his reactions that way, but the tremor in Eddie’s back muscles and the quiver in his breathing told him all he needed to know. Also, in that position, Richie could bring his thumbs to Eddie’s cheeks and pull them apart, giving him a magnificent view of his cock buried in that gorgeous ass. He needed to catch his breath after that sight. That beautiful red pucker clenching around the base of his cock, letting out a thin, shining dribble of his saliva and semen, as Eddie moved his hips vainly in Richie’s grasp, trying to fuck himself. Richie’s heart was beating hard, and his breath was coming in short pants. He wondered how he was supposed to know if he was having a heart attack.

“Eddie,” he said, voice strained. “Are you all right?”
Eddie gave a tiny nod but didn’t speak.

“Am I hurting you?”

To his surprise, Eddie laughed.

“No. No. You could never hurt me.”

“Can I—”

“Please. Please.”

The slide out was slow, partly because Richie still didn’t feel good about the amount of prep that they’d done, and partly because the idea of retreating from that hot, tight, wet cavern was the stupidest fucking idea Richie’s primate brain had ever heard. The push back in was also slow—until Eddie grabbed Richie’s thigh and turned around partially, and the look on his face had half turned Richie on and half scared him to pieces.

“Speed. Up.”

So he slid back in faster, and that did something, because Eddie’s back went ramrod straight and he pushed back with a loud cry. Richie repeated the process, Eddie, fucking back with every stroke, and between the tightwetvelvet sensation of Eddie’s asshole and the visual of Eddie’s perfect cheeks jiggling as he fucked himself on Richie’s cock, and all the pretty noises he was making, the “oh Richies” and the “uh-uh-uhs,” Richie knew he wasn’t going to last long. To help Eddie along (and to spare himself the misfortune of coming first on only their third sexual encounter), Richie reached under him to grip his cock, but Eddie slapped his hand away.

“Huh—?”

“I’m so close—I want—just talk to me,” Eddie moaned. He did sound close. In fact, he sounded near tears.

For maybe the first time ever, Richie got stage fright. What was he supposed to say? He reached out for encouraging voices, but his parents and his manager certainly wouldn’t have endorsed this. Then, after what was probably a second, but felt like an hour, Roxanne’s voice echoed through his head.

“Communicate, be confident, and do everything from a place of love and respect. Get in there, tiger!”

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, voice choked with how much he meant it. “Eds, you’re so pretty. And I love you. I love you. And—” He swallowed, mouth dry. “And you take my cock so well, sweetheart. Like you were born to do it.” Eddie moaned, clearly past the point of no return, but Richie kept talking, like he always had. “I’m gonna take care of you, Eds. I’m gonna just—spend the rest of my life doing whatever it takes to make you happy. I’m gonna hold you in my arms every night, and kiss you and tell you that I love you every morning, and I—I wanna marry you, in some big church, in front of all of our friends, and I want to invite my parents just so that I can tell them to fuck off, and I want to take you places, sweetheart, on our honeymoon, I want to take you to Paris, London, and San Fran, Venice, Vienna, Budapest, Krakow, Amsterdam…”

Richie had started coming somewhere around the wedding, and his vision had greyed out somewhere around the honeymoon. When he came back to himself, he was laying on top of Eddie, whose arms were around, him, and who was kissing him so deeply that for a moment, he was concerned that Eddie thought he might be dead. He opened his eyes, but that didn’t help much,
because his glasses were gone. Eddie pulled back with a faint pop, and said:

“Whoops. Hold on.”

The glasses were placed back on his face, and he saw Eddie beneath him, looking rumpled and tired and so beautiful that Richie couldn’t help but bully his way back into his mouth. Eddie responded with a pleased hum, cupping the back of Richie’s head with one palm.

“Did you—” Richie asked.

Eddie gave an embarrassed laugh.

“Oh, yeah.”

Richie pulled back a little, saw the spidery strands of come on Eddie’s belly, and smiled.

“That was unbelievable,” Eddie sighed, rolling over onto his side and putting his hand on Richie’s chest. The cool of his wedding ring burned a brand just above his heart. Eddie followed his eyes and withdrew his hand.

“Shit. Sorry.”

“No, no. It’s okay. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Eddie colored, twisting the band.

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t own any part of you, Eddie.”

Eddie took in a breath, thrown by Richie’s use of his real name. He opened his mouth to say something saucy, but Richie interrupted him.

“Neither do I. Neither does your mom, or Bill, or anyone else. Nobody should get to push you around.”

For a moment, Eddie thought that Richie might be making fun of him, but when he met his gaze, his dark eyes were big and earnest. Eddie removed the ring, tossing it down on the nightstand without a thought, and turned to give Richie a smile—not a tiny private one, or one of the lip-twitched wrested unwillingly from him by Richie’s hijinks—a real, wide smile that, as the bard wrote, “taught the torches to burn bright.”

Richie was duly dazzled.
Sugar Mice

Chapter Summary

Roxanne has a tense showdown with Sonia. Events get set in motion.

Chapter Notes

“I was flicking through the channels on the TV
On a Sunday in Milwaukee in the rain
Trying to piece together conversations
Trying to find out where to lay the blame

I heard Sinatra calling me through the floorboards
Where you pay a quarter for a partnership in rhyme
To the jukebox crying in the corner
While the waitress is counting out the time

So if you want my address it's number one at the end of the bar
Where I sit with the broken angels clutching at straws and nursing our scars…”

—“Sugar Mice,” Marillion, from Clutching at Straws

The next day, many things happened at once. Bill left to confront Pennywise on his own. Mike was scurrying around, trying to rally everyone for a final confrontation. But Roxanne, Michelle, Richie, and Eddie were nowhere to be found. They were at the police station, having an apocalyptic showdown with Sonia Kasprak.

The Derry Chief of Police summoned Roxanne to the station at ten that morning. Sonia wanted to talk to her, and he was no match for her nagging and her tears. So, donned her blouse and skirt, put on some makeup, and made her way down. Michelle, Richie, and Eddie accompanied her. They were all silent, fearing some unknown evil.

When they arrived, Roxanne made her way into the interrogation room. Sonia was sitting at the table, wearing a red blouse and a beige skirt. She looked made-up and in control. A faint smile hovered over her lips. Eddie felt nauseous.

There were no cops in the building. They had bigger fish to fry than Sonia Kasprak’s vandalized house. The five of them were alone.

“Something’s wrong,” Eddie had whispered into Roxanne’s ear.

“I know,” she muttered in reply.

“Oh,” Sonia said. She was gloating. “Agent Little. You came.”

“I did.”
Neither of them spoke, and Eddie was confused for a moment. Then he saw the gun.

“Oh God,” he gasped. “Oh my God. Michelle—”

“Don’t move,” Roxanne said.

“She’s talking to us,” Michelle signed. “Let her do her thing.”

“What are you going to do?” Roxanne asked. “Kill me? Hell, you could.” She grabbed the muzzle of Sonia’s gun and pressed it to her own chest, right over her heart. “Of course, you’d die, too. My wife is right through that glass. She’ll blow your head off proper, even if she can’t save me. You and I both know that the only way your son will be free of you is when you’re six feet under. If my death is the price for getting him out from under you, then so be it. I’ve lived. I’ve had two children, both grown. He hasn’t. Do it. Do it, motherfucker, pull the trigger, you goddamn cunt—”

After a few moments—days, months, years—Sonia lowered the gun. She was slumped and defeated. “I thought not,” Roxanne said softly. “I’ll never respect you, Sonia. Not as a human being, and certainly not as a mother. But if you had shot me, in the moment before I bled out, I would’ve respected you more, because you would’ve showed me that you had the courage of a single one of your convictions.”

She left the room. Eddie, Richie and Michelle all tried to speak to her, but she didn’t stop to listen. She left the building, and Eddie followed her. She was standing by her car, holding a lighter to a cigarette pinned between her lips.

“Michelle thinks you’re wearing a vest,” he said.

She turned. Not all the way, mind you, but just enough for him to see the blue of her left eye through her hair. “She thinks you knew that she had a gun. But you aren’t, are you?”

She didn’t reply.

“You were going to let her kill you!”

“She didn’t have it in her.”

“You didn’t know that! Why would you…why?”

Roxanne sighed.

“Because I’ve…done things. Many things. I have had a chance to live. I can’t imagine—you’ve been living in stasis, Eddie. I want for you…it is heartbreaking that…I did my job.”

“Do you have a death wish? I—I am asking, because I never wanted—I didn’t ask you to do any of this!” Blood was pounding in Eddie’s temples. The idea that someone could get hurt, or killed, because of him was almost too much to bear. “What are you running from that’s so horrible that you’re trying to—what am I, some sort of project? A charity case?”

In the moment before Roxanne could school her face, Eddie saw real hurt in the curve of her mouth and the tilt of her eyes. Eddie was horrified. “Oh, God, no. I don’t know, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. These past couple of days…you have to believe me…but you didn’t answer my question! Why are you—what happened in Albuquerque?”

“I already told you,” she said. Her back was still turned. She was resting all of her weight on her palms, which were pressed against the hood of her car. Eddie could see the tension in her
shoulders. “I didn’t do my job. Someone died. He was just a kid, had his whole life ahead of him, you know? A boy, no older than my daughter. He risked everything to help me make my case, and I didn’t protect him. I failed him, and now he’s gone. And yeah, I didn’t kill him, but when it comes right down to it, there’s no use trying to pretend, and there’s no one here that’s left to blame. And I know what I want, I know what I am, I know what I need. I’m a pusher. I take risks. And sometimes, the people who are around me, who never signed up for any of it, turn out to be collateral damage. I mean, is that what you want to hear? That I’m selfish? That I got greedy, I got sloppy? That I’m struggling? I mean, what do you want me to say?”

Eddie was silent for a few moments. He shifted his weight, the gravel crunching beneath his shoes. He was cold, so he zipped up his jacket. Then he walked up to Roxanne and, after a brief pause to summon his courage, took her hand. It was cold in his, and he was a little grossed out by the prickly, ropy ridge of scar tissue that bisected her palm, but it felt good to remind himself that she was real. That this was real.

“I barely know you,” he said. “I mean, I don’t feel like I barely know you, but it’s only been three days. But in those three days, you’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty to save and improve my life. So if you’re always that productive, I’d say that the world is a damn sight better off with you in it.”

She didn’t reply. There was pain in her that his words couldn’t touch, and that wasn’t a good feeling, but Eddie accepted it.

“You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves,” he said quietly. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on. Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers. Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.”

Next to him, Roxanne was weeping. She made almost no noise, and her spare hand came up to dash the tears away as soon as they emerged, but they were arriving too quickly. He didn’t look at her. All he could do was stand there and let her quietly maintain her dignity, just as he quietly maintained his. They were proud people, and it was difficult for them to expose their pain to each other, and for a moment, it was a relief to be freed from expectations of recovery, and to just stand, in the wet midmorning, together, like sugar mice in the rain.
Neverland

Chapter Summary

Choices are made, and events are set in motion.

Chapter Notes

"When the darkness takes me over
Face down, emptier than zero
Invisible you come to me
...quietly
Stay beside me
Whisper to me ‘Here I am…’
And the loneliness fades.

Some people think I'm something.
Well, you gave me that, I know
But I always feel like nothing
When I'm in the dark alone

You provide the soul, the spark that drives me on
Makes me something more than flesh and bone

At times like these
Any fool can see
Any fool can see
Your love inside me…”
—Marillion, “Neverland,” from Out of the Box

Richie started talking the second Roxanne and Eddie returned to the station.

“I can’t believe you did that! How did you know—”

“I’ve been doing this a long time,” she said. It wasn’t exactly a lie. “You start to get a feel for… situations…I…I’m not fooling you at all, am I?”

Michelle shook her head.

“So I’m just digging my own grave?”

Nod.

“Aw, jeez.”

“You…you don’t seem mad. Am I missing something?”
Michelle shook her head.

“What can I say? I knew what I was signing up for when I married you. Skunk’s gonna skunk. My wife’s gonna do something ridiculously impulsive. That’s life.”

Roxanne put her hands on her hips and shifted back and forth.

“I mean, I don’t…I’m not sure how I feel about your pessimism regarding my impulse control, but, uh, I’ll take what I can get. Now—”

“Eddie!”

It was Mike. He’d pushed his way through the doors, with Bev and Ben in tow. “There you are! We thought you left town!”

Eddie, who was still wondering if the load Richie had pumped into his ass was ever going make a reappearance, turned, stiff-legged. He hadn’t even been thinking of Pennywise, or the others. Being in love, and feeling as if he and Richie were the only people in the universe, didn’t mesh well with the pervasive feelings of dread and insignificance aroused by the monster haunting Derry. Richie placed a warning hand on Eddie’s upper arm.

“Mike,” he said. There was a warning in his voice.

“It’s Bill,” Bev said. “He went after Pennywise by himself. Eddie, we have to go.”

“No way,” Roxanne said. “You stay right here. Take me to this…house.”

“She’s right,” Richie said. “Eds, stay in the hotel. We’ll come back.”

“What! No!” Eddie exploded. “Richie—”

“When I say ‘you,’ I mean the collective ‘you,’” Roxanne snarled. “I’ve got enough to worry about without chasing two untrained idiots. Leave this to the professionals.”

“Nuh-uh! We’ve done this before, you haven’t!”

Eddie wasn’t exactly up in her face, but he wasn’t backing off either.

“Eddie, enough. I’ll take her. You stay.”

“What the hell are you talking about? We do this together, or we don’t do this at all!”

“You shouldn’t be anywhere near this fight!” Richie screamed. His nerves were frayed, and he was terrified. The blood was roaring in his ears. He felt ill.

“Why not?” Eddie yelled.

“You’re too important!”

“And you’re not?”

“No! I—I don’t have any siblings, any friends, and I make my parents sick to my stomach! Nobody is going to miss me, okay? I just—you have to keep you safe, okay?”

“No!” he shrieked.
“FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, WHY WON’T YOU LET ME DO THIS FOR YOU?”

“YOU DON’T GET TO TELL ME—”

“E-NOUGH!”

Roxanne’s voice cracked across the room, shivering through every cell of Richie and Eddie. Her speaking voice held only a hint of the power available to her. This was the voice that had gained her the title of “The Banshee” in her Tactical Assessment days; how you could hear her nearly a block away, how her voice could cut through metal and stone and flesh to reverberate into your ear, slicing through the crap.

“Eddie. You stay here. You three. Take me to the entrance, then join him.”

Eddie opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it. When pushed this far, Roxanne’s decisions were made by fiat. She didn’t give him much time to argue, either. She just grabbed her cane and stumped off, following Richie. Eddie wanted to cry. He had no confidence that Richie wouldn’t just follow her and just get himself killed.

“Oh,” Bev said cautiously. “What’s going on? I’ve never seen you guys fight like that.”

“He is taking her, because he didn’t want me to, and if he gets hurt, then it’ll be because of me,” Eddie ground out.

“That makes sense,” Ben said.

Bev looked at him like he’d sprouted another head. “Huh?”

“You remember. When we were kids, it was like Richie was proud of putting himself in danger for Eddie. If he saw Bowers or Criss or any of them near Eddie, he’d start mouthing off, get the snot beaten out of him to distract them. Am I the only one that remembers this?”

Bev opened her mouth to disagree, but the memories were filtering back, and then she saw Eddie’s face. He was completely gray, and the skin around his eyes was tight and bluish.

“He was like your big brother,” Ben said.

Eddie scowled.

“Oh, shut the fuck up. That’s not funny.”


Eddie looked up, anger and disgust mingling on his face.

“No, I didn’t—all I meant is—I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t know. You really didn’t know.” Eddie got up and started to pace. “I bought him ice cream. I stood for hours just watching him play Street Fighter. And you didn’t think—not for a second—that I loved him.”

“We were just kids,” Bev said, dumbfounded. “We never thought—”

“No. No. I’m not doing this.” Eddie turned on his heel. “You can stay and hide if you want, but I’m leaving.”
“You don’t trust Richie?”

“In general? I’d trust him with my life. Not to get killed? Not for a second.” Eddie grabbed his jacket. “I don’t trust his decision-making capability as far as I can throw him. I was there when he told Bowers to go blow his dad, remember? I…he needs my help. And if I live through this because he…it won’t be worth it.”

“What do you mean?”

Eddie’s eyes lost focus and his face slackened. For a moment, he looked just like the little boy that he’d used to be, painfully serious, but full of a shy kind of hope. “I was asleep,” he said quietly. “It was like a nightmare, and I just woke up to a bright new morning. I am not going to sleep again. I’m leaving this shithole awake, or I’ll die. I will die, Beverly. That was what Roxanne was trying to tell me, right? Live free or die.”

“Eddie, you’re not making any sense.”

He laughed.

“Maybe not. But that’s okay. It makes sense to me.”

He left, and after a few moments, Ben and Beverly followed him.

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“Down there,” Richie said. “The passages change. I’m sorry I can’t be of much help with directions, but I can try to guide you.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. Time for you to head back.”

Roxanne was standing at the edge of the standpipe, looking down at the oily, inky darkness. Michelle stood beside her. Her shotgun was slung over her back, and the Magnum and Beretta were at her belt. She also had a rucksack strapped to her back, filled with whatever it was that Supervisory Special Agents brought to demon-slaying occasions.

“I don’t think so,” Richie said. “I have to end this.”

Roxanne looked up, eyes narrowed.

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“Doesn’t matter. This…shadow won’t affect the rest of my life. You know, I’m so sick and tired of running, Roxanne, and I’m not going to do it anymore—”

“So start by coming out to your parents,” she said. “This isn’t your job.”

“I was the one who took It down the first time. They helped, but I made the first move.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s not about belief.”

They stood there for a few moments. “I’d do anything for him, Roxanne.”

“I know.”
“I’d die for him, right here, right now.”

“I know.”

They stared at each other for a few moments. “Can I talk you out of this?”

“No,” Richie said.

More silence.


Richie grabbed the rope and started to descend. It wasn’t as easy as it had been when he was thirteen, and there were a couple of times where he thought he might slip and die, but eventually he made it. When he got to the bottom, he saw Michelle descending with Roxanne on her back. When she got down to the bottom, Roxanne slid off and scowled.

“We don’t talk about that,” she said.

Richie shrugged.

“Fine by me.”

“Not in a joking mood, huh?”

Richie sighed.

“No. Not really. I’m…I really, really, really don’t want to die here. How crazy is that? I’m risking my life now, when I finally have something to live for.”

“Dying for someone is easy, Richie,” Roxanne said. “Living for them is hard.”

Richie wheezed out a brief sob. It took even him by surprise. Roxanne’s face was startled, and a little uncomfortable. She wasn’t a therapist. She didn’t know what to do.

Michelle took his hand and pulled him into a hug. He pressed his face into her bare shoulder, feeling the warmth of her skin, smelling grapefruit, hazelnut, and patchouli. She held him tight, her right arm a comforting, solid bar against his back. A tentative touch on his shoulder told him that Roxanne had also moved close. Richie sobbed.

“I want to spend time with him,” Richie wailed. “I want to marry him, Roxanne. Twenty-seven years…”

Roxanne didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what to say. If she had lost twenty-seven years with Michelle, she wouldn’t want to hear a word anyone else had to say.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Why risk it?”

Richie sniffed and dried his eyes.

“I made a promise,” he answered, voice watery.

“No promise is worth your life.”

“This one is. Because of who I made it to.”
“I can’t guarantee that any of us are going to make it out the other side of this.”

“I know.”

“Hmm,” she said. “How very rare. To risk your life for your honor.”

“I wouldn’t do it for just anyone,” Richie said. “Not like you.”

“My psychoses aren’t at issue here,” Roxanne said, jerking her head at the entrance to the tunnel. “C’mon. Let’s get moving.”

Michelle stepped forwards, wrists crossed, right hand gripping her revolver, the left hand holding her heavy flashlight. The hot, white beam of light cut through the gloom, and at her cue, they pressed forwards.
Dry Land

Chapter Summary

It always ends in blood.

Chapter Notes

"In all the time that I've known you
You've been so edgy and nervous
I never wanted to own you

I was aware of the danger
Of making a bid for your favours
You're such a natural stranger
I made excuses and ran

You're an island
But I can't leave you all out at sea
You're so violent with your silence
You're an island
I can't sleep
Won't you speak to me
I'm on dry land
Won't you help me please

In all the time that I've known you
There has been something between us
I don't think it's my imagination

I felt like I couldn't touch you
But I had the feeling you'd love to
Tell me the truth if you could do
I made excuses and ran..."

-Marillion, "Dry Land," from Holidays in Eden

When Eddie made it to the bottom of the well, he was ten, maybe fifteen minutes behind Richie. He didn’t wait for Ben and Beverly. There was no time. The tunnels were a rabbit’s warren, but he’d always had a good sense of direction. He could catch up to them. And if he couldn’t…well. Best not to think about it.

Voices. He heard voices up ahead, and footsteps. His heart leapt into his mouth.

“RICHELIE!” he screamed.

The footsteps stopped, but there was no answered. Eddie sped up. “Richie! Answer me, damn it!”
Roxanne, a few meters away, spoke. “Aw, hell—”

That was when the ceiling caved in. It wasn’t natural. It was way too perfect. It was like a sheet of rock descended, cutting Richie, Roxanne, and Michelle off from Eddie.

“Shit! Are you there?” Eddie yelled.

“We’re here. I told you to stay put!” Roxanne shouted.

“Like hell!” Eddie yelled back. He kicked the wall. “Damn it!”

“You’ll have to go another way. Just follow my voice!” She lowered her voice for a moment. “Richie, for the love of God, you have to pull it together.”

“I’m going to the right,” Eddie said. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Hold your horses.” She said something inaudible, then cleared her throat, and began to sing. Her voice was husky, rich, and reverberant, dispelling some of the gloom of the cavern.

“I drank sixteen doubles for the for the price of one
Trying to find the courage to talk to the one
I asked her for a dance
Not a second glance
My night had just begun
Well, I drink to the father and the holy ghost
I'm kneeling at the altar of my nightly post
So I'll raise a glass, not the first nor last
Come join me in this toast…”

Eddie followed the passage, keeping one hand pressed against the wall, listening to Roxanne’s voice. The tunnel was so dark that it was easier for him to close his eyes, because when they were open, ghostly shapes swam across his field of vision. Afterimages popped behind his eyelids. Richie was just on the other side of that wall of rock, in the dark. The distance was unbearable after twenty-seven years of separation.

Not to mention that he now knew just what closeness felt like. In the dark, he blushed. It was stupid to be thinking about sex now, in Pennywise’s catacombs, but he couldn’t help it. He felt like a teenager, hurrying into his bathroom to jerk off thinking about Richie’s lips, his hands, the glances he’d stolen in the locker room in the quarry. Coming through that, that fear…how could he be afraid of Pennywise now? He’d already—

“Hey! There’s a hole up there! I think I can squeeze through.”

“Are you sure about this? I mean…”

Eddie remembered the sheet of rock crashing down and shuddered. If it t’were be done, he thought, ’tis best it be done quickly. The crevasse was narrow enough that he had to breathe in to fit, and shuffle sideways. Halfway through, he started to get nervous, but then he felt someone take hold of his wrist and pull him through. He emerged from the other side with a scratched face and dirty jacket, but alive. Michelle had been pulling him through, one foot braced against the wall of the cave. She released him, dusting him off with hard, painful swats.

“Unbelievable,” Roxanne snapped. She was standing against the wall, arms crossed. She uncrossed them to mess with the rubber caps covering the stumps of her fingers. “I fucking told you to stay back there.”
“Yeah, right. I—”

All of the sudden, Eddie realized that Richie wasn’t talking. He turned to look at him, and it wasn’t pretty. Richie looked like death warmed over. He was pale and hunched, like a man recovering from the flu.

“Eddie, you can’t be here,” he said miserably.

“The hell I can’t.”

“You don’t understand—”

“Zip it!” Roxanne hissed. “I hear something. Let’s go.” Roxanne started jogging, but was quickly halted by Michelle, who grabbed her ponytail and pushed her behind her. They pressed forwards, but not far forwards. They were confronted by three doors:

NOT SCARY AT ALL

SCARY

VERY, VERY SCARY

“Hell,” Roxanne snarled. “Fine. Not scary at all is obviously a trap, to make us think we should pick very, very scary. So the answer is…scary.” She reached for the knob, but Eddie grabbed her hand.

“Are you—”

“It’s gotta be.”

The door opened, and a rush of hot air emerged. A young man stepped into the beam of Michelle’s flashlight. He was pale and slender, with bright blue eyes and short blond hair. Once he might’ve been boyishly handsome, but now he was haggard. He had two black eyes, a busted lip, and a ring of violet bruises around his neck. His arms were covered in track marks.

“Roxanne,” Eddie said. He grabbed her arm. “What—”

She didn’t answer. Her face was a taut, wan mask.


Roxanne didn’t even move. She wasn’t breathing. She quivered, just a bit, but otherwise, she was like a statue.

“Roxanne, don’t listen!” Eddie yelled. “It’s just trying to mess with you!”

Roxanne made a little sound. Eddie thought it was a sob at first, but then it bubbled into a laugh. She slowly looked up, a pale smile playing around her lips.

“Good to know,” she chuckled. “Good to know.”

“What are you—”

Roxanne stepped towards the young man, looking him in the eye. “Two days ago, there was a shootout in the desert twenty-five miles west of Albuquerque. An automated M-16, mounted on a
“Carriage. Eight dead white supremacists. An empty cage. A missing El Camino.” She laughed. “Walter White is dead, you lying piece of shit. I don’t know why, but if Jesse was dead, there would be a body. I Didn’t. Kill. Anybody!” She kicked the apparition in the knee, and shoved him to the side. “Out of my way. Let’s go.”

From the other side of the door came a faint yell. Eddie broke into a run, pulling Richie behind him, until Richie just stopped.

“What are you doing? Bill and Mike—they could be in trouble!”

“Eddie, you can’t—listen to me. What I saw—”

“Richie, are you kidding me? We talked about this! It was just messing with you!”

“I can’t take that risk. We—”

“Then why come here, Richie? If it’s too dangerous for me, then it’s too dangerous for you, too. Do you think I’m weak?”

“I don’t think you’re weak, Eddie!”

“Then what is it? Because we said we’d do this together! What are you so afraid of?”

“Yeah, only a killer demon clown! What’s to fear?”

“Richie!”

Richie sighed and shook his head. He reached up and cupped Eddie’s cheek in one hand.

“I can’t…listen to me. I tried to protect you back then. I have to…God. Please. I have to protect you. And if you go in there…and you get hurt…I’ll die. I will just die. I would rather die. Sweetheart.”

Eddie’s heart fluttered.

“You’ve gone through enough. You deserve to be safe.”

Eddie laughed.

“So do you. What you said about your parents…Richie, I could just kill them. How fucking could they not see how special you are? We do this together. All right?”

“Hey!” Roxanne yelled. “Daylight’s burning!”

They booked it through the hallway into the main chamber, and were confronted by Pennywise, but not the clown. Eddie had felt pretty good going into this boss battle, but he hadn’t been prepared for a massive spiderclown with a head bigger than he was.

“Fuck me,” Roxanne breathed. “Chelle—”

“On it,” Michelle grunted, her voice barely audible. She couldn’t sign, because her hands were occupied with her shotgun.

“Wait,” Roxanne said. “We have to get closer. HEY!” she shouted. “Men of England, sons of glory, heroes of unwritten story! Offspring of the mighty mother, hopes of her and one another!”
Mike rose from where he was lying on the ground. Bill turned. So did Pennywise. He started to
crawl towards her. Roxanne held her ground. “Rise like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable
number! Shake your chains to Earth like dew, which on sleep had fallen on you! YE ARE MANY,
THEY ARE FEW!”

Pennywise was close enough that Roxanne could reach up and touch It. It opened Its mouth, teeth
lengthening. She took a breath.

“NOW!”

She hit the ground like she’d been dropped from an airplane, and Pennywise flinched back, roaring
in pain. A moment later, Eddie heard the crack of Michelle’s shotgun. “That hurt it!” Roxanne
yelled. “Spread out! Stay low! Wait for—” One of Pennywise’s claws buried itself in the ground
next to her arm. “Shit!”

“HEY!” Richie screamed. He’d left Eddie’s side, drawing Pennywise away from him and Roxanne
to the far side of the cavern. “You wanna play truth or dare?”

Eddie ran over to Roxanne and helped her up.

“I’m fine,” she hissed. “Keep moving.”

“Here’s a truth: you’re a sloppy bitch!” Richie bawled. “Yeah! You—”


His body acted before he did. He grabbed Roxanne’s Beretta and started running. She said
something, grabbed at him, but he was too fast. He ran in front of Pennywise, aimed, and pulled the
trigger. Then he realized the safety was on, pulled the hammer, and tried again. That time it
worked, so he did it again. And again. Pennywise screamed and retreated, folding into Itself,
evaporating, but he couldn’t be bothered to watch. Richie was on the ground. Without thinking,
Eddie straddled him, grabbed the back of his head, and bent down to kiss him harshly. Mike/
Ben/Bev/Bill/Roxanne/Michelle said something, or moved, but there was nothing else in that
moment but the feeling of Richie’s lips beginning to move against his. He pulled back, holding
Richie’s head in his hands.

“I did it, Rich!” he laughed. “Richie, I did it! I—”

***

She was too late. She’d thought that the six shots down the gullet would slow down the monster,
that it was down, but It was just waiting. She’d broken into a run when she saw it start to manifest
behind Eddie, but she was too slow. Her abrupt fall had been nasty on her badly healed breaks, and
she was limping badly. She was still six feet away when It stabbed Eddie.

“MotherFUCKER!” Roxanne wailed. She threw herself forwards, grabbing one of Its legs. Trying
to pull It back. It was stupid, sure, but she was pissed. What happened next was utterly foreseeable.
It bent down and used one hand to slap her away.

Roxanne hit the wall and slid to the ground. She immediately felt two of her ribs shatter along the
old breaks, and one shoulder popped out of its socket with alarming alacrity. She rolled, landing
with one arm underneath her, cheek pressed against the slimy rock of the cavern’s floor. Someone
screamed in the distance, but it sounded very far away. Her body felt like it was trying to
emancipate itself. She tried to regain control of her limbs, but her brain was powerless against the
pain signals that were rampaging across her nerve endings.
Kill me, she thought. A tear dripped off her nose and plinked into the smelly water without her permission. Just do it. Get it over with.

A pair of small red Keds entered her field of vision. The owner of the shoes bent down and offered a hand to her. It was a small boy, maybe eleven or twelve, slightly built, with chocolate-colored hair and eyes, like they were made of the same stuff. He was wearing a worn yellow t-shirt and short red running shorts with rainbow decals on the side, the kind a female jogger might wear, and a beat-up black fanny pack. It didn’t seem off to her that there was a child in the tunnels with them. I mean, hell, there might as well be. This day was already so fucking weird. She made a wild grab at his hand, but her effort was short.

“It’s okay,” he coaxed. “Here.”

The boy took her by the forearm and helped her sit up. She looked around, the kid supporting her, holding her by one forearm as she leaned against him. Time was standing still in the cavern. There was Michelle, mid-stride, running towards that fucking spider, Beretta in hand. There was Ben, and Mike, and Beverly, and—

And there was Eddie, straddling Richie, looking down at the talon penetrating his chest like a stake through a vampire’s heart.

“No,” she whimpered. “No, I don’t want to look anymore—”

“You have to,” the boy said quietly. “The deadlights. Let me show you.”

“No, I can’t—who are you?”

He gave her a small, sad, smile.

“How long have you been here?” she whispered.

“I never left. None of us did, really. This way.”

She followed him to Pennywise’s maw. One eye slowly tracked her as she crossed the cavern, but the demon seemed just as frozen as everyone else.

“I can’t look,” she said, palms sweating. “You saw—Richie—”

“This is different. Take what you need. You can look, Roxanne. Make it show you the way out. You’ve done it before. You do it every day.”

“What if I can’t?”

The boy shrugged hopelessly.

“Well, that doesn’t leave me much of a choice, she thought as she stepped into the yellow beam.

The little boy was right. She could control it, but like getting her daughter dressed for church, it was a constant struggle, and she had to fight not to lose ground. She wasn’t getting anything solid, just flickers, and she could feel Its impotent rage, the constant pushback, and then she remembered that It had just killed her friend, and she thought, fuck it. She remembered punching through the glass of that cupola, wrenching the window open as she heard him hurl his body against the door, and channeled that feeling. Break glass in case of emergency, right? Well, this was about as
emergency as it got. She thrusts her fists against the posts and still insists she sees the ghosts. Men of England, Sons of Glory, Heroes of Unwritten Story. Shake your chains to Earth like dew. Ye are many, they are few. I know I must be going, but I swear it won’t be long. There isn’t that much ocean between Boston and St. John’s.

When she punched through, the influx of sensory input was so overwhelming that she almost lost control. As the cavern faded from sight, Roxanne saw the path of her life stretch out before her. It was like a river running towards the sea that was eternity, with many branches and tributaries. A million futures flashed before her eyes. She saw herself holding a child with her daughter’s brilliant blue eyes as Michelle smiled proudly. She saw herself being in police custody with a revolver in an evidence bag and a crime scene photograph of Sonia Kaspbrak’s bullet-riddled corpse laid out in front of her. She saw herself fucking her wife with a strap-on while her gentle hands cupped her breasts. She saw herself bleeding out under a Metrobus. She saw herself waking up in a puddle of piss only to be gently cleaned up and re-diapered by a patient and kindly Michelle/Marian/Booker/Eddie. She saw guest-lectures at Hopkins and children’s hearts starting to beat again under her latex-gloved hands. She saw those same hands bare and bloodstained as she held in the life’s blood of stranger stabbed on a streetcorner. She felt the life run out of her as she watched a newscaster announce an active shooter at her son’s favorite bar. She saw herself making love and laughing and writing and painting and healing. She saw herself drinking herself into a stupor and slitting her own wrists and committing murder and vomiting in mall restrooms.

All of this happened within the span of three or four seconds. She saw all the thing she wanted to do with her life, all the mistakes she wanted to have a chance to make. She knew that her time might be short. It might be full of pain and suffering. It might be ugly. But she wanted it, nonetheless. As quickly as it had appeared, it faded, but before her vision turned to darkness, Roxanne saw what the boy had been trying to show her, what It had been trying to hide. Her leather bag. A bottle of gin. Her knife.

“I finally get it,” she said, looking down at him. “It's you. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Eddie looked a bit sheepish. “It’s not too late.”

“Bullshit it’s not!”

They turned to see another kid walking across the room. This kid, however, was easy for Roxanne to recognize. It was her. She was fifteen years old, wearing her blue wool skirt and white blouse, hair tied back with a blue ribbon. Her arms were crossed.

“A low percentage play,” she said. “You know it. I know it. We all know it.”

Little Eddie’s face fell. He turned his face into Roxanne’s skirt, wrapping his arms around her. Looking for comfort.

“One in a million,” the other Roxanne continued. “You’re smart. If you’re wrong, then we all die. You have kids.”

A small hand slipped into Roxanne’s.

“She’s right,” Little Eddie said. “She’s right, but I don’t want to die here.” A tear slipped down his cheek. “There was so much…for me. What did you see? Was there more? I wanted…I saw it. More than this. I want to have it.”

“I know,” Roxanne whispered. Ignoring not-Roxanne, she got down on her knees in front of the boy, taking his hands in hers. “Tell me. What do you miss most about being alive? I mean, really
alive. Before you forgot what it felt like.”

Little Eddie sniffled.

“I miss the sound of Richie singing from outside my bedroom window, off-key enough that I knew it was on purpose, to try to make me laugh. I miss the way that Stan would always tag along with us, even if he did lecture us all the way home for being stupid and immature. I miss going to the library, the feeling of clothes just out of the dryer, the quarry. I miss ice cream.”

Roxanne was crying, but she smiled through her tears, putting a hand to Little Eddie’s cheek.

“I know. I know. And I’m sorry I wasn’t there then. I wish I could’ve protected you.”

Whatever dreamlike state they were in was starting to break down.

“Well?” Not-Roxanne asked. Her voice was fuzzy, like a radio caught between stations. “What are you going to do?”

“My fucking job,” Roxanne whispered under her breath, and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was back on the floor. She felt the pain, heard the scream, but this time she was ready. Mastering the pain, she pushed herself off the floor and stumbled across the cavern.

“Richie!” she screamed.

Richie wasn’t moving. His eyes were open. He was pale and shaking. Roxanne understood, but she also understood that there was no time. She kicked him in the ribs. “Get up. Get. Up. GET UP!”

He sat up slowly, still silent, shaking, shell-shocked.

“Help me with this,” she gasped, pointing at her shoulder. “Quick.” All she needed him to do was hold her arm still while she shoved the joint back into place. It was painful, but quick. “My bag. Over there. Hurry, damn you! Chelle!” she screamed. Chelle whipped around to look at her, eyes wide and relieved. “Kill that damn thing!” Michelle nodded, and Roxanne turned back around just in time to catch her bag.

From inside the bag, she pulled gauze, medical tape, a syringe, plastic tubing, a butterfly needle, and a Bowie knife. The first thing she did was slide the butterfly needle into her own arm, connect it to the tubing, and insert it into Eddie’s carotid artery. As soon as her O neg. was flowing into his veins, she pulled out the knife, readied it, and—

“What are you doing?” Richie shrieked, and tried to grab her. She had to knee him in the balls to fend him off, knocking him sideways onto the cavern floor. Behind her, the Losers were doing something—killing It, by the sound of it—music to her ears, but she couldn’t look away.

“Someone, keep him off of me!”

Michelle, who had weakened It substantially with a non-standard issue frag grenade down the gullet (which Roxanne had missed, much to both of their chagrin) ran in and stiff-armed Richie, planting him in the inch of gray water covering the floor like a daisy. Roxanne readied the knife again, shutting out the commotion around her, and cracked open Eddie’s ribcage with one smooth motion. She spread the ribs and then, after a quick breath, plunged a hand into his thorax.

His left lung was swiss cheese. It would have to be removed the moment they got to the hospital. For now, however, she had to content herself with tying off as many arteries as she could. When
she’d stopped as much blood loss as she could, she wrapped her hand around the heart and started to squeeze.

“Commencing internal cardiac massage!” she yelled. “Someone’s car better be fucking running!”

“Roxanne, we have to go!” someone yelled. “He’s dead, you can’t help him! This place is coming down!”

It was. Chunks of rock were tumbling from the ceiling. The whole cavern was shuddering, and cracks were appearing in the walls as what had once been smooth rock became crumbly and friable. Roxanne wiped sweat from her brow with her free hand and resumed her efforts to staunch the bleeding.

“She needs oxygen!” she yelled. Michelle let go of Eddie and put two hands under Eddie’s armpits. Mike, after a brief hesitation, ran in and grabbed his ankles. “Let’s go!”

They made it out, but it was a near thing. They couldn’t move very fast without compromising Roxanne’s ability to beat Eddie’s heart, and stopping wasn’t an option. The back of Michelle’s Honda, which had just been de-vomitified the other day, was quickly transformed into a trauma bay. “Richie!” Roxanne howled. “Get in here!”

“What can I—”


“I can’t—what about?”

Michelle peeled out of the parking lot. They were seven minutes away from the nearest hospital. They had maybe five.

“Were you ever in a play?”

“Yeah, Romeo and Juliet, in high school—”

“I don’t care. Read your lines. For God’s sake, I need you to keep him awake!”

“I can’t think of—”

“TALK! NOW!”

Roxanne’s sudden bark made Richie jump, and made Eddie’s eyes flicker open momentarily.

“Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene, from ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life; whose misadventured piteous overthrows doth with death bury their parents’ strife—”

“Next!”

“Uh, many a morning hath he been seen there, with tears augmenting the fresh morning’s dew, adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs. But all so soon as the all-cheering sun should in the furthest east begin to draw the shady curtains from Aurora’s bed, away from light steals home my heavy son and private in his chamber pens himself, shuts up his windows, locks daylight out, and makes for himself an artificial night. Black and portentous this humor must prove, unless wise counsel should the cause remove. Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs; Being purged, a
fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes; Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears. What is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking gall, and a preserving sweet.”

Richie was terrified that it wasn’t working, until Eddie’s eyes fluttered open, and he moaned. Richie put a hand on his forehead, wiping away cold sweat, mud, and blood.

“It hurts,” he whimpered. “Richie…”

“Shh,” Richie whispered. “Don’t try to talk. You know what I thought when I first saw you?”

Eddie didn’t answer, but his eyes flicked over to Richie, chest rising and falling steadily.

“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night as a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear— Beauty too rich for use, for Earth too dear. So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows as yonder lady o’er her fellows shows. The measure done, I’ll watch her place of stand and, touching hers, make blessèd my rude hand. Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight, For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night.”

A faint smile found Eddie’s lips. He coughed a little, then closed his eyes. “No, no, baby, eyes open. Look at me, Eds, please. Please.” After a moment, with obvious effort, Eddie opened his eyes again. Roxanne was on the phone with the hospital, calling for a trauma team in place and an OR.

“But soft!” Richie crowed, stroking Eddie’s pale cheek. “What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and fair Eddie is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou, her maid, art far more fair than she. Be not her maid since she is envious. Her vestal livery is but sick and green, and none but fools do wear it. Cast it off. It is my lady. O, it is my love! O, that she knew she were! She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that? Her eye discourses; I will answer it. I am too bold. ’Tis not to me she speaks. Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, having some business, do entreat her eyes to twinkle in their spheres till they return. What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars as daylight doth a lamp; her eye in heaven would through the airy region stream so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night.”

“Ay, me,” Eddie whispered, a smile hovering around his lips.

“He speaks! O, speak again, bright angel!”

“O, I am fortune’s fool,” Eddie breathed. Richie took one of his hands and pressed it to his lips.

“Let me be ta’en; let me be put to death. I am content, so thou wilt have it so. I’ll say yon gray is not the morning’s eye; ’Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia’s brow. Nor is not the lark whose notes do beat the vaulty heaven so high above our heads. I have more care to stay than will to go. Come death and welcome, Eddie wills it so. How is ’t, my soul? Let’s talk. It is not day.”

They arrived. Roxanne threw open the door.

“Chelle, get the crash team here.”

Michelle nodded. A few seconds later, a doctor, accompanied by three nurses, ran up with a gurney. “Listen to me! ICM, five minutes. I need you to be ready when I remove my hand.”

The doctor nodded.

“I SAID, I NEED YOU TO BE READY. CAN I HEAR ‘HEARD’?”
“Heard!” the doctor shouted. Roxanne removed her hands, holding them up like she was surrendering. The ER doc’s hands replaced hers and they whisked him away. Richie whimpered. Roxanne swung her legs out of the car and stepped down. She hissed in pain as her right foot hit the ground.

“Are you——” Richie asked numbly. She waved him away. Michelle grabbed her and supported her into the hospital. Richie, stunned and blind, followed.
Roxanne fell down onto one of the chairs in the E.R. waiting room.

“My phone,” she gasped. “Chelle…”

“You’re hurt,” Michelle signed.

“Forget it. Phone?”

Michelle gave up and passed her the cell. Roxanne unlocked it with a shaking finger and dialed.

“Pick up, pick up. Rita! It’s Roxanne. I need a helicopter in Derry, Maine YESTERDAY. You hear me? I’ve got a patient—cardiothoracic penetration, severe lung damage—he’s in the OR now, but they’re not equipped—No! I’ll pay!” She squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her face into her hands. “Okay. All right. For the love of God, hurry.”

“Sweetheart,” Michelle signed. “You’re hurt.”

Roxanne hissed in pain.

“My ankle,” she groaned. “It’s not—oh God—it’s unsalvageable. I can feel—aah—” She reached down, rubbing her calf.

Richie hovered over her.

“Can I help—take your boot off, maybe—”

“I wouldn’t,” she ground out. “’S the only thing holding my ankle together. Get me my bag.”

Richie complied, hands shaking.

“Roxanne—”

She rummaged around and pulled out a bottle of pills. She shook one out, popped it in her mouth, and started to chew.
“Roxanne,” Richie whimpered. “Is he going to be—”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Richie, I did my best. I swear to God, I did what I could.”

“They were just going to leave him there,” Richie whispered.

“Richie, don’t.”

“They would’ve left him to DIE!” he shouted. Ben, Bill, Beverly, and Mike turned around.

“Richie, what are you talking about?” Bev asked.

“You, all of you, would’ve left him to ROT. Underneath that…house he hated so much. You were all so concerned with saving your own skins that you were going to abandon Eddie.”

“That place was coming down—” Bill started.

“NO! He was there because of YOU! This was your fight, not his! And when he got hurt, you couldn’t care less! How dare you! How. Dare. You.” He fell silent, chest heaving.

“Richie, that’s not fair!”

“I don’t care, all right? I don’t give a shit! Just get out.”

“Rich—”

“LEAVE!”

Richie paced as they trickled out the door. Roxanne didn’t respond. She was leaning backwards, face pale and drawn.

“You don’t think I should’ve done that,” Richie growled.


“There’s no defending it.”

“I agree.”

“You—you’re a stranger. You stayed. You risked your life. They didn’t do a goddamn thing.”

“I’m also a doctor. I’ve trained for situations like that.”

“So what? You think they did the right thing?”

“No.” She grimaced and struggled to sit up straight. “I think they were cowards. Selfish. But plenty of people are cowards. They failed to show extraordinary bravery, compassion, selflessness. In a dangerous situation, you can’t trust them to do the right thing. So keep it in mind, and forgive them.”

“Forgive them? Hell no!”

“At the risk of quoting Dr. Phil, forgiveness isn’t about saying that they were right. It’s about saying it’s not worth the energy. You’re going to have to decide if you want to hate them more than you want to be there for Eddie.”

“How could you even ask me that?”
“It’s a rhetorical question, asked for effect. I know what you feel.”

They were interrupted by a heavy whup-whup-whup coming from above. “Ah,” Roxanne said. “She’s here.” Roxanne swooned, face bathed in sweat, and gasped. “Oh, shit. That hydrocodone… it’s not doing the job…Jesus…”

A woman burst through the doors. She was wearing blue scrubs tucked into a pair of red cowboy boots. She had a blonde crew cut and pink lip gloss.

“Roxanne?”

“Rita,” Roxanne gasped.

“Team’s on the roof. Are we ready?”

“They’re in there. Go, go, go. I don’t trust these fucks.”

“I can’t burst into someone else’s OR, Roxanne—”

“Please,” Roxanne said. “I am asking.”

For an interminable second, they stared at each other. Rita sighed.


Roxanne pointed vaguely in the direction they’d taken Eddie.

“I’d—I’d do it myself, but my hands…”

Rita nodded.

“Okay. All right. Sit tight.”

For eight hours, Michelle, Roxanne, and Richie sat together. Roxanne swam in and out of consciousness. The last time she’d been in this much pain had been when she’d hit the pavement in Baltimore, but that didn’t seem very important right now. She’d felt so damn good, just yesterday, like she was back on top of her game, proving she could roll widdit, baby. Like she’d done something good, made friends. Sure, it was selfish. She’d seen so much of herself in them, those two people on the borders of life, waiting to exist again. She wanted to help breathe some life back into them, break their hearts of stone and see if she could coax them into a happy ending. And if she could do that for them, maybe she could do it for herself, bring herself back from this walking slumber she’d found herself in. But here she was, on the verge of losing someone she had sworn to protect, someone who had become a friend. Jesse was alive, yes, but his future was so uncertain. The cops would be blanketing Albuquerque now, searching for him. Walter was dead, and someone had to pay. Coming off that, the promise of a simple B story, a walk-on part in a sweet rom-com, had been powerfully alluring. But she hadn’t forseen this.

She couldn’t imagine how Richie was feeling. He was gray and sweaty, shaking like a leaf. He was giving off some kind of crazy scent, like a terrified animal. Michelle was trying to comfort them both, but there was only so much she could do. They were sequestered in their griefs.

Rita emerged after an eternity. Roxanne’s heart leapt into her heart. Dr. Rita Tesperian was smudged with blood. Eddie’s blood.

“He’s alive,” she said. “He’s stable.”
She opened her mouth to say more, but she was interrupted by the sound of Richie’s head cracking against the linoleum. He’d fainted dead away.

“Give it to me straight,” Roxanne said.

Rita glanced at her leg.

“If I do, will you let me take a look at that?”

“After we get to Dartmouth. What happened?”

Rita sighed.

“You saved his life with the ICM. I’m concerned about an infection, but we’ll keep him on antibiotics for a while. That’s not what concerns me.”

Roxanne’s face was impassive, but Michelle knew her too well. Very much she fears, she thought. Very much she fears some ill uncertain thing. “The flow of blood was interrupted for a long time. I managed to perform a bypass and repair the major arteries, but when the brain is deprived of oxygen, we don’t know—”

“Don’t lecture me,” Roxanne ground out. “I taught you that speech.”

“Fine. I don’t know how much of his brain is still alive. Right now, he’s comatose. He might never wake up. He might make a full recovery. It’s impossible to—”

“Guess.”

“All right, fine. You said he was talking in the car ride over. Given that, it’s likely that his brain was without oxygen for six, maybe seven minutes. If you held a gun to my head, I’d say it’s likely that he’ll slowly progress to a PVS.”

PVS. Persistent vegetative state.

“I know it’s not what you wanted to hear.”

Roxanne’s own voice floated back to her. “There will come a time when all of this is over. Something else will grow and take its place…”

“Roxanne. Talk to me.”

Roxanne opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t even breathe. She tried to move, but it was like she was underwater. This was all wrong. It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this. She was frozen.

Inch by inch, one hand, flopping and inching like a beached carp, made its way down her leg. With a herculean effort, she wrapped her fingers around her broken ankle—and squeezed. The boiling pain that raved its way up her leg to her armpit, threatening her consciousness, and, as it seemed for a moment, her sanity, was a welcome change. It broke up the log jam and allowed her to spit out:

“I woke up. Didn’t I?”

Rita Tesperian, who had been one of Roxanne’s students, had been the one to put her back together after the fall. There had been bone marrow in her blood stream, and she had had to fish shards of bone from canyons and ground-beef patties of pulped flesh and skewer them back together with
titanium pins, but she had somehow managed to put the ragdoll back together. Roxanne had been hoping that she would have similar luck. She sniffed, and looked down at Richie, hoping that he would stay asleep for as long as possible. “God. How am I supposed to explain this—?”

Rita sighed.

“Do it later. We need to get in the helicopter. I’ll know more once I can get some second opinions.”

“Give me ten minutes,” she said. “I need to do something first.”

***

When Michelle found the rest of the Losers, they were preparing to leave. She jogged up to them, shaking her head in disbelief. She motioned at them to come back, pointing to the hospital.

“You heard Richie,” Bill said bitterly. “He doesn’t want us there. We’re all just selfish cowards. Didn’t you hear?”

“Oh, get over yourself,” Michelle hissed. They started at the sound of her voice: low, harsh, and pained. She pressed a hand to her throat, winced, and continued. “Dartmouth-Hitchcock. Be there.”

She turned and jogged back.
Chapter Notes

“There’s a hot hard hurt
Burning under her skin
And it pricks her like thorns
And it’s needles and pins
And it twists in her body
And I know what it is

And I’m paying in pain
But it’s the cost of the high
’Till the weight of the secret
And the weight of the lie
Makes my heart want to burst
Feel the ache as time goes by
Getting better and worse
Getting better and worse

And there’s a screw that I tighten
As I dream of the kiss
And it twists and it cuts me
And you know what it is?
It’s a fragment of love
From a splintering heart
And it tears her apart
But not as much as this

So you save up your tears
For the moments alone
’Till the splinters you gather
Leave you glass-hard and numb
And the same sun is shining
On the old and the young
On the saints and the sinners
On the weak and the strong

And there’s a burning and freezing
And a cross for a kiss…”
- Marillion, “Splintering Heart,” from Holidays in Eden

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They amputated the lower third of Roxanne’s right leg as soon as she allowed them. They should’ve done it two years ago, after the fall, but better late than never. It didn’t take long, and they tossed her into Recovery pretty fast. Only a few of them had worked with her, but word spread fast. Chief among those words were these two: terrible patient. It was true. They say the best doctors are the worst patients, and Roxanne was a very good doctor. She just barely acceded to
their prescription of a Duragesic patch and let them give her an epidural—the better to get out of bed and back into the waiting room. She couldn’t move below the chest, but she could push a wheelchair, and nothing the surgeon could say would convince her to say in bed. As she emerged from the room, wedging the door open with the wheelchair, Michelle looked up. The sight of Roxanne, up and about three hours after surgery, shocked words out of her:

“Oh, fuck!”

Richie jumped, startled awake. Roxanne didn’t know how long he’d been asleep, but it couldn’t have been long. He was sprouting a serious five o’clock shadow, and you could sleep a family in the bags under his eyes. Looking at him made Roxanne feel mildly ill. Not just because she could feel his pain (she could), but because she knew that this was how Michelle had felt, along with her father, grandmother, and kids, all those times she’d would up under the knife because of stupid, risky decisions.

“Roxanne,” he rasped. “Shouldn’t you be…resting?”

“I’m fine. If I exercise it, keep the bloodflow up, it lessens my chance of chronic pain. I ain’t planning on running a marathon.”

“Roxanne?”

It was Doctor Tesperian. She’d changed scrubs, and she’d washed her face. “I’ve got some questions for you and Agent Johnson. Do you mind?”

Roxanne sighed.

“Fine. Richie, we’ll be right back.”

***

Richie watched Michelle roll Roxanne away, and resisted the urge to chase them down and ask them to explain everything, line by line, test result by test result. The doctors couldn’t tell him much—he was alive, that was all.

Could I see him?

No.

When can I see him?

Not sure.

Can you tell me anything?

Are you family?

Well…

Then no.

He couldn’t explain to them who Eddie was to him, that he needed to be with him, that every minute he had to go without seeing Eddie and making sure he was all right had him withering on the vine, like a plant kept in the dark. It had looked so awful, down in that tunnel. Richie had no idea how he had survived. The wound had looked so deep, so horribly placed, that part of him was terrified that when they did send him into that room, it would be empty, and he’d turn to see the
nurses, doctors, janitors, all wearing Pennywise’s face, and they’d raise their arms and scream:

“APRIL FOOLS! YOUR BOYFRIEND’S DEAD, AND YOUR FRIENDS HELPED KILL HIM!”

The prospect was almost too horrible to contemplate. That it all might have been some sick joke, Pennywise letting him get a taste of something different, something beautiful, and to have it all snatched away…to have Eddie pay for his carelessness…

“Hey! Hello! We’re looking for Roxanne Little?”

Richie got up and turned around.

“You’re looking for…she’s gone…”

The woman who had spoken turned around, eyes wide. The older man with her gasped and put his hands to his face.

“Gone?”

“Oh, shit! No, no—she’s fine, she’s out, she’s just—not here,” Richie corrected hurriedly. “Roxanne’s fine. I saw her just a minute ago.”

The older man sighed in relief. He had shoulder-length silver hair and a soul patch. His little round glasses were propped up by his big, beaklike nose. The woman beside him was much younger, maybe in her twenties. When she turned fully to face Richie, he gasped. “You look just like her,” he whispered.

She did. The woman, who must have been Roxanne’s daughter, had a stylishly ragged Joan-of-Arc bob and a smooth, unscarred face, and she was a little shorter and curvier, but other than that, she was her mom’s carbon-copy. She was wearing a wrinkled blue linen skirt, gray ankle boots, and a soft white t-shirt. Both she and the old man looked exhausted.

“Do you…know her?” she asked. “You called her Roxanne. Everyone calls her Doctor Little.”

“We’re…friends. I…she saved my friend’s life.”

“Oh.” The young woman considered for a second, then stretched out her hand. “I’m Marian. Marian Magdalene Little. My parents have a funny sense of humor. This is my grandpa Allen.”

Richie shook her hand, and then shook Allen’s hand. He was numb, but it was odd to see Roxanne’s daughter, her father, standing in front of him. He guessed he’d assumed she’d sprung fully formed out of a test tube or psychology textbook.

“How’s my daughter?” Allen asked.

“She’s—well—”

“Dad? Marian? What the hell are you doing here?”

Roxanne emerged from the supply closet, pushed by Michelle.

“Rosie!”

“Mom!”

Roxanne spluttered.
“Michelle, did you—what—of course you did. Why—”

“You’re missing your fucking leg!” Allen shrieked.

“No. Okay. Nonononononono. This is good, actually. I’ve been thinking of—you know, most of
my complex regional pain was in that ankle, okay? So if they cut it off—”

“Aw, jeez, Mom,” Marian groaned. “What did you do now?”

“It’s not as—wait. Where’s Booker?”

“He’s with Nana, at the hotel.”

“You brought Nana? Are you for real?”

“Am I for real?” Marian yelled. “Her granddaughter just got her fucking leg cut off! You don’t
think she might want to hear that?”

“You can’t just drag a ninety year old Holocaust survivor coast to coast—”

“All right, enough!” Richie shouted. “Roxanne, what’s going on?”

Roxanne sighed.

“Look, Richie, it’s not that simple. It’s really hard to predict what’s going to happen when
bloodflow to the brain is interrupted. He could wake up in an hour, or a week, or…”

“Or never. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“And what…what if that happens? What if there’s some sort of…brain damage, and he can’t take
care of himself? Are you going to ship him back to his wife, so she can keep poisoning him?”

Roxanne scowled. “I’ll never let that happen. You know that. But Richie, are you…” She shifted
in her chair, rubbing her temples. “Are you—and I’m not saying that this will definitely happen—
are you ready—willing—able—to spend the rest of your life taking care of someone who can’t
take care of himself? Who needs care around the clock? Can you—”

Richie burst into tears. He couldn’t help it. He was tired, and scared, and guilt-ridden, and he just
wanted to see Eddie.

Again, it wasn’t Roxanne that comforted him. His vulnerability disturbed her, and he was sure that
it was because she was seeing the other side of her injuries and close calls, the side that had been
going on whole she was too doped up or under anesthetic to notice. But Michelle had. Hell, she had
been Richie, wondering how much of the person she loved would be left to her once the doors
were opened and all verdicts were in. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry into the
neck of her dirty, muddy, bloody jacket. He couldn’t read her hands, but her face told him
everything he needed to know. Her heart broke in sympathy with his, along old fault lines that had
never fully healed.

cry.”

Richie couldn’t stop. He felt like there was a leak somewhere inside of him, and the drip-drip-drip
of saltwater would continue until someone soldered it shut. For twenty-seven years, he hadn’t felt
anything like this. For twenty-seven years he’d felt nothing at all. He might have know that there would be a price to pay for the, what? Three days of happiness? He couldn’t—

“All right, I can hear you pitying yourself, and you need to stop. That’s not helpful,” Roxanne said. Richie sniffed and pulled back.

“Mom!”

“Don’t ‘Mom’ me, I know what I’m talking about. Listen. I know you’re afraid. That’s natural. So let it in. Five seconds. No more, no less. Then you have to get down to business—get down to being the person he needs. Do you understand me?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You never know if you can do something until it’s in your rearview mirror.”

Richie pressed the heels of his hands into his eyeballs until bright spots burst across his eyelids, groaned, and shook his head, like a dog shaking off water.

“Okay. All right. This was…helpful. I think. Can I see him?”

Roxanne nodded at Dr. Tesperian, who sighed.

“Sure. Fine.”

“Take Marian,” Roxanne advised. “You shouldn’t be alone, and I…I think I need to lie down. Or maybe some Oxy. Dad—”

“I’m right here,” Allen whispered.

“No, I was gonna suggest that you get a hotel or something, maybe go hang out with Booker—”

“I’m staying right here.”

“Michelle,” Richie said. He wanted to go see Eddie, needed to go see him, but it didn’t feel right, dropping them like a hot Pop-Tart onto a cold kitchen floor. He cared about them, obviously, but not like he loved Eddie, but somehow the line between that mutual understanding and its overt acknowledgement was one that he felt shouldn’t be crossed. “Roxanne—”

“Go,” she said. “I don’t want you hangin’ around, breathin’ down my neck. Get lost. Hit the bricks. Tell your story walkin’.”

“Thanks,” Richie sighed. “Be well, Rosie.”

“I’ll just be down the hall.”

Chapter End Notes

I KNOW this is kind of inching along right now because I just got done with final exams, but on the bright side, I have five weeks of break (well, working on my prospectus, but STILL) so I should be much more with it in terms of updating and moving the story along at a more customary pace for me.
Sidenote: Though I have spent a fair amount of time in hospitals, I'm not a doctor. BUT I'm guessing that if and when they really amputate your leg, they'll keep you in bed for a bit longer than three hours, no matter how unpleasant you are. If you have major surgery, don't take medical advice from my OC (one of whose primary distinguishing traits is a reckless disregard for her own safety coupled with an adrenaline-junkie disposition). Not that I think that you would.
Roxanne’s voice floated to Eddie, wave by wave, as he floated in a gray haze. He didn’t know where he was, if he was alive or dead. He couldn’t see anything, couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t hear anything, except for the cadences of her voice.

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease…”

Eddie opened his eyes, and momentarily he could see shadows, shapes fading in and out of focus, but the effort exhausted him, and he had to close his eyes again, and lost the thread of her voice for a moment.

“That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow."

He wanted to tell her to read something else, to stop frightening him, when he still wasn’t sure if Richie was alive or dead, but he couldn’t move his mouth or open his eyes. He didn’t want to leave the world unseen, but he felt so damn weak that he was in danger of fading away, and she wasn’t helping.

“Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglandine;
Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.”

Eddie was weeping now, silently, passively, but weeping nonetheless. He remembered nights with Richie, walking home through the dark. It was seeming more and more likely that he was dying, bleeding to death on the floor of that cavern. Suddenly, the world in his memories seemed unbearably beautiful.

“Eddie,” she said. “It’s time to get movin’.”

Eddie woke up, moment by moment. The world faded from black to gray to saturated colors. Sunlight was beaming down, catching on the curve of a wine glass. Eddie looked up to see Roxanne sitting on a marble railing looking out over a river. One leg was propped up, and the other was swinging free off the ledge. The Eiffel Tower emerged from the skyline behind her.

Paris? Eddie thought.

“There you are. Thought you’d never wake up.”

Eddie went to stand up, and when he looked down, he was wearing his shorts. He was seventeen when he wore those for the last time.

“This isn’t real, is it?” he asked.

“Of course it ain’t,” Roxanne answered. She jumped down, adjusting her dress. When Eddie looked closely at her hand, he noticed that she had all of her fingers.

“Am I dead?”
“Hmm. Yes and no. Both and. It’s hard to describe, but we’re on a threshold. A nexus. Millions upon millions timelines converge here. In this moment, you’re Schrodinger’s cat—well, you both are and aren’t. You’re here until you decide whether or not you’re going to eat the poison.” She spread her arms. “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.”

It was true. Before Derry, for many a time he had been half in love with an easeful Death. Before returning, it would have been an easy decision, to stay—where? This ever-sunlit dream city? But now…he remembered the feeling of Richie moving inside him, prying him apart, fingers digging into his hips, talking about MARRYING him, for the love of God, and this weak imitation of happiness seemed fragile. Pathetic. Supremely unsatisfying. Speaking of Richie…

“Why aren’t you Richie? If you’re taking the form of someone I care about, then shouldn’t you be…him?”

Roxanne—well, Not-Roxanne—laughed.

“That would be putting a thumb on the scale, wouldn’t it? Reminding you what you’re leaving behind. At Nexus G-39243, we pride ourselves on being fair and balanced. Anyhow, love and respect are radically different emotions.” She gestured at the Eiffel Tower. “C’est vraiment joli, non? Well, at least I think so.”

“I’ve never even left the East coast.”

“Well, I guess some things are best left in dreams.”

“I was saving it,” Eddie said. “You’re here to get me to, what? Give up the ghost? Cross to the other side?”

Not-Roxanne shook her head.

“You have to understand, not everyone gets this sort of courtesy call. You showed great valor. So they sent me to explain the situation to you. Simply put, you can go back, or you can stay here.”

“Here? You mean…Paris?”

“It could be anywhere. The world as you want to see it. At least, until it’s time for you to move on.”

“To where?” Eddie asked.

Not-Roxanne shook her head. Her face rippled, and for a moment, she looked like an old TV stuck between channels. Eddie recoiled, disturbed.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been. When you decide to stay here, you never get to see it. I get glimpses sometimes, like looking out the window of a plane, but I…that door is shut. It reminds
me of when I was little, when the world was my kingdom, but I don’t know why.”

“You’re a ghost,” Eddie said, numb.

“Sort of. I’m a Death. A psychopomp. I guide souls. When my time came, I was…afraid. So they offered me this.” She made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the Eiffel Tower, the Seine, the table with the cigarettes, the croissant, and the wine glass. “But I have to work. God, do I have to work. I have to be everywhere at once. There’s a war on, you know? Whoever said that War was Death’s best friend was a goddamn liar. I’ve been running myself ragged.”

“H-how old are you?”

“Very. I was ferrying souls when your Messiah was still shitting the manger. It’s been a long time.”

Eddie desperately wanted more answers, but he was disturbed by how Not-Roxanne seemed to be getting fuzzy at the edges, like a leper unraveling.

“Who made this deal with you?”

“Well, it was…oh, it must’ve been…it was Her, wasn’t it? A very long time, then.”

“Her, who?”

“Her. God, of course. Well, not God in the traditional sense. But God nonetheless. Do you know what we are, Eddie Kaspbrak?”

“Atoms, right?”

“Yes. Biology underlaid by chemistry underlaid by physics underlaid by mathematics. The universe is a mathematical expression, Eddie. She is the lurking variable that makes it equal to itself. She used to be a bit livelier, but She’s withdrawn over the years. Time has made her strange. The integrity of the equation is slowly unraveling, and all of us with her.”

“What? H-how do we stop it?”

Not-Roxanne laughed.

“Stop what? The essential laws of the universe? Are you familiar with the law of entropy, Eddie? Order always devolves into chaos. From the oceans of time, she rose an architecture of equations to allow for this.” Not-Roxanne gestured at the city. “The clean room always gets messy again. But don’t worry. This decay progresses in terms of geological time, evolutionary epochs, not lifetimes. You need not concern yourself with it.” She paused. “Well, not anymore than you already have.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Eddie asked.

“The one you killed. He was a symptom of this decay. We are all made from her in part, and as her mind…wanders…ours do, also. Some cope better than others. The one you call Pennywise was one of us. He was greatly disturbed by the whisperings of Her diminished mind, and his actions reflected that.”

“Disturbed? What the hell is that supposed to mean? It—it was one of you? Are you telling me that we cleaned up your mess?” Eddie got up from the table and, in an uncharacteristic moment of lost control, threw the bottle of wine on the table to the ground, where it shattered, spilling plum-colored liquid all over the cream-colored cobblestones. The broken glass and spilled wine remained for a few moments, but quickly blinked into nonexistence, like a corpse in a video game. “We were
FUCKING CHILDREN! And we were cleaning up YOUR GODDAMN MESS!"

Not-Roxanne didn’t answer. She just stared at Eddie. The more closely he looked at her, the more he realized that her features weren’t quite right. She couldn’t understand him, he realized. His fear, his love, his desire to return were words in a language she’d forgotten how to speak, if she’d ever spoken it at all.

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” she asked. “Understand that you are making a choice few people have ever been offered. Consider—”

“You have to take me back. You don’t understand, Richie needs me—”

“Please listen to me,” Not-Roxanne said. “There are no guarantees. If you—”

“If there’s even a chance I can be together with Richie, I have to try.”

“Your dossier said you would play it safe.”

“I’ve been playing it safe all my life. Look where that’s got me.”

Not-Roxanne nodded.

“Your wish is my command. I can tip the scales in your favor, but the rest is up to you. Capisce?”

“Just do it.”

She leaned towards him and placed two fingers on his forehead, driving a spike of pain into his skull.

“Hold tight,” she said. A muzzy smile hovered around her lips. “There’s going to be some pain.”

End Notes


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